
Images of the Wa Hills: The Effect of the 'Opening Up' of Southwest China to Southeast Asia on 'Minority Nationalities' and Ethnic Autonomous Areas Along the Sino-Burmese Frontier

Naomi Hellmann*¹

¹Max Planck Gesellschaft (MPG) – Hermann-Föge-Weg 11 37073 Göttingen, Germany

Abstract

This paper explores the effect of the 'opening up' of Southwest China to Southeast Asia on minority groups in ethnic autonomous territories on the Sino-Burmese frontier. Inspired by Alonso's work on the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism in the process and practice of state formation, the paper looks at how the partitioning of space is connected to ethnic inequality. Focusing on the Wa Hills on the border between China and Myanmar, the paper calls attention to four different kinds of territorializing strategies as central to understanding how unequal relations between nations (ethnic) and states (national) are shaped over time. These are: political (the system of administration); economic (the extension of infrastructures and ownership and control of natural resources); symbolic (nationalistic motifs); and, language and education. The paper contends that an increasingly 'open' China and Myanmar has had a seemingly paradoxical effect in the Wa Hills of weakening Wa ethnic territory, but strengthening Wa ethnic identity. To illustrate the visual narrative, I draw upon photographs and ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a period of eleven months from October 2015 to August 2016 in both the Wa Self-Administered Division (Special Region 2) in eastern Myanmar and Wa autonomous areas in southwestern China.

*Speaker