

Chapter Six

Rethinking the role of consensus in pluralism: Learning from community-based forest management in Yunnan, China

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Abstract

This chapter contributes to an understanding of pluralism and social learning in community-based forest management by examining three cases of village forest management in Yunnan, China. The authors question the current trend in the literature to dismiss the value of consensus and endorse open conflict (FAO 1999, Rescher 1993). An analysis of the three cases suggests that cultural values about consensus can be equally important in generating learning that leads to successful forest management strategies. The analysis also demonstrates the significance of informal communication and the importance of influential leaders as insider facilitators, for successful negotiation and compromise to reach consensus, and we thereby question the emphasis on formal mechanisms in discussions on pluralism. We show that through negotiation and compromise, even communities that encompass diverse interests in forest resources can be effective in uniting under a common cultural value system and thus develop successful mechanisms for managing interests.

INTRODUCTION

In discussions on community-based forest management, the current literature on pluralism maintains that diverse interests among stakeholders are inevitable, both on a material level as well as on the level of cultural values (FAO 1999, Rescher 1993). Therefore, argue some authors, no single view of forest management can be pre-eminent, and consensus is unattainable (Anderson *et al.* 1999, Daniels and Walker 1999). A process of formal negotiation with a neutral or powerful outside facilitator is often required. Social learning theory (Lee 1993) also emphasizes the importance of bounded or manageable conflict as a primary basis for social learning and adaptive management. While this emphasis on overt and presumably constructive conflict may be useful in many management situations, it seems inappropriate in the context of village-based forest management in present-day China, where consensus building is regarded as an essential cultural value (Faure and Rubin 1993).

The literature on pluralism and forest management places considerable emphasis on formal processes, such as those involving the roles of official, outside facilitators in multistakeholder negotiations. Though informal communication is discussed, it is often not accorded prominence in explaining stakeholder relations, nor does the discussion shed much light on how informal channels work. Our study, as well as others in China, found that informal communication is essential for people to come together to negotiate, compromise and to identify agreed-upon strategies.

Using case studies of community forest management in Yunnan Province, China, we demonstrate first that the Chinese cultural context requires a heavier emphasis on initial, overall consensus building, often based on fundamental cultural values, before diverging or conflicting interests can be handled effectively. Second, we show how informal processes of negotiation and compromise, facilitated by the strong influence of village leaders, play crucial roles in consensus-building processes. Insights on the interplay of consensus and conflict, and of formal and informal negotiation mechanisms, may shed light on the dynamics of community forest management in other cultures within Asia and beyond.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Lee (1993), Korten (1984), and Röling and Jiggins (1998) suggest that collaborative adaptive management involves social learning. Actors involved in forest management learn together about ecosystems and about institutional innovations and reconfigurations that support effective learning. This learning approach leads to an improved understanding of relationships among:

- The status of the natural resources (forests and forest resources)
- Institutions governing human activity that affect the status of the natural resource
- Learning (knowledge and information) systems for improving technical innovational capacity for managing the natural resource (Maarleveld and Dangbégnon 1999).

Here we will examine how the management of diverse interests in resource use by communities in Yunnan addresses all three of the above elements. The term ‘interests’ here refers mainly to the material interests of the community members, although some essential spiritual interests are also included. We assume that in addressing different user interests, communities formulate a consensus that can in principle be accepted by community members. Rescher (1993:13), referring to Jürgen Habermas, refers to this as a rational consensus, the ‘product of people implementing the norms of reason’, which is to be distinguished from a *de facto* consensus. In the process of coordinating their interests, local people continuously institutionalise basic, agreed-upon values and norms via enforced community rules that can serve as the basis for negotiating further disputes. Thus, consensus is achieved through active negotiation and compromise among community members. Conflict is managed behind the scenes rather than overtly. The community’s power to negotiate with outside stakeholders in adaptive management is, in turn, determined by the degree of consensus reached among stakeholders within the community. The purpose of negotiation within the community is to facilitate understanding of different interests among members. Community members carry out negotiation processes according to the cultural value that face-to-face agreement and harmony is important. Compromise arises out of a need for some members to forgo fulfilling some of their individual interests in favour

of community-wide interests and values. This is facilitated by leaders working informally with individual or small groups, encouraging the development of a consensus before open public discussions.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Yunnan Province, located in southwestern China at N 21°9′–29°15′ and E 97°39′–106°12′, covers a total area of about 390 000 km², of which over 90% are mountainous (see Figure 6.1). The Province has a population of 40 000 000. Forest land throughout China is divided into two types, state forest land and community forest land. The latter accounts for 61% of the total. By law, each village community in China has its own forest land exclusively for meeting its basic needs. The policy on usufruct of village forest land was implemented in the early 1980s and assigned a forest area to each household for particular uses. The assigned forest land was categorized into

