China's New Socialist Countryside
Harwood, Russell

Published by University of Washington Press

Harwood, Russell.
China's New Socialist Countryside: Modernity Arrives in the Nu River Valley.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27003.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27003

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=988796
Prior to 2007, many of Menke’s primary school–aged children were missing out on a full education. This was not because their parents did not want their children to attend school; as the quote above suggests, many of Menke’s parents in fact placed great value upon education. The reason was that when it rained or snowed, the steep, 1.3-kilometer dirt path connecting Menke with the local primary school became extremely slippery and very dangerous to walk down, and parents did not allow their children to make the treacherous journey to and from school. Recognizing the difficulties these children were facing in getting to and from school and the impact it had upon their education, a local teacher and I initiated the building of an all-weather concrete path to safely connect Menke with the local primary school. The project was also a response to our perception that local governing authorities were providing inadequate access to education for the local community. The Safe Path (Ping’an Lu) project was made possible through funds donated by a Western Australian community organization as well as other members of the Western Australian community. Later I initiated a project to fund university scholarships for women from particularly disadvantaged ethnic minority households in Gongshan. The first two recipients of these scholarships graduated from universities in Kunming in July 2011. The path project embodies the theo-
The path project was initially perceived as a minor embarrassment for the local governing authorities, as it appeared to highlight their failure to provide adequate levels of infrastructure for the local population. In response, the local government made considerable efforts to ensure that it was involved and ultimately had symbolic ownership of the project. For example, upon completion of the project in 2007, a special opening ceremony was organized by the local governing authorities. It was attended by senior government officials from both the Gongshan and the Nujiang governments. The Gongshan television station produced a special news story on the path and the opening ceremony for its daily Gongshan News (Gongshan Xinwen) broadcast, including separate recorded interviews with the hamlet leader and me. Through this highly choreographed news story, the path project became encapsulated in the “Build a New Socialist Countryside” campaign. Indeed, the newsreader introduced the news story by stating: “Menke village has answered the Party’s call to ‘Build a New Socialist Countryside’.” The path was a symbol of the efforts that China’s governing authorities were making to modernize rural China and to provide better social and economic outcomes for poor rural communities such as Menke. Following the completion of the path, Menke was named a “model village” in acknowledgment of the sacrifice and hardship the villagers had endured as they worked without pay for several months to complete the path. In being named a model village, Menke became directly implicated in the population improvement program directed at Gongshan’s ethnic minority population. The implicit message to the rest of the community was quite clear: “Gongshan’s farmers are unproductive and engage in backward livelihoods that are holding back the development of the country. But if you are willing to work hard and comply with the opportunities, resources, and direction provided by government, you too can become productive, valued citizens.”

To this end, my involvement in these projects inadvertently made me complicit in the state engineering project that has been the focus of this book: the socialization and political integration of China’s ethnic minority population into the Chinese Party-state. The path and the university scholarships were initiated to improve access to state education and work opportunities for children from disadvantaged households. However,
another critical outcome of these projects is that they have drawn mem-
bers of Gongshan’s ethnic minority population further into the institu-
tions and rationalities of the Chinese Party-state.

Since the late 1990s, major policy reforms in areas including agricul-
ture and education, in conjunction with the rolling out of large-scale eco-
nomic infrastructure such as roads and rail networks, have accelerated
the collapse of time and space between peripheral ethnic minority com-
unities and the market-driven industrialized economy concentrated in
China’s coastal areas. Reflecting Anthony Giddens’s analysis of moder-
nity, the movement of people and ideas is becoming more fluid, with
livelihoods increasingly influenced by distant events and disembedded
from their local context (Giddens 1990: 18–19; Giddens and Pierson 1998:
98). In once-peripheral rural communities such as Gongshan, this trans-
formation has been marked by, among other things, an unprecedented
proportion of the population being drawn into the state education system
and the increased movement of surplus rural labor away from traditional
subsistence-based livelihoods and toward off-farm work regimes, both
locally and beyond the county border.

These changes are providing opportunities for many economically
disadvantaged ethnic minority people to engage in off-farm work and
improve their financial situation. They are also, for better or worse, fur-
ther facilitating these people’s integration into, and dependence upon, the
Chinese Party-state. In line with Michel Foucault’s notion of governmen-
tality and his analysis of the ways in which modern nation-states are gov-
erned (1978, 1991), reforms such as the strict enforcement of compulsory
education, the SLCP, and the increased penetration of state media reflect
the increased governmentalization of ethnic minority communities,
wherein the Chinese Party-state has an enhanced array of technologies
at its disposable for influencing, and governing through, the desires and
aspirations of the ethnic minority population.

