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The True Story of Akheu

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“The True Story of Akheu” is of course meant to call to mind “The True Story of Ah Q,” by Lu Xun, although my Akheu is in many ways the opposite of Ah Q.¹ In Lu Xun’s story, Ah Q’s insensitivity and hapless choices led ultimately to his execution. In direct contrast, Akheu, an Akha villager in Yunnan, had an astute understanding of the possibilities emerging during China’s reform era.² For the most part he made clever choices. Like Ah Q, though, Akheu was always on the lookout for ways to get rich. In reform-era China, that was a Good Thing. The last time I saw him, in 2002, Akheu was talking about a scheme to raise goats in Mengsong, his village in Xishuangbanna on the ridge that separates China and Burma. In fact, he planned to organize Akha on both sides of the border in a project to increase local incomes by providing goat meat to a hot-pot restaurant in Shenzhen. Akheu was busy linking Akha villagers in peripheral southwest China with urban and possibly international consumers in Shenzhen. How did he pull this off?

In Mengsong, Akheu came from a leading clan whose forebears had been village heads when Mengsong was part of the tiny principality of Sipsongpanna, which for centuries had paid tribute to both China and Burma.³ That cross-border relationship is important to this story. Once firmly enclosed within the People’s Republic of China, Sipsongpanna became the Dai autonomous prefecture of Xishuangbanna.⁴ In the 1950s, Akha in Mengsong were incorporated within the Hani minority nationality and rated at a “primitive” mode of production during ethnic identification (*minzu shibie*). During the reform era, that rating meant that Akha were considered “backward” with respect to economic development. Akheu’s relatives were heads of the Mengsong production brigade during the collective period, and later (skipping a few changes in nomenclature) heads of the administrative village of Mengsong.⁵ So as Mengsong’s administrative village head from 1992 to 1998, Akheu was a big fish in a peripheral pond. From the outset, I viewed him as charming and very smart. It

was very hard not to like him, even as I discovered that he was woe-fully corrupt. His manipulations were successful in part because other people must also have found him charismatic. This story is about how Akheu managed to connect his “out-of-the-way” pond with lowland administrators in Xishuangbanna,⁶ business people in Burma, and most recently with a restaurant owner in Shenzhen, turning his peripheral realm into a site of possibility for his own ambitions.

The economic reform period in Mengsong entailed, as elsewhere, the dismantling of the commune. In this locale, “reform” basically meant the devolution of property rights in land and trees to households and hamlets, together with the authority to make decisions about their use, within state regulations. In this upland site, in 1982 households acquired shifting cultivation fields as well as areas for wet rice, tea, bamboo, and livestock. Villagers experienced this allocation as fair and equitable, giving everyone the same shake as the reform era began. In 1984, forests were distributed to hamlets as collective forests, and to households as freehold forest for subsistence uses. In Mengsong, all of these initial contracts for agricultural and forestland were for 50 years. With the gradual opening up of markets, Mengsong farmers sold cultivated products—vegetables, fruits, and livestock—and goods collected in the surrounding forests, such as wild fruits, medicinal herbs, bamboo, and rattan. Products that Akha farmers had used all their lives could now be sold. Farmers could compete in selling these goods in the market, leading potentially to disparity in household incomes. Like Lei Guang in his essay here, I trace the emergence of a market in Mengsong, but I give a quite different example of how “the *actually emerging* market in China . . . is constituted by specific government policies and the practice of market agents (i.e., entrepreneurs) and government officials” (Lei Guang, this volume). Here on China’s periphery, minority nationality shifting cultivators’ experience of “the market” fell under both agricultural and forest policies, as agricultural goods and nontimber forest products (NTFPs) could be sold, but timber could not. Other factors influencing market formation included the form of “development” promoted in “backward” minority nationality areas, and the central government’s changing perception of forests—to be protected, or used, and by whom. The configuration of “the market” in

Mengsong also came to be closely tied to aspects of globalization, as China prepared for entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

To understand Akheu's role in the expansion of markets, we need to start earlier in his career. As a minority nationality youth in the 1970s, Akheu joined the People's Liberation Army as an avenue for upward mobility in Mengsong and in Chinese society more broadly. The PLA made Akheu a communications officer in Burma just across the border from Mengsong. He could speak Akha and some Dai, as well as Yunnanese Chinese, making him a multilingual border person in the service of the Chinese government. In this post Akheu developed many Burmese military and business contacts. In the PLA, Akheu joined the Chinese Communist Party and also perfected his standard Mandarin, a rare accomplishment for someone without a high-school education.