Figure 6.1 Location of three villages in Yunnan province, China. 1. Dongda village, 2. Beida village and 3. Tangdui village



two types: freehold forest land (*Ziliushan*), which is intended for meeting household needs such as firewood and is primarily managed and utilized by individual households, and contract forest land (*Zerenshan*), which individual households have the duty to manage for the whole village. In implementing the policy, some adjustments have been made by local communities to facilitate management. For example, contract forest land in many villages has been collectively managed and utilized. Regarding the use of collective forests, the volume of wood extraction is controlled and authorized by the county forestry bureau based on villagers' requests.

To illustrate how local communities manage their diverse interests, we document the experiences of three villages. Two villages with contrasting experiences of good and poor management were selected on the basis of having a similar ethnic composition, being near each other, and having access to relatively good transportation and market opportunities. A third village was selected in a relatively remote location with less direct contact with authorities and poor access to markets. We have been working with local villagers as researchers and facilitators for over four years using participatory rural appraisal and participatory observation. Village leadership at each site consists of a committee composed of one headman, one deputy headman, one accountant and one woman leader. Table 6.1 presents additional information about the context of forest management in each of the three villages (Cao and Zhang 1997).

Table 6.1 Location, population, and forest information for three case study villages in Yunnan Province

Village	Location and Population	Forest Condition and Ownership
Beida	Near provincial capital (20 km); population: 210; Han majority	Forest area: 2000 <i>mu</i> *; no large trees present Main tree species: <i>Pinus yunnanensis</i> , <i>P. armandi</i> Ownership: collective, but with contract and freehold assigned to individual households
Dongda	Near provincial capital (20 km); population: 225; Han majority	Forest area: 3000 <i>mu</i> , large trees present Main tree species: <i>P. yunnanensis</i> , <i>P. armandi</i> Ownership: collective
Tangdui	Northwest Yunnan, nearest town 30 km away; population: 752; Tibetan majority	Forest area: 30 000 <i>mu</i> , large trees present Main tree species: <i>P. densata</i> , <i>P. armandi</i> , <i>Picea</i> sp., <i>Arbies</i> sp. Ownership: collective

*15 *mu* = 1 *hectare*

CASE STUDIES

Beida

Beida village consists of diverse groups, including agriculturists, livestock raisers, fruit tree cultivators, vegetable cultivators, and other small business owners. The village has experienced a steady decline in forest area until recently. As early as the 1960s, owing to political reasons affecting most of China, agriculture production failed and severely affected the villagers' basic livelihood. Although the community wanted to conserve its forest for future use and formulated regulations and assigned a guard to do so, the forest was not conserved. Because of the lack of effective measures to deal with the food shortage, villagers were forced to cut their trees to trade for food. Due to the dire circumstances and lack of alternatives for procuring food, the village forest guard did not prevent the illegal cutting.

Dissatisfied with the deforestation problem they had created, the villagers changed their leadership. Deforestation continued nevertheless, so they changed their leadership again. This pattern was repeated again and again until nearly every adult man had been posted as the headman. With most of the forest already gone, it was left to regenerate naturally. This regeneration was threatened again in the early 1980s, when a new forest policy was implemented to encourage more individual control of forest lands. The villagers met at the time. Without much discussion before the village meeting, the villagers generally voiced support for more individual control of forest lands in the meeting. However, no effective, community-wide control mechanisms were worked out. Further deforestation followed soon after the allocation of forest lands. Individual ownership may have contributed to deforestation, but we suggest poor consensus building and a weak learning process could have been equally or more important.

Despite the deforestation, a few hectares of watershed forest have been relatively well conserved, although there are no big trees. Villagers attribute this success to the area's importance for their water resources, as well as its location in direct view of the village settlement.

