

THE ‘LUCKY’ ONES: LAND, CITIZENSHIP, AND INEQUALITY IN THE WA SELF-ADMINISTERED DIVISION

Naomi Hellmann

The journey from the northern Wa Hills to Pangkham, the capital of the Wa state (see map) ran along a winding, paved road in good condition that lay roughly parallel to the Sino-Burmese border. The vertiginous, sparsely populated landscape was jarring and incongruous. Rays of sun streaming through a dense layer of mottled grey clouds illuminated a cascade of rolling green mountains shrouded in mist and wisps of fog from a passing shower. The halcyon scene was broken by the intermittent sight and sound of oversize cargo trucks rumbling towards China with heavy loads of massive timber. The verdant slopes were covered in unending rows of evenly spaced rubber trees as far as the eye could see like scores of soldiers lined up for a military march.

Outside the house of a top military officer, a main street had been closed off for his son’s wedding, an elaborate six-day affair. Two long rows of tables with hundreds of chairs sat opposite Lexus

and other SUVs parked in front of a beauty parlor advertising Chanel. More tables and a large stage fill an enclosed, outdoor courtyard in front of an enormous marbled entranceway with stone pillars. A crystal chandelier and sweeping staircase graced the interior of his decadent, brightly-lit manor. A Chinese-speaking host announced the couple on behalf of the officer, an elderly, ethnic Wa with little to no command of Chinese, and introduced ethnic Shan, Ta’ang, and other family members.

A reception followed with bottles of imported Johnny Walker Black Label instead of the standard Chinese sorghum liquor accompanied by bountiful platters of food. Dozens of United Wa State Army (UWSA) soldiers with guns strapped to their waists served dishes, cleaned up, and guarded presents. Guests wore brilliant jewelry with multiple carats of diamonds and precious and semi-precious stones. Families owned mining concessions, large tracts of agricultural land, and processing factories. They enjoyed the benefits of dual and even multiple national citizenships, study abroad, and the

¹ I use ‘Wa state’ in lieu of Wa Self-Administered Division or Special Region 2 because it is the name most commonly used in the region. It is not intended as a political statement.

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A view of a rubber concession in the Wa state.

Source: Naomi Hellmann



labor of children and servants. On the second floor, business was made over the steady clicks and intermittent sweeps of Mahjong tiles and the hum of hushed voices. Bets were placed for hundreds and thousands of USD or perhaps more.

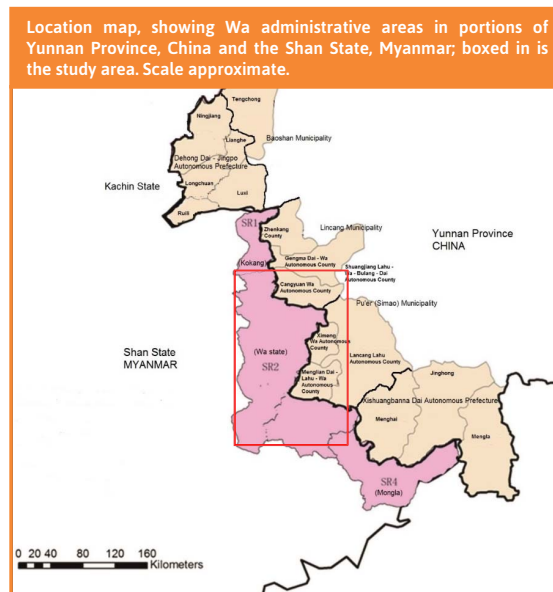
The life of the local elite lay in stark contrast to the entrenched poverty in the northern Wa Hills. Rural localities connected to distant town centers along narrow, deeply rutted dirt roads, perhaps only half of which were even accessible by a robust, all-terrain vehicle during the dry season. Village settlements comprising about 10 to 50 households dotted the upper ridges of isolated hillsides. Homes were constructed out of woven bamboo and straw roofs, which were susceptible to damage from strong winds and heavy rain. On the surrounding slopes, land was used as a means for subsistence for every aspect of survival from swidden or shifting cultivation agriculture to gathering fuel, collecting water, and other less visible activity. Basic needs, including access to schools and teachers were entirely unmet. Villagers were often illiterate and spoke only the local Wa language. Even bare essentials like food and clothing were insufficient. Without healthcare, they faced a host of eradicable diseases and other medical problems from polio to cleft lip and palate.

In the northern Wa Hills, a landholder with around 300 hectares of rubber, dual national citizenship, and family who had allegedly made hundreds of thousands of USD had a new agricultural concession on property that had been sanctioned at no cost by the Wa land authorities in the interest of economic development. Under China's crop-substitution scheme, a cousin from across the border had provided financial, technical, and other essential resources while he had obligated land and labor. Walking alongside plants sown by villagers, he explained how the Wa state had many impoverished people living on a vast expanse of "empty land". Therefore, outside investors were needed to "develop" the land in order for the poor to prosper.

Theoretically, land belonged to anyone "native", an amorphous entity that included autochthonous populations and those who had arrived in the 1940s fleeing Japanese forces in the Kokang, but not those who had moved to the area from China to support the Communist Party of Burma or more recent settlers. In practice, however, only

"natives" with the "means and ability" – long-term, trusted social, political, and economic relationships, connections to people in positions of authority and control, and enough money – could claim property. Despite inconsistencies and ambiguities in the local vernacular of land use, it was clear that villagers lacked formal ownership rights. Moreover, according to wealthy proprietors and business owners, households subordinated to the area's industrial crop economy were the "lucky" ones on the argument that conditions for them were better than for those living in remote areas without access to any opportunity.

While conducting fieldwork in the Wa autonomous areas that run along the Sino-Myanmar border, people often singled out the obvious disparities in material wealth between the rich and poor. Even the upper echelons of local society described the Wa state as a "golden pyramid" with the top one percent enjoying access to remarkable privileges and luxuries while the rest of the population bore the human consequences of living in poverty. This picture of inequality is similar to the one that emerged from the 2014 population census in which 94% of the population lives in rural areas excluded from access to land or resources. Not without coincidence, 94% of the population also lacks national registration cards. This means that not only are they bound to the land by their relative disadvantage, but also by their spatial immobility.



Yet, there remained an underlying Lockean mindset – not least among the leadership – that "natives", who are "lazy", "backward", and "incapable" could somehow be expropriated. In describing factors influencing development outcomes on the two sides of the border despite the area's geographic and cultural affinities, a Wa official explained China had "provisions" the Wa state didn't have: "the sun is different there than it is here."

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RISE is T.wai's quarterly focused on current Southeast Asian affairs; the only Italian journal entirely devoted to the region.