

BORDER LANDSCAPES

The Politics of Akha Land Use in China and Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

THE JEEP LUMBERS UP A DIRT ROAD FROM THE XISHUANGBANNA VALLEY, a tropical site in southern Yunnan in China, to Mengsong, an Akha settlement at the top of the ridge. We pass villages half hidden in the trees and large forests that look good from a moving vehicle. At last we arrive, emerging from the forest onto a spectacular plain atop the mountain that separates China from Burma. Wooded hills ring the plain, with Akha hamlets nestled in the folds where slopes meet the level land. This is an old settlement, with clans that have lived here for more than 250 years. An Akha man dressed in faded army green welcomes me and points out the lone tree in the distance that marks the Burma border. In the main hamlet, adults and children throng the market. A few soldiers from one of the Burmese rebel armies amble with their purchases back toward the border. Since Mengsong is also home to a Chinese military post, I assume that the soldiers from Burma are tolerated. My guide leads me to a large old-growth forest, woods where Akha elders have forbidden cutting for many generations. In the evening, over a lavish meal of wild game and many unfamiliar vegetables, villagers complain that agricultural extension agents from the valley introduce varieties of fruit trees and grains suitable for the tropics, but not for Mengsong at 1,600 meters. Mengsong is firmly enclosed within China, yet is right on the border. Even in this first visit, I decide that this will be the site for the China half of my research.

Two months later, in another jeep on a dirt road severely rutted by mon-

soon torrents, I approach another Akha village, this one in Thailand. After passing hamlets with extensive fields and scant clumps of trees, the jeep suddenly turns onto a ridge carpeted in dense forest, reputed to be the largest contiguous wooded area in Mae Faluang District of northern Chiang Rai Province. I am about to arrive in Akhapu, settled four generations ago by ancestors of current residents.¹ Akhapu is thought to be the oldest and one of the largest Akha settlements in Thailand. Over dinner, the heads of Loimi and Ulo Akha villages extol the harmony between the two Akha groups living beside one another in Akhapu. I later discover that this harmony was manufactured for my visit—Loimi and Ulo Akha, who migrated here from Burma at different times, have serious conflicts as a result of declining access to land. The village heads also carefully point out that no one here uses heroin, implying that this would be a safe place for me to live. I am intrigued with this locale an hour's walk from the Burma border, with Taiwan-funded tea plantations, large forests, and numerous villagers who speak Chinese. There are obvious signs of wealth—people with trucks, large houses, and cell phones—as well as farmers with tiny, fragile houses and shredded clothing. For the Thailand half of my research, I have found my site.

I had arrived on the geographic peripheries of two major nation-states, China and Thailand (see fig. 1) to investigate border landscapes. China and Thailand represent dramatically different political regimes, yet they share a common set of upland peoples along the borders with Burma. I chose one of these peoples, who call themselves Akha, for a comparative study of border landscapes in two distinctly different settings.

I was interested in “border” in two senses. The first sense means the margin or edge of a nation-state. From the vantage point of Beijing or Bangkok, the two national capitals, these two Akha villages are on the extreme periphery (see fig. 2). In both capitals, modernizing policies over the past several decades have sought to enclose these border areas within the national realm. Using border in this sense, as margin or periphery of a large political entity, I wanted to trace how Akha access to resources and land management had evolved as they and the forests around them became incorporated within the national boundaries and state imaginations in China and Thailand.

The second sense of “border” is a dividing line that links as well as separates people in two nation-states, including the social relationships surrounding that line. Each village chosen for my research was located within walking distance of the Burma border. In both Mongsong and Akhapu, some villagers had moved back and forth between the adjacent Shan State of Burma and their current location. Taking border as boundary line, I set out to

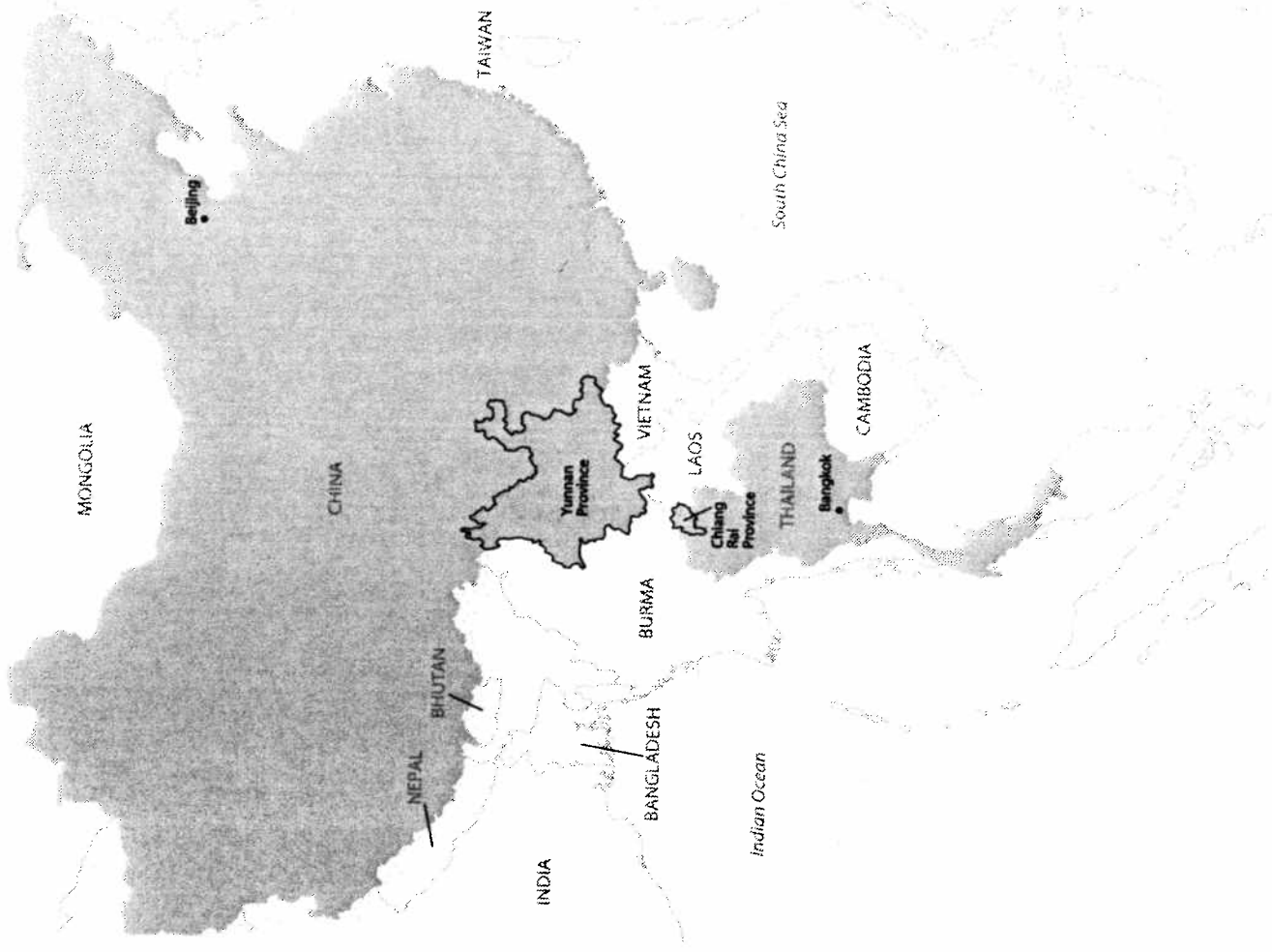


FIG. 1. China and Thailand

discover how border dynamics and cross-border relationships had shaped Akha access to resources and land use in each case.

Farmers in both Mongsong and Akhapu have experienced the first meaning of border, as periphery, through processes of incorporation that had occurred over the past fifty to sixty years, within the life experience of older villagers. In both nation-states, Akha have been marginalized by their ethnicity, their form of land use, and their upland location removed from mainstream lowland societies. I already knew that in China, Akha were citizens with formal property rights in land and forests, while Akha in Thailand were "hill tribes" and mostly not citizens, without legal rights to land or trees. What was less clear was how Akha in these two places had arrived at this point of inclusion in one nation-state and exclusion from the other. I also knew that the bulk of forests in China had been designated as subsistence resources for villagers, while in Thailand forests had been claimed as state resources to be used for national purposes. The distinction was clear—in Thailand and China, Akha and forests were defined remarkably differently.

The second meaning of border, as a dividing line with dynamics across it, has an intriguingly complex history in both village sites. In premodern eras in each village, before their enclosure in China and Thailand, these upland farmers had been clients of lowland Tai or Shan princes, rulers of small principalities that in turn paid tribute to larger kingdoms and empires.² These small principalities constituted the frontiers or border realms between larger political entities. I wanted to find out how premodern border dynamics, with border reaches comprised of tributary principalities, had been translated into modern border practices surrounding clearly delineated lines separating major nation-states. Had the patron-client relationships that characterized principalities disappeared under modernizing regimes? And how had Akha villagers, who surely had relatives and trade relationships in Burma in each case, negotiated the transition to being divided from them by a national line? My questions, then, focused on processes of Akha enclosure within China and Thailand, as well as the changing border dynamics resulting when clear boundaries were drawn between upland peoples related by common social and land-use histories. My overall question concerned how these processes had combined to produce border landscapes in the distinctly different realms of China and Thailand.