The primary lessons learned from this case can be summarized as follows:

- The villagers' needs and interests were not well-coordinated toward the good maintenance of forest area, even though villagers had clear interests in managing their forest resources well.

- No effective social learning occurred. Adaptation was not channelled into social learning, but rather to the superficial change of leadership.
- The information flow was largely random, therefore social learning was not well-coordinated.

In contrast, in the following cases of good management, the above shortcomings were overcome.

Dongda

Dongda village still has some of the old forest plantations established in 1947 during the Guomindang period. During the past 50 years, Dongda has experienced steady growth in forest cover with more than half of the forest land having been reforested. In the past, nearly all villagers depended on diverse aspects of agriculture for their livelihood, such as livestock raising, crop cultivation, medicinal healing, crafts and others (Figure 6.2). As the economy developed, more diverse economic interests among villagers also developed. For example, most farmers now cultivate different kinds of vegetables. Some are busy in mushroom and *Myrica* sp. collection activities for cash,

Figure 6.2 The village forest addresses villagers multiple needs. A farmer's horse grazing in the forest Dongda



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while others are involved in small non-agricultural businesses. Some people rely more heavily on forest resources for their livelihood. These differences have not strongly affected forest management, however, nor has the fact that forest resources are not crucial economic resources for the village as a whole.

The villagers all agreed that the forest provides them with many forest products and provides clean water for them. Their drinking water comes from a hill covered by dense scrub woodlots. When asked about the rationale for conserving forests, one villager answered:

a forest is always better than barren land, because barren land arouses bad feelings and monotony in one's heart. To have a forest nearby means that the site's *fengshui* [meaning harmony in the environment, mystically referring to the effect of a particular site on one's fate and the good of the future generations—a prevalent way of thinking among Chinese] is good and it implies good living...

In the 1960s, the village leadership developed a strategy to address the multiple needs of villagers, through enrichment of the forest with fast growing bamboo. The forest was not allowed to be cut individually for sale, only collectively.

At a later period, from 1981 to 1989, the headman in Dongda village led the community through the critical years of shifts in national forest policy. He said:

the national forest policy was incomplete and thus could be easily operationalised in a way to suit our needs...we adjusted the general policy to our village's condition and made it effective. The principle was that we used the rational content in the policy to facilitate local forest management. For example, the 1980s forest policy regulated that the collective forest should be divided into two parts before being assigned to individual households, namely the 'contract hill', the *Zerenshan*, and the 'freehold hill', the *Ziliushan*. Considering that our forest condition was good and farmer households did not have enough money to buy the 'freehold hill', we decided to allocate only the contract hill to farmer households and stipulated the appropriate rules to monitor management activity based on informal discussions with some villagers. When this was announced in the village meeting, most villagers supported the option and no one openly opposed.

The plan was submitted to the local forest department, which supported it.

The village headman added ‘If you want to conserve the forest well, the key to its management is the word “dare”, i.e., you dare to prevent offenders and potential offenders. If you are afraid of creating “opposition” and try to be good to everyone, do not talk about forest management.’ However, he also said, ‘Daring forest management cannot function on its own without the exchange of ideas and opinions and talking about the problems. One needs to talk to the person who commits the wrong and let him fully realize the necessity of the decision.’ Therefore, while conflict is acknowledged, the manner of dealing with it points towards a greater cultural emphasis on consensus, in the sense that even an offender is expected ultimately to see the situation from the point of view of the larger group.

The village meeting was the site where much of this discussion took place. These meetings enabled a high proportion of the village to be involved in the decisions taken about their future. The village leadership was well aware of the importance of these meetings. When new forest action was initiated, the community’s ideas and opinions were probed in these meetings and the responsibility divided among members. The process before the village meeting was, however, equally important. It was before the meeting that informal consensus would be negotiated. As one headman said, he would often release messages through friends and family regarding future management to test the feedback from the villagers. Gossip and different opinions often suggested that a new plan was not feasible and needed adjustment. According to the village headman, good management cannot rely upon the punishment of the offenders all the time, but on the control of misbehaviour beforehand. The most efficient way to achieve this is to discuss and publicise new regulations in the village meetings.