When Akheu returned to Mengsong in the 1980s, he became the security officer for the administrative village. In this role he was closely linked with the township, the lowest level of state administration, and also with the Mengsong border military post. He maintained his contacts across the border with businesspeople and with Burmese military and "rebel army" personnel. In this position, Akheu was well placed to take advantage of the state attention and funds funneled to this sensitive border site as markets began to play a greater role in China's development. Akheu presented himself to township and county officials as someone who was "in the know" about conditions in Burma and able to protect the border against the "chaos" on the other side. Through his role as border protector, as well as his delivery of goods and information from Burma to lowland administrators in Xishuangbanna, Akheu made himself into an important player well beyond Mengsong. He then used his regional stature to become a patron in Mengsong, controlling how certain natural resources became commodities and tilting the benefits to himself, his family, and his network of cronies. Here are three stories that illustrate his role in determining who got access to emerging resources as they became commodities in new markets: the tin story, the wasteland auction, and the lodge.

THE TIN STORY

In 1985, when a geological survey team from Jinghong, the prefecture capital, found tin in one hamlet in Mengsong, the team hired local

villagers to do the mining. Villagers initially thought the tin was being mined for some national purpose, part of a “planned economy.” When they discovered that the geology team was selling the tin for their own profit, they quickly adjusted to this new possibility and wanted to mine and sell the tin themselves. This incident marked a moment of transition in the way villagers understood a socialist market economy. Tin rapidly became a “resource” that could be bought and sold. To get rid of the geology team, villagers asked for help from Akheu, the administrative village security officer. Akheu complied with their request, but he also intervened to claim the tin as a resource belonging to the whole administrative village. According to his arrangement, anyone in Mengsong could mine the tin but had to sell it to him for 12 yuan per kilogram. He set up a company to collect the tin, which he sold to companies in Jinghong for 20 yuan per kilo. At that time, any Chinese “company” had to be affiliated with a unit of government, in this case the administrative village. Under the tin company agreement, Akheu was to contribute 3 yuan per kilo from the resale profits to Mengsong. The Mengsong accountant claimed that for the first four years, the figures never came out right. Akheu allegedly skimmed off about 100,000 yuan (about US\$20,000 at that time) for himself and his collaborators.

At the time of my research (1996–97), villagers in the hamlet with tin were still furious at Akheu. By the mid-1990s, tin had become the largest source of household income and villagers knew that Akheu was unfairly pocketing profits. Villagers claimed that the tin was theirs and that they should be able to sell it directly to the county. They based their claim on the state property allocations of 1982 and also on their use of these lands over many generations—a customary claim. In fact, the tin belonged to the state, but the Chinese government was not concerned about who mined a small tin deposit as long as the state received appropriate taxes when it was sold. In other words, the state was not going to protect villagers, and was more likely to support Akheu, an official at the administrative village level. In any case, Akheu got away with claiming the tin and managing a lucrative tin business because of his many connections in township government, and because of his role in securing the border by organizing the mining. Akheu found a way to control who could mine the tin, where they sold it, and who got the profits, enhancing his own role as the patron controlling resource access. State policies had made

possible a market for tin that linked the village, the administrative village, the township, and the county, but in Mengsong, the market was shaped by a clever administrative village official who had connections at all of these levels.