In addition to looking at processes, I also wanted to assess current outcomes. As of the time of my stay (1996–97), how were Akha livelihoods faring under these very different processes of incorporation? Similarly, what was the condition of Akha forests under these distinct policy regimes? Based

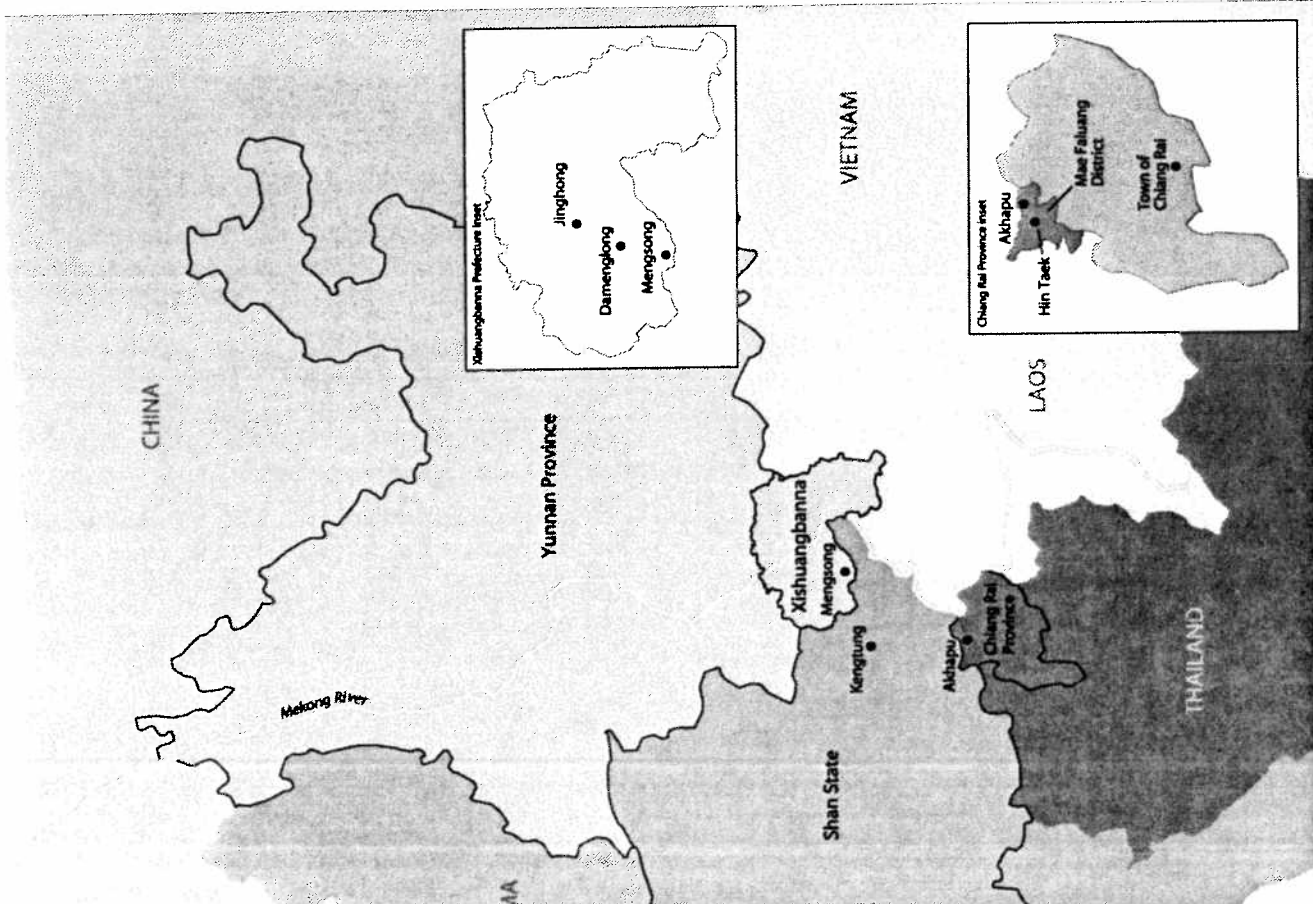


FIG. 2. Research sites

on the initial dichotomy of conditions in China and Thailand, I expected to find Akha in Mengsong doing reasonably well under China's drive for economic development, and Akha in Akhapu rapidly losing land and sliding into poverty, as they were elsewhere in Thailand. I also anticipated that Akha forests in China would be in good condition, while those in Thailand would be shrinking rapidly and declining in quality. My initial impressions of both villages suggested that the outcomes were not so clear-cut. So what was going on?

Over many months in each village, I began to untangle the ways that Akha farmers—men and women of differing ages and political positions—made use of their upland, border locales. Their daily lives involved producing food and other products in mountainous terrain, engaging with state agents and traders, and crossing the border for a variety of purposes. For Akha in Mengsong and Akhapu, border as margin and border as dividing line often intersected in daily activities, although villagers understood the difference. For much of the past two thousand years, Akha farmers have lived in the mountains that now link China and mainland Southeast Asia and have relied on shifting cultivation in hilly, wooded sites to grow upland rice and a rich array of vegetables. As of 1996, in addition to cultivating upland rice in swiddens (shifting-cultivation fields), Akha in both villages also managed wet rice fields, raised large numbers of livestock, hunted wild game, and collected many kinds of wild fruits, vegetables, and medicinal herbs in surrounding fields and forests. Akha cultivation practices revolved around complex upland environments that varied greatly in elevation and microclimate. Akha farmers exploited these diverse sites by nurturing an astonishing array of trees and plants, whether wild or cultivated. Through practices of shifting cultivation, in which farmers open an area of forest to plant upland rice for a year or two and then allow it to regenerate into forest, Akha farmers knew how to take full advantage of products in different stages of regeneration. In other words, Akha landscapes in both China and Thailand were complex and mutable, both spatially and temporally, and produced a great diversity of goods. This diversity and flexibility of production, in fact, constituted Akha strength in engaging with shifting political regimes.

Beyond their understanding of ecological processes, Akha farmers manipulated their complex environments to meet daily needs, respond to emergencies, maneuver around state extractions, and to produce for markets. In fact, farmers refashioned their landscapes as a means to negotiate with both state agents and border patrons. Akha took advantage of the com-

plexity of their land uses and regeneration pathways to deal with state administrators, traders, and diverse political figures. This ability to adjust complicated land uses over time in response to local needs, state plans, and border possibilities is what I call “landscape plasticity.”

I first became aware of landscape plasticity and the extent of farmers' use of it early in my field research when I was trekking with a small group of farmers. We were covering all the land areas of Xianfeng, the Akha hamlet in China. At one point, when we had stopped on a ridge, they mentioned that the prefecture government planned to build a reservoir that would inundate much of the hamlet forest we could see stretching out in the valley below. The dam for the reservoir would generate electricity for lowland towns in both China and Burma. This plan was news to me and I reacted with horror. The villagers, however, reacted differently. They pointed to areas of pasture that they would regenerate into trees, because forests were necessary for survival. They would meanwhile move the pastures downslope, taking out some shifting-cultivation fields. They would also open more wet rice fields on their lowest elevation lands. At that moment, I experienced a sudden understanding of these farmers' knowledge and practice of a processual landscape. I also immediately realized the conceptual chasm between their understanding and the usual state vision of set property rights on mapped landscapes for which annual production estimates are made. I began to comprehend the extent and scale at which these farmers could imagine their landscape differently and plan the transition to a new mosaic of land uses. I had previously pictured individuals and households planning on the scale of a swidden and its various stages of regeneration. But here were farmers strategizing on a landscape scale and planning for forests that would not be usable for fifteen to twenty years.

Following this experience, I began to see landscapes not just as topography and land cover, but as sites for maneuvering and struggle. In diverse and sometimes conflicting ways, Akha have produced their livelihoods at the juncture of state actions, border possibilities, and their own sedimented histories in each place. This is the realm of border landscapes.

As of 1997, in each village the possibility for using flexible, plastic landscapes was being undermined. First, state policies for agriculture and forestry had separated cultivated fields from areas of woods, limiting the practice of shifting cultivation. Second, policies had designated property rights in land and trees, mapping out clear areas with known owners or users. Third, policies and development projects had introduced the intensive production of fewer crops on smaller land areas. All three of these steps

had reduced landscape plasticity, although in very different ways in China and Thailand.

Another kind of threat to landscape plasticity came from Akha village heads, local chiefs with state appointment to keep order in border realms. These village heads limited landscape plasticity in two ways: (1) by using their connections on both sides of the border to set themselves up as border patrons controlling local resource access and skewing the benefits to themselves; and (2) by introducing state-sponsored simplified land-use practices in ways that linked these border heads to lowland planners and sources of money. In other words, Akha village heads used the border in both senses, manipulating the border-as-line with relations across it to control resource access and collaborating with state agents to include other villagers more securely in the realm of border-as-margin of the nation-state. Through combining their use of border in both senses, village heads colluded with elite actors on both sides of the border to enhance their own roles as border guardians and to further marginalize other Akha. These practices played out in dramatically different ways in China and Thailand, with distinct outcomes for Akha farmers and the practice of plastic landscapes.

In sum, border landscapes encapsulate the conjuncture of two interrelated processes: the intersection of Akha practice and state plans under two very different regimes (China and Thailand); and the mediation of these intersections by border dynamics.

In each country, the Akha hamlet of study is situated within a region that comprises numerous ethnic groups, with Tai in the lowlands and a similar, but not identical, set of hill groups in the uplands. This political and spatial arrangement of lowland and upland ethnic peoples is common in adjacent parts of Burma and Laos as well.³ The regions of study are Xishuangbanna Prefecture in China and Chiang Rai Province in Thailand (see fig. 2). Each has been the target of a complex array of efforts by state agents, and recently by development experts and entrepreneurs, to integrate it into economic development.

Until the Chinese revolution, Xishuangbanna Prefecture was a Tai Buddhist principality, Sipsongpanna, with strong links to what is now Southeast Asia. The principality was inhabited primarily by Tai wet-rice cultivators in the valley and an array of peoples who practiced shifting cultivation in the hills. Following the revolution of 1949, the central government changed the area's name and sent thousands of Han Chinese to Xishuangbanna to open and run state rubber farms to make China self-sufficient in rubber. These state farms have taken out most of the lowland tropical forest that

once carpeted the valley. In the economic reform period since 1982, state extension efforts have promoted cash crops for farmers at all altitudes, and policies have encouraged villager participation in markets. In the late 1990s, Akha and other hill farmers at low to midslope elevations planted high-value fruits, vegetables, and medicinal herbs, as well as rubber trees in their former shifting-cultivation fields. Upland farmers opened areas for wet rice as well as fruit orchards and sugar cane, and state policies were slowly bringing shifting cultivation to an end.

Over the past fifty years, state projects have also seriously reduced forest cover. From 1949 until the early 1980s, central planners considered forests to be an inefficient land use. Agricultural policies from the 1950s through the 1970s ensured that huge expanses of forest were cut to make room for grain production. With China's opening up to outside influences in the early 1980s, international advisors persuaded policy makers to manage forests for both protection and use. These advisors also introduced the understanding, common in environment and development circles, that shifting cultivation was destructive to forests and watersheds. Accordingly, over the past twenty-some years, agriculture and forestry departments have moved to stop shifting cultivation, including in Mengsong. To the extent that they have succeeded, Akha scope to use flexible landscapes has also been greatly curtailed.