The lessons learned from the Dongda case are that:

- Coordination of interests through effective leadership under a common value system results in good forest management, even if some villagers are not heavily dependent upon forest resources for their livelihood.
- To reach overall consensus within the community does not mean a complete absence of conflict. Rather, the village committee tries to reduce the severity

of conflict and move the community as a whole toward consensus as much as possible.

- Learning occurred through an effective leader who engaged in active informal information exchange.

Tangdui

The occupational interests within Tangdui village are diverse, including agriculturists, mushroom collectors, livestock owners, pottery makers, transporters, retailers and craftsmen. Forests play an important role in supporting daily living needs, providing resources such as firewood and timber. Tangdui's village committee is composed of experienced people. According to local culture, elders are respected. Communication and decision making occurs through formal and informal means. For example, pottery makers once proposed an expansion of their pottery business, which required more consumption of firewood, but also provided more employment. They made their proposal first through informal channels and then to the village leadership, until it was finally accepted by the village community.

The Tibetan villagers' spiritual life is closely linked with the surrounding forest resources (Figure 6.3). According to their Buddhist religion, people should behave in such a way that nature will not be seriously violated. In the village, two opposite hills in the surrounding mountains are their sacred hills, where no tree is allowed to be cut and the forest condition is better than elsewhere.

Every morning, each household burns branches and leaves of *Pinus densata* as incense in its own special stove for traditional worship. The village has traditionally set rules to manage the pine species, and these rules have been voluntarily observed by the village households. Religious beliefs and use of tree leaves have created a common base for all villagers' concern about the forest. In village meetings, this common value system is often referred to as the reason for better forest management.

The villagers in Tangdui harvest their timber through selective logging from relatively distant spruce and fir forests. Elders and others discussed management options informally among themselves and then formulated a regulation for the rotation of cutting. This regulation has been continually announced in the village meetings. In the

Figure 6.3 The local worship under the divine hill in Tangdui village



words of the village headman, it is necessary to constantly remind people of certain regulations to avoid open charges and offences. He said that so far everybody has voluntarily observed the rule.

The local people also organised themselves collectively to protect their exclusive rights to collect a valuable mushroom—*matsutake*. This move was initiated by the collectors and communicated to other groups in the village to gain their acceptance. Finally the consensus was publicised in the village meeting: outsiders are not allowed to enter the village forest freely to collect mushrooms; rather, a gate fee will be charged to these outsiders.

Between 1996 and 1998, a social forestry project was launched by the government. Local villagers convinced the forest department to help them to build an irrigation system (SFET [Social Forestry Evaluation Team] in press). They also successfully negotiated with the local forest department for a controlled grazing arrangement, in which animals could be grazed in an otherwise closed forest. The successful management of this project with external agents such as the forest department

demonstrates the importance of internal consensus in strengthening the village's negotiating power.

The lessons from this case study are:

- Common cultural values regarding forest resources gave villagers a shared incentive to protect the forest.
- Local communication processes were facilitated by local elder groups.
- Effective adoption was possible through the coordination of interests internal to the community and efficient information flow through informal channels.

ANALYSIS

Negotiation and Compromise

The importance of informal negotiation and compromise is clearly illustrated in all three cases. In Dongda and Tangdui, common shared values created a strong basis for successful negotiation and compromise, which led to effective forest management. Beida illustrated that common values alone may not be enough. Without effective leadership in informal processes of consensus building, efforts at forest management can fail.

Although spiritual needs contributed to a common value system in Tangdui, community members were most concerned with their essential livelihood needs, i.e. their material interests, which should therefore serve as a basis for further negotiation. The Beida case demonstrates that, because the community was not able effectively to address its basic needs without overusing the forest, its ideas for forest management could not be institutionalised, and were, in fact, finally abandoned by the villagers. On the other hand, in Dongda and Tangdui villages, the adequate handling of basic needs issues ultimately resulted in more effective management. This analysis suggests that effective internal negotiation should begin when certain crises, such as food shortages or policy changes, are foreseen.

The benefits of consensus building, grounded in informal communication and organised by strong leaders, were clearly perceived by local communities in our two successful forest management cases. Even in the case of Beida, the community wanted to institute a better process, as is evident in their repeated trials with new leadership. These cases suggest that successful forest management requires social learning, effective leaders, and informal communication.