THE WASTELAND AUCTION

In 1993, Yunnan province adopted a wasteland auction policy, allowing villages to auction degraded village lands for contracts up to 99 years to a bidder, either from the village or outside, who promised to keep the auctioned area in trees. This policy marked a change in property rights, since the auction winners were now allowed to “buy” land that had earlier been allocated to collectives. The policy was designed to increase the extent of forest cover in Yunnan and to prevent soil erosion, in line with the state’s growing interest in the environment (Zuo 1997). By applying market mechanisms, the state hoped to attract entrepreneurs to invest in trees. The policy allowed the “market,” in the form of auctions, to determine access to land, and also brought issues of forest management and environmental degradation into the market arena.

In Mengsong in 1995, a former hamlet head approached Akheu, by then administrative village head, about holding a wasteland auction to allow him to contract about 2000 mu of land in the watershed of the Mengsong reservoir.⁷ Akheu and the former hamlet head signed the papers in secret to allow this former hamlet head to acquire collective land. When this man presented the papers to the township forestry station, the foresters approved the wasteland auction, since the papers stipulated that other affected villagers had all agreed to the auction. When the wasteland auction became public, however, there was a storm of protest in Mengsong. Villagers were furious, not only because the deal was done without their knowledge, but also because the auctioned area was immediately cleared and burned in preparation for planting fruit trees. A project that was supposed to prevent soil erosion was funneling silt into the reservoir, and in fact causing increased soil erosion.

Villagers also worried about the accumulation of so much land by one person. They claimed that they had built the reservoir with their own labor during the collective period, creating a communal resource that benefited everyone. The forest above it had been regenerating since 1970, when work on the reservoir began. By 1995, the for-

est was still somewhat brushy, but sufficient to prevent erosion into the reservoir. Villagers were now nostalgic for the collective years when, in their memory, good socialist leaders took care of everyone's needs. In their view, the accumulation of more than 2000 mu in one person's hands meant that this person would benefit from the auction while many others lost out. Villagers saw this as a major change in the allocation of land and a dangerous step away from the path of watching out for the whole community. They claimed that Akha custom had always been to take care of everyone in the village. While other stories suggested that this was not always the case, the wasteland auction mobilized villagers around the narrative of Akha custom in defense against Akheu's predations. While he may not have benefited monetarily from the auction, he increased his role as the patron of access to new resources. Villagers were concerned not just with present soil erosion, but portents for the future. Their experience of "development" projects in the reform era had been that often a few people got rich, while many remained poor. Again, because of Akheu's connections in township administration, nurtured through the occasional delivery of wild game from Burma, the township forestry station rebuffed villagers' protests. Township officials relied on Akheu as their man on the spot, implementing state forest policies, protecting the environment, and taking care of the border. The "market" for land was of course made possible by state policy, but in this case,⁸ the auction transpired in ways that benefited Akheu, reinforcing his role as the controller of resource access, and enriched one of his cronies among the local elites.

THE LODGE

The third story about Akheu concerns a lodge that he built during my stay there in 1996–97. Akheu maintained that government agents needed a better place to stay in Mengsong, and that tourism was opening up for border areas. Foreign tourists would surely like to visit Akha hamlets in this glorious upland site right on the Burma border. Accordingly, Akheu organized men from his own hamlet to cut trees in the collective forest, the area designated for house construction. The men then built what looked like an oversized Akha house right along the main street. Akheu's final step was to have the lodge painted orange, green, and yellow to attract visitors. Other villagers were appalled at the lodge's appearance, saying it looked

like a Han Chinese imitation of a minority nationality building, many of which they had seen in Jinghong. They feared that profits from the lodge would make their way into Akheu's personal hands. Hamlet collective labor and trees had gone into the lodge, but the benefits would flow privately to Akheu. The resource in question was not just the lodge, of course, but income from tourism, as ethnic tourism became a key selling point for Yunnan. Akheu wanted to tap into that tourist money. Other villagers judged that Akheu was using "Akha-ness" in inappropriate ways. Villagers were not opposed to tourists, nor were they averse to new money-making schemes. What they objected to was Akheu's maneuvering to benefit from the lodge at their expense. The market for tourists had been opened up by a set of provincial government policies to build a tourist industry based on Yunnan's twenty-five minority nationalities. Once again, the market was shaped by Akheu's maneuvering to turn collective resources into private gain. In this case, he was exploiting Akha difference from mainstream Chinese culture, using Akha marginality to market an out-of-the-way place (Tsing 1994).