Akha send their children to school, some of them through middle and high school, and a handful through university. As a consequence, Akha can be found throughout Xishuangbanna on the staff of every government office, school, bank, and business. As the head of one Akha hamlet put it, "In the next generation, we will be Chinese." In fact, Akha are already Chinese citizens, as they have been since the revolution. In another sense, however, they will not be Han: each ID card identifies the bearer's minority nationality, a marker of backwardness.

Life in lowland Xishuangbanna reflects the rapid transformations of the landscape and livelihoods of Tai, Han, Lahu, Jinuo, Akha and other residents in response to a bustling economy, as well as the ambition on the part of many young people of whatever ethnicity to become "urban," "modern," and "rich." Xishuangbanna has been a provincial target for tourist development, luring foreign and Chinese visitors to view China's colorful minority nationalities in one of the country's few tropical areas. Although not entirely successful, this tourist business has produced numerous hotels, restaurants, and fly-by-night tour guides in Jinghong. As the capital of Xishuangbanna, Jinghong is a frontier town, complete with prostitution, gambling, and growing use of drugs such as heroin and amphetamines.

ethnic groups similar to those in nearby China and Thailand.⁴ In the 1950s, several of these ethnic peoples organized armed political movements to fend off inclusion in Burma. To add to the complexity, some of these so-called rebel armies, together with Nationalist troops escaping from China, were supported by Taiwan and Thailand, while others, including the Communist Party of Burma, were funded by China. In a mini-Cold War arena, these rebel armies sometimes fought against each other as well as against the Burmese army. In this highly contested and violent milieu, in which all parties sold opium to fund their efforts, so-called drug lords introduced large-scale collection of opium, and later heroin and amphetamines, to sell to the international drug cartel. Often caught in the middle of battles, or forced to be unpaid porters for the Burmese army, upland farmers began to flee in large numbers over the border into Thailand. Those who stayed behind use shifting cultivation to produce opium and grain in what are still reputed to be vast stretches of primary forest.

On the Thailand side, Chiang Rai Province, another former Tai principality, is experiencing economic development through tourism and a dynamic real-estate market, a market somewhat variable and muted since the economic crisis beginning in 1997. For Thais, the good life is urban, or urbanlike, and part of the urban experience is to retreat occasionally to resorts in the mountains amid nature tamed into golf courses. Overseas tourists come to see the town of Chiang Rai, to tour colorful hill tribe villages, and until recently, to smoke a little opium. Chiang Rai and the far north have a reputation as being slightly dangerous and wonderfully exotic, qualities attractive to urban foreigners.

Much of Chiang Rai Province was forested until fairly recently, when a combination of government-approved logging operations, lowland Thais moving into the hills, and a sudden influx of people fleeing the violence in Burma rapidly took a toll on the forests. In the 1980s, there were a cluster of major international highland development projects across northern Thailand to end opium cultivation and substitute other cash crops, such as cabbages. A general outcome of the projects was agricultural intensification on much-reduced areas of land. More recently, the Royal Forestry Department has been reclaiming both forests and shifting-cultivation lands. In the late 1990s, Akha villages at all elevations were losing their land, whether to state reforestation efforts and protected areas or to enterprises such as golf courses and resorts. The loss of land, together with sedentarized production of cash crops, has nearly eliminated Akha flexible land uses.

In Akha villages across the north, people sense uneasily that government

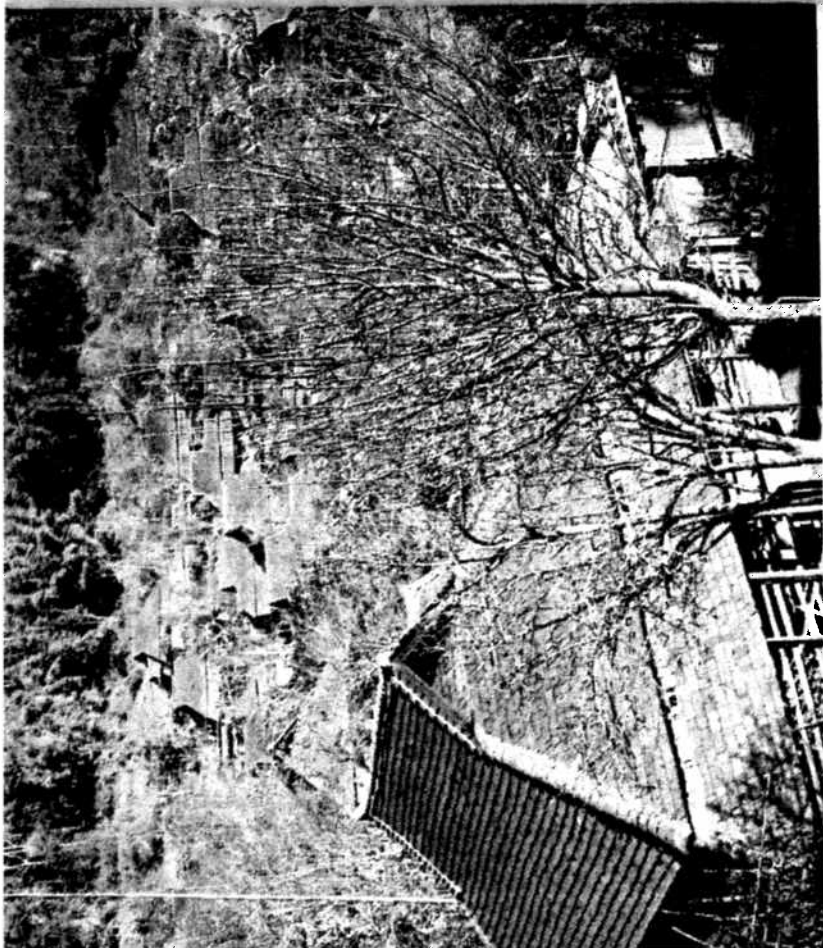


FIG. 3. A Mengsong hamlet

Unsurprisingly, there is an increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS in Jinghong and surrounding villages, one of the high costs of "modernity," especially in a border town close to Burma, the source of many drugs.

In Xianfeng hamlet in Mengsong, 1,000 meters above Jinghong on the ridge separating China and Burma (see fig. 3), villagers are aware of changes in Jinghong and the threat of AIDS. Problems of drugs and gambling seem distant from their daily concerns, however, as they struggle to increase their incomes, produce grain and vegetables, and send their own children to school. People on the ridge still live within the forest, an entity that both enfolds Akha ancestors and represents a site of contention with state landscape visions. The forest, as well as 250 years of Akha history embedded in the landscape, keep many villagers in the mountains and right on the border.

In neighboring parts of Burma, a complicated civil war has been going on for half a century. When Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, the new government in Rangoon wanted to take control of the Shan States, tiny Shan (Tai) principalities with an array of upland and lowland

efforts are pushing them out of the hills to work in towns, where with a hill-tribe ID card they cannot own a house or work at any but low-end jobs.⁵ There are no Akha in Thailand's government offices, schools, or large businesses. For Akha in towns, two avenues beckon with a promise of wealth: prostitution and the drug trade. Through either route, many Akha and other highland people wind up HIV positive. Although statistics vary widely, the incidence of HIV/AIDS among hill-tribe populations in the north is staggering.⁶

In Akhapu (see fig. 4), drug use is limited and cases of AIDS have been few. For this reason, the devastating effects of AIDS are not included in this analysis. To understand the context of this hamlet, however, it is important to realize the implications of the limited prospects for Akha in towns, as well as the increasing poverty and insecurity for many Akha in the hills. Most Akha in Akhapu are anchored in the hills by the remaining forest, the tea planted within it, and connections across the border.

Both Xianfeng and Akhapu are at high elevations, with a longer history of residence than other Akha hamlets in their respective states. For each hamlet, its location right on the border makes it a site of heightened state concern, as well as a place with easy access to people and goods in Burma. In comparison with other Akha hamlets, both Xianfeng and Akhapu benefit from their altitude, border location, length of residence, and particular social history. They are also among the few hamlets with sizeable remaining forests.

Among the various mountain peoples who practice shifting cultivation, I chose Akha because of their dispersal across this mountainous region and the disparity between their reputations in China and Thailand. In China, state administrators think Akha (Hani?) are good managers of the environment. Local officials in Xishuangbanna rate Akha as the "most developed" among the hill groups. In Thailand, by contrast, state officials consider Akha to be forest destroyers. When officials rank highland peoples, Akha are always at the bottom, those with the most entrenched "backwardness," the opposite of "developed." How did these different narratives come about, and what relation do they bear to Akha livelihoods and land uses? Are Akha management practices, especially of forests, significantly different in these two places? Or do state officials read in the landscape what they expect to see based on strong preconceptions about what Akha and forests are in relation to state plans? Or are these two possibilities somehow combined? Additionally, what role does their border location play in Akha reputations and forest practices?

Akha are variously thought to have originated in northern Yunnan or in



FIG. 4. Akhapu hamlet

Tibet (Alting von Geusau 1983; Bernatzik 1970:33; Sturgeon 1996 field notes).⁸ In either case, these are now parts of China. Akha speak a Tibeto-Burman language related to Lahu and Yi (Matisoff 1983), other mountain peoples in this same region. Chinese documents from the twelfth century refer to Woni (Hani) (Armijo-Hussein 1996), although Akha genealogies suggest that they have lived in what is now China for at least two millennia. In recent centuries, some Akha have migrated south into Laos and Burma, and some farther into what are now Thailand and northern Vietnam. From the Thai point of view, Akha are newcomers and indeed intruders in the realm of northern Thailand. Akha are now spread across mountainous mainland Southeast Asia, including the part of China (Xishuangbanna) historically most closely related to other Southeast Asian kingdoms. While I make no claim that Akha in China are "the same" as Akha in Thailand, these peoples are historically related and share genealogies reaching back fifty-five to sixty-five generations to the first Akha.⁹ In my two research sites, Akha

live in similar evergreen oak forests, and until the early 1950s, land uses in both locations were almost identical. These similarities from the time before major state making took hold made possible a comparative study of Akha access to resources and land use as they and their forests became enclosed within China and Thailand. The similarities also allowed an exploration of the workings of border landscapes, as Akha, in various and sometimes contested ways, engaged with an array of new policies and markets in modernizing states, as well as with the violent and at times lucrative world of Burma.

