

State policies, ethnic identity, and forests in China and Thailand

Janet Sturgeon

1998

Keywords: mountain communities, ethnic groups, Akha, forests, land management, China, Thailand.

State-building processes in many parts of the world include policies for the integration of remote, forested areas on the borders of the state, and for the forest-dependent communities who dwell in them. These peoples are often ethnically different from the dominant population, and since many practice shifting cultivation, they have come into conflict with the growing state over territory, resources, and land use practices. My research looks at the Akha, a hill ethnic group originating in China and now found across mountainous mainland Southeast Asia. My study compares Akha in China and Thailand to discover how Akha access to resources and land management have changed and persisted since the 1930s under these vastly different political economies and state structures. In China the Akha are subsumed under the larger grouping of Hani, one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China. The Hani in Xishuangbanna call themselves Akha, the same name used in Thailand; Akha here refers to both groups.

As of the Revolution in China in 1949, all residents were automatically citizens of the New China. In the 1950s the state sent out teams to identify all the ethnic minority groups, or what are called minority nationalities, and to evaluate them according to the modes of production. A plan was devised for each minority nationality to bring it up to a socialist mode of production and into modern civilization. As citizens, Akha were then included in land use policies that affected all rural farmers. The major policy shifts in property rights and levels of management were three: 1) land reform in the early 1950s, when agricultural land was wrested from landlords and distributed to farmers, 2) collectivization in 1958, when villages were designated as production teams and organized into communes, and 3) the economic reforms beginning in 1982-83, when commune land was distributed to villages and households. The one notable difference for Akha and other hill groups was that in 1982-83 each household acquired shifting cultivation land in addition to wet rice fields and areas of forest. Since the early 1980s extension efforts have encouraged planting cash crops and perennials in swiddens to contribute to growing markets. Discussion of hill groups by government officials today refers not to their mode of production, but rather to how "developed" they are. The extension of perennials is also gradually bringing an end to shifting cultivation, which is seen by policy makers in China as degrading to the environment.

Property rights and levels of management for forest land in China have also shifted numerous times since 1949. While large forests came under the new

Ministry of Forestry in the early 1950s, about two-thirds of forest land were allocated initially to households, and later collectivized in the late 1950s. When land was again redistributed in the early 1980s, new areas of state forest and nature reserves were designated as belonging to state agencies. The Kunming Institute of Botany reports that about 70% of forest area in China is now in the hands of villages and households (Xu 1996).

In Thailand the policy history for forests and hill ethnic minorities is quite different. Since the Thai nation was modeled on capitalist states in Europe, especially Britain, the government in Bangkok created a Royal Forestry Department (RFD) in 1896, and in 1898 allocated to the RFD all "unoccupied" territory in what was then Siam. "Unoccupied" territory in the north was inhabited by various hill ethnic groups, who in some cases had been there for generations. Aside from areas of teak concessions, however, the RFD was not too concerned about who lived in its vast "unoccupied" area. By the 1960s, when the Thai state began to emphasize rapid economic growth based on capitalist models of development, the government granted timber concessions to logging companies on a rotational basis throughout almost half of Thailand's land area. This capitalist transformation was based on notions of state and individually-held private property, with forests as state assets. This conception precluded notions of community ownership and management of forests.

In the early 20th century, in a process Thongchai (1997) describes as "self-civilizing", since Thailand was not formally colonized, the king and other elites undertook state building to emulate Europe. Part of this effort involved instilling nationalism in the populace, and describing a notion of "Thai-ness" inhering in lowland wet rice cultivators who spoke Thai, were Buddhist, and were subjects of the king. Increasingly this shaping of Thai identity contributed to an understanding of who were citizens of the new nation-state of Thailand, and it did not include non-Thai speaking, upland rice growing ethnic minorities. With the development drive based on logging in the 1960s the state had to come to terms with those who lived in the forests. Policy makers began to call the ethnic minorities who lived in the north "hill tribes", beginning a construction of these particular groups as "not Thai" and "squatters in the forest" (Pinkaew 1997). "Hill tribes" came also to mean those who were opium producers, potential collaborators in the communist insurgency spreading in from Laos, and more recently, shifting cultivators who were destroying the forest (Pinkaew 1997). Policies and development projects aimed at the hill tribes were different from those targeted at other rural populations because these groups were perceived as opium producers and potentially not loyal to Thailand. They were not citizens and probably did not deserve to be. Even ethnic minorities outside the north, such as Muslims in the south, were citizens of Thailand (Vandergeest 1997).

