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Agrarian Transformation in the Mountain Watersheds of Yunnan

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Abstract

The social and other changes brought about in China after the decollectivisation of land ownership has been an important area of study. This paper examines the dynamics of land and forest ownership over the past two decades in the mountain watersheds of Yunnan in southeast China. It examines farmers' access to land and forests and argues that the recent Sloping Land Conversion Program has recentralised control over natural resource by restricting farmers' access to land and forests. The paper shows how achievements have been limited by many poor farmers lacking information about the programme. It concludes that the failure to reorganise property relations and the programme's poor governance structure have prevented it from achieving its social and ecological objectives.

Introduction

Several studies have shown how agrarian transformation has had dramatic positive changes on developing societies (Hart et al. 1989, Sikor 2001). However, this process has also had negative impacts on rural societies in particular where rapid urbanisation has led to uneven development. Studying the conditions of agrarian transformation should help rural societies to find alternative means of improving local livelihoods.

The factors that have a significant impact on agrarian transformation at the grassroots level in China have come from land reallocation, environmental protection programmes, and reforms of village administrations. In China it is essential to look at macro-political changes to understand agrarian transformation at the grassroots level. Political changes have led to changes in control over and access to natural resources (land, forest, and water). These changes have affected farmer's livelihoods.

Over the last two decades the Chinese people have experienced dramatic changes with the introduction of the Household Responsibility System and the socialist market economy. These have been the main forces behind the push for agrarian transformation. In addition, Yunnan in southwest China, as a remote mountainous area with a rich forest cover, has been heavily affected by the environmental protection policies and the process of decentralisation. These policies are designed to conserve the environment and strengthen local livelihoods. The main policies are the Policy on Nature Reserves and Biodiversity Conservation, 1985, the Natural Forest Protection Program, 1998 (NFPP), the Village Organic Law and Building Grassroots Democracy Programme, 1998, and the Sloping Land Conversion Program, 1999 (SLCP).

The implementation of these policies has fundamentally changed agrarian relations and local resource management practices in Yunnan's upper watersheds. They are characterised by de-collectivisation and market liberalisation and have strengthened local control over natural resources and improved local livelihoods. The implementation of these policies has contributed to China's rapid economic growth that has lifted millions out of poverty.

Questions were raised at the time these policies were introduced about how they would effect farmers' access to resources. There were concerns that environmental protection policies could undermine local livelihoods and make some people poorer. The accompanying strict regulations might undermine local sustainable practices and the diversification of resource use and lead to conflicts over access to natural resources.

This study investigates the effect of the implementation of the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) in Baoshan prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. It moves from a historical comparison of agrarian transformations and their effects on farmers' access to land to the impact of the programme on farmers' access to land. Some important terms are defined in Box 19.1.

Box 19.1: Key concepts relating to agrarian transformation in Yunnan

Access – Resource access is composed of direct physical access, market access, labour access, access to capital, access to social relations, and access to knowledge;

Institutions – for environmental issues, institutions are the mediator of the people-environment relationship. Institutions constrain some activities and facilitate others. Some actors may attempt to bypass these constraints by creating new institutions that better suit their interests (He 2002:39)

Governance – governance is the framework of social, cultural and economic systems and legal and political structures within which humanity organises its affairs (Hillman 2003). It is the science of decision-making; and

Power relations – power is the capability to influence or dominate others to achieve a goal, despite resistance or rebellion (Pattana 1999). Studies on access to natural resources must look at the underlying bundles of power relations that govern people's access to resources.

Macro policies and the market are the key factors affecting governance at the local level. Local institutions and governance systems change in line with changes in policies and the market situation. Local institutions and governance systems structure local power relations that govern people's access to natural resources. The current research looks at the influence of gender, socio-economic status, age, politics and other factors that influence access to resources and looks at how far local people's rights and access are differentiated by power relations. It also explores how the local governance system affects farmers' access to natural resources. Figure 19.1 gives the conceptual framework of how the present study was carried out.