While doing this study, I tacked back and forth between China and Thailand several times to trace the comparison. Each time I arrived in either hamlet, the experience was dizzying. In the two hamlets, Akha spoke a common dialect of Akha, recited almost identical genealogies, managed forests with many overlapping species, and lived along the Burma border—these peoples and their environments were clearly related. But the worlds they inhabited were dramatically different. I attempt here to capture both the remarkable similarities, and also the vast differences, in the constitution of these two worlds in terms of access to resources and land use among Akha in China and Thailand. I also explore how the manipulation of complex, flexible landscapes, enhanced by border dynamics, strengthened Akha hands in managing their environs. This book is situated on the boundary joining these two processes: the intensification of rule of two modernizing states and Akha land-use practices along the border.

Before I had ever imagined doing this research, I worked for seven years as a program officer in natural resource management programs related to Asia. From activities that I oversaw in China and Thailand, I knew that there were numerous upland ethnic minority peoples who spanned the mountains linking southwestern China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. My strong interest in upland peoples and mountainous border realms had been sparked earlier during a five-year stretch living in Nepal. The desire for a better conceptual understanding of property rights in natural resources and upland livelihoods propelled me back to school in 1993, where I embarked on doctoral study at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. An earlier master's degree in Chinese Studies, plus many extended visits to China, had fostered my fluency in Mandarin Chinese. By the time I arrived in Xianfeng and Akhapu,¹⁰ I was a middle-aged Caucasian woman with years of experience in Asia, able for the first time to do extended research in mountain villages.

I studied Akha language during my village stays, but worked with an interpreter fluent in both Chinese and Akha in doing interviews in both Xianfeng and Akhapu. In China, this was an Akha master's student at the Kunming Institute of Botany. In Thailand, my interpreter, who spoke excellent Akha, was an ethnic Chinese from the Chinese village adjacent to Akhapu. To my surprise, I found myself doing research in both sites in Chinese, one of the *lingua francas* in this frontier region of China, Burma, and Thailand.

The terms for administrative units in both research sites deserve a bit of clarification. In China, Xianfeng is one of eleven hamlets in the administrative village of Mengsong. Since “administrative village” is cumbersome, I sometimes refer to “Mengsong village.” In Thailand, the units are not as clear-cut. “Akhapu” is the name for both the three-hamlet settlement as well as for the research hamlet. To avoid confusion, “Akhapu settlement” means the three-hamlet unit and “Akhapu” means the research hamlet. There are other potentially confusing names in Thailand as well. The town of Chiang Rai is located in Chiang Rai Province, and the city of Chiang Mai is located in Chiang Mai Province. For clarity, references to “Chiang Rai” and “Chiang Mai” mean the cities. References to the provinces specify “Chiang Rai Province” and “Chiang Mai Province.”

To begin the research, first in Xianfeng, then in Akhapu, I gathered detailed information on hamlet and land-use history through semistructured interviews with older villagers, male and female. In both hamlets, this history reached back to a time before China or Thailand was a major presence in their lives. To get diverse perspectives and bring narratives up to the present, these interviews were repeated with middle-aged and younger men and women. The second stage of interviewing, again carried out in both villages, focused on moments of change in land use and corresponding access rights, supplemented with timelines and group mapping exercises for land use at specified times. I also worked alongside farmers in fields and forests and questioned them about present and past uses in these sites.

I was able to make limited trips across the border into Burma, at least from the China side. The administrative village head and the Xianfeng hamlet head each separately accompanied me to nearby villages in Burma. From Akhapu in Thailand, it was not safe to cross the border because the Wa and Shan armies were active on the other side. Most information about relations with Burma came from interviews, either with residents of Xianfeng or Akhapu, or with Akha visiting from Burma.

In both China and Thailand, I supplemented extended hamlet stays with visits to officials and researchers at different administrative levels. In China,

this included interviews at township, county, prefecture, province, and national levels to gain the perspectives of government administrators, researchers, and university faculty. In Thailand, this comprised interviews at the subdistrict, provincial, regional, and national levels with government personnel, nongovernmental-organization (NGO) workers, private and state researchers, and university faculty to get diverse points of view about forests, land management, and ethnic minority peoples.

Traveling from Xianfeng to Akhapu entailed a four-hour bus ride to Jinghong, a flight to Kunming, a flight to Chiang Mai, and a five- to six-hour jeep ride up to Akhapu. Traveling in the opposite direction meant, of course, reversing this procedure. I made these journeys at least six times. Through scores of interviews in China and Thailand, and a few in Burma, I traced processes related to resource access, land use, and border livelihoods in Xianfeng and Akhapu. Altogether, my field research lasted twenty months.

In the spring of 1997, just before concluding research, I conducted a social survey on landholding and incomes. By then I had a good understanding of the complicated dynamics surrounding changes in land use and resource access in the two villages. I also carried out forest measurements on the various kinds of wooded sites, including regenerating swiddens, managed by Akha in each village. Maps of the two locales summarize my overall findings. The first (fig. 5) is a schematic map of land use in the early 1950s, when land uses were almost identical in the two hamlets. The subsequent maps (figs. 6 and 7) are schematic depictions of Xianfeng and Akhapu as of 1997.

In the early 1950s, when land management was similar enough that the hamlets can be described together (see fig. 5), Akha farmers kept an area of forest around the village large enough that it took about an hour to walk from their houses out to their shifting-cultivation fields. They also kept an area of protected forest right around the village, as well as a cemetery forest and a watershed protection forest where cutting anything was prohibited. Along a river, farmers opened areas for shifting cultivation. Households could open swiddens (shifting-cultivation fields) wherever they wanted, making them large enough to meet household needs for grain. When that field regenerated to forest in thirteen to fifteen years, any household could open that field the next time. In other words, in terms of resource access, Akha villagers had rather set, enduring rules for areas of forest, and flexible rules for areas of shifting cultivation.

The next schematic map shows land use in Xianfeng in China in 1997 (see fig. 6). The area of forest surrounding the village is still in place, now

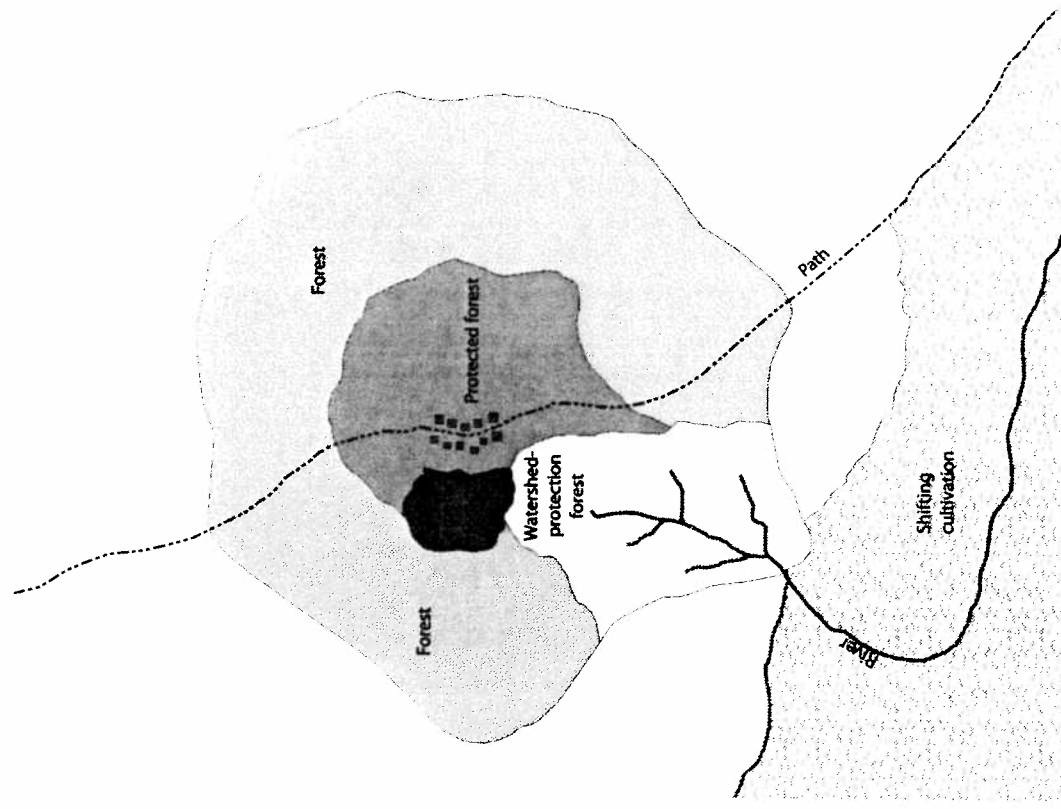


FIG. 5. Schematic map of land use in the 1950s, Xianfeng and Akhapu

divided into sites designated as collective forest and household fuel-wood forest. The protected forest around the village, the cemetery forest, and the watershed protection forest are still there. Along the river, much of the shifting-cultivation land has been terraced for wet rice. Upper-elevation shifting-cultivation fields have been turned into pastures. A new area for

equitable. On wooded sites, the species richness overall was 217 different species per 4.2 hectares of sampled plots, with an average of 16.8 species for 78 square meters of sampled area. Considerable species richness, or biodiversity, together with the presence of numerous old-growth species in protected forests, shows that some of the forests were of notable age and diversity, indicators of forests in reasonably good condition for an area of shifting cultivation.¹²

The next schematic map shows land use in Akhapu in Thailand in 1997 (see fig. 7). The area of forest around the village has been planted in tea, displacing the primary forest. There is still a cemetery forest and a watershed protection forest designated by Akha, but there is an additional watershed protection forest in a new site chosen by the Royal Forestry Department (RFD). As in China, there are now wet-rice terraces along the river. On either side of the river, what used to be shifting-cultivation lands have been taken over by the RFD for reforestation. The point to notice here is how much this map differs from the map from the early 1950s. The primary forest around the village is being replaced by tea, while a new forest, claimed by the RFD, has been planted in the old shifting-cultivation fields. In other words, the location and owner of the forest has changed completely. Akha are losing their forest to tea, and the new forest belongs to the forestry department. Farmers have also lost their shifting-cultivation lands.

