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We All Fall Down:

Self-fulfilling Prophecies and the Minority Question
in China's Educational Policies



An Honors Thesis
Presented by
Lauren Alexandra Burke

to

The Sociocultural Dimension of International Relations
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Major Field

Prepared under the direction of
Professor Amy Dooling, Primary Advisor
Professor Arthur Ferrari, Secondary Advisor

Connecticut College
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Table of Contents

Introduction: Why Bother?	4
Being a Foreign “Anthropologist”	13
Methodology	17
State of the Field	18
Outline of Chapters	22
 Chapter One: Past Minority and Education Policies in the PRC	 25
Why Study the <i>Minzu</i> ?	25
From Mao to Market Economies	27
Rhetoric and Reality in the Current Minority Position in China	33
Imagining Minority Cultures: Chinese Perceptions	39
The State’s Use of Education in Minority Assimilation Strategies	44
 Chapter Two: The Government and the Tourist Industry at Work	 50
Why Schools?	51
Needs and Goals	53
Starting in the Schools	55
How Minority Schooling Works	57
A Purpose of Schooling	60
Language: A Bridge Between the State and Tourism	71
Tourism Realized	77
 Chapter Three: Underlying Causes to Educational Success	 83
The Affect of Economic Status	84
Preconceived Notions	89
Further Affects of the State Policy and the Tourist Industry	99
 Conclusion: So What Now?	 111
 Appendix	 119
 Figures	 120
 CISLA Addendum	 123
 Works Cited	 131

Introduction: Why Bother?

This is a study about minority education in China and how conscious governmental policies and economic conditions shape the schooling of ethnic children in the Southwest province of Yunnan. This thesis will investigate the underlying premise of such policies and the idea that minority children are less capable and not adept to studying and thereby are often unable to complete the necessary test and coursework needed to attend high school and college. I hope to challenge those notions of inferiority by examining the negative implications governmental policy and economic concerns have upon school-aged minority students in terms of their self-identity and esteem. This thesis is thus an examination of the social construction of “winners” and “losers” which ultimately corresponds with ethnic categories in the People’s Republic of China. The outcomes of academic success, as I will argue, are not based upon intrinsic characteristics existent within the ethnic groups themselves, but rather are part of a larger societal self-fulfilling prophecy which aims to keep the Han majority as the “winners” and the ethnic minorities as “losers.” This phenomenon is an important agent in the government’s ultimate goal of assimilation which, ironically, is pursued through claims of equality between all ethnic groups.

The conditions of being a minority are deeply embedded within everyone’s psyche. While the academic discussion of majorities and minorities truly emerged through the latter half of the 20th century, stereotypes and ethnic hierarchies pre-empted the intellectual conversations on what they meant. Western, MA or southern Italy, the discourse of majority and minority populations have permeated our minds ever since humans were able to construct and define categories for ourselves and the other. By

examining these constructs one can understand what it is that makes a person, by their standards, an individual. One can also discern what characteristics make a group nearly sacred to self-identifying members of the group. Minority discourse and societal perceptions often have deeper implications which run throughout political, academic, and economic circles. These realms consistently envelope such sub-groups in a web of stereotypes. While historical and cultural factors play a role in the development of these ideologies, the majority's ultimate need for supremacy and deeply rooted hierarchical structures embraced by most members of a given society, are key to discovering the longevity of such perceptions. This thesis will examine three case studies of minority schools with the aim of helping to debunk the ethnic stereotypes and conventional explanations for why these children are failing the school system and will question why and how the schools are failing their students. In the end, I hope to open a dialogue about the ultimate educational goals of the minority populations in the Chinese state.

From stereotyping to essentialization, various discourse strategies are used to formally deal with "minorities". However, many of the categories that result from these strategies do not fit. In America the labeling of "minority" is fast becoming questioned as new groups and identifications flood the social market each day. The problem with the term "minority" does not just lie within America's domestic arena, however. In other countries not built on the backs of immigrants, refugees or forced slave laborers, the term minority often connotes something very different. Thereby it is important, in any work on "minorities" to start with the question of language.

In my mind, there is no proper translation for the term *shaoshuminzu* in English. One cannot even discuss minority issues in China without first addressing the problem of

terminology. Most scholars in the field seem content with the use of the standard translation, “minorities”. I find it problematic, however, to impose a contemporary western construct, as one inevitably does when she translates Asian concepts into a Western language, upon the Chinese realm. Westerners, I find, often struggle with this idea of “minority” and indeed the term, *shaoshu minzu*, in Chinese which literally means “small numbered ethnicity”, has political implications of its own. In America, there is a wide range of ethnic groups, most of which have immigrated to this country within the past two-hundred years. Thus, if the term minority allows an English speaker to imagine the more American categories such as “Asian American” or “African American” one will be confused when attempting to apply these same restrictions to ethnicity groups in China. I find it often works best to conceptualize the minority groups in China along the same lines as Native American populations in the United States. Like many Native American groups, especially those forced to reside on reservations, many minority populations in China continue to be isolated from the mainstream Han culture. Native Americans and Chinese Ethnic Minorities are also similar because of the indigenous nature of their cultures. These populations are very similar in how they have been categorized in their countries of origin. Although there are many subgroups of Native Americans, they are often lumped together under the larger category of Indians. Similarly, the 56 distinct ethnic groups in China are often categorized simply as minorities. So, if an American must use English words to articulate the Chinese concept, it is best to keep possible analogous situations in mind. I would prefer not to deviate from past scholars and cause extra confusion to an already strained field, and instead will

continue to use the currently acceptable word, minorities and its synonyms; *minzu*, *shaoshu minzu*, ethnic groups, and indigenous populations. But who are they?

Though most of China is comprised of one ethnic group, the Han, with which over ninety percent of Chinese identify, there are over fifty minorities recognized by the government. Just as China's population as a whole often is depicted as ethnically/ racially homogenous in the western media, the minorities themselves in China are often victims of acute stereotyping and, consequently, discrimination. From the yearly Chinese New Year televised event featuring minority song and dance, to the exotic costumes tourists are invited to dress up in, even to take photos in, one finds current-day minorities to be just as essentialized and eroticized within their own country as one would find Chinese cultures in America today.

As much as China's central party exploits its non-Han ethnic populations, they are necessary to China's national unity and overall modernization. Minorities were largely ignored by the government prior to the communist regime; some cultures were not even officially recognized or labeled by the government until after 1949. With China's modernization, however, the minorities are increasingly entering the public realm. Integration of the minorities into mainstream Han culture has played a large role in the formation of policies towards the ethnic groups. Many argue that this integration, or even assimilation, is necessary for the survival of a country as large and diverse as the PRC. As one noted anthropologist says, "[Understanding] ethnic politics is essential in defining the meaning of China. It pertains simultaneously to unification and modernization."¹ Officials themselves, often wary of the possibility of minority fragmentation of Chinese

¹ Chih-Yu Shih, Negotiating Ethnicities in China: Citizenship as a Response to the State (New York: Routledge) 3.

society along minority/ majority lines, have noted that the most outspoken and dissenting ethnic groups tend to be those most separated from mainstream Han culture, such as the Tibetans who reside mainly in Yunnan's Northwest corners. How can the government, then, ensure a smooth integration of the minorities into mainstream society? It seems that China has found its answer mainly in state-run education.

Education plays an increasingly large role in the formation of ethnic identities that correspond with the state's overall goal of unity behind the Chinese red flag. Thus, according to researcher Colin Mackerras, "Education policy, in part, provides an important social foundation for the maintenance, reconstruction, or transformation of ethnic identity."² Education has been a tool used not only to define ethnic identity in China, but also to complete the country's goal of assimilating its entire population to Han culture. Often, the state is actively involved, through the education system, in maintaining the stereotyped images of the minorities discussed in this thesis. Educational theorist Gerald A. Postiglione examines this phenomenon, "Because education makes possible the reproduction of those (minority) essential value orientations, it becomes central in determining the manner in which ethnic groups and national minorities integrate themselves into the larger societies."³

It is not just the state's control over minorities' identity in the classroom that makes the schooling of minorities an important topic for discussion. One also needs to examine the state's education policy in China because it has, in large part, failed the

² Colin Mackerras China's Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford University Press) 51.

³ Gerald A. Postiglione, "China's National Minorities and Educational Change," Journal of Contemporary Asian Studies 22 (1992): 35.

minority children themselves. Many minorities in China continue to live in the poorest and most remote regions in the country. Since schools in that culture are largely subsidized by the towns in which they are located, minority schools are thus some of the most under-funded in the nation. It is also evident that virtually all schools run by the government are not adequately prepared to specifically cater to minority populations. While schools do acknowledge the widespread presence of minority students in their classrooms, teachers are often unprepared to undertake the challenges associated with educating these communities. There is a glaring absence of any sort of training for teachers that would adequately equip them with the necessary tools to confront their poverty. The lack of training is especially problematic when one examines the test-based education system employed by the Chinese government through the Bureau of Education. However much teachers may attempt to incorporate various methods of learning into their classrooms, it is ultimately the correct answer on an objective test which will dictate whether or not a student will advance. The goals of the test system, furthermore, are not as objective as it may seem when one examines the disadvantages associated with being an ethnic and linguistic minority within the system. Thus, it is not surprising that, “the 55 officially recognized national minorities tend to have fewer students and graduates at all levels of education than the majority nationality, the Han. Statistics from Yunnan [a highly populated minority region in Southwest China] show that its residents have among the lowest education levels of all provinces.”⁴

⁴ Mette Halskov Hansen, “Ethnic Minority Girls on Chinese School Benches: Gender Perspectives on Minority Education,” Education, Culture and Identity in Twentieth Century China, eds. Glen Peterson, Ruth Hayhoe, and Yangling Lu (USA: U of Michigan Press, 2001) 406.

What is perhaps most interesting to my study, however, is not necessarily the fact that minorities are succeeding academically at a much lower rate than the already low national average⁵. This observation is acknowledged widely throughout China as many Han Chinese will tell visitors about the “remote, primitive, and backwards” cultures of the national minorities. What is most important is that the minorities themselves often espouse the prevailing ethnic stereotyping themselves. While traveling, one encounters just as many minorities who would talk of the “uncleanliness” of another ethnic group, while some of the children I encountered in the course of my research would say that their own culture was one where “people do not think anything, cannot do anything.” In many ways, it is the institutionalized education system in China that forms and maintains unhealthy attitudes between minorities, sometimes even within a single ethnic group. Even where the system is seemingly headed in the correct direction by promoting and teaching about minority cultures, the results are far from ideal.

I saw many examples of prevalent negative attitudes towards minority cultures prevailing while I was in China. Dance performances showcased the “quaint, primitive” cultures, and people from many different *minzu* would tell me about the shortcomings of another ethnic group. I began to wonder how these ideas of ethnic otherness get formed. What effect does formal schooling have on minority children’s sense of identity? Does learning Mandarin, the language of the Han ethnic majority, help minority children assimilate, separate, integrate, or become marginalized to and by Han culture? Do children show resistance to taking an entirely new language and way of life as shown in

⁵ Due to China’s population boom a very small percentage of the country can actually be accommodated for in high school and college. Thus, it is much more likely for any child in China to end school after the precursory nine years of formal education.

their textbooks? What is the ideal image that Chinese schools are attempting to project for minority students and what are the political reasons governing these visions? How do possibly detrimental policies actually further the goals of the political and economic arenas? Lastly, why are the state schools failing a vast majority of minority children and is it, in part, due to the stereotyped visions educators themselves have of minorities?

To answer these questions I worked with two different ethnic groups in China, using three elementary schools as my case studies. To be honest, the initial choosing of the ethnic groups I worked with happened unsystematically, based on where I could find schools to support my work. Through the ever important Chinese channels of “connection” or *guanxi* where knowing someone greatly adds to the opportunities available to an outsider, I found myself working with a Dai population in Namu village in Dehong province and with two Naxi populations in the autonomous prefecture of Lijiang. These populations ended up being ideal for my study for a number of reasons. First, the Naxi and the Dai are distinct in terms of their languages and religions and both have different origins. Secondly, the isolation levels of the various populations I worked with also differed. Naxi-populated Lijiang has been open as a tourist spot for many years and is currently a “must see” tourist attraction for both Han Chinese and foreigners. Baisha, a Naxi village, is one of Lijiang-city’s surrounding countryside areas most known for their Buddhist Grottoes and receives nearly a dozen visitors on even their off-days. Namu village in Dehong, on the other hand, is located roughly 20 miles from Mangshi, a lesser-known city bordering Myanmar. Namu itself receives virtually no tourists, and 99% of its

population identifies with the Dai ethnic group.⁶ The use of languages also differs between areas. Daily life in Lijiang old town and Baisha is conducted in a mix of Naxi and Mandarin, with more Naxi spoken in Baisha and Mandarin used in Lijiang. On the other hand, nearly every aspect of life outside of school in Namu is conducted in Dai, until one travels 20 minutes by bike away to a nearby Han village, and then ventures into the city where business is conducted, again, in Mandarin.

The schools themselves also differed in terms of their economic resources. While the students in Lijiang city come to school with books, markers, erasers and pens and art classes provide them with paper and other materials, there were times in Namu when children could not complete their schoolwork due to a lack of pencils. Baisha teetered somewhere between Lijiang city and Namu in terms of monetary assets. Though the children's clothing was the most tattered of the three areas I rarely found these Naxi children to be without the necessary school supplies which had been provided from their homes. Teachers differed in terms of their background, experience, age, and course content. Educators and classes in Naxi Lijiang City and Baisha also tended to be more specialized. Children in Lijiang, for example, start learning English by at least fourth grade, whereas English instruction takes place in middle school for children who live in Namu village. These contrasts provided me with a fairly broad range, or at least as broad as three case studies with attempted controls can be, with which to compare and contrast my quantitative and qualitative data.

Lastly, the Dai and the Naxi have proven to serve well in the realm of perceptions of minorities both by the target groups themselves and outside observers. Where the Dai

⁶ I use the term "identify" due to the fact that many minorities may actively chose their own ethnicity, which will be discussed further in chapter one.

are often considered an erotic, over-sexed ethnic group, sometimes unsuitable for formal schooling, the Naxi are actually achieving education rates equal to or higher than their Han counterparts and are often noted for their ability to assimilate to the Han. Oftentimes, these perceptions were exemplified in multiple conversations with both Naxi and Han who would tell me of how early on the Naxi cultures were to adapt to Han educational tactics. On the other hand, Dai and Han would both explain how the Dai are not suited to studying by classifying them as lazy or “better at other things”. One of the main questions in this thesis will be how it is that school children become so inculcated with the preexisting attitudes about their own ethnic group that their progression towards or resistance to assimilation is affected.

Being a Foreign “Anthropologist”

While completing my research, and even as I sit to write this thesis, I continuously find myself caught up in two dilemmas. One is that of generalization, the other of cultural relativism. This problem is dealt with by virtually all researchers, especially by those working in countries “foreign” to them and with “obscure” populations who might be unfamiliar to their readers. The fear of generalization often coincides with the idea that one’s own words might be the only context within which another learns about these specific groups. Sometimes it seems that one is left to either subtract any shred of individuality from one’s research and only talk of larger groups, or, alternatively, to never make any assumptions about the larger whole and rather only talk of certain case studies. Neither of these approaches, however, serves adequately for a researcher who is trying to get anything accomplished. As the noted anthropologist Susan

Blum put it, “Without the ability to generalize, anthropologists can write only verbatim transcripts⁷”. Thus, generalizations will inevitably be made within this thesis.

Undoubtedly my recommendations will not be unanimously accepted. I hope to provide insights to the culture and the specific problems plaguing the children within it regardless.

The second difficulty when writing about a culture different from one’s own is the notion of relativism and how one manages it. There are many researchers who tend to ignore this question and write strictly of what exists, passing no judgment on any aspect of what they are writing about and who thereby offer no solutions to the problem at hand. I will not be this type of researcher. Though it is extremely important to take the specificities of any culture into account in the course of academic research, I believe that if there are inherent contradictions within a society or, more importantly, when the people of that society themselves see a problem that needs remedying, it is important that we, as academics, attempt to put the issues into some sort of context and grapple with them in their own right. Inevitably, however, it seems we are always prejudiced in our work regardless of the precautions we take or the ultimate goal we hope to reach. As Kiesinger notes, “As researchers, we are also inventors, just as artists are inherently part of the portraits they paint...interpretive ethnographers become inherently part of the lives they represent.”⁸ The next best thing is to acknowledge my personal interest in the issues my thesis revolves around and my background pertaining to them.

⁷Susan Blum, Portraits of ‘Primitives’: Ordering Human Kinds in the Chinese Nation (USA: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2001)12.

⁸ Christine E. Kiesinger, “From Interview to Story: Writing Abbie’s Life,” Qualitative Inquiry, 4 (1) (1998): 86.

One could argue that my own interest in the issues of linguistic and ethnic minorities in the school has been developing throughout my entire life. I lived in Beijing with a host family during my junior year of high school, during which time I traveled throughout the country and its surrounding regions. Upon return to the United States during my senior year of high school, I worked for a couple of hours each day translating for Chinese immigrant children and teaching Chinese culture classes to first and second grade classes through the Transitional Bilingual Education Department at Wildwood school in Amherst, MA. Since the department was made illegal in Massachusetts in 2002 as part of a growing “English Only” movement throughout the United States, I have continued to work at the school as a substitute. In January of 2005 I began another six-month venture in Yunnan province where I was both a student and completed my own research in preparation for this project. While in Yunnan China I worked at three different elementary schools as noted above. In Namu I spent one month both teaching classes for both 1-6 in virtually every subject the school offered and completing my own research in the evenings and on weekends. In Lijiang I worked in conjunction with the Dongba Research Institute for Culture. Throughout this time I worked with two elementary schools, one urban in Lijiang’s old town, the other rural in nearby Baisha village. At these schools I taught English classes while observing and completing interviews.

My interest in studying minority educational issues, however, and particularly linguistic issues that pertain to minorities, does not only stem from my exposure to China but also my involvements with the system itself. I have seen how children’s eyes gloss over and their minds become inactive when they cannot understand the language being

spoken by their teachers, and I have seen those same eyes light up when a previously misunderstood phrase is translated into their native tongue. My students in China have been called “stupid” “slow” “lazy” and “bad.” I have watched a fourth-grade-boy burst into tears when his classmates enthusiastically turned around and called him the “dumbest” student in the class. When I asked Dai children what they wanted to be when they grew up I found an unsettling trend of more and more of them settling for professions of dancer and singer, while the dreams of becoming a doctor, a predominant position in an agricultural society, fades. I have met Naxi parents who refuse to speak their indigenous language with their children, fearful it will hurt their chances in the examination system. These issues have become ingrained in my heart and even if they do not apply to every child in every ethnic group, the mere fact that it is happening to even one is compelling enough for me to look deeper.

Clearly, being a foreigner played a role in my research. The implications of my difference, however, had a variety of affects upon my interactions with the groups I was studying. In Namu, I was told I was the first western visitor since World War II and often was initially met with much curiosity; indeed, many children sometimes covered their faces and cried in fright when first viewing my face. In the village I lived at the school and was thereby able to immerse myself within the culture as much as possible as well as be at the school for all of my time there. I got to know all the teachers and a good number of the 400 students by name and often visited other areas of the village in my spare time. By contrast, I was one of hundreds of tourists who cycle in and out of Lijiang every few days. Working for the institute and as a teacher provided me with some idea of daily life, though my dual roles meant that I was never at one place for very long. In the old town

urban school I was often met with excitement for my classes whereas in Baisha, I often felt the children I was teaching resented my presence, though I was more well received from children who I merely observed. Thereby, it was more difficult to collect interviews in Baisha than in Namu or Lijiang.

Methodology

My own fieldwork provides both the inspiration for and the foundation of the thesis itself. My research in the field is comprised mainly of a mixture of formal interviews and participant observation. In Namu, Lijiang, and Baisha, I met with students from all grade levels and both genders and discussed with them a previously prepared set of questions.⁹ The children were chosen based on my asking a group who would like to participate in my study, often after class or during recess; the children were aware that I would compensate them for their time, always with a pencil or other school supply. Most interviews were completed one-on-one or with two children. I tried as often as possible to keep the students in a more private area when completing the interviews but sometimes they were done with a group of students watching. Oftentimes these “group” interviews would turn into arguments between the children, thus, I attempted to do more private interviews whenever possible. I also interviewed teachers and principals at all three schools. The majority of interviews were conducted by myself in Mandarin Chinese, though with three interviews with children in Namu and with the families I used my host mother who was a teacher herself to translate from spoken Dai.

⁹ See appendix.

In addition to my interviews I completed a number of “art projects” with the children focusing on their ideas of family and identity, as well as their comfort levels with both their indigenous language and Mandarin. I also collected data from all classes at all schools about how children felt they themselves performed academically, on a scale of one to ten. Lastly, I completed charts with the children in two second-grade classes in the Lijiang city school discerning what they found most important in their lives. I carried a journal every day and made notes in it while I was observing classes and daily life in each area.

State of the Field.

Much of my research has been made possible by the scholars who came before me, without whom I often would only be able to translate transcripts and draw empty conclusions. The field of Chinese ethnic studies in Western cultures, however, is just emerging and is still in great need of further probing and criticism. One need only look at my bibliography to realize that this subject is fairly new on the circuit of American academia. Because this area of study is so recent within both Chinese and Western discourse, many scholars examining the issues pertaining to minorities within China have had to spend much time and effort laying the groundwork and foundation for future studies. As China itself becomes more open to the West and Western anthropologists, it is my hope that other researchers will develop a larger, more specialized literature on the issues affecting minorities in China. Many of the texts rely upon similar intellectuals and the common names of Dru Gladney and Colin Mackerras are consistently cited in many works. One could even note that most of the literature in China is intertwined and that the

same materials are used to reference one another. It is not just the subjects themselves, however, that seem to carry a more narrow scope, but the subjects upon which people are writing. As mentioned above, the great trend in China and even sometimes in America seems to have been to write about the situation of minorities in China without really commenting on the effects, repercussions and underlying reasons for those occurrences. Though this largely has to do with the novelty of the field itself, minority issues are fast becoming a sought-after topic in the world of Chinese studies.