Policy Dynamics and Agrarian Transformation in China

In China over the last fifty years several dramatic changes have led to agrarian transformation. These policies have affected hundreds of millions of rural peasants.

The Mao era

Events in the Mao Era (1949-1978) had huge effects on social transformation in China. The first land reform (1947-1952) redistributed land ownership rights. It eliminated the largest

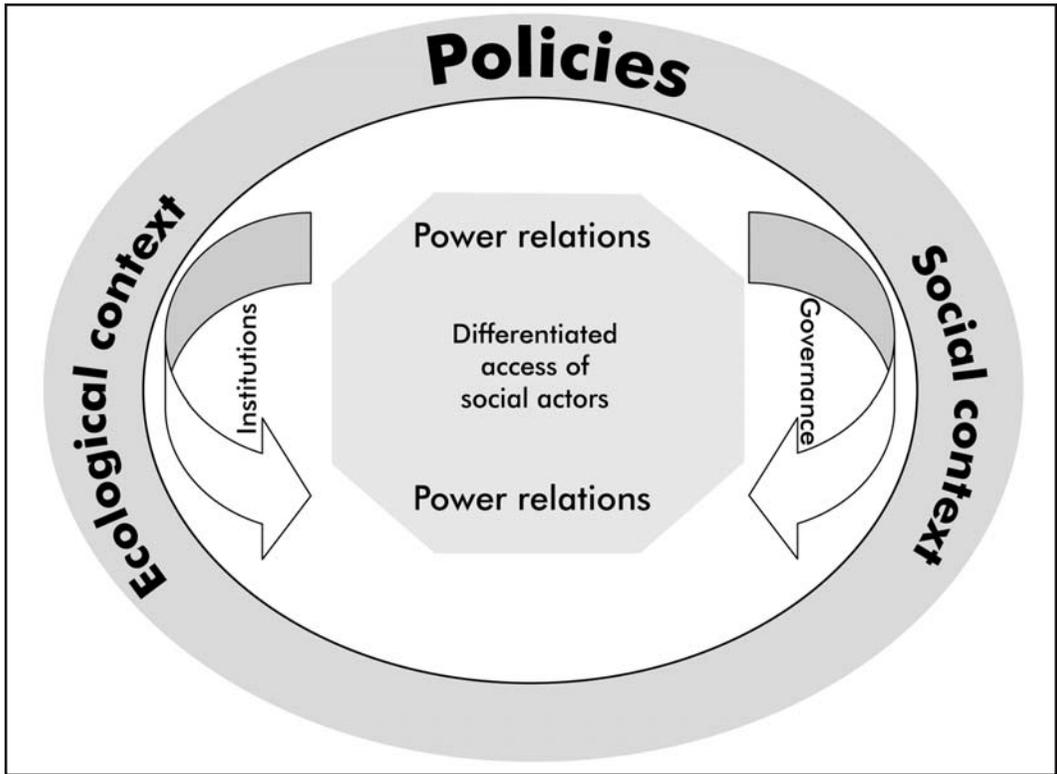


Figure 19.1: **Conceptual framework of agrarian transformation**

inequalities in property ownership at village level whilst affirming the ownership rights of individual cultivators (Selden and Lu 1993, Ho 2001). It promoted the changeover from feudal to socialistic means of grain production. This reform enhanced farmers' access to land and increased social equity.

Maoist agrarian policy continued through collectivisation. This happened from 1955 to 1978 through the abolition of private land ownership. Formal ownership rights to land and other means of production were shifted from individuals to collectives at the village or village sub-unit levels (Selden and Lu 1993, Hu 1997). The collective system controlled which crops farmers grew, the availability and distribution of inputs, prices of inputs and crops, and marketing. An important complement to this collective-state control of land rights were private plots (*ziliudi*) (Selden and Lu 1993). Rural households were allowed to cultivate about five percent of local cultivable areas where they could choose which crops to grow and what inputs to apply, and whether to consume or market the produce. Collectivisation also applied to forest lands.

