

DISENCHANTMENT AND PARTICIPATORY LIMITS:
SCHOOLING AT A CROSSROADS IN RURAL ETHNIC CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the global image of China's educational success, despite the cultural belief in education for social mobility, schooling in rural ethnic China is plagued with widespread disenchantment and alarming attrition rates. In the two rural minority schools where I conducted this research, over 30% students drop out before completing the 9th grade, often with the tacit consent of their parents, and seek work as a more realistic path to social mobility. This dissertation explores the complex formation of such disenchantment and participatory limits of education by situating schooling within China's larger modernist quest to transform its "holdout" population—namely the rural ethnic minorities—from being the national burden to becoming the national assets. The efforts to modernize rural ethnic populations bring into play a wide array of mediating factors that often produce messy discontent and challenge the neat policy template of education and development.

Specifically, this work is based on sixteen months of multi-sited ethnography conducted in a Miao and a Dong village-town in Southwest China's Guizhou Province. It examines how state educational campaigns are entangled with other rural development agendas to produce a nexus of forces that both promote and strangle village schools. I adopt an ecological perspective that locates educational issues not merely in schools, but as embedded in the cultural-economic-social landscape of rural China. As the study illustrates, state educational campaigns for access, quality, and accountability are lived in everyday predicaments and maneuvers in two rural schools; schooling has become a polemic site increasingly penetrated by developmental state programs, audit culture, tourism agenda, and translocal labor migration to produce unintended consequences. The goal of this dissertation is therefore to unpack the limit-points of schooling at a most awkward intersection of social changes, state governance, and modernization agendas in rural ethnic China.

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Prelude

In today's China, education is on virtually everybody's lips: metropolitan residents invest intensely in their own or their children's education and seek better opportunities overseas;¹ urban parents vie to enroll their children in various extracurricular activities to cultivate in them *suzhi*² tastes and dispositions; privatized educational training becomes an immensely profitable market niche; education is touted as the fifth modernization that the country is collectively driving towards. As the discourse of "China Rising" witnesses the nation moving beyond its pre-reform economic stagnation, education is upheld as the gateway to the country's continual prosperity and potency, as a signature "soft" landmark of a globalizing China.

Indeed, more than six decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country professes to have achieved an education miracle. With a ninety-ninepercent literacy rate and high mass participation at all levels of schooling, China has demonstrated remarkable records to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, outperforming many of its Asian neighbors.³ Recently China's stellar performance in an OECD-administered international standardized testing (PISA) outshined all other participating countries in math, reading, and

¹ When financial crises hit the domestic market, many U.S. high schools and colleges turned to China for student recruitment. They rightfully sensed the rise of an educational craze in China, today more than ever, especially among the urban new rich who worship overseas education as a new form of distinction.

² *Suzhi* is one of the keywords (see Kipnis 2006) I grapple with in this dissertation. To put it simply for now, since the 1980s, the Chinese term *suzhi*, for which "quality" is a rough yet inadequate Anglophone translation, has permeated popular and policy narratives to mark an increasing concern on the "qualitative" makeup of the population. It is commonly belief that "such a thing as *suzhi* exists, that its level is too low in the Chinese population, that the collective *suzhi* of individuals produces the *suzhi* of the nation as a whole, and that raising the *suzhi* of children is a particularly important step" (Woronov 2009: 568). Found in the state's birth control and educational policies, *suzhi* is closely linked to the technoscientific reasoning of making China globally competitive through improving its population quality. It denotes particular physical, emotional, intellectual, social, moral, and aesthetic characteristics of a group or an individual and marks hierarchical criteria of human worthiness.

³ According to the statistics compiled for the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, China's literacy rate of 15-24 years old was estimated to be 99.3% (not including Macao) in 2008, compared to 81.1% in India in 2006 and 74.4% in Bangladesh in 2008. See <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/SeriesDetail.aspx?srid=656&crd=> According to a report by the UN Statistics Division, China's adult (15+) literacy rate and youth (15-24) literacy rate are 94% and 99% respectively in year 2008, compared to 78% and 87% respectively in Cambodia, 55% and 74% respectively in Bangladesh. The statistics for India was only available for year 2006, with the percentage of 63 and 81 respectively. See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/literacy.htm>

science, continuing to showcase its relentless educational progress while producing deep-felt anxieties in the western hemisphere (Dillon 2010).