In Akhapu, the highest-earning household earned nine hundred times more than the poorest household, showing extreme economic stratification in the village. A handful of people were really wealthy, while those on the bottom were falling through the cracks. Wealthier villagers owned the wet-rice fields, while poorer villagers (the majority) had recently lost their shifting-cultivation fields to the RFD. As for forests, the species richness was 87 species for the 9.4 hectares of sampled plots, with an average of 7.4 species on the 78 square meters of sampled area. Species richness was considerably less than in China (87 as compared to 217 species). The relative lack of species diversity, together with the presence of many more pioneer species on protected sites, indicated that forests in Thailand were frequently cut and sometimes burned, and not in very good condition.¹³

Xianfeng and Akhapu had almost identical land uses in the early 1950s. At that point large areas of primary forest surrounded both hamlets, with extensive swiddens beyond the forest. By 1997 in Xianfeng, the forest around the hamlet had been divided into collective and household forests. Additionally, there were now large areas for wet rice and pastures. Overall, though, the land area for Xianfeng was much the same as in the 1950s, and sites for

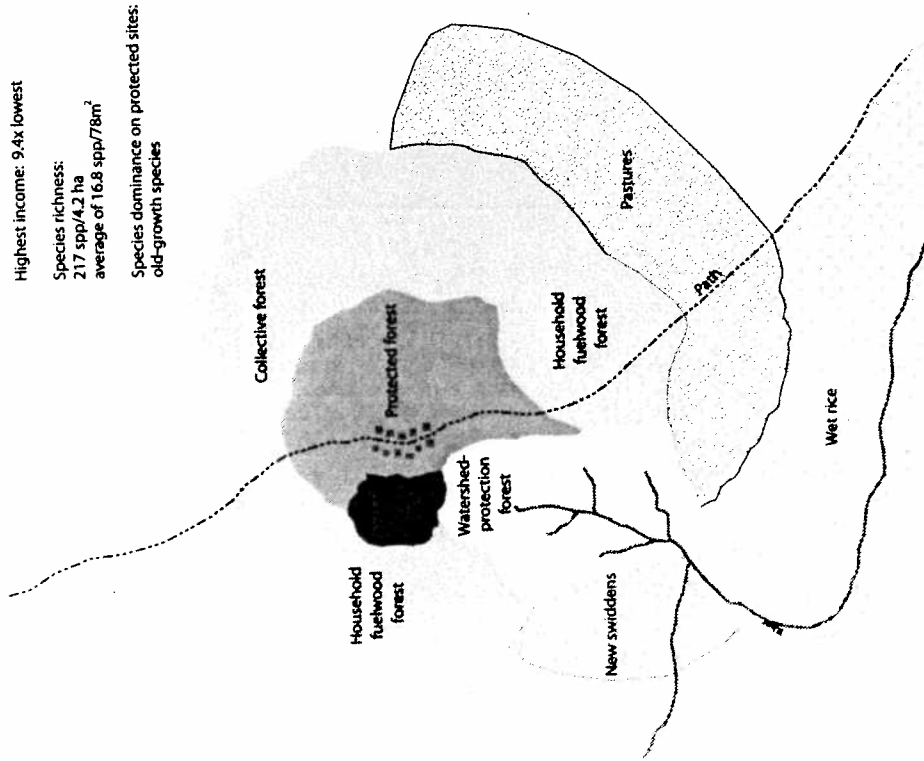


FIG. 6. Schematic map of Xianfeng in 1997

swiddens has been opened. The point to notice in this map is how similar land uses and the sites designated for them are to the map from the 1950s. Areas for forests and the production of grain are still the same.

The data to the right of the maps are condensed versions of the most important outcomes as of 1997.¹¹ In Xianfeng the household with the highest income earned almost ten times more than the poorest household. Disparities in income were noticeable but not pronounced. In general, household incomes were gradually rising. No one was really rich, but no one was desperately poor, either. Landholding in Xianfeng was relatively

tinued to manage forests with considerable biodiversity, including old-growth forests, while Akha in Thailand used forests with declining biodiversity and many pioneer species? Beyond what is visible on the maps, how did Akha become peripheral peoples in such different guises in these two places? How did state policies for ethnic minorities, forests, and land use reshape Akha land uses? In each case, how did the proximity of the violent, drug-producing Shan State of Burma play into local power relations, access to resources, and flexible landscapes? And finally, how did Akha practices of plastic landscapes mediate their political relations at various scales, including across the border? Examining border landscapes for Akha in China and Thailand addresses all of these questions.

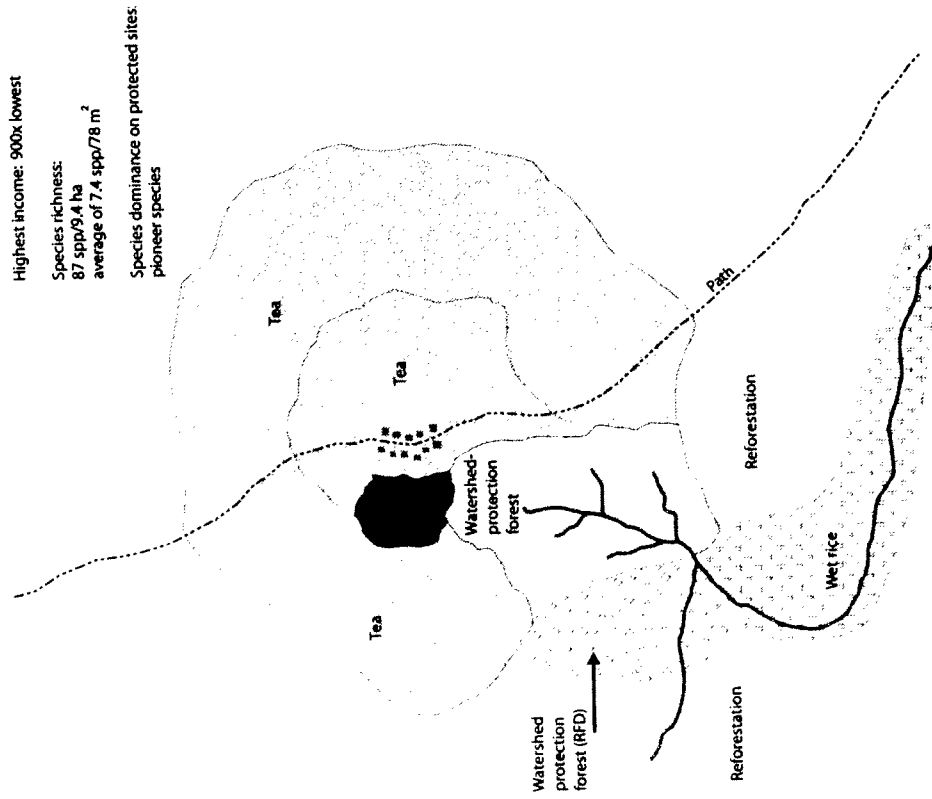


FIG. 7. Schematic map of Akhapu in 1997

forest and grain production were still the same. In contrast, by 1997 in Akhapu, farmers were losing their primary forest to tea production. Their shifting-cultivation fields were gone, replaced by new forests for the RFD. The land available to farmers had shrunk dramatically, especially considering that wet-rice fields belonged to the wealthy few. There were large disparities in household landholding as well as income.

How did these divergent outcomes come about when land uses in the 1950s were very similar? Through what processes had Akha in China con-

different state regimes. Resource access and control are entwined in all three processes.

The production of marginal peoples and landscapes on the margins of China and Thailand and along their borders with Burma has occurred primarily at a national scale, with long historical roots. State definitions of peoples and forests have been of overriding importance in determining current outcomes for both.

The production of borders in this mountainous, frontier region has been constituted in both premodern and modern contexts through the accumulation and distribution of resources. Border chiefs today continue to mediate the border through the control of resource access. Borders are sites of negotiation between local border chiefs and state agents, with the state implicated in the production of both predatory border chiefs and their border-mediating role.

The third process in forming these border landscapes has been the encounter between state and Akha landscape visions under two very different state regimes. A combined spatial and temporal knowledge, "landscape plasticity," gives Akha a certain resilience in negotiating with state agents and extending land uses across the border. State policies in China and Thailand have sought to reduce the scope for Akha practice of landscape plasticity, but through different processes and with different outcomes. Flexible, plastic landscapes are sites of agency, negotiation, and conflict, as farmers maneuver between border-as-margin and border-as-connecting-line in engaging with the state.

These border landscapes, then, have been constituted through state definitions of upland peoples and forests, the negotiation of borders through resource access and control, and encounters between Akha and state landscape visions. Practices of resource access and control are threaded through all three processes forming border landscapes. In fact, a focus on resource access reveals that small border chiefs, having accumulated clout through cross-border maneuvering, maintain resource control by introducing the clarified, simplified landscapes promoted by the state. Border landscapes may be understood as sites of accumulating influence and riches for village heads and local elites, and as sites of increasing marginalization for local farmers.

These processes—the production of marginal peoples and landscapes, the production of borders, and the encounter between state and local landscape visions—played out very differently in China and Thailand. The con-

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THE PRODUCTION OF BORDER LANDSCAPES

One morning in Mengsong I found Akheu, the administrative village head, nailing a leopard skin to the doorframe of his house to dry. Akheu was smiling to himself as he worked, clearly pleased with this leopard skin. I admired the skin and asked how he got it. He had shot the leopard in Burma in a wooded site some ten kilometers south of Mengsong. As he explained, many Akha men from Mengsong hunted in Burma, since the Chinese government prohibited shooting certain wildlife, including leopards, within its borders. The solution was to hunt in Burma, where state agents imposed no such restrictions.

For Akheu, the hunting landscape extended into Burma for quite a distance. Akheu could cross the border by the road or numerous footpaths, thus extending the scope of his hunt well beyond the domain of Mengsong. He could also escape from the Chinese regulations, which he, as a state agent, enforced in Mengsong. In his hunting, Akheu transgressed the usual meanings of border and landscape, moving beyond not only Mengsong "property," but outside his home nation-state as well. Akheu was familiar with the nearby terrain in Burma, as well as with family and friends there with whom he could share a meal. His hunting routinely crossed the border and back again, producing a landscape that was in China and not in China, procuring game that was illegal in one place and not in the other, allowing him to navigate between the realms of China and Burma in ways that played out to his advantage. He could also share wild game with township administrators, nurturing his good offices with them. This is an instance of producing a border landscape through livelihoods that combine border-as-margin and border-as-line between nation-states.

THREE RELATED PROCESSES COMBINE TO PRODUCE BORDER LANDSCAPES:

the production of marginal peoples and landscapes; the production of borders; and the encounter between state and Akha landscape visions under

ceptual underpinnings of these three related processes, and the resource access that knits them together, are explored below.