There were heated complaints about Akheu's handling of these three episodes, the tin, the wasteland auction, and the lodge. The nature of the conflicts over these episodes reflects a number of trends experienced more broadly across reform era China. One way to view them is to focus on the tension in the term "socialist market economy," with some people (villagers) leaning toward the socialist side, and others (mainly Akheu) leaning toward the market economy. Villagers valued the state's involvement in the equitable distribution of resources, broad-based increases in household income, and communal resources for everyone's benefit. Akheu and his cohort valued an increasingly freewheeling market, individual competition, privately owned resources, and individual gain. These split perspectives actually represent two strands in the state's development mission. One strand encouraged household competition in growing markets to foster economic development. The other strand emphasized poverty alleviation to make rural livelihoods more secure. The two meanings of development, as market development and poverty alleviation, are also prevalent in international development thinking and are often mistakenly conflated (Ferguson 1994). Akha villagers could tell the difference, which they experienced as a contradiction.

In a general sense, villagers favored poverty alleviation, whereas Akheu favored market competition, in an arena where he could skew the market to his own private benefit. The story is not quite so simple, however, since Akha villagers *were* interested in increasing their incomes, but in a context of communal resources and general hamlet improvement—or at least in explaining the conflict to me, that’s how their argument ran in contention with Akheu’s plans. In other words, villagers configured as households were competing in markets and engaged in disputes over access to lands and trees.

Villagers’ most heated complaints were about what they perceived as Akheu’s corrupt practices. Mengsong hamlet heads approached officials in township and county government to protest Akheu’s claiming and profiting from Mengsong tin as well as conducting a secret wasteland auction. In their view, much of so-called development benefited predatory elites instead of raising everyone’s income. The episode of the lodge, meanwhile, opened up a different realm of development, promoted particularly in Yunnan, to take advantage of its “cultural diversity” to attract large numbers of tourists. While this tale again illustrates Akheu exploiting collective resources for personal gain, it also shows him, in other people’s estimation, catering to a Han Chinese sense of what “Akha” meant. Akheu’s lively corruption in all three of these stories was also characteristic of reform-era China (O’Brien and Li 1999). He was by no means the only one benefiting from the devolution of property rights and responsibilities to the local level, a process that allowed many local elites to enrich themselves at other people’s expense.⁹

In 1998, Akheu’s fortunes changed. He had done well in the reform era, but the good times were coming to an end. By 1998 his corrupt practices had either gone too far or become too blatant. Akheu had bought a new truck in Burma to avoid paying the 100 percent duty on new cars in China. For many weeks he drove around Mengsong and down as far as the township with Burmese license plates on his truck. Akheu approached township officials about getting him Chinese plates, sweetening his request with the carcass of a barking deer from Burma. Without the Chinese plates, he couldn’t drive to Jinghong to take his two children back to school. When Akheu and his children returned to Mengsong with the Burmese plates still on, it was clear that a barking deer had not done the trick. Within a few months, township officials removed from office Akheu and two oth-

ers in the administrative village. It was bruited about that financial improprieties had got them in trouble. Since corruption was common in the township and in Jinghong, it's possible that Akheu just hadn't bribed the right person, or hadn't contributed enough. Villagers, of course, thought that their persistent complaints had brought him down.

Once out of office, Akheu and his wife moved to Baoshan where he had a three-year contract to run a tin mine. According to his wife, they invested 100,000 yuan in the tin mine, and lost it all. In late 2001, Akheu returned to Mengsong in failure.