Yet, such triumphalism obscures more than it reveals. In the heterogeneous landscape of China, education is a study in contradiction. On the one hand, as part of a greater anxiety over the global competition, an educational craze is turning affluent urban China into a mad race towards elitism. As a *New York Times* article vividly depicts, wealthy parents in Shanghai take their children to extended stays overseas for them to learn Western-accented English; they also compete to enroll their children in private lessons of fine manners and lifestyle training, including ballet, horse-riding, ice-skating, golfing, polo, and even the Japanese finishing school (French 2006). The widespread educational desire envelops contemporary Chinese society in a form of social struggle for prestige (Kipnis 2011). On the other hands, education remains an elusive ideal and offers only a mirage of the good life for many who find themselves schooled yet prepared only for factory sweatshops. While urban kids enjoy ready access to leisure commodities, free from domestic labors yet disgruntled about weekend piano lessons and restrictive parental control, children in the countryside are pressed by more immediate concerns for foods, shelter, and clothing. Twenty-three million children (under the age fourteen) in rural and ethnic settings are left behind as “institutional orphans” while their parents eke out a living as migrant workers in urban centers.⁴ Their leisure time is consumed by house chores, farm labor, care of younger siblings, and long hours of hiking on hilly mountain paths to and from school. They draw chessboard on the ground and move rocks, twigs, discarded cigarette cases to entertain themselves. While elite urban schools charge astronomical tuition and boarding fees, rural schools in inland regions are often strapped for resources and struggle mightily to get by.

⁴ See Guo, Lin. *Living Arrangement of Migrant's Left-Behind Children in China*. Unpublished Manuscript. SUNY-Albany. Retrieved 12/03/2010 from <http://paa2009.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=90008>

What the global image of China's educational success conceals is an educational system replete with cacophonies and frictions. In a society that puts premium value on knowledge-based economy where the urban desire for education is palpable, many rural ethnic people express ambivalence and disenchantment towards schooling,⁵ even when the law stipulates basic education (grade1-9) free and compulsory. Once during an interview, a high-profile official at a provincial ministry of education sarcastically called himself a firefighter who dashed around to attend to constant emergencies in rural minority schools. What is on fire? What is the state of emergency concealed by the national discourse of "harmony" (*hexie*) and the global discourse of "China Rising"? How does the fire affect the crumbling walls of rural schools, metaphorically speaking, where learning and social mobility purportedly takes place? What triggered the decay of the centuries-old aspiration of jumping out of peasantry and into scholar-officialdom through academic success (*xue er you ze shi* 学而优则仕)?

The widespread disenchantment as well as high attrition/dropout rate is not only prevalent among rural ethnic students in southwest China where this work is based; it is also a haunting issue that underpins a growing corpus of comparative studies of education around the world (Aronowitz 2001; Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994; Rifkin 1995; Willis 2003). The issue cannot be explained away as simply a matter of economic inequality (though it certainly lends itself to such reading), nor is it sufficient to nullify the school-to-the-social-rescue ideology. Despite the disenchantment, the school remains a most significant institution in youth's lives, although it is far from being the singular pedagogical site.

Yoked into the enchanting logics of modern development, compulsory education is one of the many sites that underwrite both state ordinance and local aspirations through which people variously imagine and pursue the good life. In a study of rural education, it is only fitting

⁵ This is more widespread than usually associated with the Tibetan and Uygur communities where mass education has historically led to various forms of resistance due to particular ethnic, social, and religious contexts.

that I examine pedagogical practices in tandem with other translocal processes that multiply configure and “deterritorialize” the “imaginative resources” people use to come to grip with their changing lives (Appadurai 1991:196; Stambach 2000:173). What constitutes schooling and education is, after all, a slice of a complicated assemblage that brings people, ideas, resources, and priorities into productive frictions.

Specifically, this dissertation is based on sixteen months of multi-sited ethnography, oral history, discourse analysis, and archival research conducted in a Miao/Hmong and a Dong village-town in Southeast Guizhou Province (Qiandongnan) of China. It is a study of educational dilemmas and disenchantment facing rural minority communities in southwest China, as they are entangled in unprecedented social changes and state modernization agendas. It provides a nuanced ethnographic account of how compulsory education is lived in everyday predicaments and maneuvers in two rural schools; how schooling becomes a polemic site increasingly penetrated by developmental state programs, audit culture, tourism agenda, and translocal labor migration to produce unintended consequences.