Perhaps one of the larger problems with the previous research done in the field of Chinese ethnic studies lies in many researchers, myself included, having to rely on a very small and specific group of scholars with which to legitimize our research. As there is a vast difference between the written and spoken language of Mandarin, I personally have not yet attained the level of proficiency necessary to read full documents first hand in Chinese and thereby must lean upon the observations of Western scholars in order to draw some of my inferences. During my time at the Dongba Research Institute, however, part of my job was to translate abstracts for articles on minority issues and I was able to gain a sense of where ethnic studies was headed in China itself. I found that many of these articles were concerned with more cultural aspects of the minority groups, such as “handicrafts of the Yi” and many pieces on language. Religious holidays and festivals were also a topic, along with issues of poverty among the minorities. In fact, through the conversations I had in China, both with government officials and ordinary citizens, I found that the most widely-held belief and stance of the government was that many minorities did not succeed in the school is merely due to economical issues. Thereby the intellectual discourse on ethnic groups in China itself is equally problematic to Western

academia. Unlike many Chinese writers, however, the western academics, as few as they may be, are more willing to problematize the education system with questions of identity and status that go beyond simple stereotypes.

Clearly no one can learn anything of substance, or anything new, without traveling to China itself and many of the researchers have done so and lived with and studied specific minority populations. It also becomes clear that there are certain minorities that have proven to be more popular than others in academic discourse. Some of these, not surprisingly, are issues which reflect academic and political trends such as Tibetans and, more frequently, the Hui. The Dai are a relatively popular group to study, undoubtedly due to their frequent presence in Chinese national media. I found it interesting, however, that nearly all studies done on the Dai focus on those living in XiShuang Banna¹⁰, while other Dai populations in Yunnan, such as Dehong, where I carried out my own research, are often ignored.

Perhaps another problem intrinsic to completing any research in China is the role the government plays in shaping academic work. As many researchers note, the government often dictates where people can and cannot complete work and who they are allowed to talk to. Although such practices are becoming less stringent as more people travel to China it still exists to a good extent. It is also sometimes difficult to discern the differences between the rhetoric of the party and the reality of the minority situation. This obstacle is also apparent in the works of certain authors, such as Mackerras (1994), whose statistics tend to rely heavily upon governmental sources. Because of these reasons, and due to the large disconnect I found between governmental ideology and the

¹⁰ Also known as Sip Song Panna

realities of the classrooms I observed, that I have chosen to focus not on state papers and rulings, but rather on the words of the Dai and Naxi people themselves and the work of academics in the field, so that I could form my own conclusions.

Though the field of minority studies in China may be small and recently emerging, it is one that is certainly expanding. As the question of identity and choice increasingly arise in an ever-growing pluralistic world, ethnic and indigenous issues around the globe seem to be gaining more and more academic attention. I encountered many researchers in China who were studying minority cultures and, hence, many articles are currently being written. The field, however, is still young and it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about any of the work in the field today.

One scholarly consensus is that it is within minorities' best interest to continue learning their indigenous language within the schools. Indeed, linguistic studies are of interest for a number of authors, especially Chih-yu Shih (2002) in her book, Negotiating Ethnicity in China: Citizenship as a Response to the State. The main arguments in works such as these often move away from the more politically-charged question of maintaining an indigenous culture's heritage. Instead, most authors arguing for a type of bilingual education to be furthered in the classroom cite the need to ensure a smooth transition. One significant scholar, Hansen (1999) and (2001) was compelled, however, to take the argument for bilingual education and dual identity issues further in her work. Hansen often examines the concept of identity loss on the part of minority children as a direct result of the state's education system. Hansen's research focuses on the direct impact education will have upon identity among minority girls of the Bai descent (2001) and of Dai and Naxi children in Xishuang Banna and Lijiang (1999). Clearly, Hansen's work

not only proved the most useful to my own research, but also provided me with new areas of research and exploration.

Outline of Chapters

The main question in this thesis is as follows: How does the state education system affect minority children's identity and what objectives drive this system? My thesis will be narrowed by limiting the study to the two ethnic groups in the three areas described above. In terms of identity, I am most interested in examining the push/pull factors created in the classroom for ethnic children to assimilate to Han culture. I will also examine the effect education has on both minority children's sense of their own culture in an abstract sense and how those perceptions become manifested in their parents' and their own personal self-perceptions on a more concrete, personal level. My first chapter will focus on the history of minority/ majority relations in China and, more specifically, the history of education policies towards minorities. In chapter two, the state's reasoning behind educating minorities will be examined along with the economic affects of the tourist industry. The process of educational socialization will be discussed as well as the academic factors influencing children's assimilation, acculturation or rejection of mainstream society. Chapter two will also examine at how the state is effectively using schooling to create a minority identity.

Chapter three will examine why schools following governmental policy of socializing students into a minority identity which, combined with other forces, lessen their academic success for Dai in Namu and while heightening educational opportunities for the Naxi in Baisha and Lijiang. Chapter three will ask, is the state setting up many

minority children for failure? I will argue that it is the integration into the school system of both Naxi and Han characteristics that make schools more successful in Lijiang while the marginalization of the Dai adds to their failure in Namu. Since it seems that the Chinese government's ultimate goal is concerned with the eradication of minority characteristics in the classroom, this chapter will question whether schooling in China is perhaps about something more than education, but teaching a way of life and the formation of "model minorities". My hypothesis is that this is true. Lastly, the conclusion in chapter four will discuss possible solutions to the minority education problem in China, as well as speculate about where the minority situation is headed in the future.

Lastly, I am interested in studying the situation of minorities in China today not only because of its intrinsic importance, but also because of the implications the issue has for other societies. As Blum notes, "The Chinese case is unique yet also has implications for some other social settings."¹¹ Many of the issues facing minority education in China today interest me precisely due to their relevance to ethnic education issues around the world. As cultures become increasingly intertwined and schooling becomes mandatory for every child, the question of cultural assimilation versus ethnic isolation emerges. In America, one need only examine the state's treatment of native ethnic groups in education to find a situation analogous to China's. A more recent phenomenon is the debate over bilingual education and how to deal with immigrant families in the United States. As educators, parents, and the government take sides over the pros and cons of allowing children to use their home or "private" language in the classroom, a plethora of teaching methods are being used and no one can agree on which is best. It is my hope that

¹¹ Blum, Portraits 11.

this thesis will offer some insights into the struggles encountered and gains made or not made by students from ethnic areas in China who often are facing the same language issues as immigrants to America today. I am hoping their experiences can shed light on the debate over linguistic minorities in the classroom and the maintenance of indigenous knowledge worldwide.

Chapter One: Past Minority and Education Policies in the PRC

In order to understand the various impacts of the Chinese education system on Chinese minorities, one must first examine the precarious position into which national minorities in China are often placed. Though the situations vary from group to group, the minorities themselves are often victims of policies and politics directed at the *shaoshuminzu* as a whole. Thus, it is possible for one to generalize about the struggles the minorities have encountered during the twentieth century. Though the focus in this thesis will remain on two ethnic groups, the Naxi and the Dai, similar discussions and arguments could take place across the study of *minzu* in China.

Why Study the Minzu?

Minorities in China play a special and often highly symbolic role in the political realm, as their inclusion in the system is deemed vital to the nation's development. Though the total minority population is less than eight percent of the population of China, the implications of their groups' actions run deep in Chinese society. One need only look at populations such as the Tibetans (*Zangzu*), who are recognized as "national minorities" by the Chinese government,¹² and their political struggles with the PRC to acknowledge the fragile state of ethnic relations in China. When the Chinese government attempts to control a population of over 1.3 billion, it must be wary of any groups that might affect the delicate balance between the need for totalitarian control and the possible fragmentation of the state. History has taught China and the world that differences in bloodlines can destroy a once unified country.

¹² For example, see texts by Dru Gladney and Thierry Dodin.

The actual size of the minority population in China can be surprisingly difficult to delineate. While the government keeps strict control of its urban populations, the census done in more rural areas tends to be more relaxed. Since the institution of the population control policies of the late 1970's, it is common for families to hide or not report children who were born without governmental consent. Complicating matters is the fact that minority status is, to a large extent, a matter of self-designation. When a child has an ethnically mixed set of parents, it is up to the caregivers to decide with which *minzu* the child will identify him or herself. While special considerations are given to minorities, such as less stringent birthing policies, a handful of Chinese identify as Han even though they have one minority parent. Thus, while the government and many researchers place minority populations as between six and eight percent of China's whole, the figures contain some fluctuation.

While the size of their population may not be a large factor numerically, the geographic settlements of the minorities are disproportionately large. According to David Yen-ho Wu, author of "The Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," the 55 national minorities in China reside in over sixty percent of China's total territory.¹³ Many of the regions inhabited by the minorities include an overwhelming amount of China's national resources in forests, mines, and tropical crops. Yunnan province, which is home to twenty-six of the national minorities, is home to thousands of species of plants and animals, making it the biodiversity leader of all regions in China. The Ethnic groups also occupy ninety percent of the border regions in China where their proximity with other

¹³ David Yen-Ho Wu, "The Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities." The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today. Ed. Tu Wei-ming (CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) 153.

countries puts their position in the spotlight for the government. These facts have certainly made Frank Bockelmann question the underlying reasons behind cultural tensions. As he states, “One must ask if the conflict between Han and non-Han peoples is one of culture or moreover one of power, since the latter is neither the result of cultural struggle nor limitations, but rather about the control of resources and territory.”¹⁴

Regardless of the reasoning behind the government’s minority policies, one thing is very clear: there has been a special treatment regarding minority culture’s identity that has been taking place throughout Chinese history in the 20th century. The realization of that treatment has come in the form of the government’s rapid suppression of any ideals towards self-determination or autonomy for the minority groups. These acts have been part of governmental policy since the instatement of the PRC in 1949. As a CCP newscast on October 21st, 1949 read, “Today, the question of each minority’s self-determination; should not be stressed any further.... For the sake of completing our state’s great purpose of unification...we should not stress this slogan.”¹⁵

From Mao to Market Economies

Policies toward minority groups in China have varied little since 1949. On a national level, policies are often directed at all minority groups. The ethnicities are bound together under the category of *minzu* and their incorporation into Chinese society is the main goal. While some specific agendas were set because individual ethnic groups have

¹⁴ Frank Bockelmann, as quoted by Thomas Heberer, “Old Tibet a Hell on Earth? The Myth of Tibet and Tibetans in Chinese Art and Propaganda,” Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies. Eds. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rother (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001) 145.

¹⁵ Dru Gladney, “Ethnic Identity in China: The New Politics of Difference.” China Briefing. Ed. William A. Joseph (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994) 179.

their own histories of inclusion, exclusion or removal from Chinese governmental authority, there are a number of trends that one can identify throughout the 1950's to the present day. Perhaps the first major step taken by the government was to compile an actual list classifying the *minzu*. Though efforts similar to these were made within the KMT in order to nation-build and “galvanize a sense of identity”¹⁶ in the 1920's, the 1950's were the first time in Chinese history that such a widespread and extensive classification system was pursued. As anthropologists, scientists and other intellectuals were sent to various minority regions, they discerned the ethnicity of the region's inhabitants based on a number of factors. The vision of what constitutes a *minzu* that most attracted Mao was Stalin's definition of a minority group. At the beginning of the 20th century, Stalin outlined the four “commons” needed to create a nationality; these traits included a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.¹⁷ While the meeting of all four criteria is suspect in its application to many of the minority groups, the old definition of the four “commons” is continually employed by the PRC today.

The new classifications, though not entirely groundbreaking, certainly did change the labeling of many of the *minzu* themselves. Some minority groups who had never previously considered themselves interchangeable were combined, as in the case of the Naxi and Musuo who became lumped together under the group name “Naxi”, and others were split. One group, the *Hui*, were ultimately classified based as a separate group primarily upon their Islamic religion. Due to the governmental classification and ultimate categorization of groups that previously had been separated or unified, new provisions

¹⁶ Gladney, *Politics*, 176.

¹⁷ Mackerras, 142.

had to be made in order to solidify the new nomenclature. Thus, as Wu describes, “as a result, the revival of minority culture in China has required the creation of new unified, centralized, and pan-national sets of cultural symbols and activities.”¹⁸ These new needs led the government to sponsor programs which often created a more controlled minority culture; key examples include the development of Romanized written languages for many of the previously oral indigenous languages as well as a greater emphasis placed on the study of ethnic medicinal procedures. These efforts had a large impact on the minority communities they intended to serve, as Mackerras remarks, “whereas before 1949 many members of the minorities tried to hide their identity, they (were) now proud of it, in most cases with the direct encouragement of the state.”¹⁹ While literacy programs and cultural categorizations proved helpful for those interested in examining minority culture, they also marked the beginning of a period during which the ethnic experience would be, to a large extent, controlled by the government in the next three decades.

During the Great Leap Forward from 1959-1963, the government embarked on more restrictive policies toward the *minzu*. Many of these measures were indicative of national efforts to galvanize a sense of community in areas throughout the country. In an effort to lead the struggle against so-called “local-nationalism”, many minority cadres’ leaders were forced to step down. The cadre leaders were ultimately criticized for promoting “local nationalism” and harming the overall “unity of the *minzu*” by focusing upon local politics. As took place throughout the Maoist era, many of the criticisms of leaders came without total proof or reason. In the same vein, many practices implemented during the Great Leap Forward seemed counterproductive and contradictory. For

¹⁸ Wu, 157.

¹⁹ Mackerras, 144.

example, though the number of written indigenous languages was growing quickly, the use and instruction of them was reduced, or even halted. Instead, a heightened study of *hanyu*, (literally “the language of the Han” known as Mandarin in English), was promoted throughout the country.²⁰ The Great Leap Forward led to an even stricter noose placed around minority cultures during Mao’s most ambitious, and ultimately disastrous, political campaign.

Known to ethnic scholars as the “most assimilative (time period) in the history of the PRC,”²¹ the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to Mao’s death in 1976, was a period of fierce policies and dictatorship intended to unify the country behind Maoist doctrines and Communist ideologies. During this time the entire country faced confusion and chaos as families were dismantled, temples burned, and anyone considered not in line with party ideology was viciously attacked. While much of the country was in turmoil, the *minzu* occupied an especially unstable position because many of their practices lay outside the parameters of the “normal” Han society. In discourse, the minorities’ status appeared to have been elevated Mao’s rhetoric advanced the status of minorities in China as he energetically denounced the idea of the minorities as backward people. The equality of the ethnicities in discourse, however, led Mao to simultaneously condemn practices and treatment that gave minorities special consideration in Chinese society. The minorities also underwent intense inspection. Mao’s official stance at the time was that all ethnic conflicts were the result of class conflict and that class conflict was the root of much evil in society. Thus, any act that further separated the minorities from mainstream

²⁰ A new, romanized, version of *hanyu*, known as *pinyin*, was also introduced on a pan-national scale during Mao’s era as an effort to incorporate more peasants who did not read Chinese characters into the development of the nation.

²¹ Mackerras, 152.

culture was viewed as an assertion of that difference. Indeed, it seemed that Mao's idea of equality did not emphasize equality for all practices, but for all Chinese to be equal in their adoption of Han customs and traits. Minorities were often forbidden to celebrate traditional holidays, wear their traditional attire, and speak in their native languages. As was the case with social "deviants" throughout China, those who did not follow these instructions were criticized, humiliated, beaten and even jailed.

The Cultural Revolution ultimately became, as described by Hansen, a time that "legitimized brutal suppression" of minority languages, religions, traditions, cultures. As Hansen continues, "whereas minority students had previously learned through their education that minorities in the Chinese state had their own culture and economic characteristics...they now learned that the time had come to clearly eradicate the backward customs that separated them from the forefront of the revolution."²² Mao's policies were not only contradictory; they also led to huge losses of minority cultural development and pride. During the Cultural Revolution, many traditional music festivals in China's Southern region were "forbidden on account of 'obscurity' and 'debauchery'".²³ Many Naxi Dongba priests currently studying at the Research Institute of Dongba Culture in Lijiang described that the only way in which their scriptures and rituals survived was through the hiding of texts. A generation of priests, along with their knowledge, was lost as cultural relics, religious artifacts, and countless other treasures were destroyed.

²² Mette Halskov Hansen, Lessons in Being Chinese: Minority Education and Ethnicity Identity in Southwest China. (USA: University of Washington Press, 1999) 17.

²³ Heberer, 125

After Mao's death, China's policies underwent a change in terms of respect for and appreciation of the indigenous cultures and struggles of national minorities. Under the new leader, Hua Guofeng, the question of what constitutes "equality" was opened as knowledge of all groups was attempted to be implemented and honored, not just that of the Han. Hua urged all cadres in minority areas to learn and respect minority languages and customs. The eighties followed these ideals as Ulanhu, who was the highest-ranking minority cadre in the CCP as a member of the Mongol Politburo proclaimed, "We must resolutely oppose the reactionary policy of coercive assimilation and negate the fallacy existing in the national policy."²⁴ Minority schools were opened with specialized textbooks for minority regions and indigenous languages were taught in some areas. These reformations, however, still had political motivations. As Mette Halskov Hansen notes in Lessons in Being Chinese, "the development of minority education had the dual purpose of raising the education level of minorities and ensuring minorities' loyalty to the state, the CCP, one another, and the majority Han."²⁵ In 1984 The Law on Regional National Autonomy was established granting an extension of appreciation for the indigenous populations while still taking into account ideals of unity and patriotism. Educational theorist Postiglione comments on the change, "the policy has been characterized as one state, but many nationalities, or, political integration but cultural integration."²⁶ 1988 saw the foundation of the National Minorities Research Center that solidified a trend which began in the 1980's of including minority issues in academia, thereby strengthening the ideological value of the minorities themselves. Throughout the

²⁴ Mackerras, 154.

²⁵ Hansen, Lessons 61.

²⁶ Postiglione, 24.

past two decades special provisions have been granted to minorities that have attempted to close the economic and achievement gaps between ethnic minorities and their Han counterparts.

Rhetoric and Reality in the Current Minority Position in China

As one can see from the above discussion, official governmental policy towards minorities has fluctuated throughout the past century. The current institutions and official ideologies towards minorities have attempted to promote ideals of equality and unification between all *minzu* in China. As Article 50 of the China People's Political Consultative Congress of 1949 states, "All nationalities within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China are equal. They shall establish unity and mutual aid among themselves and shall oppose imperialism and their own public enemies so that the People's Republic of China will become a big fraternal and cooperative family compound of all nationalities."²⁷ Two committees: the Nationalities Committee and the State Nationalities Affairs Committee have been created in the latter half of the 20th century to deal directly with all issues of the national minorities as well as to carry out the principals of equality and unity dictated by the state.

What, however, are the realities that coexist with these notions of unity and equality in China? When examining statistics, it become clear that despite the wishes of the Communist Party to create an equal society, the gaps between reality and rhetoric are as wide as those separating the Han from the minority groups. Although many of the governmental ideals represent hopes for the future of the *minzu*, the policies (or lack

²⁷ Postiglione, 23.

thereof) implemented in minority regions often complicate the state's projected goals. According to government statistics in the 1990's, of the 41 counties in Yunnan specially labeled poor, 75.6 percent also received the label of a "minority county". While the minority population made up roughly a third of Yunnan's total inhabitants, at that time they also made up two thirds of the 12 million Chinese officially declared poor in the province.²⁸ Though every minority group now has its own cadres working at official levels, the ratio of the number of ethnic representatives in relation to a minority group's overall population still lags behind the national average. In addition, many indigenous cadres only act on a county or provincial level. In education, minorities as a whole continue to achieve at strikingly lower levels than the Han. A census completed in 1992 showed that none of the twenty-seven groups in Southwest China reached the national average literacy rate whereas only eight percent attained a Junior Secondary Education, considered middle school in the United States.²⁹ In order to understand these variations in policy and truths, one must examine the true political motivations of the government. As Gladney understands- the complexities of minority developments in China today, "the study of minorities must not be divorced from the understanding of ethnic and national identity in general and explore the increasing importance of the politics of difference throughout China."³⁰

Like all issues in any country, the minority question is not just one of cultural rights and value judgments, but also one that deeply concerns domestic politics in China. A shift has been made in Chinese rhetoric to push ideals of patriotism over those of

²⁸ Hansen, Lessons 19.

²⁹ Postiglione, 30.

³⁰ Gladney, Politics, 175.

nationalism. Though the two concepts seem similar, there are subtle yet important variations. As Zheng Yongnian differentiates between the two ideologies in *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China*, this change clearly has political implications. “While nationalism is based on a shared culture and ethnicity, patriotism does not necessarily need an ethnic or cultural base and can be regarded as encompassing all those legally entitled to be citizens...Patriotism thus attempts to downgrade ethnicity and culture, and emphasizes loyalty to the existing state”.³¹ This concept is dangerous, as Xiao Gongqin, a major spokesperson of cultural nationalism further explains, “nationalism refers to advocating that people ought to have concepts of loyalty for their own nation nationality.”³² Authorities fear that the ethnic nationalist movements that took place in the former Soviet Union could occur in China if nationalism was advanced over patriotism. If such a split were to occur, it would clearly decrease China’s power and could possibly encourage a splintering of the Chinese state. Patriotism is not necessarily indoctrinated within minorities in the same way it is within Han Chinese, which is perhaps why the government feels the need to push political ideals with these groups. As Shih has observed, “China means something to ethnic minorities only at the moments when local people are dealing with its government or the Party.”³³ Thus, tactics are employed around China to arouse a feeling of loyalty towards the state as a whole. From education, which will be explored further in chapter two, to national propaganda on television, the minority regions have been targets of loyalty campaigns since the foundation of the PRC. As Shih comments, the trend of migration of minorities from

³¹ Yongnian Zheng, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China: Modernization, Identity and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 93.