In the period between 1998, when Akheu left for Baoshan, and his return in late 2001, a series of important events had occurred in China. Deng Xiaoping died in 1997, ushering in an era of rethinking and reshuffling among top leaders in Beijing. They were preparing for 2002, when new national leadership would be chosen. Among their considerations were China's possible entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the growing disparities in income between its eastern and western regions (Goodman 2004, 2001). Debates centered on how to prepare China for WTO, and how to both alleviate the poverty in the West and integrate the region more firmly within China (Goodman 2004, 2001; Economy 2002). There was also discussion of how to reduce the corruption at county and township levels, especially in western China (O'Brien and Li 1999).

In 1998 massive floods along the Yangtze River and in Heilongjiang killed hundreds of people and caused massive damage. Central leaders interpreted these floods as national environmental disasters, caused in part, it was claimed, by deforestation along the upper watersheds of the Yangtze. In response, the government instituted a logging ban that gradually extended across western China. The logging ban meant that the state was reclaiming responsibility for those forests earlier allocated to villages and households in the early reform era. The overreach of the policy is shown by the fact that the logging ban eventually included Mengsong, even though Mengsong is actually located in the Mekong River watershed. Additionally, my forest measurements from 1997 had shown Mengsong forests to be in good condition. The "cut of one knife" logging ban policy, though, was implemented across western China without reference to local conditions.

In 2000, central leaders launched the “Open Up the West,” or “Go West” project (*xibu dakaiifa*), one of several regional projects to improve China’s infrastructure and technology in preparation for the foreign investment that was presumed to flood in as a result of China’s accession into WTO (Goodman 2001). One component of Go West was called “ecological construction,” a campaign to mobilize farmers across the West to re-green the landscape. Forestry departments paid villagers to plant trees in any “wastelands” with a slope of 25 degrees or greater, and farmers were enjoined to either let trees regenerate or plant trees on sloping agricultural fields (Economy 2002). Through a policy called “grain for green,” farmers were to receive 150 kilos of grain and 20 yuan per year for eight years for each mu of cultivated land that regenerated into trees. The scale of labor mobilization to accomplish reforestation was reminiscent of Maoist campaigns, but here the labor was organized to prepare China’s environment for the international standard represented by WTO (Jhaveri 2003). Ecological construction was a further step in the state’s reclaiming land and trees and even extending the area of forest under forestry department control. In line with notions prevalent in international environmental projects, the meaning of forests also changed from being subsistence resources allocated to farmers, to environmental resources protected by the state.

In March 2002, during my visit, Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji were on television every night as they visited cities across western China. They were explaining the reasons for the inclusion of businesspeople (in addition to peasants and workers) in the ranks of citizens represented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Businesspeople would be in a starring role in the international capitalist economy, signified by the WTO that China was very pleased to join.

This series of somewhat disparate events represents changes that combined to produce devastating outcomes in Mengsong. The reforms undertaken between 1982 1997 entailed the devolution of property rights and decision making to the local level in rural areas in a bid to increase agricultural productivity (Goodman 2004). From 1998 on, the state recentralized authority over forests, and reinserted itself in large-scale plans for the West and in preparation for the WTO. While the meaning and outcome of these broad changes, especially Go West, are anything but clear (see Goodman 2004), the re-

sults for forest-dependent villagers are more apparent, and more ominous.

By the time Akheu returned to Mengsong in October 2001, several changes had already taken place. The logging ban and ecological construction were in place, meaning that the forestry department had reclaimed the collective forest and household forests as belonging to the state. Additionally, under ecological construction, the forestry department required Akha farmers to plant either pine trees or tea on their pasturelands. With the loss of pasture, farmers had sold off almost all their livestock, formerly a major source of household income. At the same time, the logging ban prevented farmers from cutting trees larger than a certain girth on their shifting cultivation lands. Without cutting the trees, farmers couldn't get a good burn. As a result, most shifting cultivation lands were regenerating into forests, meaning that the forestry department would reclaim these lands, too. The state had not only taken back the forest, but also extended its claim to include what had been farmers' fields and pastures. The logging ban and ecological construction in tandem had wrought major dispossession in Mengsong. The loss ensued from a government judgment that upland farmers, especially minority nationality ones, were partly responsible for the deforestation that had caused the 1998 floods. "Backward" minorities were being removed from resources that they didn't know how to "manage."