I adopt an ecological perspective that suggests the permeability of the school as a contact zone rife with tensions and embedded in the cultural-economic-social landscape of rural China. As I will show, the ecology of rural schooling is penetrated by myriad compulsory technologies that are dispersed in today’s China, oftentimes couched in narratives of social progress. Learning (as prescribed by schooling), visibility (as sanctioned by tourism and the audit culture), and mobility (as instigated by labor migration) are deeply entangled rural governing/modernizing strategies. These strategies are appropriately seen as “pedagogical” events forming an assemblage of “pedagogical” spaces.

Understanding the movements in and around these entangled pedagogical spaces provides a broad angle of vision towards the complex formation of disenchantment and participatory limits of compulsory education. This understanding necessitates grasping the

entwinement of schooling and rural governing strategies in the context of state formations and rural revitalization, as well as the production of exclusion/inclusion, enchantment/disenchantment. The goal of the work is to move beyond the utilitarian concerns of the causes and effects of particular education policies, and sketch with a finer brush the ecological contour of rural schooling at a most awkward intersection of China's spatial-temporal processes.

The five analytical chapters (chapter two to six) is an attempt to unpack various facets of the ecology and politics of rural schooling. Chapter two examines the disjuncture between the official compulsory education policy known as the Two Basics Project, or TBP, and the lived beliefs and practices of people living in the two villages. It explores how the policy's ordinance of universal literacy sits in a jarring relationship with a rich array of cosmologies, episteme, and subjectivities to encumber students' participation. It illustrates how the Miao and the Dong people who have their own notion of the "educated person" (Levinson and Holland 1996) and their own forms of learning are often considered illiterate under the aegis of modern nation-state education. Students' withdrawal from compulsory schooling perturbs the normativity of what constitutes learning and knowing, and suggests schooling's limits-points as ineffectual attempts at social progress.

Following chapter two's discussion on universal basic education, chapter three engages with the uptake of *suzhi* (quality) in the recent quality curriculum reform as yet another facet of the ecology of rural schooling and another compulsory technique of the Chinese state. It engages with three layers of analysis. The first two layers map out the etymological and philosophical foundations of the reform through probing the ways the keyword *suzhi*⁶ is deployed in China's cultural politics. I argue that *suzhi* functions as a moving target in the formation of ideal citizen-subjects and embeds an ontological divide that codes and

⁶ For a keyword approach to the elusive deployment of *suzhi* in China's cultural politics, see Kipnis 2006.

differentiates human values with a civilizing agenda. Thirdly, the chapter provides nuanced account to illuminate how *suzhi*/quality is understood, contested, and reappropriated in everyday pedagogical practices in the context of two village schools; how the bifurcated (front- and back-stage) maneuvering trouble the salvatory overtone of the *suzhi*-oriented curriculum reform; and how the universalist ideal of *suzhi* education juxtaposes oddly with folk epistemology. This further informs the dilemmas and disenchantment of compulsory schooling in rural Qiandongnan.

In chapter four, I lay out a peculiar facet of rural schooling, a.k.a. educational inspection, to illustrate the controversial strategies deployed in fabricating a successful story of compulsory education. Rural schools' performative compliance with the audit regime reveals the contradictions and ironies of the emancipatory *raison d'être* of schooling. Through the lens of an audit culture, the chapter illustrates the bifurcated performance on the front and back stage in rural schools to fabricate China's educational success.

Chapter five takes a close look at tourism as another compulsory apparatus of Chinese developmentalist state and examines how the cultural politics of tourism renders school walls ever more porous. It illustrates tourism's pedagogical functions in shaping the experience of schooling in Qiandongnan, the tensions and spatial politics in everyday lives, the changing notion of village teacherhood, and the disenchantment in and around compulsory education as its discursive effects.

The last chapter illustrates the life trajectories of the Dong and Miao youth beyond studentship and the crumbling school walls, to speak metaphorically. It reveals how these young people, who have "fallen through the cracks" of formal education, grapple with the rapidly changing social world in seeking a dream of economic viability that schooling fails to bring to fruition. Pedagogical effect does not end with schooling, and is manifested in practical

adaptations and livelihood strategies, which further reflect the complex ecology and greater porosity of educational subjects and the broader society.