³² As quoted in Zheng, 71.

³³ Shih, 8.

smaller villages to larger, more Han-inhabited cities has been to “enlighten ethnic people about becoming state citizens and to transfer their object of loyalty from traditional kinship networks to the abstract state.”³⁴ Migration plays an important role for the government; one of its largest fears is that over-consolidation and isolation might lead to the ultimate rebellion of any one ethnic group.

The fear of ethnic solidarity over patriotism combined with the limited economic prospects in many of the minority areas has created a need to assimilate the minorities to mainstream Han culture. Though seemingly in direct conflict with the ideals of “equality” stressed in current-day political rhetoric, ideals of assimilation actually coincide with the government’s overarching message. This contradiction was explored earlier by Gladney as the “politics of difference” where it is important to understand political motivations behind the differentiating of cultures. Perhaps the current government, much like Mao himself, is not claiming an equality of all religions, languages, and cultural practices of the various *minzu*, but instead that all minorities can become equal to the ideal Han. Discerned by Shih, “From the state’s point of view, the integrity of China depends on the assimilation of ethnic people into mainstream Han culture.”³⁵

Though the government has seemed to have made great leaps in terms of cultural equality from the restrictive days of the Cultural Revolution, it is clear that minority difference has been emphasized in Chinese media. From television to state monuments, evidence of the push to imagine China’s various nationalities as part of the larger unified nationality of China is everywhere. On the gargantuan Chinese New Year broadcast each year on the state network, CCTV, various minority groups are paraded about, performing

³⁴ Shih, 11.

³⁵ Shih, 8.

various “traditional” songs and dances from their regions. In Tiananmen Square, the Hall of the People celebrates the “great *minzu* of China” while the recent wax museum addition to the Chinese Museum of National History in Beijing contains a display of minorities, all in their traditional costumes. It is quite possible, however, that these so-called “freedoms” of clothing-choice and cultural practices are merely seen as temporary appeasements to the minority people. As anthropologist Susan Blum speculates about the original hopes of the CCP, “Nationality and ethnic differences are considered inevitable in the present, but in a distant utopian future, with the accomplishment of communism, these differences were expected to wither and die.”³⁶ Because any Chinese can claim a certain ethnicity on his identification card and label himself a minority, one no longer needs to speak an indigenous language, believe in traditional dieties or, indeed, have any connection whatsoever to other ethnic groups. As Bloom has ventured, “this suggests that ethnicity is more and more understood in the sense of blood kinship alone, rather than in linguistic, religious, or customary uniqueness.”³⁷ By noting the quote above from Article 50 of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress of 1949, one is able to discern that the state is also advocating the incorporation of minorities into the larger Chinese “family”. The official *White Paper on Tibet’s March Toward Modernization* alludes to the ideal of the integration of minorities into the Chinese family, along with notions of heightening their culture when this takes place.

As the paper, published in 2001, states,

To sum it up, the development history of Tibet in the past five decades

³⁶ Susan Blum, “China’s Many Faces: Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Pluralism,” *China Beyond the Headlines* Eds. Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen, (USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000) 73.

³⁷ Shih, 194.

since its peaceful liberation has been one of proceeding from darkness to brightness, from backwardness to progress, from poverty to prosperity and from isolation to openness, and of the region marching toward modernization as a part of the big family of China³⁸

The use of the familial terminology, however, has gone beyond official documents and entered mainstream popular culture. An example of this idea is found in the 1990's hit song "Big China" (*da zhongguo*) whose first line states, "We all have one family, the name of which is China."³⁹ The family of China is one whose deeply-ingrained roots are in a patriarchial Confucian system and at the head of the family is the race of the Han. In mainstream media and in many Chinese mindsets, the Han represent the civilized, developed and ideal Chinese culture which, it is assumed, all minorities would want to aspire to. The trend of placing the minorities as secondary citizens, or little brothers or nephews, to the Han has carried itself from China's dynasties to the current day as "both Confucianism and socialism envision the ethnic minorities either capitulating to or mimicking the development of the Han and eventually being assimilated into its culture, for non-Han people were always perceived as needing to be upgraded to the level of the Han."⁴⁰ In such displays, only essentializations of the minorities' cultures, such as their traditional clothing, songs, and dances, are represented. Little, if anything, is ever mentioned about technical or academic achievements made by these groups. This is not to say there are not positive aspects of the programs; as Shih notes, "such promotions have enhanced the sense of dignity among many ethnic people

³⁸ "White Paper on Tibet's March Toward Modernization," The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America <www.china-embassy.org/eng>

³⁹ Gao Feng, "*Da Zhongguo*", compact disc.

⁴⁰ Heberer, 119.

and they become the most committed watchers of the programs.”⁴¹ The minorities are often viewed with both fear and fascination, at their primitiveness and exoticism by the Han. As Heberer has noticed in his encounters in China, “it is exactly this exoticism that appears to characterize the official public image of ‘minorities’ in China.”⁴²

It is not just that minorities are portrayed in media as being below, but that the Han are portrayed as existing above. Throughout Chinese media, the Han are consistently portrayed as the most culturally advanced and economically developed of the ethnic groups. Han lifestyles are portrayed in virtually every type of Chinese media, from books to drama, television and movies, it is the Han culture which is most often linked with a greater Chinese identity and thus, is the one that most ethnic minorities are encouraged to aspire to. As Shih comments in *Negotiating Ethnicity*, “‘Civilizing’ projects work most effectively in the media because the programs broadcast are products of a monopoly Han lifestyle seen on the screen...[that] become[s] the model for ethnic people.”⁴³ These projected images certainly fuel the continuing phenomenon of ethnic stereotyping and prejudice towards the national minorities.

Imagining Minority Cultures: Chinese Perceptions

Currently, the collective Chinese mindset towards minorities appears to be changing toward a view that values ethnic groups more than in the past yet continues to contain remnants of outdated assumptions and stereotypes. As Heberer remarks, “minority religions and traditions are seen as frightening and superstitious, their cuisine

⁴¹ Shih, 10.

⁴² Heberer, 123.

⁴³ Shih, 10.

barbaric and unpalatable, their clothing colorful but disheveled, their lifestyles primitive.”⁴⁴ Though these perceptions are not to be ignored, it is also possible that Heberer is going too far in his belief in the Han’s total denouncement of all minority culture. If it were truly the case that minority life was so completely intolerable, one would not see a gigantic wave which gives rise to a second factor having enormous impact upon minority identity: tourism. Since China’s continuous economic boom began in the mid-nineties, many Chinese themselves have the funds and opportunity to vacation in previously unexplored regions of the country and many prime destination sites are located in what have been labeled “minority regions”. From Xishuang Banna to Lijiang to Dali, one can see tourists eating minority foods such as pineapple sticky rice, joining in minority dances, and paying to dress up like the *minzu*. Additional funds in Chinese households also mean added opportunities to spend them in the form of television sets and tickets to shows. Within such performances the minorities are often showcased reinforcing essentialized images of their cultures.

The anthropologist Susan Blum gives the Han some credit: she writes, “a kernel of truth lies within this prejudice; poverty and illiteracy are much higher in rural areas, and the majority of ethnic minorities are found in these areas.”⁴⁵ It seems, however, that along with their typical costumes and languages, stereotypes pertaining to personality traits and overall characteristics of the minority groups abound within China. As most generalizations tend to be, the stereotypes are far too similar and too strict to incorporate each of the millions of people whose identity is minority. In fact, the generalizations about some groups have become so pronounced that they have almost become

⁴⁴ Heberer, 145.

⁴⁵ Blum, *Faces*, 79.

caricatures. The expected Tibetan yak-fur garments and Dai water splashing festival appearing in practically every showcase of minority cultures. Any traveler who bothers to ask invariably runs into Chinese of any and every ethnic group espousing his beliefs about another specific ethnic group. The Dai and Naxi groups are no exception.

The Dai perhaps are victim to some of China's most widespread publicity efforts and often, thereby, mass-stereotyping. While completing research in China, Blum detected "[the Dai's] representation is found in virtually all complimentary contexts, such as tourist brochures or murals."⁴⁶ The Dai are often portrayed as one of the more gentle, clean and picturesque of the minority cultures and their costumes and songs and dances are featured in many minority dance shows. Interestingly enough, it is not a requirement that performers in these shows actually are ethnically Dai. Regardless of where one travels however, there is one aspect of the Dai he will invariably encounter; the Dai portrayed in film, media and national tourism campaigns as major national sex symbols. The Dai have been one minority whose exoticism has been inextricably linked with eroticism. Though attempts have been made by Dai and other officials to suppress the lust-filled images, this suppression sometimes appears to arouse interest in the subject itself. Below is one example from Heberer who examines an incident regarding Dai imaging.

At the end of the 1970s, there was a scandal at the opening of the new airport in Peking (Beijing) when a large mosaic at an airport restaurant was unveiled. Though tastefully rendered, it depicted, among other things, naked, bathing Dai women. In Xishuang Banna it is not uncommon for Dai women to bathe naked in rivers or lakes. But it was asserted by the Chinese authorities that 'Dai representatives' had complained about the mosaic's voyeuristic quality. The artwork was veiled for a long time,

⁴⁶ Blum, Faces, 83.

which caused many Chinese to seek out the airport restaurant in order to peek behind the curtain.⁴⁷

Though these images might not be endorsed officially by the government, the popular representations of minorities are often consistent with governmental policy. Thus, one must examine the motivations underlying the constant showing of the Dai's bathing rituals and water festivals, and the affect they have upon viewers. Hansen comments on the phenomenon, "In the imaginations of many Han Chinese, the Dai people, and especially Dai women, have long been wrapped in an aura of mysticism, beauty, gentleness, and liberal sexual behavior as is evident from numerous Chinese popular and pseudo-scientific publications, TV series, and postcards."⁴⁸ These renditions often have a reverberating impact upon the individual viewer which is clear in Gladney's research for his article, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/ Minority Identities." Though the individual Gladney interviewed does not directly mention Dai women in his words, one can assume that he is alluding to this minority group through his mention of their bathing rituals, something the Dai are notorious for in minority imaginings. As Gladney recalls the words of a taxi driver in Beijing, "Those minority girls sure can sing and dance...I really like to watch those minority girls, they're a lot "looser" (*suibian*) than our Han women. They bathe naked in the rivers and wear less clothing."⁴⁹

The Naxi, on the other hand, have enjoyed a much less erotic, though perhaps no less exotic, treatment in modern-day China in both media representations and intellectual

⁴⁷ Heberer, 125.

⁴⁸ Hansen *Girls*, 416.

⁴⁹ Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/ Minority Identities," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 92.

discourse. One could make the assumption that the positive opinions held toward the Naxi minorities are almost lavishing praise. As researcher Hansen interviewed her subjects about various ethnic groups, she noticed patterns among the responses that Naxi are “good at studying” and are “extremely eager to learn from other *minzu*’s advanced cultures.”⁵⁰ Undoubtedly those “advanced cultures” are the Han. Although Naxi have maintained their own language, both written and spoken, and, especially in recent decades, the study of Dongba religion has elevated itself in Chinese education, the Naxi are praised for their sponge-like absorbance of Han culture. While the Naxi kingdom enjoyed an exclusive leadership role early in its reign, it succumbed to direct Chinese dynastic rule in 1724. Perhaps, then, it is due to their early interaction with Han Chinese, and, perhaps most importantly, because of dynastic governments and Confucian education, that the Naxi are often considered one of the more “modernized” of the minority cultures. As Hansen describes, “the Naxi belong to an ethnic group that is celebrated in China for its openness towards what is often described as a ‘more-developed nation’ (notably the Han) and which has managed to establish itself as a well-known and influential national minority in China.”⁵¹ Positioning the Naxi in such positive terms can almost be seen as a good-behavior reward for their assimilative behavior. It would do the reader well to note, however, that the Naxi also pose one of the smallest threats towards national determination. Already partially sequestered by the Naxi autonomous prefecture in Lijiang, the Naxi have no relations with ethnic groups in other countries, their numbers remain fairly small,⁵² and they have never attempted political

⁵⁰ Hansen Lessons, 28

⁵¹ Hansen Girls, 425

⁵² Today, the Naxi population is estimated at just under 300,000. Library of Congress.

movements for autonomy like those of the Tibetans or Mongolians. In fact, the Naxi, in strict contrast to the Dai, are often considered one of the most assimilated of the *minzu*.

The State's Use of Education in Minority Assimilation Strategies

Presently, the most sought-after strategy in China to assimilate minorities into the dominant Han culture lies in state-controlled education. This approach is certainly not a new one as, according to Hansen, these strategies have been employed for over one hundred years. She elaborates, “since the Qing dynasty many Chinese leaders and intellectuals have regarded institutionalized education as a means of integrating, controlling and civilizing the various people who inhabit the border or peripheral regions of what was the empire, then the Republic and now is the People’s Republic of China”⁵³

Chinese education today has taken its cues from historical practices and developments. Continuing a tradition dating back to the Imperial exams, the testing system in China continues to carry the largest weight in the education system. Where nine years of compulsory education was made a requirement of all school children in the mid-nineties, a child’s success continues to be defined by a series of tests that are administered beginning in the first grade. An exam taken at the end of sixth grade determines where a student will continue on in middle school and another test, at the end of ninth grade, dictates whether or not one will attend high school at all. Not surprisingly, the middle schools attended by the higher testing students are those with the best teachers and resources and are thereby able to send a higher percentage of their pupils on to high

⁵³ Hansen Lessons, xi.

school. Thereby in China, one's educational fate could already be decided upon at the age of eleven.

The Chinese Communist Party first called for the standardization of all education in 1962, during which time many of the *minbian* schools were shut down.⁵⁴ This change led to the re-institution of the examination system in 1977 and “since then, institutionalized education has again been emphasized as crucial for achieving a technically and economically developed nation.”⁵⁵ The standardization has now stretched to all areas of China, including the minority regions. Previously, the extent to which minority children were exposed to formal education varied, based on ethnic grouping and geographical location. The specifics of the Dai in Dehong and the Naxi in Lijiang will be discussed below. The homogenized efforts and authority of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 allowed for a special effort to incorporate minorities into institutionalized education because many of the minority groups had never encountered the official Chinese education system prior to the 1950's.⁵⁶ This introduction to education was initially positive and groundbreaking and provided learning and new opportunities to groups previously excluded from the imperial exams and past systems. Since that time minority education in China has undergone a series of changes in policies and practices. At the onset of the PRC, the government was mainly concerned with building new schools at the primary level to “raise the cultural standards of the population”⁵⁷ as well as

⁵⁴The term *minbian* refers to local schools that were often in very poor conditions with one untrained teacher for the entire population. When disbanding the *minbian* schools, the government often did not set up new institutions to replace the old and many rural areas were thereby left without education systems. Hansen, Lessons, 16.

⁵⁵ Hansen Lessons, 18.

⁵⁶ Hansen Girls, 406.

⁵⁷ Postiglione, 28.

train minority teachers and cadres to increase minority participation in the government. During this time, while Chinese and Han culture was emphasized, minority languages and cultures maintained a stronghold on classroom interactions. Often, the degree to which minority cultures were incorporated into the schools was backed by political motivations, as Hansen notes, “it was important for the new government to encourage support from the minorities by emphasizing their right to develop their own language and incorporate them into education.”⁵⁸

As mentioned earlier, the Cultural Revolution saw a backlash against the ethnic groups and their cultures as their traditions were seen as a legacy of feudal times. As happened across China, the quality of education suffered as schools were closed and students were engaged in political activities such as joining the red guards. While the minority groups residing in areas in peripheral regions of China were less affected by the Han dominated cities, their cultures and languages were still ignored, attacked, or forbidden within schools and communities across the country.

The economic reforms of the 1980’s brought with them a move towards the four modernizations and, again, a more relaxed attitude toward minority education in general. Schools in autonomous regions in China, such as the region of Lijiang inhabited by the Naxi, were allowed to partially develop their own education and local cadres and government officials were widely encouraged to take some ownership in their town’s education system. The 1980’s, however, also led the central government to realize that many educational institutions in minority regions were in desperate states. Schools that had been attacked during the Cultural Revolution were under-funded and run by

⁵⁸ Hansen Lessons, 12.

inadequate teachers while the number of minority students in higher education was actually decreasing.⁵⁹ Illiteracy was also a major concern for the government as distribution of governmental materials and policies was almost exclusively done in Mandarin Chinese.

Today, minority education is again on the rise. The government has taken active steps in order to advance the overall education levels of the *minzu*. Stricter laws, such as the 1986 Nine-year mandatory school program, have been implemented, extra points are awarded to minority students on the national exams, minority universities, previously open only to national ethnic groups, have been created, and more aid is being given by the government. These tactics seem to be working. According to official statistics, the number of minority students attending school in 1991 when compared to 1961 was up nearly four hundred percent in colleges and universities and just under that in primary schools.⁶⁰ The figures have continued to climb steadily in the 21st century due to Yunnan's financial support of forty primary and secondary boarding schools for minority students throughout the 1990's. The statistics are not, however, as promising as the government would like them to be. While the number of schools and teachers has significantly increased for minority children, many groups literally started at ground zero in terms of experience with formalized education. Levels of literacy, retention and completion also fall far below national averages.

Again, though generalizations can be made, each minority group has its own history of interaction with the Chinese education system. In the case of the Dai, like a handful of other minority groups, the degree of immersion in formal education remained

⁵⁹ Hansen Lessons, 78.

⁶⁰ Hansen Lessons, 15.

at a low level before 1949. So, although there were minority schools in certain regions, the government never made a widespread attempt to incorporate and engage the Dai in the system. The history of institutionalized education among the Naxi, however, enjoys the same lengthy history as do Han-Naxi politics. Lijiang saw the opening of three full elementary schools in the 1920's. During this time a school was also opened in the nearby Naxi town of Baisha. Educators teaching at the rural school today continue to speak of the "great tradition of Han learning"⁶¹ in the area. As a group, the Naxi tend to fair far better in formalized education than many of the other *minzu*. The number of Naxi students in senior secondary schools is equal to that of the Han while in 1993, the number of students graduating from college was over six times that of the Dai and 20% above the national average. As will be examined in Chapter three, the implications of these statistics are far reaching, while reasons for them might be surprising.

Chapter two will discuss further the use of education as a tool to assimilate minorities. How the ideologies actually share educational practices in schools will be outlined looking specifically at the effects of the government and tourist industry. These insights will be considered in conjunction with an apparent conflict between assimilative attitudes of the state and current trends towards "celebrating" minority cultures in educational institutions. I will argue that, in fact, a tension need not exist as perhaps these culture-classes are, in fact, ways in which governmental concerns can actually coincide with the needs of tourism in order for commodification to take place. The integration of both factors extends further the effect education has on ethnic identities, as both the

⁶¹ Naxi school administrator at the Baisha elementary school.

government and the tourist industry each struggle against and simultaneously motivate pre-existing stereotypes.

Chapter Two: The Government and the Tourist Industry at Work.

In Chapter One, we have viewed how the current reality for minorities has been constructed by both governmental and economic forces. There are many questions yet to be answered such as: What are the social conditions which all for these constructions to exist? How do they then become adopted as shared generalizations in society by both the majority and minority cultures themselves? What are the agencies that take part in the co-construction process? How are they benefiting from the creation of an ethnic identity and how are they affecting minority education in China today?

A number of scholars look to education as a vehicle for the construction of minority identity in China. As the authors of Contemporary Minority Migration, Education and Ethnicity in China argue, “education policy, in part, provides an important social foundation for the maintenance, reconstruction, or transformation of ethnic identity.”⁶² Before one can examine the co-construction of one’s identity through the avenue of education, one must first define what is meant by the term “identity”. There are at least two ways to look at ethnic identity in China. The first definition is a group identity and pertains to the ascribed identity of an ethnic minority, that is, the identities which a society places upon individual members of the *shaoshu minzu*. In turn, society also places values on and prescriptions for behavior of one’s ascribed ethnic identity. The second identity that I will explore is the voluntary identity, the more personal self-identity which encompasses those feelings and evaluations one has about oneself that may or may not be independent of other ascribed identities (such as female, mother, *Naxi*, etc.) I will

⁶² Robyn Iredale, et al. Contemporary Minority Migration, Education and Ethnicity in China (USA: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2001) 51.

argue that the government's "categorized and definite"⁶³ grouping and labeling of minorities and ethnic identifications through the school system, affects both students' ascribed and voluntary identities.

Why Schools?

It is easy for one to assume formal education takes the form of simply transferring knowledge from teacher to student. One can forget that people are actively being formed while learning arithmetic and chemical equations. The average child at the Baisha elementary school will spend roughly 40 hours of her time in classes each week. School in China is not just about teaching facts, but also a way of life. By examining *pinde* and *shehui* textbooks, it is clear that the Chinese school system in particular is attempting to mold children into model citizens. This, of course, is not an educational phenomenon particular to China. Children who attend school in America are also taught "proper" morals in society. One can easily find, for example, classrooms in America engaged in essay writing contests on the importance of environmental activism and singing songs about sharing. I would argue, however, that there is a distinct effect that schools in China have upon minority children that does more than teach them "correct" morals and ethics. Schools often teach children how to adequately conduct themselves according to their ascribed identities; that is, they are taught how to be good minority subjects.