Another change in Mengsong was that all mining of tin and other minerals was now contracted out to firms from Fujian, Guangdong, and Kunming. These companies hired laborers from elsewhere to do the mining. The firms paid a fee to Mengsong, but that didn't contribute to household incomes. Contracting arrangements that in urban areas could foster creative marketing arrangements (see Lei Guang's essay in this collection) managed in this upland rural area to deprive local farmers of the benefit from minerals found on their lands.

As a result of both ecological construction and the loss of income from mining, household incomes in Mengsong had dropped by 25 percent between 1997 and 2002. In February 2002, Mengsong was officially declared a "poor village." The rise in prominence of businesspeople, in this case the mining contractors, had impoverished Mengsong villagers. The minerals in Mengsong and the profits from their sale now flowed away from Mengsong. The state's reclaiming

the forest meant that villagers had lost much of their pasture, agricultural land, and forests to the forestry department. The staples of their economic life—herding, forestry, mining, and agriculture—were denied them.

In this new context, Akheu was remaking himself, step by step, into an entrepreneur. Instead of being an ethnic minority farmer, one of those backward people who destroyed the environment, he would become a forward-thinking entrepreneur who would contribute to China's economic growth. He was no longer pursuing state office, but was instead becoming important regionally as a businessperson valued by the CCP. Through his experience in tin mining (however uneven), Akheu knew provincial mining contractors and convinced one of them to hire him. Akheu was now the head of the tin contract in Mengsong, mediating between the firm in Kunming and the team of outside workers hired to dig out the tin. Additionally, Akheu was the point person for the transport of a special kind of rattan from Yeren Shan in Burma to a furniture factory in Kunming. While in Mengsong, the rattan was stored in the colorful lodge, which had never attracted many visitors. Local people claimed that a ghost lived in the lodge—they were unwilling even to hold meetings there. But the lodge served well as a warehouse for rattan.

Akheu's most creative idea, however, was the goat project. He was busy organizing Akha in Burma and Mengsong to raise goats. In a new guise, he constituted himself as an important border mediator and patron of a new business, setting out to organize and control the border in a new way. Perhaps most tellingly, Akheu had devised this new project in the face of adversity. In January 2002, his daughter had been killed in a truck accident in which the driver, the Han Chinese husband of Mengsong's doctor, also lost his life. At the Mengsong memorial service for the doctor's husband, one of the deceased's relatives from Shenzhen got into conversation with Akheu. They noticed that their interests converged and developed the goat raising scheme on the spot. The Shenzhen relative owned a hot pot restaurant but had a hard time getting a reliable supply of goat meat. Akheu quickly responded that a mountain environment was ideal for raising goats, and that Mengsong Akha could use a new money-making venture. Following the memorial service, Akheu visited his elder sister, an expert in the agriculture office in Jinghong. She was ready with services and possible funding to help. Akheu planned to

apply to the Go West project for additional funding—the only person in Mengsong who mentioned Go West. Akheu was ready to serve as one of the entrepreneurs that the CCP was highlighting as critical to China's future. He had hooked up with possibilities created by China's globalization from his position on the far periphery, making good use of his out-of-the-way place.

A reprise of the themes covered here relate to the market, the state, and China's moves toward globalization with respect to Akha upland villagers and our hero, Akheu. The reform era was characterized, in Mengsong and elsewhere, by a socialist market economy, replete with somewhat contradictory impulses. The two strands within the state's development mission, to foster a market economy on a competitive basis and to alleviate poverty, signify the disparities involved. There were state initiatives for the equitable distribution of resources, such as land allocations to households and collectives. There were also state programs for poverty alleviation, particularly in western China. On the other hand, the state opened up markets and encouraged increasing market competition over a growing number of goods. Villagers configured as households were to manage their own affairs in competition with others. The devolution of responsibility for local management, in addition to other factors not mentioned here, allowed for considerable corruption at local levels of government as well as in administrative villages. Indeed, widespread corruption was a hallmark of the reform era, one that central leaders wanted to address.