THE PRODUCTION OF MARGINAL PEOPLES AND LANDSCAPES: RESOURCE ACCESS ON THE PERIPHERY

In both China and Thailand, Akha are peripheral in several senses. They live on the geographic edges of both nation-states. They are regarded as socially different from mainstream peoples, whether those are Han or Thai, and “backward” in either case. Their location in upland areas is marginal to the lowlands, where majority peoples live. And their land use, shifting cultivation, is considered in both places as different from and inferior to lowland agriculture. Akha in each country have also become located on political-economic peripheries, but in ways that have spun out differently in each case. How do certain peoples become peripheral or marginal? In relation to modernity, how do some people become backward? The answers lie largely in how various peoples were incorporated into modern nation-states, through processes that have been simultaneously cultural and political.

In much of Asia, the imposition of citizenship in the twentieth century entailed identifying and categorizing peoples inhabiting national territory. Although citizenship created an “imagined political community” of people who came to see themselves as having a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991:6, 7), the classification of people into “races” or “ethnic groups” undercut the presumed equality of citizenship. These practices were modeled on European racial classifications based on biological, linguistic, or cultural differences (Keyes 2002). Unlike Asian typologies in the past, these purported to be based on “scientific” criteria (1164). In effect, such state classifications were a technology of power (Keyes 1994) that enclosed peoples into a new nation in marginalized and disempowered positions. These classifications, while seeming to be bureaucratic, neutral procedures, were “exercises in social engineering which [were] often deliberate and always innovative” (Hobsbawm 1983:13). Ethnic groups discovered through scientific criteria were in effect invented traditions that gained their power by seeming primordial. Named and evaluated ethnic groups seemed natural, as if they had always been there.

In some cases the categorization was done by colonizing states, but in forms that persisted into independence, such as the division of peoples into castes and scheduled tribes in India (Guha 1999). In precolonial India there had been named occupational groups, and members could sometimes

change their occupation or residence and make claims to higher status. The British-allocated caste system hardened the boundaries between castes and relegated some peoples to “primitive” status based on their “isolation” since time immemorial. Sumit Guha demonstrates that one group named “primitive isolates” had earlier been upland militants who inspired considerable fear in the lowland farmers paying them tribute (Guha 1999:83–105, 130–145). The Dutch in Java in the early twentieth century identified difference among peoples as “cultural divergence” (Kahn 1999:79), a mechanism that continued after Indonesian independence. The idiom of cultural divergence erased the power differentials between centers and emerging peripheries. It also obscured the processes through which social differences were being created by colonial and regional political economies. Whether done by colonial or modern states, the new categorizations imposed “ethno-racial hierarchies” (Anderson 1991:169) that slotted some people into the nation as “mainstream” and others as “minorities” in varying degrees of inferiority. Certain peoples became marginal within the nation in part because they were defined as such during classificatory moments.

In both China and Thailand, an evolutionary model of human society influenced how policy makers and urban elites conceived of upland peoples. Lewis Henry Morgan, an American anthropologist, propounded the theory that human society developed from savagery, to barbarism, to civilization (Morgan 1964 [1878]). The socialist regime in China fully adopted the evolutionary view, with direct lineage from Morgan to Engels to Stalin to Mao (Gladney 1991:72). In the modes of production theory, which Mao Zedong adopted from the Soviet Union, societies were thought to evolve from primitive to slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist modes of production. In China, Akha (as Hani) were rated at a primitive mode of production, meaning that at the point of entering China as citizens, they were seriously “behind” and backward in their social development. This rating was derived from their property system, which Communist cadres saw as communal, and their land use, shifting cultivation. Especially for hill peoples, such as Akha, their state-allocated identities have also been constructed in relation to their forested upland location and their land use, which often includes shifting cultivation. In evolutionary models, shifting cultivation was imagined to evolve naturally over time into settled “intensive” agriculture. From the 1950s to the late 1970s, Chinese state planners were not concerned about protecting forests, which they saw as resources to either exploit or move out of the way for agriculture. They regarded shifting cultivation as a form of agriculture, but a backward and unproductive way to

produce grain. The state project, dominated by Han, was then to “help” Akha farmers learn to be productive and advance into socialist modernity.

In Thailand, the adoption of an evolutionary model was more diffuse, arriving with Thai scholars who had studied in Europe and the United States, as well as with Western development project staff beginning in the 1960s. As early as the 1940s, staff from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) convinced Thai foresters that shifting cultivation was damaging to the environment (FAO 1948). Influential Western scholars in the 1960s and 1970s doubted if Akha had a property regime and judged Akha land use to be destructive to soils and forests (Kunstadter et al. 1978:201–202). In the 1970s, Akha backwardness was equated with being threats to the forest. In contrast to China, the meaning of forests in Thailand at that time was as state capital assets to be exploited to fund industrialization. Since Akha land use was perceived to damage the nation’s wealth and threaten its development, they and other “hill tribes” were defined in relation to Thai society as “not Thai” and not citizens. The state project was therefore to protect state assets, the forests, by keeping hill tribes out of them.

China and Thailand have recently experienced dramatic economic transformations and rapid incorporation into global economies. In contrast to these dynamic changes, largely experienced by urban populations, central state planners have tended to see peoples such as Akha as even more backward than before. Newly industrializing state regimes in Asia have responded to the exigencies of late capitalism by instituting graduated sovereignty (Ong 1999). Some kinds of citizens have become transnational employees of global enterprises, while others have turned into low-wage workers, illegal immigrant laborers, and what Aihwa Ong refers to as the “aboriginal periphery.” Different kinds of citizens become located in “zones that are . . . subjected to different kinds of surveillance and in practice enjoy different sets of civil, political, and economic rights” (Ong 1999:216). Her category of “aboriginal periphery” is where Akha are located, a zone subject to frequent redefinition depending on what development means. Although the Chinese regime is quite different from the Thai one, the zone of sovereignty for Akha in either case is geared for peripheral, marginal, and backward peoples. In China the zone of aboriginal periphery is for upland minority nationalities whom the Han can modernize, whereas in Thailand the zone is for hill tribes who do not qualify to be Thai. Although there are important differences in these state-given Akha identities, the zone in each case is clearly marginal and distant from urban entrepreneurs.

In sum, state representations of peoples, upland land uses, and forests

have been fundamental in determining modes of citizenship, official property rights in rural resources, and the degree of maneuvering room available for local people’s customary land uses. Chapter 2 traces the contours of this process in China and Thailand through the longer-term history of peripheral peoples and spaces and through the twentieth century development of policies for citizenship and ethnic minorities, property rights in land and forests, and state claims on rural resources.

THE PRODUCTION OF BORDERS: SITES FOR THE ACCUMULATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

The two Akha hamlets are located right next to the Burma border. In each state, the border could be considered as both the end of the state’s margin and as a line to step across. But what difference does the border make, in either sense, for access to resources and the production of border landscapes? Answers to these questions depend on how we conceive of national borders and on what practices produce and maintain them.

Richard Muir, a contemporary geographer, gives a technical definition of a border: “Located at the interfaces between adjacent state territories, international boundaries have a special significance in determining the limits of sovereign authority and defining the spatial form of the contained political regions. . . . Boundaries have been loosely described as being linear; in fact they occur where the vertical interfaces between state sovereignties intersect the surface of the earth” (Muir, *Modern political geography* [London: Macmillan, 1975], 119, cited in Thongchai 1994:74).

In a similar definition, boundaries of modern states are “the point at which a state’s territorial competence finds its ultimate expression” (Sahlins 1989:2). In these rather static formulations, boundaries define the limits of state territory and sovereignty, as if these projects had already been completed. These definitions emphasize the vantage point of centers, where border areas are imagined as margins of the nation-state rather than as sites of cross-border relations.

Recent studies of borders emphasize the need to look from the border vantage point, discovering how states bring border peoples and territories under central control. M. Baud and W. van Schendel feature borders between nation-states as political constructs, “imagined projections of territorial power” (1997:211). They conceive of borders as state creations that are separate from local life, artifacts that border people might “challenge,” “take advantage of,” or subvert (211, 212). From their perspective, the state

tries to eliminate cross-border networks established by local elites, since these networks give elites "leverage with regard to the state" (226). In a related way, Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson conceptualize boundaries as "the expression of the spatial limits of state power, the manifestations of political control" (1999:46). At the same time, however, they see borders as socially constructed sites of power, an "interface . . . between two systems of activity, of organization, or of meaning . . . liable to be characterized by ambiguity and danger" (22). People who live in borderlands, as a result of their location at the intersection of multiple systems, "draw strategically on multiple repertoires of identity" (39). While differently argued, these recent studies present borders as process and sites of negotiation. They take into account social relations across the border, but expect that the state would seek to curtail or control cross-border relations.

Regarding upland peoples and borders in Southeast Asia, John McKinnon and Jean Michaud maintain that the state has ushered "isolated highland societies into the World System," and that ethnic minority societies are distant "from the seat of power" (2000:5, 8). They conceptualize border regions as margins of the nation-state. Analyzing the border between Thailand and Laos, Andrew Walker critiques the center-periphery approach. He advocates analyzing "the active involvement of local communities in creating and maintaining trans-border connections," noting that "state regulatory practices are intertwined with those of local communities" (1999:13, 17). Walker depicts "nodes" of power where border transactions occur, sites of local agency in "benign" interactions with states and markets. He emphasizes border in the sense of cross-border relations in which local people can benefit. His analysis underplays the importance of border as national margin.

Understanding the extent to which these border conceptions help explain dynamics along the Burma border requires a brief sketch of borders and boundaries in premodern Southeast Asia. During the era of Southeast Asian kingdoms, lords in small principalities between kingdoms maintained their relative autonomy by both accommodating and fending off the interests of major kings (Thongchai 1994:84–88). To do this, small princes accumulated resources and controlled their distribution. They extracted products from people under their rule, as well as *corvée* labor. They sent tribute to overlords, whether voluntarily or under duress, both to ensure protection from mightier kingdoms and also to prevent takeover. Small princes often maintained ritual and kin links in multiple directions, sending tributes of allegiance to various larger and smaller entities (Steinberg 1987; Tambiah 1976; Thongchai 1994; Wyatt 1984). Political relations were enacted through the

collection and distribution of resources, and networks of patronage and alliance constituted the border regions between larger kingdoms and empires. In other words, these borders were created and maintained through the collection and distribution of resources.