As Joshua Fishman discusses in Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguism Perspective, "As a formal institution of socialization, education is

⁶³ Hansen, Lessons, 4.

necessarily also co-responsible for and engaged in sociocultural socialization, i.e., in socialization for ethnic membership and for ethnic consciousness. The elementary school's studies curriculum, with its emphasis on national history, civics, and geography, not to mention its rituals...is essentially an explicit and implicit course in mainstream ethnic sociology.”⁶⁴ As mentioned in chapter one, there are at least two prominent factors affecting what takes place within schools. The first is the state whose goal, as I argued, is to dilute any possibility of minority political independence and autonomy from the nation as a whole. Another influence, the tourist industry, can reach its goals without upsetting the government agenda. Since the tourist industry is a market that depends on the exoticization and eroticization of the other, it also needs the existence and maintenance of that variation for survival. The set-up of the education system in China, if one assumes the dual factors of economy and the state, allows for the simultaneous expression and suppression of various minority characteristics. Interestingly enough, these two pulls are not at odds since their main objectives overlap. As explored in this chapter, even the tourist emphasis on ethnic difference does not conflict with the state's long term goal of assimilation and unity. Similarly, the government's need to project a unified Chinese state need not negate the creation of an ethnic “otherness”. Those who wish to express a form of minority and ethnic identity separate from the Han are able to realize this goal by incorporating aspects of individual cultures which conform to current structures in Chinese society; for example the over-sexing of the Dai, as they have already been stereotyped an erotic culture. Consequently, suppression of other minority characteristics does not affect the imaginings of ethnic minorities which so fuel the

⁶⁴ Joshua A. Fishman, Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective, as quoted by Hansen, Lessons, xi.

tourist industries. Thereby, the realms of governmental and economic influences can dually exist and affect the production of minority identities in China today. However, there must be an avenue through which both agents can explore and further their agendas.

Needs and Goals

While the needs and goals of the governmental sector have been explored in chapter one, another strong factor affecting minority development in China today is tourism. Second, perhaps, to political forces are those of the ever-rising economy and the players that will cater to its needs in order to gain a higher position on local, national, and international levels. In Yunnan, China, where a large portion of minorities live, one of the fastest growing economic forces is that of tourism. Aside from its biodiversity and natural beauty, Yunnan's main draw to travelers is its ventures in "ethnic tourism". Ethnic tourism is defined as tourism specifically targeted to viewing ethnic groups and cultures different from that of the traveler. Indeed, in Yunnan's capital, Kunming, an entire theme park, the Minority Nationalities Park or "ethnic villages", has been dedicated to the cultures of minority people. Featuring the same essentialized landmarks and costumes as places such as Epcot center in America and over-exoticized indigenous people, the park is a place where one can supposedly view all minority cultures have to offer, without all the hassle of actually traveling to remote geographic locations. Indeed, while traveling through Yunnan one gets the same uneasy sense of ethnic tourism as Huang Yinwu, developer and project manager of the tourist development in predominantly Bai Shaxi. Huang remarks that there are not many positive examples to use as role models for the Shaxi project. Specifically targeting Lijiang he comments, "Naxi culture is sold to

tourists in Lijiang like in a big shopping mall.”⁶⁵ Because of tourism’s economic impact and importance to the region, minority identities are shaped, developed, and constantly re-imagined to suit that industry.

Who is it, however, that defines exactly what is “ethnic” and what aspects of culture will be bought and sold on the tourist market? Charles McKhann, a researcher who spent time in Yunnan in the 1980’s and attended performances of the Yunnan Province Nationalities Dance troupe, protests the authenticity of such shows: “the government is highly selective in what aspects of nationality culture it chooses to promote.”⁶⁶ How do the co-existing forces of the government and tourist industry, then, appropriate their need for “ideal minorities” to the indigenous people themselves? In order for minorities to appeal to tourists seeking “the other”, minorities first need to understand how to “be ethnic”. Just examining the terminology used towards minority cultures in various arenas of Chinese life leads one to conclude that there is something that Han viewers find, or have been taught to find, unappealing about these cultures. Chapter one discussed previous perceptions of the minorities as “backwards”, “primitive”, and even “barbaric.” While this downward “gaze” still exists, something must be responsible for transforming the barbaric and crude, to the pure, primitive, exotic and quaint. In turn, this knowledge must be disseminated to the both the Han public and the minorities themselves. While one can hire dancers and teach performers, many tourists’ thirst for the exotic is not adequately quenched with the contrived villages, parks

⁶⁵ As quoted by Rui Xia, “The Embroidered Red-Dress Economy” *The Embroidered Headdress Economy*. 24 January 2006. [Asia Times Online](http://www.aitimes.com). <www.aitimes.com>

⁶⁶ Charles F. McKhann, “The Naxi and the Nationalities Question” *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*. Ed. Stevan Harrell (USA: University of Washington Press, 1995) 44.

and dance shows created for this purpose. Entire geographic locations such as Dali, Lijiang and Zhongdian are beginning to be sold to tourists in “Travel Packages” such as the “Yunnan Panorama” or “Dreamland of Shangri-La”⁶⁷ tours put together by the government-controlled Yunnan Provincial Tourist Information Center. When tourists are taken to areas lying outside the parameters of a theme park gate, they expect to find the same “pure”, “primitive” and “promiscuous”⁶⁸ cultures in life as they would see on stage. It would be in the tourist industry’s best interest, therefore, to cultivate a sense of ethnic otherness in individuals which corresponds with these beliefs. What better time to start than with childhood?

Starting in the Schools

The school is an entity which can carry out those desires of both the state and the tourist industry. Although a strict test-based system may seem an unlikely venue for the reformation of one’s identity, it is often within the context of history, geography, moral, even science classes, that children’s perceptions about themselves and their ethnic group, are constructed. As Hansen says further, “In minority areas the school, and the educational arena in general, often comes to play its own special role in representing minorities...one that reflects a mixture of official state representations transmitted via schoolbooks, popular Han Chinese exoticized representations, and representations produced and communicated by minority elite members themselves.”⁶⁹ The fact that

⁶⁷ As labeled on their homepage, www.yunnantourism.net

⁶⁸ The three most overarching Chinese stereotypes of minority borderland cultures as discussed by Professor Beth Notar in a panel discussion on Yunnan at Connecticut College on Friday, September 23rd, 2005.

⁶⁹ Hansen, *Girls*, 415-416.

these depictions are based on a test-based system which allows for only one answer to each question, often adds further complications to children's identity formation. As is the case with most Chinese schools, the words of state-trained teachers and concepts found in textbooks are presented to children as indisputable facts. To scholars examining the question of ethnic identity in China today such as Mackerras, Hansen, Blum and Gladney, minority identities are not pure facts, but rather, are fluid. The use of terms such as "make", "become", and "create" employed by researchers when discussing the ethnic identity in China attests to this. How schools implement lessons about minority cultures, however, implies that knowledge about the minorities is held *a priori* as unquestionable truths within the system. Children are not taught to be critical towards their curriculum. This educational process becomes truly dangerous when dealing with such subjective topics as minority identity and the "valuing" of various ethnic groups. As Hansen's research on minority students in Lijiang and Xishuang Banna concluded, the presentation of definitions of minority cultures as truths affects a child's identity a great deal. As Hansen argues, "[minority students] internalize to a certain degree this external interpretation of the content of their ethnic identity, so that the categorizers' definition becomes 'true' and becomes part of their identity as a minority *minzu*."⁷⁰

On a different front, the schools are also affected by the perceptions and beliefs about minorities constructed, as we have seen, in part by the tourist industry and governmental institutions. This societal influence does not affect the schools in the same tangible methods as textbooks and posters as seen above. Indeed, society's collective opinions, often informed by state agencies, play a role in a school's atmosphere. Ways in

⁷⁰ Hansen, Lessons, 77.

which students, teachers, administrators, and even parental figures, interact with children's' notions of ethnic "otherness" undoubtedly affects at the very least the ways in which children see themselves within academic structures. The repercussions of these actions are more abstract as they are infrequently documented. Yet the everyday actions and words exchanged when in school are incredibly important as they most certainly affect both children's ascribed and voluntary identities. Chapter three will focus on the impact of such actions on minority students by examining case studies from three different schools. This chapter will analyze the tangible ways in which the education system has been and can be manipulated to serve the needs of the government and the tourist industry.

How Minority Schooling Works

In China there are no officially designated "minority schools" at the elementary level purposefully created to serve minority populations. Schools in Southwest Yunnan do become segregated based upon the population of a certain geographic area. This separation is especially predominant in rural areas. In Namu, for example, there used to be two separate elementary schools in the prefecture. One school served an almost exclusively Dai community and the other was located about two miles away in a village comprised mostly of Han. When the Han school closed down, the Han students were moved over to Namu's elementary school and became part of the roughly six percent of the non-Dai population. In cities it is more likely for the groups to be mixed, as in the elementary school in Lijiang's Old Town of whose students are roughly fifty percent

Naxi and fifty percent Han or another minority.⁷¹ Compare this situation with the breakdown in students of more rural Baisha's elementary school, located a mere 10 minute bus ride away, where the student population is 99 percent Naxi. Racial segregation becomes apparent with urban/ rural and greater geographical divides. The teachers themselves also vary in ethnicity. Due to the government's somewhat controversial policy of often placing teachers whose background lies in a rural region in a comparable area, most teachers who are classified as *shaoshu minzu* themselves tend to remain teaching in minority areas. This does not mean, however, that all teachers at these schools are minorities. During the 2004-2005 academic year at the Namu elementary school there were 11 Dai and 10 Han teachers. Most of the Dai teachers, however, were from areas within a 30-mile radius of the school. In addition, most Han teachers live in the nearby city of Mangshi and commute to the school every few days.

Achievement gaps also differ from region to region. In Lijiang, I was told that "no one" drops out, while Namu has, according to their principal, an elementary school graduation rate of only sixty percent. Though these figures may not be exact, other scholars' findings have corresponded with these overall projections. In particular, Hansen's research in Xishuang Banna and Lijiang in the early 1990's shows that while China has a national average of .543 percent of the population attending college, the Naxi have exceeded that average with .643 percent attending while the Dai lag far behind with only .107 percent enrolling.⁷² In addition, stereotyped ethnic responses were sometimes given when asked why people felt the drop-out rate was what it was. In Lijiang and Baisha I was told, "Because the Naxi culture is very deeply-rooted within them, parents

⁷¹ According to the Principal of the school.

⁷² Hansen, Lessons, 74-75.

really support their children (and they graduate).”⁷³ In Namu, children’s academic failures were often blamed on the fact that “Dai students don’t study well, they aren’t enthusiastic (*dui xuexi bu rexin*), they’re lazy.”⁷⁴ The exam system also plays a larger role in the students’ lives apart from merely gauging the success rate of children. Due to China’s examination system, it is essential that curricula remain standard throughout the provinces, if not the entire country. Thus, most children use the same textbooks regardless of where they are in Yunnan province. Teachers in China are usually responsible for teaching one or two subjects and teach at multiple grade levels; thereby one class may have six different teachers in a given day. Classes are taught in Math, Chinese, Art, Music, Gym, Morals, Society, Science, and usually English, with some variation based on grade level and location. Math and Chinese classes are given the most attention in school, as they are more heavily weighted on the annual exams, and can often meet up to 12 times within a given school week.

Recently, there has been a push both domestically and through foreign organizations such as the Ford Foundation and UNESCO, to include minority languages and cultures in the school curricula. In 2005 a conference was held in Baisha, in conjunction with the Ford foundation, to “protect our [minority] culture”⁷⁵. The conference brought together representatives and teachers from the Tibetan population in Zhongdian, the Hanyi in Xishuang Banna and the Naxi from Lijiang, to the Baisha elementary school to engage in a week of brainstorming, planning, and debating the future of minority education and its place in the classroom. At the start of the 2004-2005

⁷³ An administrator at the Baisha Elementary School, personal interview, June 2005.

⁷⁴ As said by a 27 year old teacher at the Namu Elementary School, personal interview, May 2005.

⁷⁵ *Baohu women de chuantong*, as stated by one of the event’s organizers.

school year, Baisha elementary school implemented an “indigenous knowledge” (*bendixue*) program focusing on fostering languages and other forms of minority understanding in children. Two third grade classes were used in a pilot program to teach the children how to read and write Dongba pictographs. A sixth grade class began taking music lessons that focused on traditional Naxi music. Textbooks were to be published featuring Naxi art and the pictographs. Namu elementary school has implemented more Dai-focused curriculum earlier on than Lijiang. Starting in third grade, Dai children take lessons on how to write the Dai script. Teachers in Namu explain that it is important for children to learn Dai script because it is their heritage, but also because Dai children speak more Dai than Mandarin and it is thereby useful for them to become literate in their native language as well. In Namu, teachers who can speak both Dai and Mandarin are often used in the lower grade levels where children tend to start elementary school with little or no knowledge of Mandarin.

A Purpose of Schooling

What is it about the ways in which minority students are taught that not only teaches them about addition and subtraction, but also about minority identities and how those lessons affect their own self-perceptions? As Dru Gladney argues in Dislocating China, which examines minority identifications in the country, schools can actually be the catalyst for the creation of minority cultures. As he states, “while they [minorities] are born at home (or in hospitals) they may very well be made in school.”⁷⁶ Throughout his book, Gladney argues that the Muslim population is effectively taught how to “become

⁷⁶ Dru Gladney, Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects. (Hong Kong: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 260.

Muslim” through the school system, both in religious institutions and the more standardized nine-year public schools. One sees throughout history the same patterns as the language researchers Markin and Nakayama who have noted that, “Individuals from the powerful groups do the labeling of others, they themselves do not get labeled.”⁷⁷ In China, as in most places in the world, the powerful are most often the majorities within a culture. It is not surprising, thereby, that those elites within the country’s political realm who hold the most clout are ethnically Han. As the Chinese government has a particularly strong hold on many civil and civic arenas in the society, and the school is not an exception, government agendas are often expressed in an educational setting.

One clear dimension of school indoctrination of minority students is within the realm of patriotism. As prescribed by the fourth task of education outlined in the first Conference on Minority Education in 1951, political education in China should, “foster a spirit of equality, unity, fraternity and cooperation among the nationalities; including preserving minority culture and enhancing patriotism and support for the People’s Government.”⁷⁸ Patriotic indoctrination is an obvious and open goal of the modern Chinese education system. At every school I visited patriotic slogans and posters of past Chinese leaders adorned the walls of buildings in the schools. Schools in China require students to salute the flag and sometimes sing the national anthem, as the flag is raised and lowered each week, the sounds of “*qilai!*”⁷⁹ echo over the PA system. In numerous *pinde* textbooks, lessons such as “Motherland, I Love You”⁸⁰, teach children how to

⁷⁷ Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, Intercultural Communication in Contexts (CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1997) 15.

⁷⁸ Postiglione, 28.

⁷⁹ The first words in the Chinese National Anthem.

⁸⁰ *Zuguo Mama, Wo ai nin*. In *Pinde yu shenghuo, yi nianji*, 2003.

celebrate National Day and how to act when raising the Chinese flag. The use of patriotic images, namely soldiers, are also incorporated into lessons unrelated to the military such as “Look at How Healthy I Am” (*kan wo duo jingsehen*), a lesson found in a second-grade textbook where three pictures of soldiers are used as model examples of good posture⁸¹. Clearly patriotism is integrated into the daily school routine. As Joshua Friedman explains, “Mainstream education is also an avenue for the discussion and explication of values and moral issues, of national virtues and dilemmas of national accomplishments and shortcomings, of supra-national dedication, aspiration and concern.”⁸²

Supra-nationalism is also an important lesson for Chinese students, particularly minority students. As discussed in chapter one, the switch from nationalism to patriotism in Chinese political discourse marked a shift in beliefs and political strategy for the government which corresponds with the state’s great fear of the possibility of minority collaboration and uprising. There is an obvious need in the state’s mind to remind minorities that it is the Communist Party which helped them rise to their current “civilized” level. As Hansen outlines, “The ideology of inequality is legitimized by the conviction that the dominance of the center is truly helping the culturally inferior peoples.”⁸³ By downplaying the existence of ethnic role models capable of attaining the same economic, political and social levels as the Han, an illusion is created that, without the larger Chinese state, often represented by Han people, the minorities would become

⁸¹ *Pinde yu shenghuo, yi nianji*, 2003, 59.

⁸² Fishman as quoted by Hansen, *Lessons*, xi.

⁸³ Hansen, *Lessons*, 3.

just as “backward” (*luohou*) as before “liberation,”⁸⁴ In turn, it is imperative to the party’s aims that the minorities and their geographical locations are not seen as having their own histories which follow a different vein from dynastic China. This incorporation, and perhaps the reasoning behind it, is exemplified in the following passage taken from a Chinese history textbook:

Yunnan is an inseparable part of China...in spite of all its separate kinds of rule, Yunnan has always been an inseparable part of China...Today all minority *minzu* within the borders of China are members of our Chinese nation....the purpose of studying Yunnan history is to deepen knowledge of Yunnan, to receive patriotic teaching and education in rev. tradition; and to foster feelings of love of one’s local area, love of the people, love of the fatherland, and love of the CCP....protect the unity of the fatherland, strengthen the unity of the *minzu* and actively participate in building socialism in Yunnan.⁸⁵

A further example of the historical incorporation of the *minzu* into the greater Chinese whole derives from perhaps what is China’s greatest cultural symbol: The Great Wall. The wall was not always viewed with the same honor and pride associated with it worldwide today. The structure’s restoration in 1984 led to a subsequent revision of the wall’s historic importance in China. These revisions included an incorporation of ethnic minorities’ contributions to the wall which were previously unmentioned or overshadowed. As Barry Sautman reasons in his article, “Myths of Descent, Racial Nationalism and Ethnic Minorities”, “Although it [the incorporation of minorities into the creation of the Great Wall] is not directly a myth of common descent, the emphasis on the participation of ethnic

⁸⁴ Many Chinese, especially in more rural areas, refer to the time prior to 1949 as “before liberation” or *jiefan qian*.

⁸⁵ As cited by Hansen, *Lessons*, 69-70.

minorities in the construction of what is now the principal symbol of the Chinese nation is intended to show that the minorities have always been ethnically Chinese.”⁸⁶

By putting China above nationalistic ties, the literal act of supra-nationalism, the state is simultaneously noting the existence of different ethnic groups while asking them to subordinate their ethnic identity to their Chinese one. Indeed, this theory is further defended by June Dreyer’s definition of integration as outlined in Mackerras’ book, China’s Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the 20th Century. As Mackerras postulates on Dreyer’s interpretation of integration, “‘Integration’ is a unity among nationalities, but with each retaining its basic identity in a way that is perfectly consistent with its willingness to participate in a larger social system.”⁸⁷ A similar theory is the idea of multiple positioning which acknowledges the various statuses and identities one holds and the tensions that can exist between them. There is, thereby, an ever-present awareness of the differences between *minzu* even in discussions of equality and unity so embraced by Chinese discourse in educational, political and economic realms. This difference is actually necessary in order for over-arching assimilative goals to come to their full realization. If one is to be truly integrated into a new society, or to take on a different identity, it is assumed that this identity is one with positive associations. In turn, learning Mandarin, otherwise known as *hanyu* or “the language of the Han” also requires an interest in Han culture. Markin and Nakayama note that, “language acquisition studies have shown that it is nearly impossible for someone to learn the language of a group of

⁸⁶ Barry Sautman, “Myths of Descent, Racial Nationalism and Ethnic Minorities in The People’s Republic of China,” The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan, ed. Frank Dikotter (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997) 90-91.

⁸⁷ as cited by Mackerras, 9.

people they dislike.”⁸⁸ If the goal is to have minorities place their national identification above their ethnic one, it is important the nation be portrayed consistently in a positive light. It is necessary, however, that through the words of equality and unity spoken by the state, there is still a sense of inferiority instilled within the minority populations as a whole if not the individuals themselves. It is rare that one will find a school lesson that incorporates the minorities when it speaks of great intellectual, technological, and other societal influences and achievements. Indeed, Hansen observes a similar pattern in his research on female minority students in Chinese schools. In her research, Hansen notices that “the academic and professional role models presented in contemporary school texts invariably tend to be male...they are also all Han.”⁸⁹

Before one can reach a cohesive ideal, however, a definition of what that ideal entails must be created. If the state truly wants everyone to be unified and equal, there must be some rubric or system from which one can discern who is and who is not unified with the country. Control certainly plays a factor in this need. As Shih discusses the effect the size of China has upon identity formation, “The sheer vastness of territorial China and the enormous variety in the cultural background of cadres and local residents together cause the broadcasting of the meaning of China to encounter endless mini-negotiations at various levels.”⁹⁰ The amount of time and resources allocated for patriotic education in China also could show the state’s fear and insecurity, otherwise why would so much time and attention be given to it? One solution to the possible chaos of multiple interpretations of what it means to be a citizen for the state and for schools is to set strict

⁸⁸ Martin & Nakayama, 134.

⁸⁹ Hansen, *Girls*, 404.

⁹⁰ Shih, 7.

guidelines for how to be a model Chinese citizen. This is, in fact, what the Chinese state has done. Take for example the creation of Lei Feng day, a holiday in China celebrating the life of the “perfect comrade” Lei Feng, who tirelessly worked for the betterment of his compatriots and country. On this day Chinese schools across the country honor the most socially-conscious students with a Lei Feng certificate. The concept of the ideal citizen particularly interests me in this thesis as the ideal encompasses not only nationalistic ties of Chineseness, but also ethnic characteristics.

As Shih explains in Negotiating Ethnicity, “Since most Chinese have believed that the Han people were the race of China, one that had absorbed people of all language customs and racial ethnic origins, the meaning of being Chinese, in the sense of ethnicity, culture, citizenship, or residence was almost never addressed.”⁹¹ As Shih further enumerates, “The majority of Chinese who once called themselves *Zhongguoren*⁹², now consciously refer to themselves as *Hanren*.”⁹³ Perhaps, then, the classification and eventual making of minorities has just as much to do with a creation of Han identity as it does with a minority one. While the reclassification of minorities under the early Communist Party discussed in chapter one further demarcated the Han from the *shaoshuminzu*, it also served to classify the Han themselves. Han ended up becoming anything that was not classified in another group, thereby, instead of taking on their own identity, it found its sense of self by becoming what others are not. As Shih elaborates, “While China adapts to the multiple, contradictory, constantly evolving facets of

⁹¹ Shih, 151.

⁹² Literally meaning, “people of China”.