Collectivisation increased poverty and food shortages. It led to the widespread misuse of forest resources and discouraged farmers from producing grain. Farmers lost access to and control over land and were not able to choose which crops to plant and how to grow and market them. Government policy had mandated the formation of agricultural collectives and subjected the allocation of agricultural inputs to administrative decisions.

Post-Mao land reforms

The lessons learned in the Mao Era led, in the early 1980s, to the Chinese government instituting reforms based on individual household land tenure. Farmland was reallocated to peasant households on the basis of their size. The farmers made contracts with collectives. Farmers were given the right to farm contracted lands (*zheren tian*) for 15 years – a system known as the Household Responsibility System. These lands are distinguished from the private plots (*ziliu di*) that farmers were given rights to in the 1950s. The Household Responsibility System is a sort of tenant farming system where the collective ownership of land is combined with private ownership of capital and household use-rights (Hu 1997).

This system promoted decentralisation and deregulation (Zuo and Xu 2001, He 2002) as the government allows farmers to make all decisions related to production, although farmers must fulfil state quotas for grain and cotton. Therefore, throughout the Chinese countryside rural households have become semi-autonomous producers operating within a collective framework (Selden and Lu 1993). This expanded role of rural households and the reduction of, and in many regions the elimination of, collective agricultural production has restructured land ownership rights across rural China.

The consequences have been mostly positive with rapid economic growth. This came about as farmers now had incentives to produce crops. Market liberalisation has given farmers more opportunities to market surpluses.

Along with the redistribution of agricultural land the government also reallocated forest lands through the Two Mountain System. This system recognises freehold forest land (*ziliu shan*) and responsibility forest land (*zheren shan*). Freehold land was generally poorly forested or barren and is relatively close to settlements. This land was allocated to farmers to grow trees for their subsistence needs (Zuo 1995). Responsibility forest land is leased to households or collectives to encourage forest conservation. Freehold land is leased on an unlimited-time basis, whilst the length of contracts for responsibility land are negotiated between villages and households (Zuo 1995).

However, the Two Mountain System has not worked as well as the Household Responsibility System. Studies have found a decline in forest areas as market forces have led to many forests being cut for cash incomes. This has led to social conflicts over access to forest resources.

To sum up, the Household Responsibility System and the Two Mountain System were the main land reform strategies carried out after the Mao Era. This period is referred to as the Deng era as they were carried out under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The Household Responsibility System motivated farmers to produce crops and led to rapid economic growth. The de-collectivisation of benefit distribution and land access and the decentralisation of decision-making strengthened farmers' access to land and forestry resources. This, however, led to social inequality and environmental degradation. While decollectivisation allowed for individual development, the lack of access to information, policy support, and socioeconomic differences led to a widening of the gap between rich and poor people.

At this time increasing environmental degradation became a serious problem. The over-exploitation of land (Hu 1997), forests (Zheng et al. 2001), and the short-sighted management of natural resources were encouraged by the short tenure periods and ambiguities in land

property rights. People who worked their land irresponsibly, exploiting it for short term gain, gained more than people who worked it responsibly.

Environmental conservation in the post-Deng era

Two decades of Deng's reform policies had serious negative impacts on the environment (Muldavin 1996, Hu 1997, Zheng et al. 2001, He 2002). The following government launched environmental protection policies such as the Policy on Nature Reserves and Biodiversity Conservation, 1985, the Natural Forest Protection Program, 1998 that recognises the environmental services provided by forests, and the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP), 1999.

The SLCP aims to reduce erosion and soil loss and promote more sustainable agriculture by converting agricultural land with slopes exceeding 25 degrees into forested land with compensation for affected farmers. This policy has led to the need to find alternative food and income sources for households that give up farmland.

Farmers carry out cropland conversion according to set amounts and schedules, and forestry agencies examine and check its implementation. Farmers who convert their farmland are compensated with grain – 150 kg of unprocessed grains per mu of land (1 ha = 15 mu) per year in upper reaches of Yangtze river and 100 kg per mu in upper Yellow river, and cash payments (US\$2.4 per mu per year). Farmers need completed cropland conversion task cards and examination certificates to get this compensation. These subsidies have strengthened rural economies.