Part of what ensued in the north was an ongoing conflict between ministries, with the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) seeking to settle villages so that the area

could come under MOI jurisdiction, and the RFD attempting to grant timber concessions, or more recently, to protect and enlarge forested areas, so that the areas (often the same as MOI villages) could be kept under the RFD. This conflict played out in many parts of rural Thailand, however. The situation particular to hill tribes was the targeting of northern Thailand for opium substitution projects with funding from numerous international donors. As part of creating settled villages, the Public Welfare Department of the MOI also gave villagers hill tribe ID cards. These cards identified villagers by ethnicity and village, and prohibited travel outside the province of residence without approval from the provincial governor. The hill tribes ID cards mark the bearers as less than full citizens and "not Thai". A hill tribe ID also precludes any formal use rights or ownership rights to land.

Land Management in an Akha Village in China and Thailand

In the Akha villages of Xianfeng in China up to 1958, and Payaprai in Thailand until the early 1970s, land use and village rules for forest management were very similar. In each case, the village was surrounded by an extensive primary forest. According to local rules, villagers were not allowed to cut trees within the village gates, in the cemetery forest, or in the watershed forest, but could cut trees anywhere else for house construction and fuelwood. The Akha practiced shifting cultivation in a large area at least an hour's walk from the village through the forest. Cultivation was extensive, with swiddens opened for one to two years, followed by a fallow of 13 to 15 years. The similarities in land use in these two villages 30 to 40 years ago are striking, and underscore the importance of the differences between Akha land use in China and Thailand today, and the status of Akha in relation to the state in these two countries.

Xianfeng Village, China

In Xianfeng the communist guerrilla forces arrived in 1950, bringing the revolution with them. There was no land reform in the early 1950s, since there were no large landlords. In fact there was no change in land management until collectivization in 1958. Then Xianfeng, like other villages, became a production team within a commune that extended to Damenglong, the town in the valley below. The production team organized groups of villagers for projects such as opening a road, building a reservoir, herding, and cultivating swiddens. Less than half of available labor was assigned to swiddens, so that although swidden plots were opened on a grand scale, the total land area in upland rice was less than before. Grain shortages were a chronic problem throughout the collective period (1958-82). Ironically, state policies emphasizing grain production forced villagers to open new areas for both swiddens and wet rice fields in the 1960s. While these policies reduced forest cover, they still did not provide enough grain locally, since much of the grain was collected as taxes.

In 1982-83 economic reform policies specified that land previously held by the commune be allocated to villages and households. A committee of local villagers and two staff from the nearest Forestry Station gave Xianfeng about 500 mu (15 mu = 1 ha) of collective forest for house construction, so that a communally managed forest persisted into the reform period. The committee distributed four to five mu of freehold forest land to each household for fuelwood. Additionally, each household was allocated wet rice land and swidden land based on numbers of people in the household at that time.

Since the early 1980s, agricultural extension agents have encouraged farmers to plant perennials or cash crops in their swiddens. With the gradual transition to a more market-oriented economy, including the infrastructure to collect and process rubber and sugar cane, Akha farmers at lower elevations than Xianfeng have voluntarily moved away from swiddening. In Xianfeng, villagers stopped planting upland rice in 1989 when tin was discovered in one of their wet rice areas. Although rights to the tin have been contested locally, most Xianfeng villagers now depend on tin for their income. In 1996 Jinghong County, which includes Xianfeng, declared that villages must reduce swiddening to two mu per person by the year 2000. Because of other available opportunities, including good jobs in the city available to citizens, that transition has already been accomplished in many villages.

Payapri Village, Thailand

The earliest Ulo Akha moved to Payaprai, Thailand, over 100 years ago, but the first major change in land allocation and use for the Ulo Akha resulted from the arrival of large numbers of Loimi Akha from Burma beginning in 1973. The ongoing violence in Burma had caused hundreds of new Akha to migrate into Thailand, with many settling in Payaprai on the border. Both Ulo and Loimi Akha report that conflict soon emerged over access to shifting cultivation lands. Also, the Loimi moved in teams to open wet rice fields for each household. The Ulo, despite living in the area for decades, had not cultivated wet rice before. They learned from observing the Loimi and then went by households to open wet rice fields on lower, flatter, shifting cultivation land. The Loimi had taken most of the appropriate land by then.

In the 1980s, a highland development project (opium substitution) encompassed Payaprai, but the project had direct activities only in selected villages, not including Payaprai. At the same time an ethnic Chinese Thai with KMT (Guomindang) connections rented RFD land in the forest next to Payaprai for a nominal fee and started a tea company. He and his partners hired local Akha to open terraces and plant tea varieties from Taiwan that now sell for 1000 baht a kilo (about US\$20/kilo at the time of this research). The tea company exports high quality tea to Taiwan and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Tea company staff also taught local people how to cultivate tea, with the result that villagers made nurseries and then planted seedlings in the primary forest near their houses. Local people, however, are planting low quality local tea, which sells for 50 baht/kilo. Tea is now the main source of income for most villagers. As a result of its importance, villagers have planted tea everywhere in the understory of their community forest. As villagers try to maintain the proper balance between sunlight and shade to produce abundant tea, they have cut many trees and prevented regeneration. In the areas close to the village, the "forest" now looks like a tea plantation, with large trees scattered across the landscape.