Following the 1998 floods, the central government imposed a logging ban that eventually embraced most of western China and reinstated state responsibility for and management of forestlands. As China geared up for the WTO, businesspeople rose in importance, underscored by their inclusion among those represented by the CCP. Under projects such as Go West, the central government promoted grand schemes, envisioning the West as a receptacle for massive investment. There was a heady feeling of political mobilization about the Go West plans, even though the context was preparation for full entry into an international capitalist economy. While Go West may fail to reach most of its stated goals, since state investment has been limited and foreign investment not particularly forthcoming (Goodman 2004), its ecological component, in conjunction with the logging ban, may have the most enduring long-term effects.

For Akha villagers in Mengsong, the events of recent years have entailed a loss of land, forests, and livestock—those resources equitably allocated to them in 1982-84. Villagers have also experienced the loss of income from mining. Their plummeting incomes qualified Mengsong as a “poor village” by 2002. From their perspective, recent years ushered in a massive dispossession of their resources, and the benefits of the reform era were gone. Their minority ethnicity, peripheral locale, and ostensible backwardness had played into these losses, all brought about by state plans.

Akheu, however, had remade himself once again. He read well the signs of where China was heading and who the winners and losers would be as China entered the WTO. In realms of entrepreneurship, his minority ethnicity was less important than his experience and skills, or stated differently, his minority ethnicity might play out to his advantage as a result of his experience and skills. Akheu contracted to mine in Mengsong, and organized people into a new business venture raising goats. He linked himself to a cosmopolitan urban area through the restaurant in Shenzhen. He inserted Mengsong into the rattan trade between Burma and China. He managed to use his border locale once again to enhance his position and turn a peripheral site into a node of exchange with Burma and elsewhere in China. Like Ah Q of Lu Xun’s tale, he was always looking to get rich and suffered ups and downs in his quest. Unlike Ah Q, he was able again and again to join a going concern—the PLA, administrative village government, and now business ventures—at the right time. Akheu was clever and charismatic, persuasive and enthusiastic. I had to stop myself from investing in the goat project, remembering just in time that I would lose my shirt. Unlike other Mengsong villagers, who had lost out in a major way under new forest policies and preparations for WTO, Akheu had set himself up to go with the upward flow. He had astutely read and helped shape the actually emerging market constituted by government policies, state agents, and entrepreneurs. As an ethnic minority person on the periphery of China, Akheu had been surprisingly successful at using his marginal locality to help mold the market to suit his own plans.

NOTES

1. For the original story, see Lu Xun 1981.
2. Akha are subsumed within the official Hani minority nationality in China. Since they call themselves Akha, that is the name used here.
3. Unless otherwise cited, data are from fieldwork conducted from November 1995 to March 1997, and from follow-up visits in March and July 2002. See Giersch 1998 for a history of Sipsongpanna as a “buffer” between China and Burma.
4. By changing the name to Xishuangbanna, a name without particular meaning in Chinese, the government officially erased the history of the principality, as well as China’s colonial move in taking it over.
5. The names have been changed again. Mengsong is now a “village” (*cun*) and hamlets have become “small groups” (*xiao zu*). To avoid confusion I use the terms from 1997.
6. This refers to Anna Tsing’s *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (Tsing 1993), an examination of marginality in an “out of the way” place, in which “shifting cultivators . . . worked to define and re-define their situation on the periphery of state power” (p. 5).
7. Fifteen mu equal one hectare.
8. For an extended discussion of the conflicts and corruption involved in wasteland auctions in Sichuan, see Grinspoon 2002.
9. In a recent article (Sturgeon and Sikor 2004), Thomas Sikor and I explored the dynamics of postsocialist property rights in rural resources in Bulgaria, Albania, Vietnam, and China. We found that in postsocialist contexts, local elites were invariably the winners in claiming resources or the process of their allocation.

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