The SLCP-driven conversion of agricultural land into forest land has fundamentally changed peasants' control over access to land. SLCP is associated with bundles of regulations that regulate peasants' use of land.

Five types of land

The various land reforms and policies have left five main types of land where farmers have rights to personal benefit (Table 19.1). This table shows the official legal position although, as the next section shows, the situation differs in practice.

Effects of the Land Conversion Programme

Access to land

SLCP has raised many issues about access to land. Property rights are fundamental to the means of production. Chinese political scientists were previously much concerned with analysing the conflict between socialism and capitalism. The focus has now shifted from questioning capitalism or socialism and ownership to questioning the bundles of rights associated with properties that farmers can exercise and the security of those rights.

The distinctive Chinese concepts of landownership become comprehensible when they are broken into their component elements (Selden and Lu 1993). Land rights in China have been organised around the following elements since 1955:

- formal land ownership rights;
- use rights over the cultivation, investments, industry, mining and construction of land;
- transfer rights over the purchase, sale, rent, contracting, or inheritance of land;

Table 19.1: Official land types in China, 2003

Types of land	Basic Characteristics
Private plots (<i>ziliu di</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • small pieces of land allocated to households that are owned by communities with households having use rights • farmers have the right to cultivate these plots including crop choice, control of the labour process, and consumption and marketing rights
Responsibility land (<i>zheren tian</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allocated collective land with households having contracted use rights • farmers must fulfil a state procurement quota for grain and cotton that can be fulfilled in cash
Private forest land (<i>ziliu shan</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • barren lands owned by communities and allocated to farmer households for afforestation • farmers own the trees, but large-scale use of trees or bamboo needs license from forest department
Responsibility forest land (<i>zheren shan</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collective forested lands classified based on administrative boundaries, forest statutes, and age, and allocated to farm households who have partial management rights • managed by farmer households individually or collectively • farmers own non-timber forest products. Harvesting needs permits from forest department
Converted land (<i>tuigeng di</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agricultural land converted into forests or grasslands and compensated for by the government • strict management regulations with no grazing and intercropping allowed and fixed patterns for plantations • belongs to collectives, but when farmers renew their contracts land is reclassified as converted agricultural land

- product rights over the consumption and sale of products from the land; and
- rights over the labour of those attached to the land.

However, actual land ownership rights in China are 'ambiguous' (Ho 2000 and 2001). Although village land is legally owned by collectives, what is collectively owned has not been clear since the so-called decollectivisation process. The lack of real power to make decisions on leasing land and the lack of a collective governance structure has made land ownership ambiguous at the collective level. Although farmers do have more decision-making power, the state does not allow the existence of private property. The SLCP has added to this ambiguity and complexity.

The SLCP conversions saw local people's rights shift from having tenure over agricultural land to tenure over forest land. This changes what the farmers can do with these lands. The programme's strict regulations forbid grazing and intercropping. Nobody knows about the future of those lands and in particular what rights farmers have to use these area's forest resources. This ambiguity makes tenure insecure.

Although trees on converted land belong to farmers, it is not clear whether or not they can freely use them. Farmers can use private forest land and responsibility forest land as long as they do not damage trees. Timber harvesting is permitted by license. On converted lands, farmers have the right to use and market fruits from trees planted for economic reasons. It is not however clear whether farmers can cut trees down if the market for a type of fruit has a bad future and whether or not they can harvest timber from trees planted for ecological reasons. Government subsidies end after five years for economic tree plantations and after seven years for ecological tree plantations.

Farmers have to apply for licenses to harvest trees from private forest and responsibility forest land. However, these are hardly ever given. This study found that in Baoshan 91% of farmers were concerned about their rights to harvest trees once government subsidies ended. A number were also unsure whether or not they would be able to use the land in other ways by grazing their livestock, intercropping, and harvesting non-timber forest products. Some were concerned about the security of their tenure whilst some were concerned about whether or not they could pass the land on to their children. The main concern was over the stability of SLCP policies with the general feeling being that major policy changes could well take place.