The most recent change in land use was brought by the RFD in 1993. The RFD declared the whole area of Payaprai shifting cultivation fields a site for reforestation in honor of the fiftieth year of the king's reign. The area legally belongs to the RFD, as it has in principle since 1898, although villagers have been using this land for over 100 years. In this particular effort the Petroleum Corporation of Thailand (PPT) is funding the reforestation, participating in the "greening" of Thai business. Here in Payaprai shifting cultivation is being brought to an end rather rapidly, with no related income-generating project to help local people adjust to the loss of land.

In Payaprai only the village head has a full Thai ID card. Better-off Akha villagers rely on tea and labor in nearby towns for their income. Poorer villagers who used to depend on the swiddens for grain face a serious loss of subsistence. Villagers with hill tribe IDs can only get menial jobs in town such as in construction, restaurants, and gas stations. Some young people go through the cumbersome process to get the provincial governor's approval to work in Chiang Mai or Bangkok, but this approval must be renewed as often as every six months. Other young people, seeking to increase their incomes more rapidly, are tempted to get involved in the drug trade or other illicit activities.

Comparison

For China, the socialist conception of state building explicitly intended to include all ethnic minorities and then "civilize" them to bring them into the Chinese fold. As citizens in the nation-state, the Akha of Xianfeng have gone through all the policy swings since 1949, including class struggle meetings during the Cultural Revolution. Yet through their inclusion in major events in recent history, the Akha see themselves as part of China. As they tell their stories, the history of China since 1949 and their own history merge. Villagers may adapt land use categories to their own benefit, and will even defy certain regulations, but no one talks of pushing the state further away. Villagers simply wish government officials would listen to their requests more often.

Many young Akha adults from Xianfeng have gone through secondary school and in some cases acquired advanced degrees. They have gone outside to work in

towns and cities as teachers, tour guides, soldiers, business people, and bankers as full citizens of China. Although they continue to be identified as a minority nationality, with the image of backwardness that label carries, they are members of the Chinese society and polity.

Loss of forest cover in Xianfeng was largely caused by policies emphasizing grain production during the collective period. Xianfeng leaders think the forest around Xianfeng today is in reasonably good condition, even though they worry about a few villagers who sell fuelwood illegally to outsiders. Not surprisingly, expanding markets have in some cases brought expanding problems.

For Thailand, the capitalist version of state building included claiming all forests as state assets. In the 1980s the RFD began to regard forests as state environmental assets, still to be kept out of the hands of those who live in the hills. Meanwhile the Akha have been buffeted between projects of the MOI to settle them, and reforestation plans of the RFD that have taken away part of their land. Both agencies regard hill tribes as primitive squatters. The notion of a hill tribe ID reflects an unwillingness to accept these people as "Thai". The Akha in Payaprai do not see them as part of Thailand, although they would like to be. Many feel they are being pushed out of the hills to a life in urban areas, where they will still carry a hill tribe ID.

Almost all young people leave the village to find work when they complete sixth class. Young Akha in Payaprai report that with a hill tribe ID they could complete high school, but they wouldn't be given a diploma. Without the diploma they are limited to menial jobs that they qualify for when they finish sixth class, so that few bother to go to middle school. Akha identity as a "hill tribe", as "not Thai", leaves them without access to land rights or good employment in the legitimate economy. Some young people turn to the illicit economy, which involves potential riches, but also great danger for those whom the state would like to blame for its drug problems.

In Payaprai, the area that until 15 years ago was primary forest has become tea fields. The area is productive for some local Akha, but the development project that brought in tea, which coincided with opium substitution projects elsewhere, has also effectively caused forest degradation. More recently, the RFD has taken over the village's shifting cultivation lands for reforestation, to create a new forest on lands that used to provide grain for villagers.

References

- Pinkaew Launagramsri, On the Discourse of Hill Tribes, presented at the Workshop on Ethnic Communities in a Changing Environment, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Feb. 22-26, 1997.
- Thongchai Winichakul, personal communication, October 1997.
- Vandergeest, Peter, personal communication, June 1997.

- Xu Jianchu, personal communication, July 1996.

Notes to readers

This article was first appeared in The Common Property Resource Digest, January 1998.