⁹³ Shih, 155.

modernity, no one can define what being Chinese means.”⁹⁴ Perhaps, however, one can discern what being Chinese, or Han, is by examining what it is the minorities are supposed to represent, and then taking its juxtaposition. As theorized by many intellectuals in a broad array of social sciences and the humanities, the idea of positioning one’s identification in a society has to be done against that of someone else. As Blum states, “One cannot define a self without having an other with which to reflect the self.”⁹⁵ Perhaps then constructing what it means to be a minority simultaneously constructs what it means to be Han as finding an “otherness” actually defines what one is. Just as Edward’s Said’s concept of Orientalism tells about the West than the East, so too do minority perceptions tell us about the Han.

The construction of the Han is clearly one that positions them as superior to the minorities. For instance, according to Hansen’s research on educational practices towards minority children, “It is only through the construction of a less developed minority group that a contrasting, more developed, or civilized majority can be constructed.”⁹⁶ This hierarchy of ethnicities and Han chauvinism lay in alignment with texts regarding the evolutionary aspects of minority cultures often incorporated into Chinese lesson plans. Indeed, if one is to examine the “big family of China”, as discussed in chapter one, it is most certainly the minorities who are placed as the lower ranking family members. Often, in political and education discourse, minorities are referred to as *xiongdì*, or “little brothers” of the Han. Heberer’s analysis of visual imaging of minorities and more specifically Tibetans, in Chinese culture discovers that, “A patriarchal kinship myth

⁹⁴ Shih, 181.

⁹⁵ Blum, Portraits, 10.

⁹⁶ Hansen Lessons, 4.

pervades the official Chinese descriptions of the relationship between the Han-Chinese and minorities. Han are described as father figures or elder brothers. Surrounded by members of minority groups, they advise, teach, and instruct them.”⁹⁷

In schools, the ethnic hierarchy makes clear that minority cultures, customs and habits are those which need to be changed in order to achieve ideal *minzu* status. Examples of this minority cultural hierarchy abound in textbooks throughout Yunnan. My own research revealed such practices as one particular fifth grade society (*shehui*) class which I attended at the predominantly Dai, Namu elementary school illustrates. In the observed lesson, students read about the successes in modern medicine versus the ostensibly primitive, backward, and superstitious techniques used by the practitioners of more rural and often minority, medicinal procedures. The children were asked to explain the medicinal practices they used at home and those who brought up the more “backward” techniques were told to try to use more “modern” medicines. The lesson continued to dispense information on the “uselessness” of praying to idols to cure illness and, in contrast, to what extent modern medicines could alleviate them. It was not mentioned, incidentally, that these children often have little or no access to the model treatments outlined in their textbooks. Children were taught, however, that some practices they do have available and that have been used for centuries are outdated, backward, and inappropriate. Hansen also observed this phenomenon occurring to Akha students in Xishuang Banna who were “learning [in school] that divination was a backward and ‘superstitious’ habit.”⁹⁸ Hansen also draws similar conclusions to my own that, “many ethnic minorities are forced to reconsider the significance and relevance of the cultural

⁹⁷ Heberer, 126-7.

⁹⁸ Hansen, *Girls*, 418.

values and beliefs with which they have grown up and that this sometimes results in shame and disregard for what has come to be considered ‘backward’ customs.”⁹⁹

Indeed, these lessons impact the children as they are often in striking contrast to their daily lives. It would be hard for a child to learn in school that the traditional medicine and prayers prescribed by her mother to cure an illness are worthless while still respecting and honoring her parents and heritage. Thus, it is often not only the customs of ethnic groups that come under attack in the Chinese school system but families as well. In fact, the act of disempowering the family unit is certainly not a phenomena limited to indigenous cultures. Indeed, since the very foundation of the PRC active attempts have been made by the government to ensure that citizen’s true allegiances lie beyond family lines and to the country itself. Programs such as the establishment of work units or *danwei* during the Cultural Revolution and birthing policies illustrate this strategy. There is, however, a particular need to separate ethnic families as their links could further allegiances towards the larger ethnic community and negate the process of re-aligning loyalties towards the state. Ethnic families, who are often viewed as the fosterers of ethnic culture, thereby find themselves bearing the brunt of “civilizing” tactics in schools. Minority children are more and more often separated from their families as the feeling prevails that, “In the Chinese school system most non-Han students have to disassociate themselves from their cultural heritage in order to be successful.”¹⁰⁰ Part of the logic that lies behind this reasoning exists within the nationalistic, big-brother argument; if students are taught they must assimilate to Han culture, and that, indeed, this is the ideal, they must first be separated from their current culture. Or, as one Han headmaster in Xishuang

⁹⁹ Hansen, *Girls*, 418.

¹⁰⁰ Hansen, *Lessons*, xiv.

Banna stated, “The minority children’s surroundings have to be changed if we are to manage to educate them.”¹⁰¹

This ideology is illustrated in the rapid production and shift to boarding schools for minority students throughout southwest China. Boarding at the middle and high-school levels is not a new phenomenon for those in rural areas where the closest secondary schools lie miles away from one’s home. Recently, however, more and more boarding schools are being introduced at the elementary level. These schools often boast better teachers and higher test scores than other, more localized schools, and thereby students, perhaps most accurately their parents, sometimes choose to attend these instead of those closer to home. This phenomenon even occurred with teachers themselves as was the case with one Dai teacher in Namu village who sent her son away to the city for an elementary education with higher quality.

There is also something deeper, however, that takes place through the elimination of parents in the academic life of the child. As parents and one’s home village are often the largest source of cultural knowledge, taking away their voices often disengages the child from ideas of her ethnicity that derive from sources other than the state. Thus, the state’s voice becomes the pre-eminent benefactor of knowledge on what it means to be a minority. Through the constant reminder of minorities’ secondary status, and through the placement of one’s ethnic ties secondary to one’s nationalistic ties, minority cultures become devalued.

¹⁰¹ Hansen, Lessons, 132.

Language: A Bridge Between the State and Tourism

One cannot examine minority education in China without paying close attention to the important issue of language. Because many children in rural minority areas are minimally exposed to Mandarin before attending school, the language question is one that many teachers, principals and governmental administrators have struggled with. Researchers such as Mackerras and tourist websites claim that minority children “have been offered a choice of either Chinese or their minority language as the medium of instruction.”¹⁰² Perhaps this is the case in some areas; all three of the schools where I studied, however, clearly privileged Mandarin over an indigenous language and one could never find a sixth grade student allowed to learn math in Naxi or Dai. Clearly, when children without fluency in Mandarin start elementary school it would be inappropriate to only use Mandarin as the medium of instruction as this would greatly hinder their cognitive development. Researchers such as Shih and administrators at the schools themselves both echo my feelings on the subject. As one first grade Dai teacher in Namu explains, “though there are no differences [technically] between Dai and Han teachers, it is harder on the Dai students in first and second grade to have a Dai teacher because they don’t understand as much.”¹⁰³ Thus, many schools which serve a minority population will often have a type of Pre-school program, sometimes referred to as Kindergarten or *youeryuan* where children attend school for half a day and a great deal of effort is placed on their acquiring Mandarin during this time. When children start first grade most of the instruction switches over to Mandarin. From here, according to my three case studies, it appears to be chance that decides whether or not the children will be

¹⁰² As found on the Mekong area’s “official” tourism website, www.visit-mekong.com

¹⁰³ First grade Dai teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

able to use their ethnic languages in the classroom. At both the Baisha and Namu elementary schools there were teachers who did not speak the ethnic language at all and, thus, did not use it in the classroom. Teachers who had knowledge of both Mandarin and Dai or Naxi would often switch between the two languages, with less emphasis on the indigenous language in the higher grades. More Dai was used in Namu classrooms visited than Naxi in Baisha. In Lijiang relatively no Naxi was spoken in classes other than those infrequent uses specifically dealing with Dongba characters.

Attitudes towards the necessity and usefulness of the languages also differed among administrators in minority schools in China. There does seem to be, however, some consensus among researchers and members of the cultures themselves, that perhaps the school's and the government's true goals in offering a bilingual education program are not necessarily for the preservation of ethnic culture. Similar to current bilingual, transitional and ESL programs in America, the ultimate goal is to use one's native tongue as merely a vehicle to teach the majority one. Indeed, in all three of the elementary schools where I completed research, attitudes varied yet the end result was the same. Though some teachers argued that "it is important to learn Dai because we are Dai and it is in our cultural heritage,"¹⁰⁴ when teachers with children were asked what language was most important to learn in schools many answered that ultimately, "I want my child to learn Mandarin as that is what he will need later in life. He can learn Dai later on when he has time."¹⁰⁵ Zhang, a Han who is the Deputy Directory of education in Xishuang Banna explains, "the Dai language is like a crutch to help you learn to walk. Once you can walk,

¹⁰⁴ A Dai teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁰⁵ A Dai and math teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

you should throw away the crutch.”¹⁰⁶ Academics, especially Chih-yu Shih, have noticed a similar phenomenon within the schools. According to Shih, “ethnic officials often see the ethnic language as a stepping stone to the eventual adoption of Mandarin in teaching, with the ultimate goal of assimilation into the mainstream culture.”¹⁰⁷

One can, of course, argue that these actions are taken for the minority student’s own good. Although one can technically function as a farmer or in some other agricultural occupation in rural minority areas while relying just on an indigenous language, if a person is to travel outside of his hometown, knowledge of Mandarin is all but imperative to survive. There is, therefore, a justification to ensure children’s knowledge of Mandarin is sufficient enough to protect their future. In addition, it seems as if the state has accepted the existence of minority languages in China. The policies of the state toward minority languages have been close since the foundation of the PRC. As discussed in chapter one, the state has been active in the Romanization of many minority languages as well as funding and using research institutes and places of higher education to publish indigenous language dictionaries. According to official policy in 2000, “China respects and preserves the traditional cultures of ethnic minorities, and all of the minority peoples are free to maintain and develop their own cultures.”¹⁰⁸ Perhaps, however, all of these motions are only covering up a deeper sense of downplaying, if not attempting to eliminate, those aspects of minority otherness found unsettling by the state. As one researcher on minority categorizations at official and popular levels in Yunnan’s capitol

¹⁰⁶ As quoted by Shih, 185.

¹⁰⁷ Shih, 166.

¹⁰⁸ “National Minorities Policy and its Practice in China” China Internet Information Center: White Papers of the Government < <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/4/index.htm> >

of Kunming argues, “official treatment of linguistic diversity in China has fluctuated, but the predominant goal is that everyone learns *putonghua*.¹⁰⁹ It is assumed that in time the other varieties will fade away through disuse.”¹¹⁰

Languages policies and attitudes towards indigenous languages correspond to state goals of assimilation and incorporation of the minorities into mainstream Chinese and Han culture. Indeed, if Martin and Nakayama are correct in their discussion of language and intercultural communication that attempts to make official state languages “reflect a power-bid to determine which language will be privileged”¹¹¹ then it is clear which language holds the top place in Chinese society. Although Mandarin was only made the official language of China at the turn of the 20th century, and it is the first language of only 70 percent of the Chinese population, the vast majority of that 70 percent is ethnically Han.¹¹² Thereby, by making Mandarin the main and official language used in schools and throughout China, schools are making a statement that Mandarin language is the most important which, in turn, privileges the Mandarin-speaking Han. The idea that language corresponds to national ties has, in turn, become embedded in many minority Chinese minds. When I asked both students and teachers why studying Mandarin was important, many echoed the words of one Dai teacher in Namu who said “we are all in China, thereby we must learn Chinese.”

In line with Supra-nationalist practices discussed above, one could title this act Supra-linguism where the preservation and additional learning of one’s indigenous

¹⁰⁹ Literally meaning “everyday speak” or “normal speak”, *putonghua* is used in China as a synonym for Mandarin.

¹¹⁰ Blum, *Portraits*, 27.

¹¹¹ Martin & Nakayama, 132.

¹¹² The term “*hanhua*”, meaning “language of the Han”, is often translated as “Mandarin” in current day discourse.

language comes second only to a strong foothold in Mandarin. Even in areas where minority languages are taught, a process of devaluation takes place. A child's Dai scores in Namu, for example, will play no part in determining where that child will attend middle school, thereby rendering the score useless in the face of a system where one's number dictates one's academic progression. In addition, children in Namu are only required to take lessons in Dai if they themselves are Dai, or, at least, if they call themselves Dai on citizen registration forms. While Han children are present in Dai classes, they do not participate, giving the impression that it is not necessary for those *minzu* other than Dai to learn the language. Indeed, it is not even considered valuable enough for an hour of their time.

After examining the above arguments one might question why schools and governments teach indigenous languages at all. Although there are many proponents of minority languages arguing for greater equality and a vital need to preserve indigenous knowledge, in order for these programs to exist and succeed the state must agree. So what is it that the state is after in the allowance of minority language programs? One must return to the overall goals of assimilation and unity to answer this question. In one of Shih's chapters on ethnic languages and educational practices, she makes a compelling argument that "successful maintenance of an ethnic language may paradoxically contribute to assimilation into the mainstream Chinese culture."¹¹³ By incorporating a higher¹¹⁴ number of languages into state policies, the government can reach a wider audience. In this way, the promotion of ethnic languages allows the government to

¹¹³ Shih, 163.

¹¹⁴ See Figure one.

enhance what Shih labels “thought education”¹¹⁵ through minority newspapers, governmental announcements, and other forms of media conducted in the ethnic language. A positive view of the after-effects of the creation and the subsequent reading of a Naxi newspaper in Lijiang by the Ethnic Commission argues that:

The peasant masses tasted the sweetness of reading and writing. Many previously illiterate commune members can read newspapers and books. They can understand the Party’s policy, learn how to cultivate the field scientifically, and advance in both spiritual and material civilization. They write to the government in their own words, reporting on production and their living conditions. They appreciate the sanitation policy and have given up some of the bad customs. They know why they should be industrious and frugal now, and have begun to plan their family life. The Lisu people, who lived in wooden houses for generations, can design and construct adobe houses for themselves.¹¹⁶

It is clear from the above paragraph that the government is much less interested in the spread of Naxi than it is with how using Naxi newspapers have further incorporated the Naxi into mainstream China. In addition, new policies in the measurement of literacy rates in China allow for those who are illiterate in Mandarin but can read an indigenous language as literate, which makes the state look better in the eyes of the international arena. Perhaps I am being too cynical, but if the government truly respected those who could read and write an indigenous language as literate and learned, one would expect one’s indigenous language scores to have some bearing on the national exams, the state approved rubric of intelligence measurement.

¹¹⁵ Shih, 172.

¹¹⁶ Ethnic Commission of Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County, “*Yung minzu yuwen sao mang xiaoguo hao*” (Using the ethnic language to reduce illiteracy works well), in Editorial of Ethnic Work (ed.), *Yunnan minzu jiaoyu gaige shijian yu tansuo*, pg 246. As referenced by Shih, 172-173.

Indigenous language instruction is not the only form of minority knowledge taught in elementary schools in China. Some schools have also recently incorporated indigenous singing and dancing classes into their curriculum. School uniforms in Lijiang and Baisha have begun to be re-fashioned to approximate traditional Naxi clothing¹¹⁷ and Naxi movements are included in daily morning exercises. If the forces of the government and the tourist industry co-exist, so must the need to assimilate with the need to continually position the minority as an “other” that needs to be taught how to assimilate and fit in. This difference provides an especially strong foothold in the economic development of the tourism in Yunnan’s minority areas.

Tourism Realized

The second factor influencing minority children’s collective ascribed ethnic identity is the tourist industry. Tourism is the key economic factor in Yunnan’s development and, with the increasing popularity of eco-trips and backpacking tours, even the most rural areas have become subject to the onslaught of travelers seeking out new and exotic locations. In 1992 a special tourism course was offered by a boarding school that served national minorities. Open to those who had not succeeded in passing the state provincial exam, the course lasted one year and consisted of classes in “tourism psychology” and “minority dance” and sought to prepare students for working in tourist industries later on in life.¹¹⁸ Presently, it is common to find minority students at both Kunming Normal University and Yunnan Nationalities University majoring in “tourism”, using their college educations to study English and learn local histories of places such as

¹¹⁷ See Figure two.

¹¹⁸ Hansen, *Girls*, 417-18

Dali and Lijiang. One sees billboards across the province with lavishly costumed minorities welcoming the foreign or, increasingly, domestic traveler to their homeland.¹¹⁹

Far from adding to the exposure of minority cultures to China, however, these advertisements, training courses, and the overall commercialization of ethnic cultures often do more to complicate the definition of ethnic minority identity than clarify it. Although many minorities prosper from the tourist industry, they are ultimately shaping a warped reality of ethnic culture and condemning their future generations to abide by it, indeed live off of it. Although true indigenous cultural authenticity can be argued against, as culture itself is fluid, the very question is often marginalized at the outset of the creation of these culture shows, villages and billboards. Most often the performers in these media representations needn't even belong to a certain ethnic group to represent them in a song, dance, or TV advertisement. The reigning criterion to sell oneself as any one minority is merely that you are a *shaoshu minzu* yourself.

This is not to say that those involved with a display of minority culture are always from a different *minzu*. In Lijiang, where the Naxi population is very much in evidence, older Naxi women dance each day in the town's square and musicians who have been playing throughout the 20th century and whose musical traditions have been passed down through generations are the ones performing in the "traditional Naxi music hall."¹²⁰ What is not mentioned, however, is that the women are paid by the government to dance and more and more non-Naxi musicians are hired as the older ones pass away. What is more, Lijiang is also home to one of the larger "minority dance shows" in the area. A popular sight for tourists, this show features "traditional" dances from some of Yunnan's 26

¹¹⁹ See figure three.

¹²⁰ See figure four.

ethnic minority groups. The cast of the show, however, is comprised of some 20-30 dancers, most of whom are minorities, all of whom dance in pieces which “traditionally” belong to a multitude of ethnic groups. Indeed, as more and more Han are coming into the region precisely because of the tourist market, one is hard-pressed to find someone of actual Naxi descent selling the infamous painted pictographs on T-shirts. Although many businessmen will claim they are Naxi, because they know it will be considered more authentic and thereby desirable to the more conscientious tourist, one need only ask Lijiang locals, who are completely aware of the scam, to be told they are not. Local Naxi in Lijiang complain about the influx of Han businessmen whose monetary assets allow them to buy out the increasingly expensive property in the traditionally Naxi old-town. As one Naxi researcher who lives in Old Town remarked, “If we were to buy our house now, we could not afford it. More and more Han are moving in and more and more Naxi are moving out. It used to be that when you walked down the street all you heard was the Naxi language, (*Naxihua*), now everyone speaks Mandarin (*putonghua*).”¹²¹

I am not arguing that having someone dance, act, or sing from a culture different from their own is bad in and of itself. Indeed, if this were so I would have to condemn half my life as an American studying Chinese culture. I believe the tension rises, however, when these events are presented to the uninformed viewer as authentic sources for cultural information. When so much about minority cultures has been suppressed and academic knowledge is limited both in content and in form, these shows and exhibits often comprise the most prominent source from which Han and foreign tourists view the ethnic “other.” Songs, dances, costumes, and food, therefore, come to represent all of

¹²¹ Professor Wang of the Cultural Research Center of Lijiang City.

minority culture and indeed, are taken to be the only differences between one group and another. Even if the minorities themselves are aware of the intricacies of their actions, they may not realize the impact their commodification has upon future generations as all of these essentializations and devaluations are linked with ethnic education in the school systems. While government and education are linked in China, so too is the tourist industry with governmental bureaus for tourism in most regions in the Southwest. Indeed, since it is imperative for the success of minority tourist pursuits to suit the agendas of both the state and the tourists themselves, an understanding of aspects of social phenomena, such as assimilation and patriotism, are necessary. In Shih's research on ethnic citizenship in juxtaposition with state needs, she discusses the lure of the tourist industry in Xishuang Banna. As she explains, "Assimilation into Han culture in the tourist sense assists ethnic villagers in attracting and satisfying Han people's imagination about the villagers' ethnicity."¹²²

Schools who are actively involved in the assimilation process also use Han perceptions of ethnic otherness in order to generate funds and enhance governmental favor. Hansen observed the phenomena of how schools utilize their minority students in order to perform ethnic songs and dances to, "elite audiences made up mostly of middle-aged Han Chinese men in important social positions."¹²³ Often schools themselves stage performances for Han businessmen or government officials touring the area or during special holidays. While teaching in Namu I observed the "best" female dancers in grades three and four spent many afternoons practicing with their dance teacher for the upcoming children's day township performance. Oddly enough, though the girls

¹²² Shih, 184.

¹²³ Hansen, *Girls*, 417.

practiced in their traditional Dai “costumes”, they copied moves from a mainstream DVD taught to them by their Han music teacher. Thus, the performances need not even include traditional ethnic dances or songs, the performers themselves just need to be minorities. Hansen suggests that, “by staging on command a public performance of minority students who ‘like to sing and dance’, the school actively participates in the commodification of minority women and serves to confirm and reinforce an exoticized image of minority people.”¹²⁴

It is clear that schools are allowing, if not actively engaging in, the use of minority children to cultivate and strengthen ideas of what it means to be ethnic by tourism’s standards, in Yunnan Province. One must also take into account the underlying motives or factors affecting the shift to incorporate the ethnic knowledge in the classroom. One must certainly concede the positive aspects in the tourist industry’s involvement in the addition of minority classes in educational institutions. A concern, however, lies in the true motivations of teaching children these classes. While many teachers and researchers alike argue for the need to preserve cultural heritage and to foster ethnic cultures in the youth, others have different views of why studying indigenous knowledge is important. As the Vice-Principal of the Baisha elementary school said, “I do not oppose or support the teaching of Dongba pictographs to students myself as I don’t understand and cannot read or write Dongba. But it has value because Baisha is a place with many travelers and (one) can make money from the travelers who buy things from children.”¹²⁵ As illustrated by the creation of the tourism course above, schools are also effectively funneling minority children towards jobs that the tourist

¹²⁴ Hansen, *Girls*, 417.