Access to information

Access to information is crucial in rural transformation. The most important information is about markets and policies. The SLCP has strict regulations and prescribed means of compensation. It also advocates tree planting and subsidies to reduce poverty. The system of subsidies and benefit calculation is complex. The dissemination of this complicated policy has been difficult for local government.

This study found that farmers who lacked information about SLCP were at a disadvantage. For example, many people in remote and poor villages in Baoshan had never heard of SLCP. In Bawan village it was found that several outsiders had taken over contracts for cultivating sloping areas of land by paying local villagers US\$6 per mu of land per year. The outsiders promised that they would give up the contract after seven years leaving the forest belonging to the village. Later these outsiders took part in the SLCP conversion programme. The outsiders thus made a good profit receiving 150 kg of grain per mu and US\$6 for tree seeds and US\$2.5 for education compensation per mu of converted land.

Cases were also found where outsiders rented land at US\$4 per mu per year for 10 years. These peasants from other villages had come to know about the benefits. The study found that several farmers in Baoshan misunderstood SLCP due to their lack of information and lack of access to the authorities. Access to information shapes farmers' access to participation in SLCP and leads to uneven rural development.

Much of this area's farmland has a slope of more than 25 degrees. The main crop is maize with average yields being only 100-150 kg per year. These poor villagers hoped that SLCP could improve their livelihoods and help them find new sources of income.

Although many villagers know about the benefits of SLCP, they often do not know how to take part. In fact, taking part simply involves applying to the local government. But, one villager said that the local authorities never replied to his applications.

Strangely some lowland villages with farmland having slopes of less than 25 degrees have been accepted into the programme. These villages have social relations with the local government and forest authorities giving them good access to information.

Governance of implementation

The six line agencies involved in implementing SLCP are the Planning Commission of Minority Nationality Affairs, the Department of Finance, the Department of Grain Supply, the Department of Land, the Department of Forestry, and the Department of Animal Husbandry. This makes the SLCP difficult to coordinate.

The SLCP's centralised approach gives little space for local people to participate. The forestry sector, with the assistance of township governments, dominates the process. Every year, in accordance with the prescribed quota, the Baoshan Forestry Bureau distributes quotas for land to be converted in each township. The townships fulfil these quotas in accordance with applications and ecological priorities.

SLCP is supposed to be implemented in line with local people's wishes. However, this principle is ambiguous and has been interpreted as only meaning local people's willingness to participate rather than their wishes to see the programme taking a certain shape. In practice, locals' willingness to participate is respected, but their needs are not. In Baoshan, for example, many farmers wanted to plant a mix of tree species; but were not allowed. Only walnut trees were planted in most villages. The official view is that these trees are an ecological tree that gives future economic benefits, and so farmers can get seven years of subsidies from the ecological tree and in the future get cash incomes from selling walnuts. However, this is not actually true as the density of tree planting should be 85 trees per mu for an ecological tree plantation but only 30 trees per mu for producing walnuts. The trees will not produce saleable walnuts at the closer spacing.

Such uncertainties cause village people to be concerned. The study found that they were not sure whether they could thin out the walnut plantations to promote nut production. Doing this would convert the ecological forest into an economic forest which would conflict with the programme's main objective of soil conservation. Another concern was that a great increase in walnut production would lead to a drop in market prices. Experiences with previous government programmes such as the large-scale planting of sugar cane, worries them. In spite of its claim to be promoting decentralisation the stipulation of which species to plant points to continued centralised governance.

In addition, the selection of priority target areas, the preparation and distribution of seedling trees, and monitoring are all centralised with the forestry line agency and township governments. A major problem is that local government agencies often neglect remote areas where it is more difficult to work but where the needs for environmental improvement are greatest.