In relation to borders with Burma, E. R. Leach argued that Burma itself was a frontier between China and India, meaning a border region with people of multiple ethnicities. Burma was distinct from European notions of a nation comprised of people with a common culture and language (Leach 1960:49). Leach (1954) described political systems in highland Burma involving complicated patronage relations between lowland and upland peoples of differing ethnicity. These political systems, known elsewhere as principalities (cf. Hill 1998; Thongchai 1994), were separated from one another and larger states not by boundaries but by "zones of mutual interest" (Leach 1960:50). Critiquing Leach, Gehan Wijeyewardene (1992) claimed that by 1960, when Leach's article on borders was published, Burma had delineated clear national boundaries and some of the ethnic groups mentioned by Leach had defined themselves as political units in opposition to Burma. Indeed, in the frontier region that extended into adjacent parts of China and Thailand, policy makers had been working to extend control over people and resources in ways leading toward territorial sovereignty. In part, their efforts were intended to protect the homeland from the political violence and drug trade in the neighboring Shan State of Burma.

The state policies in question delineated borders and defined peoples (citizens and ethnic minorities) and property rights in rural resources. An unexpected spin-off from state building in the border areas of Thailand, China, and Burma has been the production of small polities much like the pre-modern principalities referred to by Leach. Small political entities based on patronage have been revised in diverse ways to suit the emerging needs of their rulers. In Burma these entities included Chinese Nationalist forces, ethnic rebel armies, and drug-lord realms. In the late twentieth century, these borders continued to be sites of negotiation with a degree of autonomy. China and Thailand faced an array of political, economic, and ideological adversaries across the border in Burma. Agents of the Chinese and Thai states sought to keep out these enemies, get information about them, and sometimes to form covert alliances with them. The ambiguity or conflict among these desires recreated the need for border-mediating figures.

Among these figures have been Akha village heads who claimed loyalty to the state, but meanwhile, through connections (and loyalties) across the border, provided useful information and at times illicit goods from the other

side. With their role enhanced by state approval, Akha village heads as small border chiefs have reworked patronage practices, serving larger state interests while controlling local resource access. By maneuvering among multiple affiliations in more than one state, border chiefs have in fact constituted the border, much as princes did in the past. Territorial sovereignty, local resource control, and the meaning of "citizen" and "ethnic minority" have all been mediated by these border chiefs as patrons and negotiators, and borders are sites of ambiguity, negotiation, transgression, and the concentration of power.

State agents and Akha village heads are linked together in a complicated dance to both protect the border and to enable transgressions across it. This perspective rejects a characterization of borderlands as "distant from power," as portrayed by McKinnon and Michaud, although it accepts the view from the periphery advocated by both Baud and van Schendel and Donnan and Wilson. Unlike all of these authors' assessments, in the cases portrayed here the state is not entirely separate from border chiefs, nor would state agents seek to eliminate networks cultivated by Akha village heads. Like in Walker's view, state agents and village heads are involved in border regulation. But in contrast to Walker, the picture here is of predatory border chiefs, whose growing control of local resource access is not "benign." A focus on resource access allows a conception of border practices different from what these scholars describe. Borders are nodes for the collection and distribution of resources, and the role of small border chiefs is implicated in and even produced by state making. Border practices are intimately entwined with the control of resource access. Chapter 3 explores how borders have been produced, historically and currently, in the Akha hamlets of Xianfeng and Akhapu.

STATE AND AKHA LANDSCAPE VISIONS: PRODUCTIVITY AND RULE VERSUS PLASTICITY

As James Scott argues, modernizing states have imposed a "legible property system" of freehold tenure that produced legible landscapes, those that state agents could "read" and tax appropriately (1998:333ff.). He contrasts this with customary tenure arrangements that are "illegible" to state agents but readable by local inhabitants. Tania Li questions Scott's notion of legibility, especially its assumption that the state and local people are separate and that local people resist, reject, or flee from state control and extractions (Li 2001:43–44). Li points to upland people who desire the security and mar-

ket goods that connection with a state can bring. In conformance with Li's assertion, Akha in China and Thailand welcome property rights and recognition from the state. But they have a complicated relationship with landscape legibility, sometimes seeking and sometimes evading it, in dramas that have generally played out among Akha rather than directly between Akha and state agents. Legible landscapes in Scott's sense, though, inform the language and goals of state administrators. In fact, state goals of legible landscapes are reinforced by understandings from international development projects, which promote clear and secure tenure as fundamental to economic development (see, for example, Feder and Feeny 1991; Meinzen-Dick et al. 1997; World Bank 2001:35–37). State administrators promote clearly demarcated landscapes under coded and quantifiable uses, whether the reality on the ground reflects that desire or not. Indeed, state agents use the call for clear, simplified land uses whenever they chastise Akha for messy landscapes and backward practices. The discourse of legibility is founded on landscapes of productivity and rule.

Roderick Neumann focuses on the visible aspects of landscape in describing what he calls "landscapes of production" (1998:19). In Neumann's formulation, landscapes of production are where people labor, in contrast to landscapes of consumption, those bounded areas of nature, such as national parks, that middle-class visitors consume and admire. But like landscapes of consumption, landscapes of production, in the view of central and regional state planners, should look a certain way (cf. Neumann 1998:1). In southern China and Thailand, lowland agriculture should look like wet-rice fields, where the property lines and invested labor are both evident and the combination has produced beautiful, manicured paddies as well as abundant grain. This is a civilized landscape, under the management not only of hardworking farmers, but also of a benevolent state regime. For state agents, the visible landscape reflects an advanced culture derived from centuries of knowledge and experience. It is also a visible reflection of state power. Other kinds of rural landscapes would also qualify as manifestations of productivity and rule, but for Xishuangbanna in China and for northern Thailand, the appearance of well-managed wet-rice fields is the paramount example.

In the eyes of modernizing state agents in the 1980s and 1990s, Akha landscapes were the opposite of legible. Property lines were messy or invisible, productivity was deemed to be low, and the influence of state authority seemed to be missing. When faced with similar landscapes, British colonizers in India realized that the imposition of sovereignty entailed "creating more

discernable areas of cultivation, wastes, and forests" (Sivaramakrishnan 1999:45). Similar to state projects in China and Thailand, the work of British colonial agents was to clarify and essentialize categories of people and to link them to landscapes (82). From an official point of view in China and Thailand, Akha landscapes were not only messy but out of control. Both people and land uses needed to be clarified and governed. What is recounted here is the negotiated process through which Akha landscapes became "governed" and somewhat legible.

In the twentieth century, clarifying agricultural landscapes and making them productive meant two things: (1) introducing property rights to identify and secure ownership; and (2) making them simpler: "The great advances in agricultural production of the past fifty years have not been achieved by increasing the diversity of crops and farms, but rather by decreasing the diversity" (Padoch 2002:96). Supported by international organizations as well as states, "the road of ever-increasing simplicity has been well documented, tested, and promoted by agronomists, foresters, and the government and private organizations that they serve" (96). For agricultural scientists, diversity of production supports subsistence livelihoods, while specialization in limited crops promotes engagement with a market where farmers enjoy a comparative advantage. Under this scenario, farmers should be moving toward simpler production systems to increase their incomes.

In the face of this persistent advice, however, small holders throughout the world, including those in upland areas, often manage for diversity. Small holders, including those in upland areas, make best use of limited land areas through diversity and dynamism: "Theirs is a landscape of great diversity. Small farmers often make detailed use of small local variations in soil, micro-climate, and water conditions and often produce a great variety of crops" (Brookfield 2001:21).

In an early study of shifting cultivation, Harold Conklin portrayed upland farmers as almost entirely self-sufficient, intercropping forty to fifty different field crops with upland rice as well as managing multiple kinds of tree crops (1957:85). More recent scholarship has focused on how shifting cultivators have adjusted to changes, whether from markets, development projects, forest policies, resettlement schemes, or climatic variations (Padoch 1982; Dove 1999, 1996, 1985; Rambo and Cuc 1995; Peluso 1996). Upland farmers rarely rely solely on shifting cultivation, but instead engage in "composite swiddening," an array of practices that allows farmers to concentrate energy on different parts of the land-use system at different times (Rambo and Cuc 1995). Shifting cultivators select from among a "portfolio" of activities that

may include wage labor (Dove 1999:212). Under new policies and growing markets, some farmers have moved out of shifting cultivation to concentrate on managing elaborate fruit gardens in landscapes that continue to be diverse in both access arrangements and production (Peluso 1996). In other words, shifting cultivators respond to and sometimes take advantage of political-economic transformations but in ways that reproduce the diversity of practices and crops. Participation in markets may change the composition of activities but not necessarily simplify landscapes. State administrators are mistaken in thinking these landscapes show no state or market influence. Often, upland farmers have lost land to state forests (Peluso 1996) and cultivate goods to sell (Dove 1999; Peluso 1996). As a result of their complexity, however, from an official perspective these landscapes remain messy, illegible, and distant from landscapes of productivity and rule.

In addition to making constant adjustments, small farmers "plan their activities over a long time horizon, investing in improvements while continuing production" (Brookfield 2001:xiv). The way shifting cultivators adopt new land uses, such as wet rice, reflects long-term plans (Padoch et al. 1998). Farmers can make quick changes for new markets, policies, or infestations of pests, while keeping an eye on the long-range future. Managing for both diversity and dynamism allows them to do both. This managed diversity is a "flexible system, able to make space for new crops, more people, and new demands and to permit survival in climatically exceptional years" (Brookfield 2001:20). This flexibility, in addition to long-range planning, is inherent in landscape plasticity.

While Harold Brookfield portrays the flexibility as "adaptation" to changing biological, social, political, and economic conditions (2001:21), farmers' use of complex landscapes can be seen as more proactive. Akha in China and Thailand have used their detailed knowledge of the spatial landscape and of regeneration patterns to withstand rapacious political regimes, famine, and war. They have equally well used this knowledge to produce new crops and gather nontimber forest products for complex and dynamic markets. Their understanding of plastic landscapes is a tool for responding quickly to favorable possibilities as well as for retrenching in times of dearth. Their flexible land uses, however, are not mere adaptations to outside stimuli, as Brookfield would suggest. Nor are they totally separate from state plans, as Scott would have it. These landscapes are instead sites of negotiation and struggle among Akha as well as between Akha and outsiders over Akha livelihoods and land uses.