¹²⁵ Personal interview, May 2005.

industry requires them to fill. There is, however, an intrinsic danger when a culture is validated solely by the existence of an outside arena, such as tourism. If this link is emphasized then one runs the risk of attaching no value to the culture absent from that entity. In turn, tying ethnic culture so tightly down to the whims of tourism can prove fatal as Yinwu notes, “If the tourism boom declines, there will be nothing left of the culture.”¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Huang Yinwu, as quoted by Xia.

Chapter Three: Underlying Causes to Educational Success

Postiglione states that, “Of all the areas in the field of Chinese education, the gaps between policy and practice are particularly difficult to discern in regard to national minority education.”¹²⁷ The struggles in identifying the realities of minority education in China are partially due to the government’s own lack of information as many minority groups reside in remote geographical areas. The fact remains, however, that while China is officially striving for equal education for all its citizens, the minorities still lag far behind state requirements such as literacy rates and the completion of grades 1-8. Official responses to this discrepancy often cite economic sources. Rarely are references made to the discriminatory views regarding the abilities, or lack thereof, of ethnic minorities. This chapter will attempt to reframe the question, “why is it that there are so many minority children failing the Chinese school system?” to “why and how is the Chinese school system failing so many minority students?” Though some ethnic groups, such as the Naxi, have academic success rates that actually exceed those of Han children nationwide, minority students in general are less likely to attend high school and college than the Han. Some ethnic groups, such as the Dai, have rates strikingly lower than the Han, rendering a child’s chances of academic success devastatingly low. This chapter hopes to address the actual realities that occur in a classroom and how these and the situations discussed in chapters two and three affect a child’s overall academic achievement and identity. The opinions and thoughts that the children themselves hold about their education, their ethnicity and their personal identities will also be examined and analyzed. Most of the opinions and conclusions outlined in this chapter have derived from my own research

¹²⁷ Postiglione, 29.

experiences and through interviews with students and observing classes at minority schools for nearly three months during the spring and early summer of 2005. This chapter will examine what I believe are some of the predominant factors contributing to the relatively low or high success¹²⁸ rates of minorities as a whole. As I used the Dai and Naxi as my case studies, representing groups from the bottom and top tier of higher educational achievement, I will also discuss possible reasons as to why there are such discrepancies between ethnic groups themselves. The first obstacle to be analyzed, however, is one that connects many minority students throughout China: the conditions of poverty.

The Affect of Economic Status

One of the most prominent explanations from the Chinese government about why minority children in China are struggling in schools on a national level concerns their economic plight. While millionaires are beginning to emerge in China and elite members of urban populations are buying luxury cars and designer clothing, over 200 million Chinese are still living in absolute poverty.¹²⁹ Yunnan province, where 26 of China's 56 ethnic groups reside, is no exception to China's financial woes. In Dai inhabited Namu, the average salary of the predominantly farming community is roughly 250 dollars per year. The families who had the self-identified hardest (*zui kunnan*) situations made, according to a school teacher, about 50 dollars per family member per year. As school costs can be upwards of 50 dollars a year including books, uniforms, and miscellaneous

¹²⁸ In this chapter "success" will be defined as academic success, meaning the achievement of attending high school and college in the PRC.

¹²⁹ The World Bank, www.worldbank.org

fees, sending one child to school would cost one fourth of a four person family's income. Thus, if the same family were to send two children to school, the two parents would have only 100 US dollars left over for the year's expenses. In Naxi-populated Lijiang, typical income figures are harder to obtain as professions vary in the region. Similar to Namu, in Baisha the typical profession is farming with a handful of people now engaging in marketing crafts and goods for the tourist industry. Poverty is a greater factor in Baisha than Lijiang, however, and perhaps even more than in Namu as the children in Baisha often wear clothes and utilize backpacks that are noticeably more torn and older than their other counterparts. In addition, nearly every teacher at all three elementary schools claimed that poverty and monetary concerns plays a role in children's achievement levels in school.

There are, however, discrepancies between China's regions in terms of economic prosperity. Clearly, minority students who live in cities, on a whole, face less financial pressures than their rural counterparts. This is illustrated through my interviews with 35 Naxi students, seventeen from the school in Lijiang and 18 from those in Baisha. When children were asked whether or not it was difficult for their families to pay school fees (*xue fei*), one third of children from the Baisha school answered yes while only 12 percent of those who lived in Lijiang had the same response. When asked how they knew that paying for school was difficult for their families, children gave similar responses. Most children in Baisha responded that, "farming is hard work" while one Lijiang child explains, "my mother works so hard, it takes her nearly three months to make enough money for [my] school."¹³⁰ These types of perceptions, however, can offer extra

¹³⁰ A fourth grader in Lijiang, Personal interview, June 2005.

incentive for children to achieve academically as they feel their parents have made great sacrifices. As Hansen notes in her research on female minority students, “Akha students in lower primary schools...all expressed concern that their families had to suffer economically because they were in school and that, therefore, it was important that they made up for this sacrifice by succeeding in the quest for a job outside the village.”¹³¹ This type of thinking is also apparent within the children of Namu elementary school. When fifth graders were asked to complete essays entitled “Who Am I?” one fifth grader wrote, “I think that they [my parents] do so much farm work and the work is so hard on them, so I’ve decided to study very hard, only this way can I achieve my aspirations. When I have free time I help my parents do housework, help them wash dishes and feed the pigs. I feel that this little bit is what I can do, in this way I can alleviate their exhaustion.”¹³² In an interview, a fourth grader similarly expressed that she wanted to work hard because, “My studies (currently) are a little poor, but my parents work so hard for me so I don’t want to throw [my opportunity for education] away.”¹³³

While educational researchers such as Jonathan Kozol agree that one’s economic level affects one’s performance at school, it is harder to discern the tangible reasons behind why this is actually true. In China, the government does not provide significant additional funding to schools aside from teachers’ salaries¹³⁴ as Postiglione explains, “with [the government’s] emphasis on economic development and modernization,

¹³¹ Hansen, *Girls*, 414.

¹³² A fifth grade girl in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹³³ A fourth grade girl in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹³⁴ When a new school building was being constructed in Namu the government paid one third of the costs while it was up to the community to cover the rest. Recently, the government did provide the school with a television.

schools, educators, buildings and supplies get left out.”¹³⁵ It is usually through “miscellaneous funds” (*za fei*) that a school can obtain materials such as paper for art classes and basketball courts. A town’s economic level often dictates the amount of resources the school can obtain. It is thereby not surprising that the Lijiang elementary school is equipped with trees for scenery and construction paper to draw upon, while Namu students are sometimes even without pencils for a lesson. The lack of resources is often an obstacle further complicated by China’s nationalized education system. Many textbooks used by students throughout China assume the same financial level for the students as they require materials such as clay, bottles and scissors, something that many rural schools do not have. In addition, the *sipin* textbook includes a VCD which the book makes frequent mention of, regardless of the fact that many rural schools are not in possession of a television. Thus, children whose school districts find themselves unable to purchase the materials called for in their textbooks, merely discuss the lesson and read through steps to create projects, rather than engaging in the hands on activities of their more affluent counterparts.

Being in rural and poorer areas affects the amount of basic understanding children bring to their textbooks. For example, a *pinde* textbook focuses on teaching children how to properly cross city streets when children have yet to ever see a traffic light.¹³⁶ Though 70 percent of China’s population lives in rural areas, Chinese textbooks mostly primarily display city children’s lives. This is especially evident in *sipin* and society classes taught at the school. The course-content ranges from environmental awareness, to health care, to getting along with friends. The pictures and scenarios, however, often are taken from

¹³⁵ Postiglione, 33.

¹³⁶ *Pinde yu shenghuo, yi nianji*, 2003, 26 & 27.

those that only city children would have the opportunity to encounter. Lessons display children at computers and discuss how one should treat animals at the zoo. In a lesson on disposing trash, children are taught about various recycling receptacles though Namu has not a single public wastebasket on the streets. Even in lessons which would seem perfect to include rural examples, such as planting seeds, instead show city children in apartments with a pot of dirt in their windowsill. One of the few lessons that does extensively use the countryside as its main setting topics is “I love my hometown” and uses the past-tense terms “visited ” and “remember” when discussing the area instead of acknowledging that it is where most of China’s population lives. When asked how she dealt with these problems, one second grade teacher replied, “many of the lessons don’t have much of a connection with their lives but there’s nothing we can do, you still have to teach them.”¹³⁷

The problems were similar in a fifth grade labor or *laodong* class. The textbook is entirely unsuitable for these children. The lessons range from activities that rural children learn in their early years such as “washing sweaters” and “mopping the floor” to making puppets and paper lanterns for which they have not a single resource. On one day of observance, the class was learning about “caring for and treasuring our libraries.” When the teacher asked if students had even ever seen a library the answer was a unified “no.” “Well,” the teacher continued, “If you go to high school then your school might have one.” The lesson went on to discuss how to check out books and the classification system. Though it is certainly useful and important for the children to learn about a library, some of these students might not ever encounter a library in their lives. The

¹³⁷ A fifth grade teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

lesson might have then be better suited to the students if it focused on teaching the children exactly what a library is and what it's used for, perhaps even how to start one in your town. It was not surprising that more students than usual fell asleep during this class and that energy in the classroom was at a definite low.

The differences between economic levels in Baisha and Lijiang could account for the slightly higher success rate achieved by the students of the Lijiang elementary school. Poverty, however, cannot be the single factor most affecting the low performance of ethnic minorities in China as roughly seventy percent of all of the Chinese population continues to live in the countryside and, even in Yunnan province, Han students continue to place into better schools than minorities overall. Why is it, then, that the Dai and Naxi populations continue to have such a gap in achievement levels?

Preconceived Notions

As discussed in chapters two and three, stereotypes pertaining to the academic aptitude of certain minority groups run rampant in China. While the stereotypes of Dai being lazy, bad students and Naxi being particularly adept towards studying prevail in Chinese society, the same perceptions are often found among teachers employed in schools serving minority communities. These perceptions do not take place throughout the entire teaching profession. Many teachers in the Naxi Lijiang/ Baisha elementary school answered that the students “don’t have that big a difference”¹³⁸ or “good and bad is not separated into ethnic categories.”¹³⁹ In addition, some teachers that do recognize differences between their Naxi and Han students note factors aside from ethnicity. One

¹³⁸ Fourth grade math teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹³⁹ *Hao he cha bu fen minzu*, fifth grade math teacher, personal interview, May 2005.

second grade teacher noted “Han students are usually better; mostly they come from the outside from more developed places.”¹⁴⁰ Preconceived notions in teachers, however, are prevalent enough to give cause for concern. When I asked teachers in all three elementary schools what the differences were between their Han and Dai/Naxi students their answers often corresponded with wider social perceptions discussed in chapter one. The vice-principal of the Baisha school noted that, “some families are lazy, so [the students] family life is hard, other problems include sickness, but most students don’t face obstacles because they are Naxi.”¹⁴¹

The attitude regarding the differences between students is drastically different, however, in Namu village where many teachers, Dai and Han alike, have opinions pertaining to the ethnicity of their students. When asked the same question regarding the differences they see in their students, many teachers note that their Han students perform better than the Dai, as one teacher comments, “the Dai ethnicity don’t have as many good students.”¹⁴² One music teacher stated that, “in life and studies [Han and Dai children] are not the same. Han children’s parents know more and can help [their children] more. Dai people only do physical labor (*laodong*), they don’t understand the outside. Han kids like learning more than Dai kids, are a little more enthusiastic and positive.”¹⁴³ Another teacher remarked, “Dai children think that they don’t have to study if they don’t want to, they don’t think about problems.”¹⁴⁴ When I asked another teacher what special obstacles existed for Dai children, she voiced similar sentiments, “They [Dai students] don’t have

¹⁴⁰ Second grade teacher in Lijiang, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁴¹ The Vice-Principal of Baisha elementary, personal interview, June 2005.

¹⁴² Fourth grade yuwen teacher, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁴³ Music teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁴⁴ Third grade teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

any interest in studying, they are passive in their studies and they aren't positive... they're just lazy, they don't want to do the work."¹⁴⁵ There are, however, teachers that do offer tangible factors which may cause the discrepancies between academic performances. One math teacher related to the disconnect between the children's lives and their curriculum as he explained, "Minorities learn about hard times much more than the Han, so sometimes when I ask them [minorities, Dai] a question about the outside world they don't know the answer, they don't have an interest in it."¹⁴⁶

The perceived differences come through in lessons across the curriculum as teachers often utilize this distinction in the classroom. When leading a second grade *sipin* class on different plant species, one teacher asked his students to name different flowers that grew in Namu. After hearing and confirming a number of plants, one student named a plant that the Han teacher was unfamiliar with. When the children described the plant the teacher shrugged his shoulders and stated, "We Han people don't have that flower. We don't have that, you Dai have that."¹⁴⁷ In a later lesson on language, taught by the children's homeroom teacher, the children were learning a new passage in the book. When asking the children to read aloud the teacher reminded them that, "It's OK if you speak incorrectly because we're Dai, we don't know Mandarin."¹⁴⁸ While these examples of differences may seem harmless enough, they ultimately may lower the expectations of Dai students. In the first case, rather than attempt to discern what flower the children were discussing and teach them its Mandarin equivalent, the teacher dismissed the flower as being "Dai" and thereby unnecessary to examine any further. In the latter case, though

¹⁴⁵ Second grade math teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Math teacher in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁴⁷ Principal and *sipin* teacher at Namu Elementary, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Second grade teacher at Namu Elementary, personal interview, May 2005.

the teacher was attempting to encourage a perhaps otherwise nervous class to open up, she is ultimately lowering her standards of their academic level. If children are not held to high standards by their teachers, it makes it more difficult for them to push themselves.

I am aware that the problem of perceptions and stereotyping could be likened to a “chicken or the egg” dilemma. That is, are Dai/ Naxi students performing at lower/ higher levels because teachers have lowered/ raised their expectations? Or have teachers lowered/ raised their expectations because Dai/ Naxi students have consistently performed at low/ high rates? Regardless of the answer, I believe each child should be treated as his or her own entity. When discussing failure rates in this paper I am not examining the same child throughout 12 years of schooling but, rather, am addressing a more widespread, cross-generational phenomenon. If teachers hold lowered expectations of a Dai child today because five years ago they noticed another student struggling, then I believe that teacher could adversely impact that child’s identity. The following passage illustrates an experience I had while teaching a third grade math class in Namu village:

During our free study time I go over and help a boy sitting in the front row with his multiplication. I turned to this smaller boy who is wearing blue and looks dazed, and asked him if he understood. Earlier, I had helped him up at the blackboard, in front of his on looking peers. I had asked the students to come back from rest period early if they would like to continue studying math; I was shocked when nearly all of them came. There was a large crowd of onlookers as the boy shakily answered the arithmetic I had set up on the board. Later, when going over similar problems with him in his textbook, I was surprised to find that the student had trouble with simple arithmetic, such as three times two. With patience and ample time for him to think through the problem, however, he was able to figure them out. This boy eventually started to understand and just as I felt some progress was being made the bell signaling the end of the first of afternoon classes rang and his classmates anxiously waited for me to signal their dismissal. After doing so, the classroom broke into its regular chaos and, as if it was the last day of school, students jumped on desks and ran outside. The regular teacher came over to me and attempted to sympathize with my labors with the boy.

“This student is too stupid” she said, voice in dismay though almost laughing, “We can’t do anything, he doesn’t even understand the simplest things. Every test he takes he scores zero. Ah, too stupid” she sighed shaking her head.

“But look at his homework,” I replied, extracting his simple notebook from his bag and holding it up. Most of the arithmetic had been completed correctly; it was only when double digit numbers like 13 or 25 were multiplied against figures of ten that he got confused.

“He copies from his neighbor!” Cried a girl who sat front row center.

“Yes, that’s what he does” the teacher agreed shaking her head while looking at his desk mate’s homework, which had scored one hundred. She called to the boy, “come over here. Did you copy his homework to get the answer?” He shook his head. “What’s three times six then?”

“Eighteen” the boy replied.

“That’s right” I said. The teacher didn’t respond. Perhaps she was a bit confused but she appeared mainly indifferent. She led me out of the classroom and down to the students art class where they watched a Tom and Jerry cartoon, translated into Chinese.

There are countless possibilities to the underlying causes of this interaction and I fully acknowledge that being a foreigner in the school for such a short period of time makes me unaware of many of the structures in place that could create such a situation. In addition, calling a child stupid in China is not such an uncommon occurrence. Other researchers, such as Peterson and Hayhoe, editors of Education, Culture and Identity, however, have also observed the link between the schools and a child’s negative feelings towards him or herself. “While participation in the state education system is a key means of achieving social mobility and gaining higher status in Chinese society, state schools also instill feelings of cultural inadequacy and inferiority.”¹⁴⁹ In interviews, I asked children a series of questions about their ethnicity and its relation to other ethnic groups in China.¹⁵⁰ Two of these included “How do you feel about being Dai”¹⁵¹ and “Are there

¹⁴⁹ Glen Peterson & Ruth Hayhoe, “introduction, Education, Culture and Identity in Twentieth Century China, eds. Glen Peterson, Ruth Hayhoe, and Yangling Lu (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2001) 18.

¹⁵⁰ See Appendix one for full list of interview questions.

¹⁵¹ *Ni dui zuowei ge daizu you shenme ganjue?*

differences between Dai and Han?”¹⁵² The children gave a range of responses to both questions, the most frequent response to the first question was a positive response: children, overall, felt “very proud” and “happy to be Dai”, giving events such as the water splashing festival as specific reasons. The second question often provoked an answer noting the differences in language and dress from Dai and Han. Indeed, these responses have been typical in other studies such as David Yen-Ho Wu who researched the construction of “non-Chinese” identities in Yunnan. In his experience, “[when I] inquired how a Bai or the Bai people as a whole could be distinct from the Han and other ethnic Chinese. No one was able to answer the question save for mentioning language differences.”¹⁵³

Though the majority of students gave positive responses towards their ethnic group, there were certainly negative perceptions existent throughout the interviews. In Namu elementary school, a number of children articulated negative opinions about being Dai. One child stated that “I feel like I don’t want to be Dai...because every day they just say the same thing [he says in Dai] ‘where are you going?’¹⁵⁴ whenever I see this I don’t want to be Dai.”¹⁵⁵ Another student stated that “I don’t really know how I feel. Dai are retarded (*hanba*), they can’t do anything.”¹⁵⁶ In addition, some children differentiated Dai and Han based upon their academic experiences in the classroom. One girl noted that in class, “If teachers ask a question they [Han students] can answer quicker”¹⁵⁷ while a

¹⁵² *Daizu he Hanzu yi yang bu yi yang?*

¹⁵³ Wu, 158.

¹⁵⁴ In Dai, *Mo de ga tai* is the traditional greeting when seeing people on the street.

¹⁵⁵ Fourth grade boy in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁵⁶ A sixth grade boy in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁵⁷ A third grade girl in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

seventh grader from the village who now attends middle school stated that, “Han are bolder in school; they will talk back to teachers. Dai people can’t do that.”¹⁵⁸

Recall the preexisting social perceptions about Dai already existent in Chinese society as discussed in Chapters one and two. Children, more often than not, become affected and ultimately socialized by the community in which they live. Though these children’s ideas are perhaps less firmly set than those who will tell one right off that the Dai are “lazy” and “not good at school”¹⁵⁹, they are indeed echoing the voices of their teachers, principals and countrymen in their perceptions that the differences between attitudes and abilities in school are directly linked with ethnic difference.

The children from Baisha and Lijiang offer different opinions of what it means to be Naxi than the students from Namu village. The Naxi children, however, are also echoing opinions that society has pre-formulated about their ethnicity. These children were asked the same two questions as those in Namu, the word “Naxi”, however, was substituted for “Dai”. Similar to the Namu students, however, they also often cited differences in language as the main variable between the two ethnic groups. An obvious contrast from the Namu students was that there was only one student from either the Lijiang or Baisha School who perceived being Naxi as being a negative trait when asked the question, “how do you feel about being Naxi?” This second grader answered that, “It’s not very fun because we’ve been here [in Baisha] for so many years. Our Naxi people have already been here and it’s hard because we’re farmers.”¹⁶⁰ A much more common response elicited by my question included feelings of “happiness” and the word

¹⁵⁸ A seventh grade girl in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁵⁹ As a Naxi researcher from Lijiang relayed to me, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁶⁰ Second grade boy in Baisha, personal interview, July 2005.

“proud”. In fact “proud” (*zihao*) was employed by fifteen of the twenty three children who answered the question. Only three of the Dai children in Namu used the same term to describe their feelings about being Dai. In addition, there were rarely instances of positioning Han above Naxi when children responded to the question, “How are Han people and Naxi people different?” One child responded that “They [Han] wash their clothes everyday”¹⁶¹ while another stated that “Naxi are not as cultured.”¹⁶² In general, however, children’s placements of the Naxi were equal to or above Han in many instances. Indeed, some Naxi students even gave certain examples of areas where the Naxi were better than the Han. More positive attributes were often given to the character of the Naxi people, such as “Naxi women love physical labor” and “Han speak too quickly, they are not polite. The Naxi have a very polite culture.”¹⁶³ Many children answering how they felt about being Naxi were also quick to note the “courageous” and “honest” character of the Naxi people. One child repeated society’s views of the Naxi by answering that, “I feel very proud, because our ancestors were very smart, we’re [Naxi] are all very smart.”¹⁶⁴

The above examples illustrate that there is a scaffolding process occurring which takes place when societal opinions help to build a child’s identity. I was curious, however, whether or not this would lead to a co-construction where one’s ascribed identity would ultimately affect the voluntary identity. In this case, I was surprised to find that Dai students who stated that “Dai are stupid”, “retarded”, or that they “didn’t want to be Dai”, did not necessarily attribute such negative characteristics to themselves. I asked

¹⁶¹ A third grader from Baisha, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁶² A fourth grade girl in Baisha, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁶³ A second grade girl in Lijiang, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁶⁴ A fourth grade girl in Baisha, personal interview, July 2005.

each child in the interviews (as well as conducting a larger survey with every child in the school) how they would rate their “smartness” on a scale of one to ten. The three children who displayed negative attitudes towards being Dai gave themselves a six, a ten, and another ten. Patterns were also evident when examining the collected averages taken from over 1,000 students from the three elementary schools. When comparing the average value that children assigned to their intelligence between schools, there is a definite difference in the score that Dai children in Namu gave themselves when compared to Naxi children in Lijiang and Baisha. In both grade by grade comparisons and an overall school comparison, the Naxi children gave themselves a higher number when rating their intelligence when compared to Dai students. In Namu, the average score was 6.58. In Lijiang, the average score for Naxi children was a 7.52 while in Baisha students gave themselves, on average, a 7.91. Fascinatingly, it was the rural students in Baisha who gave themselves the highest and lowest scores which could eliminate economic reasons as the sole factor affecting children’s academic self-esteem. It was, in fact, the rural students who placed themselves at both the top and the bottom of the spectrum. Though there are many factors that most likely affect these numbers it is hard to ignore the similarities between societies’ perceptions of these minority students and what they think of themselves.