This dissertation is not only ethnographically informed, place- and issue-based, but also demonstrates sensibility to the very progressive ideals and teleological visions at work in China's educational programming, and challenges binaries such as literacy/illiteracy, cultured/uncultured, modernity/traditionalism. I examine how changes in the ecology of schooling provide a physical and symbolic ground on which the making of the new rural ethnic subjects becomes thinkable. I begin with sensitivity to the discourse of rights, equality, and progressivity not as something natural but as historical fabrications.⁷ I take issues with the "discursive constellation" (Barlow 1991) of categories including rural, urban, local, global, ethnicity, and youth/adolescence that form grids of intelligibility to reorganize social relationships and enable discursive boundaries to become naturalized and normalized.

My study reveals rural indigenous education to be a jarring, ambiguous, crisis-ridden terrain intertwined with a series of rural governing strategies that affect linguistically and culturally underserved groups. These strategies include compulsory education policy, rural developmental imperatives, the Chinese audit culture, state bureaucratic officialdom, national quest for quality (*sushi*) populace, and the ways people experience and think about educability, mobility, and the good life. Through studying schooling and its implication with other imaginative recourses and pedagogical spaces (see also Reed-Danahay 2004; Stambach 2000), one can fruitfully begin to untangle education's multifaceted role in rural governmentality. Geertz's famous dictum comes to mind that "anthropologists don't study villages...they study *in* villages" (1973:22). In a sense, the locus of this study transcends the geographic boundaries of two ethnic communities and orients towards broader cultural theses. Rural schooling is the

⁷ I'm much indebted to Popkewitz whose work on the cosmopolitan child has been influential in my thinking about how the ideal child-citizen is produced at the crossroads of discursive cultural theses as effect of power both within and beyond the school.

sensitive reflector of social processes par excellence and the lens through which I investigate educational reforms, ethnic politics, citizenship, and modernization, a scope that reaches beyond the immediate case of China.

Keywords

I want to clarify a few keywords to situate the research conceptually within a semiotic matrix that codes the social landscape of contemporary China. As Raymond Williams puts, keywords are indicative of thoughts and history of ideas, whose circulation represents a discursive power at weaving dominant narratives, even though lived realities are never entirely reducible to such narratives (1976:13). Derrida also deploy the term *catachresis* (misuse of words) to describe the violent production of meanings by keywords (see Kearney 1984:123).

Words have the stunning capacities of world making and world crossings, as they mobilize, travel, shift, and unsettle, both revealing and disrupting sanctioned historiography and genealogies of thoughts (Gluck & Tsing 2009). Social world is ridden with overdetermined signs and overinterpreted meanings, by way of a rhetoric style described by Hannah Arendt (1951:49) as the “banality of evils.” While Bakhtin (1973: 94) views rhetoric as inherently ideological and tyrannical in the similar vein as Arendt, Foucault (1981: 64) maintains that repetitive, ritualized language produces forms of knowledge within which individuals actively invent and reinvent themselves.

In China’s quest for valorization in the transnational time-space, a variety of rhetorical keywords are mobilized to characterize, envision, and narrate its “proper” place and the people’s aspirations and experiences. Language formalization, i.e. doing things with words, has a crucial bearing upon all aspects of Chinese politics (Schoenthal 1992). The semantic map crafted by the formulations of terminologies mediates power through words. Global concepts such as modernization, development, growth, market, consumption, efficiency and the Chinese popular notions such as *suzhi* (“quality”), *hexie* (“harmony”), *yu shi ju jin* (“advancing with the

times”), *gaige kaifang* (“reform and opening”), *jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcun* (“constructing a new socialist countryside”) have come to express a powerful sense of both crisis and pride⁸ regarding China’s position in the global order.

Such keywords have penetrated the porous site of the school to form semiotic assemblages that are networked and continually networking, at once reinforced and negotiated, constructing a normative order yet in an uneasy relation with the subterranean everyday particularities. Following words in motion provides a unique, fruitful methodological entry to understanding ethnic rural schooling and its entanglement with China’s multifaceted social cultural transformations. I will later locate the recursive keywords in the ethnographic instances.

Postsocialism

Postsocialism is hardly a nomenclature in the burgeoning scholarship on China today. While it was initially used by western academics and journalists to describe the era after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of its satellite communist states in Eastern Europe (the so-called Eastern Bloc), more recently it is deployed to indicate the Post-Mao transformation in China marked by radical economic restructuring and social reforms.