Social Learning

Conflict and consensus are both outcomes and causes of social learning, greatly facilitating its process. When either conflict or consensus continually dominates, effective social learning is less likely to happen. Conflict prevailed in Beida village, thus adaptive management was hindered by poor social learning. For effective management, conflict should be bounded and at least a temporary consensus should be established as a basis for management (Lee 1993). As the conditions change, old consensus is broken away by new conflict, forming further consensus in an iterative upward spiral. The cases of Dongda and Tangdui show that such iterative formations of consensus out of conflict resulted in effective social learning about forest management problems.

Different cultural and political contexts suggest different points of balance between conflict and consensus. In contexts such as Western democracies, for example, where people value individual freedom and the political competition it fosters as fundamental human rights, conflict may be viewed as a prominent and even essential tool for social learning (Lee 1993). Proponents of this view admit that dissonance should be restrained, although no clear demarcation from consensus is provided (Rescher 1993). On the other hand, in cultures such as China, where people place a high value on group solidarity and where open debates and serious disagreements are considered to be disgraceful situations that should be avoided, consensus plays a relatively more important role in facilitating social learning. This importance of consensus is clearly indicated in these three cases, where local people attempted to manage their villages' essential interests without jeopardising their potential for future cooperation with one another. Even in Beida village, we can still see the urgent needs of local people to identify an effective way of social learning with a minimum of open conflict by choosing a different leader.

Leadership

To make social learning in forest management possible, the cases suggest that a good leader acting as an inside facilitator is important. A good leader should be able to coordinate the social learning process and use it as a channel to reach acceptable management choices. This type of leadership can encompass efforts to convince villagers of new views and discourage those who try to overemphasise their own stakeholder group's interests, all in the interests of reaching a final consensus. Examples of this type of leadership are evident in the case of Dongda's handling of changes in forest policy in the 1980s and Tangdui's manipulation of an external social forestry project. In Beida village, no individual seemed capable of performing this role of coordinating learning, and consequently, forest management was unsuccessful.

Communication and Information Flow

Good communication within a group facilitates effective social learning. In the case studies, local communication occurred largely through informal means. Daily chatting during casual, but frequent, visits between friends and relatives promoted rapid information flow. The effectiveness and desirability of informal communication was illustrated in the case of Dongda, where the headman hesitated to institute new management plans before receiving feedback through informal channels. Informal information flows also were used by local leaders to persuade others to help implement decisions, and to accommodate special interests (such as the Tangdui mushroom collectors and pottery makers).

The strength of informal communication rests on two premises: the Chinese cultural setting and openness. In rural China, local people avoid openly contrasting views and regard them as a threat to their personal relationships and efforts at building social capital. Therefore, more informal and seemingly casual information channels are preferred for exchanging contrasting ideas. The openness of informal channels allows for a more democratic exchange and equitable weighting of different ideas. Good leaders and facilitators should be able to understand and use informal information channels to test and communicate major decisions regarding resource use. Other documentation in China also demonstrates the use of informal channels to negotiate interests (Xu *et al.* 1998).

CONCLUSIONS

The cases in this study demonstrate that through successful coordination of their diverse internal interests, local communities are able to manage forest resources effectively. Forest management is enhanced when responsive leadership in combination with effective, but informal communication processes facilitate social learning. Based on a set of common cultural values about the desirability of agreement, especially in informal or public settings, this learning leads to effective consensus building. An analysis of this process suggests a revision of pluralist theory with regard to its views on the roles of conflict and consensus and the means to achieve consensus. We suggest viewing conflict and consensus as a linked pair, in which the balance shifts according to appropriate cultural context; neither is more prominent and both can contribute to social learning. Understanding the cultural differences in how social groups manage conflict and value consensus will lead to a more complete understanding of how social learning can be achieved. Managing conflict may thus require settings beyond the formal negotiation table, and these settings may require specific skills and types of people to manage them. More attention should be given to the importance of these other processes, such as the role of local leaders in building consensus prior to formal decision making. As the concept of social learning is applied in increasingly diverse settings, we can expect to see more of these value-related and informal-process-related modifications of the concept and the assumption underlying its use.

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