As the epigraph above from a parent in Menke illustrates, many of
Gongshan’s parents are choosing to keep their children in school not as
a response to active coercion by governing authorities, but because they
genuinely believe it will improve their children’s prospects of finding off-
farm work and provide greater social and economic security in the long
term. Paradoxically, just as choices such as this gesture toward providing a
child with educational opportunities that will enable them to have greater
individual autonomy and life choices upon completing school, they also reflect increased dependence upon the institutions and rationalities of the Chinese Party-state. Further, they reinforce the developmental agenda prescribed by China’s governing authorities for the ethnic minority population, an agenda directed toward cultivating “high-quality,” “patriotic,” and “productive” citizens who will turn away from the “backward” and “environmentally destructive” subsistence-based rural livelihoods of their parents’ generation and move into the off-farm work economy.

That said, the people and government of Gongshan have not been (and most likely never will be) completely acquiescent to the developmental agendas of the Chinese Party-state. The local governing authorities, for example, deftly circumvented the strict enforcement of the nine-year compulsory education policy. Even though official reporting indicated full compliance with the compulsory education policy, the makeshift vocational schools for dropouts created just prior to official inspection did little to advance the education of their students or to acquaint them with the rationalities and ideology of the Chinese Party-state, with many students appearing to return home soon after inspection. Government conservation programs directed at cutting off access to local forestry resources continue to be resisted by locals and outsiders. It is also critical to acknowledge that most of Gongshan’s ethnic minority population has maintained a value system and livelihood structure quite distinct from that prescribed by governing authorities, despite living through more than six decades of highly interventionist CCP population improvement programs, many of which were overtly directed at breaking down traditional social structures and livelihood practices. Gongshan’s ethnic minority people, whether Dulong, Lisu, Nu, or Tibetan, take great pride in their ethnic identity, history, and customs even as they continue to be subjected to demeaning official and popular narratives that portray them as being of low quality, lazy, and less advanced than the majority Han population. Although officially frowned upon, an enduring aspect of ethnic minority identity in Gongshan is Protestant and Catholic worship, a legacy of the missionaries who proselytized in northwestern Yunnan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Churches, both legal and underground, are a prominent feature of contemporary Gongshan society.¹

As Marshall Berman’s epigraph in this book’s introduction suggests,
the experience of modernity brings with it both transformation and disintegration: on the one hand, it promises “adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world,” and on the other, it “threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (1982: 15). This description is highly applicable to Gongshan, but with qualification: the experience of modernity in Gongshan has also been decidedly authoritarian. Gongshan’s people have been subjected to an exceptionally paternalistic form of government intervention, or “authoritarian governmentality” (Dean 1999: 131–48), in the name of modernization and to remedy what governing authorities perceive to be backward and environmentally destructive livelihood practices, and local people have had little, if any, say in the development programs that are rapidly transforming their community.

An important question is what Gongshan would be like today—or in twenty years’ time, for that matter—if it had not been subjected to this level of intervention. If the local population had been left to continue to practice their traditional livelihoods, had not been exposed to mainstream education, or had not been provided the opportunity to jump on the back of a truck and temporarily migrate to China’s coastal regions for work, there is no doubt that social and economic conditions in Gongshan would be depressed, with food security a major concern for many households. Furthermore, if given the choice, it seems unlikely that the people of Gongshan would have opted out of the modernization process that has transformed their community. However, it is just as important to ask what a more inclusive development model might have achieved. National development policy that seeks to incorporate the diverse needs and desires of communities during both conception and implementation generally leads to more sustainable and equitable development outcomes for these communities. In contrast, Gongshan’s people are governed under an authoritarian regime that offers limited space to openly discuss, challenge, and contribute to policy. While in the short term they have experienced vast improvements to their livelihoods, only time will tell if the current authoritarian approach to development results in genuinely sustainable and equitable outcomes for them and future generations.

Finally, increased government intervention is providing Gongshan’s farmers with more choices and far greater opportunities than their parents’ generation enjoyed. Over time, more of Gongshan’s farmers will take
up off-farm work, whether in Gongshan, Yunnan, or beyond. Nonetheless, they will not be competing on an equal basis in China’s increasingly urbanized and market-oriented economy. Persistent structural inequalities will relegate Gongshan’s farmers to the worst-paid off-farm jobs in the least-valued economic sectors. To this end, the greatest challenge for China’s governing authorities in the coming decade will be to determine how the opportunities and economic spoils of three and a half decades of rapid economic growth and development can be more evenly distributed among its 1.3 billion people, including the people of Gongshan.