Perhaps even more fascinating were the statistics taken from the Lijiang elementary school which has a roughly half Naxi and half Han population. In Lijiang, the Naxi and Han students had a near equal average, with Naxi students giving themselves 7.52 and Han attributing their intelligence with a score of 7.36. The two ethnic groups also each had two or three grade levels whose average was higher than the others’. Thus,

one can conclude that in Lijiang, stereotypes regarding one's ethnicity do not necessarily affect one's impressions of individual intelligence. Or, if ethnicity is a factor, then being Naxi is equal, in an academic sense, to being Han. If the same can be assumed with the Namu children in comparison to the Naxi, however, it means that children are, on some level, internalizing society's perceptions of their ethnic difference. In addition, if one examines the averages by ethnicity, not geographical location of the students, they directly line up with the rates of higher education achievement. The Dai, who have the lowest rate of high academic achievement, gave themselves a collective lowest score of 6.58. The Han, who attend high school and college more often than the Dai but less often than the Naxi, rated themselves 7.36. Lastly, the Naxi, whose achievement rate exceeds most other ethnic groups, including the Han, gave themselves the highest score of 7.71. It is important to keep in mind that these numerical values that the children gave themselves had nothing to do with their actual academic scores, but reflect their *perceived* level of intelligence. Similar mindsets were conveyed in individual interviews when students were asked the question, "Do you think you can get into high school and college?" Of the twenty-seven children in Namu asked, eight answered that they could not or did not want to attend high school or college. In Baisha, where sixteen students were asked and answered the question, only one child said he did not want to pursue higher education and none thought they would be incapable of doing so. At the other Naxi school in Lijiang, where seventeen children were questioned, there was not a single child who did not express interest in attaining a higher education. What we learn is that students' wants correspond to what society has already predicted for them through statistics and rankings.

Coincidence, correlation or causation? This author believes it might be the latter and it might be just what the government and tourist industry is looking for.

Further Affects of the State Policy and the Tourist Industry

Patriotism also has an affect upon children's mentality and self-identity. In addition to saluting the flag each morning and wearing red scarves signifying the party as part of their school uniforms, students have internalized the patriotic messages supplemented by the government. Consistently, when asked why it was important to learn Mandarin, children and teachers alike responded along the lines of "it's the language of China and we are all Chinese." A handful of children in both Lijiang prefecture and Namu, mostly boys, stated they wanted to become soldiers or "military men" (*junren, dangbing*) when they grew up so they could fight for their country. One child enthusiastically related that he would like to "become a soldier so I can bomb the Japanese!"¹⁶⁵ Perhaps, however, the government has justification for paying special attention to the political education of minority students. When I asked two second grade classes in Lijiang to draw symbols representing the five most important things in their lives¹⁶⁶, a common element was a picture of the Chinese flag. Of the two combined second grade classrooms 30 were Han and 26 were Naxi¹⁶⁷ and the only three who did not include China on their sheet were of Naxi descent.

As discussed in chapter two, the fostering of political spirit and national unity is a large factor in the government's educational goals. Also discussed in chapter two was the

¹⁶⁵ A second grade boy in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁶⁶ See figure five.

¹⁶⁷ There were also a small handful of children representing other minorities in the class who were not included in this study.

intrinsic role that language plays in this process. Thereby, another factor ultimately affecting the opportunities for academic achievement in indigenous populations relate to linguistic difficulties. Named “language obstacles” (*yuyan zhangai*) by the Namu elementary school principal, the language barrier ever-present in minority elementary schools often greatly hinders students’ academic achievement and development. Children in the school system are never taught Mandarin *per se*. Even though students are using an entirely new language, they are expected to complete the same material, mostly in Mandarin, as any other school in the area. My Dai students in Namu, for example, used the same *sipin* textbook as their counterpart Han in Lijiang. This linguistic barrier has enormous consequences for a child’s educational process as it often means that if a child does not learn a certain word on the given day, they will not learn it again. Though this problem is existent in all minority populations, the Dai students I worked with had the greatest challenges in this arena as virtually no Mandarin was spoken in the Dai student’s daily life in Namu. The problems discussed below, however, can be applied to all minority children who are not fluent in Mandarin before attending elementary school.

In Namu, though there are 11 bilingual Dai teachers in the school, the remaining 11 are Han and, aside from a few rudimentary Dai phrases, can only speak Mandarin. If a Han teacher is instructing class and a child does not understand the words being used, there is nothing that can be done except to, as the students said, “listen harder.” Students then not only have to combat learning the content of a lesson, such as multiplication tables and the difference between a fruit’s seeds and outer skin, but the new language and words as well. This is especially challenging due to the complexities of the Chinese written system. Chinese characters are not based on phonetics, which means that there is

no way of sounding out a word; one has to learn and memorize it. When learning how to write new characters or studying new vocabulary in a lesson, Dai students not only are learning to write the word but also what it means. Thereby when learning the character for drink “*he*”, Dai students must also learn what “*he*” means because they would have never used that word used at home with their families. This problem also surfaces when students are reading a lesson in a textbook. Often students read in unison and, if a word is unknown to the entire class, the reading will stop. Teachers will then give the students the *pinyin* for the word or tell them how to pronounce it, but rarely do teachers then explain what the word means. This lack of explanation can lead to further miscommunications and hinder the transfer of knowledge. In Namu, when Dai children were asked how much they understood when their teachers spoke, the students interviewed gave responses ranging from understanding everything to only grasping ten or twenty minutes of an entire lesson. This lack of comprehension can have a significant impact on a child’s emotional state in the classroom.

In each elementary school I led a second grade art class where I taught the children how to draw emotions. They were taught “happy” (*gaoxing*) “excited” (*xingfen*) sad (*nan guo*) angry (*sheng qi*) confused (*gao meng le*) and bored or disinterested (*wuqu*). The classes were then asked how they felt in certain situations and to draw the emotion in a corresponding box.¹⁶⁸ The boxes were numbered one through six; each had a circle provided for the students to draw the emotion within. Box five represented how students felt when speaking and using Hanyu or Putonghua. Out of the fifty-one Dai children responding in Namu, twelve drew a happy face, eleven an excited face, nine a sad face,

¹⁶⁸ See figure six.

four an angry face, four a bored face, and twelve a confused face. This makes a total of 22 positive emotion faces (happy and excited) and 29 negative emotion faces (sad, angry, bored or confused). When conducting the same “art projects” with the children from Baisha, 74 percent of the students related negative emotions towards hearing Mandarin, while only 39 percent of Naxi students felt the same in Lijiang.¹⁶⁹ Though the high number of Naxi students relaying negative emotions seems surprising, one must keep in mind that these students in Baisha will hear Mandarin outside of school, and thereby will be exposed more often to more sophisticated Mandarin than their Namu counterparts.

This means that a large number of students, at all three schools, felt uncomfortable and experience negative emotions when speaking the language of instruction during their school day and academic lives, creating a negative environment in which they learn. This is a pattern that, most likely, repeats itself among the linguistic minorities of China. As according to anthropologist Susan Blum, Mandarin is only the native tongue of 70 percent of China’s total overall population.¹⁷⁰ This means that the language of instruction in Chinese schools is different from children’s home or “private” languages for some 360 million Chinese. Researchers agree that, due to this linguistic diversity, “no universal language policy is possible.”¹⁷¹ The government, through their national examinations, has in affect made a policy that privileges native Mandarin speakers with relatively little support for the other 360 million Chinese. Thus, the government’s overall attempt to linguistically assimilate the ethnic minorities under the

¹⁶⁹ These figures were somewhat further complicated by the fact that 21 percent of Han students at the school also mentioned feeling negatively toward Mandarin.

¹⁷⁰ Blum, *Portraits*, 83.

¹⁷¹ Shih, 163.

philosophy that, “to learn a different language is to learn a different lifestyle,”¹⁷² is ultimately affecting the ways in which children can learn.

The way in which children ask questions in class, and the frequency with which they do, allows a second insight into children’s psyche regarding language attitudes during the school day. During observations, and according to teachers, students would rarely raise their hand, ask a teacher questions, or request clarification. When asked during interviews what they would do if they didn’t understand some students explained that they would ask the classmate in front of them during a break or ask the teacher after class. When asked why she would not ask a teacher to clarify a lesson the student did not understand, one student replied “I don’t want to disturb the students who are listening to the class and understand.”¹⁷³ Teachers believe students themselves aren’t sure how to phrase their questions in Mandarin and fear that, if they spoke incorrectly, they would be laughed at by their classmates or scolded by their teachers. If the language barrier makes it so that children cannot even ask questions in a language that is comfortable to them, a very dangerous problem exists that threatens the students’ educational livelihood. The memorization methods of the Chinese education system further compound these threats. Children are encouraged to answer questions such as “what are different uses for trees and plants?” by repeating sentences from a textbook. Thus, if they do not know a certain word used by the book’s answer, they are unlikely to follow the answer itself. This means that, instead of being given the chance to use one’s own words to explain what is going on in a certain picture and explain around unknown vocabulary words, students simply parrot back words that they may not know the meaning of. Not speaking up means that

¹⁷² Shih, 165.

¹⁷³ A fourth grade girl in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

one might not learn the information appropriately, or even at all, and could result in lower test scores and a lower academic ability.

This discrepancy is another factor which could help discredit the theory that Naxi are ethnically more suited to academics than the Dai populations. More Naxi have been exposed to Mandarin for a greater period of time than the Dai people. Chapter one explored the long-existent historical links between Naxi and Han which began in the early 1700's. Though no one in Namu was entirely sure what year formal Mandarin education began, it is safe to say that relatively few opportunities to learn Mandarin existed prior to the Communist implementation of a standardized education system. In Namu, many of the elementary students' parents only knew Dai while I found only one person from the second or third generation that I could communicate with using Mandarin in Namu village. In contrast, most people in Lijiang and Baisha were able to speak Mandarin. This may, in fact, also be a by-product of the popularity of both areas as tourist regions. As more Han are moving to Lijiang for business prospects and more domestic travelers are visiting the area, speaking Mandarin is directly linked to one's livelihood. Mandarin speakers are more prevalent in the Naxi communities than in Namu village where it is uncommon for a Han person to visit the village market.

The children of Namu, Lijiang, and Baisha, however, are well aware of the necessity to learn Mandarin if they want to succeed in life. Children can link the study of Mandarin with business as one child explained, "I want to be a doctor and if the patients tell me what hurts, I need to use Mandarin to understand that."¹⁷⁴ Another child explained the usefulness of being bilingual. The boy told me how he was able to translate for his

¹⁷⁴ A second grade boy in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

mother when Han people came to buy watermelons from her at the market. Other children responded that they need to learn Mandarin because “if you don’t, other people will look down on you”¹⁷⁵ and “because then you can communicate with people from all over.”¹⁷⁶ It is also apparent, however, that children have correlated intelligence with an ability to speak Mandarin. The extent to which one’s indigenous language qualified one as being “smart” varied upon region. Though children in Namu liked their Dai language classes, they sometimes felt they were “unimportant.” In addition, many children proclaimed that people who don’t know Mandarin are unknowledgeable or very stupid. This statement was more likely to occur within the Dai population where children explained that, “Dai are very stupid people because we can’t speak the language of the Han”¹⁷⁷ and “Dai can’t do anything, we’re not like the people in Mangshi, because we can’t speak Mandarin.”¹⁷⁸ Another example of linking knowledge of Mandarin with intelligence is apparent in the way children in Namu relate the differences between Dai and Han. While Naxi children will say that “Naxi speak Naxi, Han speak Han”, a number of children in Namu said that Han and Dai were different because, “They speak Mandarin and we do not understand.” Perhaps most interesting was the fact that these children were illustrating their points using the exact language they claimed members of their ethnic group were unable to speak. It is not that children physically *cannot* speak Mandarin, instead, they take on the assumption that since they are Dai, they are *unable* to speak Mandarin. Indeed, the second grade teacher described earlier took on this mindset as she told her students, “We don’t know Mandarin”. These Dai have internalized a

¹⁷⁵ A fourth grade girl in Baisha, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁷⁶ A third grade boy in Lijiang, personal interview, June 2005.

¹⁷⁷ A third grade girl in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

¹⁷⁸ A sixth grade boy in Namu, personal interview, May 2005.

message that unless all members of a group are able to speak Mandarin, then that group as a whole is still ignorant.

No Naxi children expressed such negative feelings towards their own indigenous language. Many teachers did, however, use the example that “the Naxi have been exposed to Han education for a long time”¹⁷⁹ to illustrate the ethnicity’s intelligence. In contrast to Namu, however, the Naxi children often stated feeling proud of their ethnic group precisely because of their linguistic accomplishments. One child stated that he felt “proud because Naxi invented Dongba pictographs”¹⁸⁰ while another remarked that he was “Proud because our class only has a few [students] that can speak the Naxi language.”¹⁸¹ Notable in the differing values that Dai and Naxi children ascribe to their respective indigenous languages is how teaching of the languages work.

As discussed in chapter two, while Han students in Namu are allowed to sit out of Dai writing lessons, students of all ethnic groups come together to learn Dongba pictographs at both the Lijiang and Baisha elementary schools. In this sense, the administrators in Namu devalue the study of Dai as it is limited to the Dai populations while those in Lijiang and Baisha state that it is a useful skill for all their students to learn. The ethnic researcher Shih has noted the importance of learning ethnic languages: “classes given in the ethnic language motivate minorities to be their own master and rise up among the ethnic masses...this development stimulates minorities’ interests in education and their conscious and active support of it.”¹⁸² Thus, the sense of pride and

¹⁷⁹ As said by a vice-principal of Baisha elementary school, personal interview, June 2005.

¹⁸⁰ A third grade boy in Lijiang, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁸¹ A third grade boy in Lijiang, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁸² Shih, 174.

embarrassment that radiate from the children might be a direct reflection of the extent to which their minority languages are taught and valued within the school system. It is not surprising, then, that the Naxi children, whose indigenous language is taught to all students, are proud of their heritage while the Dai, whose Han counterparts are excused from the Dai lessons, look down upon the language. Going further, when children give reasons as to why it is important for them to study Dai or Naxi, respectively, the students often answered that “Because we are Dai/ Naxi, it is important for us to know our language.” If Dai students automatically condemn Dai as being an inferior language, and are also connecting having to learn Dai with being Dai, then they are condemned to continue to learn a “secondary”, “un-valued” language.

Other researchers have also noticed the link that children often make between language and ethnic groups. Hansen has argued that the hierarchies apparent in Chinese ethnic populations are reflected in similar linguistic pecking orders. As Hansen explains, “The argument that the Han have the most developed culture is directly transferred into the discussion of language, and consequently, a commonly heard argument against the spread of a minority language is that it is ‘too backward’, it belongs to a lower stage of evolution, and therefore its vocabulary is unfit for a modernizing society.”¹⁸³ In chapter two, I discussed the government’s need to maintain minority language instruction in the classroom to spread literacy levels and to booster Mandarin skills. Why is it, then, that the Naxi language and Dongba pictographs are seeing greater attention paid to them in schools in Lijiang prefecture? When one examines the Dongba pictographs lessons when compared to Dai language classes, again, a notable difference is apparent. Children

¹⁸³ Hansen, Lessons, 5.

studying the pictographs were mainly learning monosyllabic nouns and basic verbs such as “sit” and “look”. The students in Namu, however, were learning more complex Dai sentences and putting phrases together. Granted, written Dai is an easier language to fully grasp than Dongba as it has a phonetic written system. I would argue, however, that there is something deeper going on in Lijiang. One must examine the extent to which the pictographs are marketed to the outside world as a specific reason to visit the area. Sometimes when Dongba pictographs are incorporated into a lesson, especially at Lijiang elementary, it is during an art class. Children such as one third grade boy in Lijiang state that they precisely like Dongba “because Naxi Dongba pictographs look like paintings.”¹⁸⁴ The pictographs are painted everywhere and on everything, from bags to t-shirts, gates and murals, they are certainly a readily recognizable sign of Lijiang to any tourist. I would argue, thereby, that there is a link between the willingness of the school and administrators to teach Dongba to all students, and the market value they believe these skills will hold for students later in life.

Another pattern becomes apparent when examining the responses of the Naxi children as well. Aside from internalizing many of the positive aspects that Chinese society attributes to Naxi ethnic group, the effects of tourist development can also be hypothesized in the students. In Lijiang and Baisha, children were able to vocalize more of the tangible attributes specific to Naxi culture. Themes that ran throughout a number of interviews include mentioning the area’s scenery and, of course, the Dongba pictographs. One child explained that she felt “very proud” to be Naxi because, “We have

¹⁸⁴ A third grade boy in Lijiang, personal interview, July 2005.

Dongba pictographs and have the Lijiang Old Town.”¹⁸⁵ Two more students echoed similar views with their comments of, “because Naxi has ancient well known scenic spots”¹⁸⁶ and “Dongba pictographs are the world’s last surviving pictographs.”¹⁸⁷ Perhaps it is not surprising that these responses come in an area where tourism is highly valued. Often, the reasons children give for their pride in the Naxi ethnicity are similar to reasons tourists give for visiting the area. Indeed, Lijiang is named one of the four provincial tourist regions in Yunnan Province¹⁸⁸ by the Chinese government and, as discussed in Chapter two, the tourist industry has an influence on education.

The students of Namu elementary school also exhibit the ways in which tourism has affected their self identity and overall life goals. While teaching an impromptu English class at Namu elementary school¹⁸⁹, I asked a group of sixth grade students to draw what they would like to be when they grew up. While the room was filled with doctors and teachers, almost half the students¹⁹⁰ drew and wrote that they would like to be singers or dancers later in life. This was not entirely unexpected as some younger children answered that they would like to dance when they grew up, with one first grader responding that her greatest hope in life was “to dance”. Entertainment was not, however, an occupation that a significant number of lower elementary students said they wished to pursue in life. There is, of course, nothing wrong with wanting to be an entertainer. One must remember, however, societal perceptions of the Dai being less academically adept

¹⁸⁵ A fifth grade girl in Lijiang, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁸⁶ A third grader in Baisha, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁸⁷ A third grade boy in Lijiang, personal interview, July 2005.

¹⁸⁸ www.eng.yn.gov.cn

¹⁸⁹ English is not a normal part of the Namu elementary school curriculum, I was asked to teach the 6th graders, however, since they would begin their lessons in Middle School.

¹⁹⁰ Eleven out of 23

and intrinsically attuned to performing arts such as dancing and singing. The noticeable gap between the fragmented wishes of those in lower elementary school and the popularization of these aspirations in the upper grades is also important. I have to wonder whether these children truly discovered their love for entertaining, or if they were encouraged throughout their lives to do so because Dai are stereotypically perceived to have talents in those areas. Perhaps students aren't made to feel that they could achieve more in an academic realm and are, instead, being encouraged to pursue more "suitable" positions that coincide with the needs of the tourist industry which feed upon these perceptions.

Conclusion: So What Now?

What is the point of devoting over 100 pages and nearly a year to the topic out of the heart of my thesis? Why should we, as academics, care about minority elementary school students in Southwest China? What other steps need to be taken before effective change is made?

I did not write this thesis to merely discuss what I have observed in China, nor is my goal accomplished after editing the final page. In the end, the significance of this thesis is that I see it as a starting point, a platform from which I will continue to develop my agenda for advancing educational opportunities for children around China and throughout the rest of the world. What is happening to the children of Lijiang and Namu village is taking place in countries all across the globe. While there are, of course, variations in structure and execution, many of the same problems can be identified in areas wherever there are minority, and thereby majority, populations. One needs look no farther than America to discover gigantic discrepancies in educational opportunities between the rich and the poor and majority and minority cultures in our communities. Even in the “land of opportunity” minority children are often held to lower academic standards than white middle class students by their teachers and school administrators. The move towards standardized education, catalyzed by the Bush administration’s implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, is sweeping America. Standardized tests are moving from the local to state level with New York’s Regent exams, Massachusetts’ MCAT’s, and national tests for college students have been debated throughout this year. In addition, as America re-evaluates immigration policy, language debates are becoming more apparent while more and more states have begun passing

English-Only legislature in the schools. In 2002 my home state of Massachusetts was one of a growing number of states to eliminate their transitional bilingual education program. In addition, while tourism may be as large of a factor in minority expectations in America, entertainment certainly is. *New York Times* writer Orlando Paterson has outlined the detrimental affects of heavily portraying African-Americans as rappers and athletes in the media have upon African-American youth. Is this not similar to the children of Namu who see only their singing and dancing older peers presented as role models, if other Dai are ever seen as positive examples at all?