The rushed implementation of SLCP means that it has produced sub-optimal results (Zuo 2002). The burden on local government personnel has been high as it often takes up two month's-worth of all their staff's working time. This centralised structure of governance framework might not achieve both ecological and economic development in the mountainous areas of Yunnan.

Comparison of access to five types of land

The institutional arrangements means that the practice of rights to land is ambiguous at the grassroots level. Table 19.2 explains the five land types that people in the Yunnan mountainous watersheds have rights to.

Land types \ Access	Private plots (Ziliu Di)	Responsibility land (Zhenren Tian)	Private forestland (Ziliu shan)	Responsibility forest land (Zheren shan)
Formal ownership	collectives	collectives	collectives	collectives
Formal use rights	farmers	farmers	farmers	farmers
Form of use entitlement	land titles	30-50 year contracts with collectives	forest land titles	50-70 year contracts with collectives
Tax system	yes	yes	none	none
Species choice	no restrictions	limited self-determination in accord with state quotas and guidance	no restrictions	no restrictions
Harvesting	no restrictions	no restrictions	no restrictions on small scale timber harvesting. Permits needed to cut large trees	no restrictions on cutting fuelwood and gathering non-timber forest products. Need permits to cut large trees
Marketing products	self-determinations	self-determination after meeting state quotas	centralised control of timber market	non-commercial use of timber

Conclusions

This paper is only a preliminary study and the following findings should not be generalised. These concluding remarks raise several practical considerations for improving SLCP.

Ecological aspects

SLCP is an ambitious programme by which the government hopes to readjust the negative impacts of rapid economic development on the ecological environment. It is also the main programme to address soil erosion in mountain watersheds. However, the weakness of programme implementation has led to only limited achievements. The poor definition of priority target areas has been the main reason for this. Studies have found that productive lands with less steep slopes have been converted. As a result, in comparison with agricultural cultivation, the control of soil erosion through this programme has been problematic. Strictly obeying the policy in defining priority areas would have avoided such problems.

Moreover, due to the short-cut implementation of SCLP, the less choice in tree species, and centralised control of tree selection has resulted in the new problem of monocultures. Monoculture plantations can cause market surpluses and ecological instability due to pest infestations. The diversification of species in plantations is crucial. Promoting local participation in decision-making on tree selection is the key to improving the output of SLCP. Officials should respect local willingness and consider local needs more carefully.

Socioeconomic aspects

The SLCP, with its land conversion and poverty reduction focus is a major force for agrarian transformation in China. The conversion of less productive land and the provision of subsidies is helping to balance out inequalities caused by differences in geography. However, poor programme implementation has increased social differentiation. Remote villagers' lack of access to information has prevented them from benefiting. In contrast, villagers with good access to information have benefited more from the programme. In many cases benefits meant for poor people have gone to the better off. Therefore, transparency of information and improved information dissemination is essential.

One risk of the programme is that planting only one or two species of fruit tree will lead to a glut in the market. SLCP should consider promoting the diversification of rural production. Increased local participation in decision making would help diversify local production and improve local economies.

Political aspects

The SLCP's ecological and socioeconomic goal can be achieved by making political adjustments. The negative and unexpected consequences all result from a politically weak government framework. As well as improving access to information and increasing local participation in decision-making the following needs to be done.

Tax reform – The taxation system on agricultural land continues to be applied to the converted land that is no longer under agriculture. The SLCP does not allow farmers to grow crops on the converted land but still taxes them at the rate for cropping land. This increases transaction costs and causes local suffering.

Property rights – The security of property rights is a fundamental issue governing whether or not farmers take part in the scheme. Privatisation is not necessarily the best way to secure land tenure, but respect for local rights to resource use and an extension of contract periods should be implemented. In addition, rights to the use of land and forests should be allowed to be passed from parents to children. Village courts should be established to defend local rights.

Decentralisation – Thirdly, SLCP is a centralised programme. The democratised local bodies are little involved in the programme. The centralised programme has increased the burden of local government and made it inefficient and ineffective. Increasing the role of democratised local bodies in programme implementation would improve the ecological, economic and social outcomes of SLCP.

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