Under modernizing states, the imposition of state-allocated property

rights and clearer, simpler landscapes clashed with flexible production practices. Landscapes of productivity and rule intersected with landscape plasticity, with protagonists on unequal terms. State agents and Akha villagers, in complicated and conflicting ways, have struggled over state plans to transform the landscape. These processes have played out very differently in China and Thailand. Most importantly, the amount of available negotiating room has differed greatly for Chinese and Thai state agents. In China, state ideology and policies for minority nationalities and forests recognized Akha forest knowledge and allowed them to manage wooded areas. As a result, Akha landscapes in China reflect both state property lines and Akha complexity—a negotiated legibility. In Thailand, state representations of hill tribes, together with state forest claims, left only a “meager space for negotiation” (Pinkaew 2001:3). The resulting landscape, while somewhat more legible to state authorities, also represents considerable coercion in implementing state plans—an enforced legibility. Chapter 4 explores the encounter between state and Akha landscape visions in China and Thailand and the contrasting outcomes for those who practice processual landscapes.

PROPERTY RIGHTS IN NATURAL RESOURCES: THE KEY TO BORDER LANDSCAPES

The complex story of border landscapes is made legible by a focus on resource access, or property rights. In common parlance, property rights are often thought to be those granted and enforced by the state, and “property” is mistakenly thought to be the thing owned. In legal and political thought, property is defined as an enforceable claim “to some use or benefit of something” and “a political relation between persons” (Macpherson 1978:3, 4). A property claim is enforceable because there is an authority, usually the state, to back it. Equally important, a property claim is enforceable because it represents a “moral claim” recognized within a community (11). Property can also be a form of dominion over others: the owner of financial, intellectual, or material resources has control over people who want to share in the benefits from those resources (Cohen 1927:12).

The complicated nature of property is reflected in the formulations of John Locke and Adam Smith. Locke supposed that “As much Land as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, and can use the Product of, so much is his *Property*” (1964 [1704], cited in Macpherson 1978:19). He emphasized the moral claims in property, a right to livelihood and to appropriate land through labor. This view of property is important because it is shared (without influence from

Locke) among farmers across Asia (see Peluso 1996:525) and certainly among Akha in China and Thailand. Smith, by contrast, underscored the political underpinnings of any property regime: “Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all” (1986 [1776]:297). Smith had in mind a group of herders, among whom the richest devised property rules to protect themselves against all other herders, with rich herders an example of a proto-state, thus explaining how any property system originates. Property rules, in Smith’s view, arose from political elites protecting their economic assets. Putting Locke and Smith together, we get property as political relations with moral justifications for livelihoods and the protection of economic assets.

Property theorists refer to *de jure* (legal) and *de facto* (customary) property arrangements. *De jure* property rules are ordinarily those allocated and protected by the state, while *de facto* property arrangements are enforced by customary sanctions. When state agents implement new property regimes in rural areas, they are often unaware of customary property rules, but state-allocated property rights by no means eliminate customary practices. Often, local people rework formal property rights, ignoring or choosing selectively among them, or turning them to their advantage. Differently positioned villagers may adopt varying strategies with respect to new possibilities, sometimes leading to localized conflict. In any case, the likelihood of a transformation in property based solely on state plans is slim: “The embeddedness of land-holding in ecological, social, cultural, and political life means that one tenure regime can seldom be legislated away in favour of another. To try to do this is to add layers of procedures or regulations on to others unlikely to disappear, and to add possibilities of manipulation and confusion between the multiple opportunities, and conflicting constraints, of older and newer land-holding regimes” (Shipton and Goheen 1992:316).

In this book the term “resource access” has a broad meaning that includes formal property allocations, customary practices of access, and local accommodations to—and reworkings of—state-given property rights. Local property relations turn out to be complicated negotiations between state agents and local farmers, as well as among villagers themselves. These negotiations, sometimes heated, are ongoing, as changing conditions revise local social relations and the valuation of resources.

Studies of landholding in Africa have shown that shifts in political, economic, and cultural factors—seen more simply as changes in power, wealth,

and meaning—have overlapping effects on property rights (Shipton and Goheen 1992). Other works have also emphasized the importance of meaning to property contestations. “People may invest in meanings as well as in the means of production—struggles over meaning are as much a part of the process of resource allocation as are struggles over surplus or the labour process” (Berry 1988:66). What is contended over or manipulated is not only the ownership or control of productive resources, but also “control over the human imagination” (Peet and Watts 1996:37). In local conflicts, the meaning of resources and their use is linked to understandings of community and custom, and to struggles to define them among contenders with unequal power (Li 1996:509). The contestations are political, as well as cultural and economic. This view is inherent in the combination of Locke and Smith as well. Recent scholarship has pinpointed that the focal point of conflict may be the notions of morality and community at stake in resource claims.

Studies of property regimes or of access to resources are often fraught with struggle. So how are struggles manifested, and equally, how do people ever cooperate? Carol Rose suggests that storytelling is inherent in both processes: “We tell tales to create a community in which cooperation is possible” (1994:27). Rose argues, in fact, that storytelling is fundamental to property, as exemplified by Locke’s extended narrative in the *Second Treatise of Government* about a farmer appropriating land, and gradually more farmers appropriating land, and this somehow leading to the formation of government with rules to protect property. As Rose notes, Locke’s “story” has no historical basis, yet his ideas have become the basis for Western property conceptions. To confirm Rose’s point, there is no historical basis to Adam Smith’s story about herders, either. Narratives about property are basic to any state, but also to any organized group that uses natural resources. Within Akha hamlets, there is general agreement about access rules, but divergence in stories about how those rules play out. Each story reveals something about how power is mediated by culture at a particular moment. Akha tell stories about landholding, either in the past or the present, to create a community of cooperation at various scales. Sometimes the stories about current conflicts are passionately recounted, but often to an audience in agreement. As Louise Fortmann notes, “Stories have the power to frame and create understanding: to create and maintain moral communities” (1995:1054). The stories give clues to the symbolic contestations that entrain a wider field of actors, including local villagers, state officials, and traders—agents of political-economic transformations that prompted the tale.

In addition to property as storytelling, something that one might hear,

property can also be visible in the landscape: “One can read the messages of successive generations through the way that property looks” (Rose 1994:269). Rose mentions fences and plowed furrows as markers of entitlement. When Akha farmers walk through their landscape, they can read there the history of many generations—successive (and diverse) uses of various plots of land, former trails, previous forests that were cut and then grew again. With an intimate knowledge of the landscape, Akha can see there the past, the present, and possible trajectories into the future. They also tell stories as they walk, tales embedded in particular sites about past violence, privation, or wealth. These are visual cues to local histories, told somewhat differently by each teller.

Although Akha can read their landscapes easily, the same vistas present a conundrum to most outsiders. A visitor sees areas of forest, but also fields colonized by what look like weeds. Farmers cut and burn patches of forest to open fields on slopes that, from a lowland perspective, seem too steep for agriculture. On these fields farmers plant grains, vegetables, fruits, and herbs all together in seemingly haphazard fashion. There are livestock ambling around, but apparently not fenced in or even herded. Referring to landscapes other than Akha, but under similarly complex land uses, even sympathetic researchers have found such visual displays “bewildering” (Brookfield 2001:4), or “visually confusing” and “disorderly” (Padoch 2002:98, 100). Agricultural extension agents and state foresters, usually less sympathetic, see in these landscapes forest degradation and soil erosion (cf. Forsyth 1995:881). In other words, these are landscapes that need to be clarified and governed, made into landscapes of productivity and rule.

An understanding of the shifting nature of Akha resource access and use contributes to the scholarship on property rights. In most recent studies of resource rights, access claims are highly contested but the resources in question are stable categories (e.g., Peluso 1992; Moore 1993; Li 2001, 1999, 1996). By contrast, Akha resource access and use keep moving around, sliding across delineated plots, state land-use regulations, and even international boundaries. This complex, malleable quality, in fact, constitutes the strength of these upland land-use practices. The very flexibility of Akha land uses, of course, has been what state policies and development projects have set out to sedentarize.

Clear international boundaries have also resulted in attempts to increase state control over Akha and their landscapes. As in K. Sivaramakrishnan’s case study (1999), state control over people and resources was unevenly accomplished and variable over time. In the Akha cases, hamlets located on

the border generally drew more state attention and investment than those distant from the border. In each case, though, small border chiefs parlayed these investments to their own advantage. The accomplishment of state rule played out in ways that strengthened small border chiefs and further marginalized Akha farmers. Border dynamics mediated through village heads have tended to undercut villagers' access to resources and scope for the practice of flexible landscapes. Additionally, small border chiefs became state representatives in local domains. At key moments, Akha village heads promoted simplified land uses and clearer property rights if these changes increased their authority, introducing landscapes of productivity and rule if this made the village heads more like rulers. These clearer, simpler landscapes have tended to benefit local elites and outside actors, while other local farmers have tended to lose out.

The practice of landscape plasticity, then, is not merely adaptation to changing conditions. It is a knowledge and practice that enabled Akha to live in complex environments, engage in trade, and pay tribute to premodern princes. Modernizing states in both China and Thailand reduced the scope for flexible landscapes, but did so differently. Landscape plasticity allowed Akha farmers to engage both proactively and defensively with a variety of predatory rulers and exploitative economic conditions, as well as to respond productively to new policies, enterprises, and markets. Where state policies and practices enabled landscape plasticity, both Akha and their forests fared well. This was the case in China. Where state policies disabled landscape plasticity, Akha and their forests fared poorly. This was the case in Thailand.

Understanding Akha access to resources and land uses as Akha and their forests became bounded within national territory and state plans requires tracing how the practice of landscape plasticity was reformed and curtailed under national policies, growing economies, and new border practices. State representations of Akha as backward shifting cultivators on the borders of the realm ensured their encapsulation on the aboriginal periphery, on the border-as-margin in both China and Thailand. The border-as-line with social relations across it, meanwhile, opened up cross-border possibilities for Akha village heads as well as local farmers. Akha village heads had more scope for taking advantage of cross-border social relations and border mediation than did ordinary farmers. In the name of protecting the border for the state, small border chiefs introduced state landscapes of productivity and rule at moments that strengthened their own stature and resource control. The collusion between Akha village heads and state agents served to further marginalize other Akha, advancing their enclosure within the nation-state on

the state's terms. In the face of state plans and village heads' machinations, Akha farmers sought ways to rework complex, flexible livelihoods and landscapes. Farmers' attempts to remake plastic landscapes had differing outcomes in China and Thailand, both for Akha livelihoods and for the condition of their forests. In the two cases, state representations of people, forests, and land uses, together with the political economies that manifested these representations, have produced dramatically different arenas for the practice of border landscapes. The available arenas for negotiation and action, in turn, have meant the difference for Akha between continuing to practice landscape plasticity in China and losing that possibility in Thailand.