It is not enough, however, to simply discuss where the gaps in our education systems of the world lie. Countless hours of research, endless articles and dozens of books have been written on subjects of minorities' lower levels of success, granted most of those are focused on American populations, while a disproportionate amount of success has been achieved. Thus, I believe that it is imperative, and indeed our duty as intellectuals, to not only identify faults in a system and their underlying reasons, but also propose possible solutions to the issues viewed. The recommendations I will offer below derive from my first-hand experiences working with minority children in China combined with scholarly analysis of issues pertaining to not only ethnic groups in the PRC but to minorities all over the world. In my opinion, there are many possible changes that can be made to assist ethnic minority children in China in achieving academic success. Just as educational obstacles facing China can be found on a worldwide level, so to can their solutions have applications that extend beyond China's reach.

One factor that is easily addressed, yet harder to solve, is the academic success gap faced by many minority students in China today. While this thesis has explored that it

is not only economic factors that can lead to a child's success, or failure, in the classroom, it is certainly a pressing force faced by a large number of ethnic groups. With a greater proportion of funds directed towards elementary schools from the government, great changes can be made in both the tangible and abstract experiences a child has in school. Not only would additional funding provide adequate materials and human resources to overcrowded classrooms, but they could be utilized to change people's mindsets altogether. If school costs were lowered and parents did not feel as pressured to provide for their children's education, I believe that a greater number of students would be encouraged in their families to continue education. It is quite possible that students would also be less likely to choose career paths thought to be "safe", such as those found within the tourist industry, if children themselves did not feel that they had to repay their parents for their educational opportunities by quickly finding employment. Perhaps if rural schools were more adequately funded, they would not be seen as such an undesirable place to work and teachers themselves would find greater job satisfaction in their professions. In addition, if teachers' salaries were raised, or incentives given to those teachers whose students performed well, teachers might become more invested in their students as a whole. Currently, teachers are not necessarily hired or fired based upon their teaching skills. As one teacher lamented, "The worst teacher in the school gets paid the best because he's been here the longest and had a higher position. He doesn't care about teaching, however, and his students always test poorly". People often enjoy their work more when they have a greater control over what they are doing and they feel their input is considered and implemented in their job. In the teaching profession, if the education system in China was more open to creativity and teacher input in the

classroom, rather than just having to parrot what an administrator gives them, teachers themselves might become more invested in and attached to their profession. Perhaps if the teaching profession becomes more desirable and China's education system opens up more to offer creativity in the classroom, teachers themselves will be held accountable for the progress of their students and their teaching methods and thus better teachers and styles will come about.

Augmenting funding would likely increase the amount of consideration about efforts directed to minority populations. This change could lead to a deeper understanding of the problems affecting them and finding durable solutions within the schools themselves. I believe that rural areas could benefit greatly from textbooks better suited towards local children's lifestyles. These changes need not interfere with China's much-prized standardized education system. Math is a prime example of a subject where this change could be made without disrupting the basic skills children need to learn. Take word problems, for example. If instances of farmers figuring out field circumference or how much money one can make off of a watermelon sale replace urban scenarios such as tabulating costs of bus fares, the calculation methods remain the same. In this instance, however, countryside children would be able to identify with the situations. When I taught a third grade class on multiplication, taking a step outside of the problem sets given in the textbook, for example, children were asked whose families raised pigs. Eager hands shot up into the air, voices shouted over each other to reply and talk about their own family. Children who hadn't been seen raising hands before were giving figures of how many pigs their family raised each year. The class enthusiastically added together the number of pigs in the entire class and then used multiplication to estimate how many

pigs the entire school raised. Because the problem directly related to their lives, the children were able to make a connection to the material and were therefore more interested. Though it is important for children to learn about the outside world and life in other areas, the content of their lessons should have solid roots in their own lives.

The point system in the national exams is another factor which could be better adapted to help advance the academic achievement levels of minority education. While points are currently added to the test scores of minority students throughout China, in some ways, similar to Affirmative Action in the United States, it is hard to define exactly what a minority student who has faced disadvantages is. While I am a staunch advocate of Affirmative Action, I believe that minorities in China and America face certain different obstacles. In China, as explored in previous chapters, whether or not one considers him-or herself a member of a minority group is largely due to their own choice, this is especially true with children of mixed families who reside in cities. As Blum acknowledges, “While the numbers of minorities in higher education may be cited, we must also realize that a good number of them- in Kunming, at least- are thoroughly sinicized, that is, they accept almost completely the practices of the greater Han culture, speak its language, and are virtually indistinguishable from the Han.”¹⁹¹ I do not believe that such children should be given the same extra allowances in test scores as those whose rural, economic, and language barriers have provided truly great obstacles to their educational success. Currently, many minority students receive extra points on their national exams even if they do not face all the obstacles described in this thesis. Thereby, when external factors, such as ethnicity, are taken into account when deciding who

¹⁹¹ Blum, Portraits, 31.

should be allotted extra points, geographic location as well as economic limitations should be considered as these are concrete impediments to educational success. In addition, I believe that not only should minority languages be tested on the national exams, but that the scores achieved should also come into play when deciding upon placements into secondary schools and colleges. This is not to say that the indigenous languages should be factored into the score as a whole which would put Han students and other minorities who grew up speaking Mandarin at a disadvantage. Giving additional points to children whose language skills are above average would simultaneously encourage the development and maintenance of minority languages while effectively recognizing children who, having not grown up speaking Mandarin, would have been put at a tangible disadvantage in their scholastic careers.

Another problem specifically plaguing minority children in China and throughout the world is the obstacle of pre-existing assumptions and stereotypes pertaining to presumed levels of intelligence. While this may actually have a positive affect on certain groups such as the Naxi who are perceived as one of the more academically adept ethnic populations, negative accounts of minorities in schools are far more prevalent than positive ones. Indeed, most stereotypes, even those with positive associations, tend to have ramifications more negative than positive. Though perceptions about a particular group are harder to break, as they are often deeply ingrained within the society and individual minds of an area, there are changes that can be made. If textbooks emphasized more minority leaders in Chinese society and popular culture attempted to display more than just the traditional cultures of indigenous people, perhaps society in general would not display them as “backwards” and “primitive”. Training, along the lines of “diversity

workshops” found throughout U.S. colleges and more recently primary and secondary institutions, might be useful in allowing teachers to understand the affect their words can have upon a student as well as increase sensitivity in educators towards minority populations.

In recent years more attention has been brought to the minority populations and the way they are treated in educational settings and in society as a whole. As mentioned in Chapter two, more and more groups are coming together to teach indigenous culture and language throughout minority areas in China. The Dongba Research Institute of Lijiang City, in conjunction with the Baisha elementary school, has begun to make a new series of textbooks teaching the Dongba pictographs and Naxi culture to school children. There remains, however, much progress to be made. It is not only important to have specific minority classes and to create specialized textbooks. Though it is a noble, necessary cause, targeting textbooks to a limited population ultimately keeps the knowledge itself restricted to those same areas. It is thereby important that minority and rural issues become increasingly integrated into China’s education system as a whole. In order for all children to be equally represented, as the central government states it truly wants, it is necessary that indigenous role models are portrayed in textbooks throughout China and students living in a metropolis learn about life on a farm. It is not enough to only teach indigenous languages at indigenous schools, as it continues to present the view that those languages are not valuable enough for the rest of the community. Granted, it would not make sense to teach Dai and Naxi, Miao and Bai to a group of seventh graders in Beijing. It is important, however, that children are educated about the various ethnic groups in a way that goes beyond listing their ostensibly primitive traditions and ornate

costumes. It must be realized throughout China that these populations are living, breathing, modernizing, evolving cultures that exist in the world today.

My critics might argue that this paper stems from an ethnocentric white, middle class American woman who has oversimplified the problems facing minority education in China today. I would refute that I became interested in these issues precisely because of the widespread applications they have and concerns they can raise to all educators and minority specialists. These issues are not limited to ethnic populations in China, Asia, or the Western hemisphere but are taking place all over the world, even in my college's hometown of New London, CT. Studying another culture does not mean ignoring your own but quite often can, in fact, lead you to develop new philosophies and offer new solutions to old problems by examining them in a new way, through the words and eyes of an entirely different country. My thesis has not solely been impacted by my work in Namu, Lijiang and Baisha, but also by my year as a translator for Chinese students in an elementary school in Amherst, MA, my years of spending time as a mentor for a biracial "little sister"¹⁹², and in my decade of childcare work in and out of schools with populations of various ethnic backgrounds. I plan to continue to use my training, research, and experience to influence educational policies in the future, working with marginalized communities and linguistic minorities at home and abroad. It is the teachers, students, and experiences in the classroom that will continue to influence and ultimately shape my opinions. I believe that we can best learn what children need through their own words as they are filled with light, energy, passion, humor and intelligence that many of us would do well to learn from.

¹⁹² In the Big Brother's/ Big Sister's program.

Appendix One

Student Interview Questions

- 1) What is your personality like?
 - a. What do you like and dislike?
- 2) What is the most important thing in your life?
- 3) What do you do in your free time?
- 4) What do you want to be when you grow up?
- 5) Do you like school? Is it important? Why?
- 6) What is favorite class? Why?
 - a. What are your least favorite class? Why?
- 7) How much time do you spend doing homework each night?
 - a. Is it hard?
 - b. Are your parents able to help you?
- 8) What do your parents do?
 - a. How long did they go to school for?
- 9) Do you know how much your tuition is?
 - a. Is it difficult for your family to afford this?
- 10) What do you think of being Naxi/ Dai?
 - a. What are Naxi/ Dai people like?
 - b. Are there differences between Naxi/ Dai and Han?
 - c. What are they?
- 11) What language did you speak before you went to school? How did you learn Mandarin?
- 12) Do you like learning Naxi/ Dai language and culture?
 - a. Is learning Naxi/ Dai important? Why?
- 13) Do you like learning Mandarin?
 - a. Is learning Mandarin important? Why?
- 14) Which language do you like speaking the most?
 - a. What language do you speak with your friends? With your family?
- 15) Do you understand your teacher when he/she speaks?
 - a. How many minutes of class time are you unable to understand?
 - b. What do you do if you are unable to understand?
- 16) On a scale of 1- 10 with one representing the lowest and ten being the highest, how would you rate your individual intelligence?
- 17) Do you want to go to high school and college?
 - a. Do you think you can get into high school and college?
 - b. Would your parents support your attending higher education?
- 18) What is your biggest hope for life?

Figure One:



A governmental announcement regarding AIDS, written in both Chinese characters and the written Dai script, has been painted on the wall of a building in Namu village.

Figure Two:



Sixth-grade Naxi students at the Baisha Elementary school play Naxi music while wearing their “formal” school uniforms, fashioned to resemble traditional Naxi clothing.

Figure Three:



A billboard advertisement for a property company displays minority women in traditional dress (left side) alongside Western golfers (center, right)

Figure Four:



Naxi men and women, dressed in traditional clothing, dance daily in the town square of Lijiang's "old town"

Figure Five:



A nine year old Han girl at the Lijiang Elementary school has drawn the five most important things to her in life. They are, counterclockwise from left: “the flag” (country), being an astronaut, home, the stars and moon and friends. Note how the child has drawn Dongba pictographs in the last three squares.

Figure Six:



An example of the language/ feeling exercise I completed as discussed in Chapter three. The boxes read (from left to right, top to bottom): “How I usually feel”, “When I am in class I feel...” “When I heard Naxi I feel...” “When I speak Naxi I feel...” “When I hear Mandarin (*hanhua*) I feel...” and, “When I speak Mandarin (*hanhua*) I feel...”

CISLA Addendum

- 1) What are the origins and dynamics of contemporary society?
- 2) What is the relevance of the past in understating the present and the possibilities of the future?
- 3) What re the material, spiritual, and ethical challenges of modernity?

The three questions listed above resonate in both their simplicity and incomprehensible nature. They are, like the concepts they discuss and those often simultaneously loved and hated by academia, bridled by quick answers, unexplainable phenomena and (un) provoking thoughts. One could respond to them in a page, an essay, a doctoral thesis or a book. The number of possible roads the reply could converge upon are endless, rendering the initial assignment to address them nearly impossible to this author herself. Thereby, the only true answer I can find must come from my own experiences and self-reflections which are, by definition, fluid and ever-changing, making this answer existent only in the time and place it is written. For just as the definitions of modernity and tradition are limitless, debatable and fluctuating, so too are my answers to the above questions.

In CISLA’S worldview, it is my experiences in China which best equip me with the tools necessary to at least address the questions. The ponderings, in turn resonate the deepest when I consider my time in the globe’s most populated country, China. While America is often labeled as one of the most “modern” countries in the world, the conflicts between present and past, tradition and modernity, are more visibly at odds in other areas of the world. Though America has similar clashes beating within its pulse, one can see the collision between the old and the new existing almost anywhere in China today. China has, by far, some of the biggest contrasts between traditional and modern lifestyles

within some of the most concentrated geographical areas that I have ever encountered. While the discrepancies between urban and rural populations are staggering due to economic levels and over-population, each town, province, city and region in China contains its own battles between the ancient and modern cultures they encapsulate. Small traditional *hutongs* and courtyard homes struggle to remain seen among high-rise buildings while street food vendors sell their wares alongside Walmart's and local plexi-glassed stores. One can find a town with limited resources in terms of running water and electricity while a mere ten miles away a metropolis has formed where teenage boys crouch over their Internet video games. Buddhist monks interrupt lectures on the afterlife to receive a call from their ornamented cell phones while Starbucks has occupied a former room in the Forbidden City. Foreigners can visit temples older than the US of A before crossing the street to purchase cheap Brad Pitt DVD's and knock-off Ralph Lauren shirts. China is simultaneously proud of its rapid development and its cultural past, using both to draw in investors, tourists and the world. How did this happen? What tensions is it causing? And what will the future be like for both them and us?

Beyond China's cities, beyond the looming billboards and McDonald's, lay rural areas that exemplify why China is still considered "third-world". While these farmers watch translated American TV shows on TV, some are without money or even resources to send their sick-children to the hospital, resulting in irreparable brain damage. Ever since Deng Xiao Ping's economic reforms which shifted China to a market-economy, households across the country have begun to embrace Western ideals of capitalist and consumerist culture. China often holds America up as its major competitor, its rival, and thereby its teachers. China often publicizes its gains as many other countries do; without

acknowledging that seventy percent of its country continues to live in the countryside, far beyond the reaches of luxury cars and even a railroad. In one elementary school textbook, a lesson is taught on crossing the street and photographs are shown of four various scenarios. The scenes, however, all show cityscapes which emphasize their bright traffic lights and over-highway walkways. My rural students seem perplexed, they were not sure what a traffic light was and how it worked. The city life, thereby, is often taken for granted as being a “fact” when, in fact, it is far more common to live in rural areas in China. China holds modernization as its ideal and, thereby, that model is often the only one that gets presented. Instead of contemporary society offering a mosaic between the old and new, only modernization is presented.

It is impossible for one of the oldest civilizations in the world, however, to ignore its past and ancient culture permeates and often defines China throughout the country itself and in global perceptions of it. When Americans envision China, images of foot-bound women and The Great Wall continue to enter into their mindsets. China often utilizes this stronghold on its ancient, yet marketable, traditions such as fengshui and architectural anomalies to lure tourists. In this sense, China uses its older culture to assert its individuality and affectively sell its past. China’s ethnic minorities are often asked to dress in costumes abandoned by younger generations for Levi’s in order to present a more “authentic” picture for tourists. Often, in China, I was teased for how “young” America is while old men expounded the virtues of China’s long history and strong cultural presence. As one soon learns, however, the relationship of the past and present is more complicated than the fact that one greatly influenced the other in a chronological sense.

History is an important factor to take into consideration when speculating the future of China. Throughout the 20th century movements against “tradition” and “Old ways of thought” were a common occurrence. From the May Fourth movement in the 1920’s to the Cultural Revolution, both the government and the people of China have called for a “look forwards” in order to “expel the evils of the past.” Many of these movements had the noble intentions of removing ageist, sexist, racist and corrupt policies and mindsets from Chinese culture. Some actions, however, went overboard. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the entire population was urged to become actively engaged in this eviction of tradition as a large number of temples and artifacts were destroyed. Perhaps this mentality of putting the future above the past signifies why the old and new are at such a level of conflict in Chinese society today. Moving forward and sweeping less progressive arenas of society under the rug, indeed, even pretending they do not exist is still occurring in China today. In fact, ignoring the less-proud aspects of ourselves and our past is happening all over the world as the Sudanese genocide, American poverty and Women’s rights in the Middle East are continually ignored.

One of the most prevalent ways in which China’s past can help one understand the present lies within the status of Women. Women’s status in China seemed to steadily rise throughout the 20th century, especially during Mao’s reign where prostitution was declared illegal and one of Mao’s famous quotes referred to women “holding up half the sky”. One could argue, of course, that most everyone suffered under Mao’s reign and it just so happened that women suffered on the same level as men, nevertheless, they were relatively equal in the early days of the communist party. In recent years, however, prostitution has crept its way back into popular Chinese culture while women are losing

jobs to less qualified male counterparts. In many countryside villages it is still more desirable for one to have a son than a daughter. The past, however, sheds light on this particular phenomenon as betrothed daughters in dynastic China, once married, would move her home, loyalties, and duties to her new family-in-law. It is not surprising then that in a state that subscribed to a one-child policy, families continue to prefer to bear a child who could look after them in their old age.

Perhaps the most common, and indeed most recent, influence the past has had upon the present is that way in which one can explore modern perceptions about history to examine modernity itself. In China and throughout the world, history is rewritten to fit the needs of the current time. Wars are placed in different lights and textbooks take on different tones depending upon who is writing them. Histories, cultures, and traditions are often manipulated in this way in China. The most prominent example of the malleable property of the past and how it is wielded by China is through the onset of global tourism. Any historical site in China now has an entrance fee and many are constantly being rebuilt or are left to decay depending upon how marketable a place is. Not only does the past then become fabricated, but it is forces the true histories, cultures and traditions, if they truly exist, to be rendered unrecognizable.

Along with post-colonialist movements, the idea of “imperialist nostalgia” has overtaken China. Though China’s populations were not arguable imperialists per say, the Han have certainly have engaged in culturally hegemonic practices towards ethnic cultures and minority groups. From schools to employment opportunities, language training and mass media, the Han ideas of culture is consistently forced upon the minorities in China. During the Cultural Revolution many groups were banned from

speaking their own language and wearing their traditional garments. As of recent, however, these same ethnic cultures have become something of a selling point and the government, in order to maximize profits, has played upon stereotypical notions of the groups. This especially holds true in Yunnan province, home to 26 of the 56 minority groups of China. Yunnan is home to Zhongdian, an area known as “cultural Tibet” whose name has recently been switched to Shangrila, and Xi Shuang Banna home to the imagined erotic culture of the Dai. With the influx of tourism from both Westerners and Chinese themselves, indigenous populations have often fallen prey to this type of reformation, perhaps irreversibly so. Traditional songs and dances are re-written, costumes are re-vamped, and academies are formed to teach children the “correct” traditions of their culture, often for commercial value.

Lijiang, another tourist hot spot in Yunnan, is home to the Naxi people. Walking around the “old town” the center of tourist activity, one will find row upon row of vendors selling “authentic” Naxi paintings or T-shirts with the Naxi Dongba pictorial written language displayed on front. Upon asking, however, one realized that it is often not the Naxi people who are selling these “traditional” items but Han Chinese who have moved in for the economic prospects Lijiang has to offer. Because of this, Lijiang has paradoxically become more modernized when its rich cultural heritage was what made people visit in the first place. Even academics at the Dongba Research Institute are not always working towards the actual preservation of Dongba culture for culture’s sake. Though one of the main goals of the institute is to preserve and maintain the Naxi language, only one of the researchers I spoke with used Naxi with her children. As one

researcher put it, “In today’s world, it is more important for them to know Mandarin, and then English, last, maybe, when they are older, is Nazi.”

Perhaps this quote alludes to one of the biggest dilemmas one experiences in modernity that involves, to quote Freshmen Focus, “the problem of choice in a pluralistic society.” While we might not all have the same opportunities and choices, the world of instant gratification is definitely being held as the international capitalist favorite. In the world I live in of inter-satellite telecasts and access to anything and everything in the world, my choices are limitless. The most pressing spiritual, material, and ethical dilemmas that modernity, if it continues where it is headed, will offer will undoubtedly pertain to one’s choices in the world in both an individual and collective sense. Will I chose to attend “song and dance” shows performed by ethnic minorities, or will I bypass the attraction and run the risk of learning nothing at all? Is it better to buy into notions of what history once was, or to allow cultures to fade away while simultaneously maintaining their integrity? Is it enough to just go see a temple or must one worship in it to understand? What happens when one can worship anywhere, can buy into any way of life, any citizenship, political party, when the choices become so many and the changes in belief become so frequent that none of it means anything anymore? And would I, would we be willing to give it up even if it meant saving the possibility of finding our authentic selves? Is modernity forcing us to be without an actual, lasting choice by providing us with so many? Is the fact that many of us couldn’t give up our ipod’s and palm pilot’s proof that modernity and globalization kidding us into thinking we are choosing when it is our choices which control us?

If one wants to survive modernity in any form of what Taylor would call an authentic sense, one must be willing to actively question the choices one is making in her life. It is not enough to decry modernity as evil when you aspire to gain women's rights and believe in educational opportunity for all. One cannot discuss the positive (or negative) aspects of living without electricity in a remote village when he knows he will be returning to air conditioning and a microwave oven in a number of weeks. Globalization is not something we can take a vacation from. It exists everywhere: China, America, rural, urban, rich, poor, black, white, it permeates all our clichéd, sometimes imagined differences; there is no escaping it. Perhaps the issue to modernity lies in its backlash against it, with those running away instead of addressing the issues head on. Whether one buys into the dream and owns a Lexus with 2.5 children; simultaneously worships god and chatters on a cell phone; or wears Adidas T-shirts while playing bag-toss barefoot in rural China, one must question where she is coming from, who she is today, and how she will fit into this world in the future. Modernity and Tradition affect us all, are us all, and our future depends on us all to take what we know and what we have learned from the past and present and create a world where true choices can be made in the future.

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