However, the term is fraught with ambiguities. Temporally, the “post” indicates a demarcation of contemporary China from its ideologically charged pre-1980s communist reign. This reflects the nation’s propensity for collective looking forwards yet doesn’t make the legacy of socialism/communism entirely irrelevant. On the contrary, the Chinese state continues an official claim to socialism, especially in global debates over thorny diplomatic matters, to highlight its ideological commitment and periodically remind their western counterparts of Chinese characteristics and the unique historical constraints the country faces.

⁸ The year 2010 has seen China surpassing Japan as the second largest economy in the world, transforming its cities into eye-catching showcases at the World Expo extravaganza, and skyrocketing the national pride in its ability to survive the global financial crisis and accomplish large economic and cultural undertakings.

Some scholars have preferred the term “late socialism” instead, indicating the difficulty to pinpoint stages or epochs in China’s developmental trajectory and the diehard legacies of the socialist regime (Zhang 2001:208). In other words, postsocialism is not a teleological prediction or radical departure from the past. The “post” in postsocialism provides a lens to think about the simultaneous existence of ruptures and continuities within which multiple governing strategies coexist. It also speaks to the fragmented and contested nature of the Chinese state in the new millennium. For instance, while rapid marketization privatizes formerly state-owned assets and services, this coexists with the *de jure* collective ownership and noncommodity status of property/land. Therefore, scholars have argued for a “flexible postsocialism” (Zhang 2010: 17) to think about the ways in which the Chinese state refashions and reinserts itself in all aspects of economic, social, and cultural life, how citizens are subject to new forms of governing and self-governing and recast into new kinds of subjects.

The conceptual binarism between the state and the market derived from the Anglophone context needs to be retooled when applying to the historical-cultural contingencies of the Chinese milieu. The rise of market logic does not necessarily cause the demise of the state. On the contrary, the continual strong presence of the state and its mediation of, and coalition with, market forces has become one of the central features of contemporary Chinese society. The state’s visible hand and the market’s invisible hand simultaneously govern the lives of the people such that some claims China has embraced capitalism with socialist undertone (Liu 2011: 38). As chapter five will make clear, the dangerous coagulation of corporate interests with officialdom makes it increasingly difficult to separate “the state” and the “private entities” in thinking about postsocialist governing and the production of educational disenchantment.

On the other hand, the sentiment towards the state is one of great ambiguity. The concept of the “emperor”—an apt metaphor conceiving the state in the paternalistic light—continues to resurface in everyday vocabularies, signifying the symbolic import the state

occupies in people's imagining and pursuit of the good life. Despite the disenchantment towards state officialdom, obtaining government employment thus becoming one of those who "eat the emperor's rice" is still an ideal of stability of livelihood welcomed by many peasants. Despite the rise of individualism and the laissez-faire ethos, people still to a large extent resort to the state as the moral orbit. With a nostalgic tinge, ethnic peasants often lament the bygone socialist welfare state, the current extensive and conspicuous level of corruption, the flaws in the ebbs and flows of market economy. While conflicts of interest between state agents and local residents have diluted the moral integrity of the state, the state persists to be a potent orchestrator of China's modernization efforts. The contemporary official discourse, likewise, deploys much of the rhetoric from the collective era, such as equality, selflessness, and service to the people and the motherland, even though in the Chinese context of "doing politics with words" (Schoenhals 1992) such utopian ideals are little more than rhetoric.

In this study, I situate rural schooling and contemporary social changes within the multi-stranded conditions and developments of China's postsocialism. In this light, this ethnography is in dialogue with a growing corpus of comparative studies in postsocialist transitions globally (Humphrey 2002; Kalb 2002), with an attempt to illustrate how postsocialist governance has brought out controversial twists and turns in the politics of rural schooling.

Harmony

Anyone who follows media coverage about China these days will notice the emergence of an interesting discourse-scape that depicts the reform-era party-state in the benevolent limelight of "harmony."⁹ The ubiquity of "harmony" in formalized language and speech acts is characteristic of the propaganda apparatus of PRC. In 2002, the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party proclaimed the centrality of building a socialist harmonious society in

⁹ The significance of the concept "harmony" in Chinese thoughts, especially in Confucius legacies, is of course much more long-standing, manifested in variegated cultural theses such as *tian ren he yi* (天人合一 i.e. the unity of natural and human worlds).

solidifying CCP's leadership legitimacy. In a 2005 speech, President Hu Jintao attributed to "harmony" a key role in constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics. The following year, "building a harmonious socialist society" was formally announced as an objective of the party-state to be achieved in 2020. Presently, the notion of "harmony" proliferates in popular slogans such as "building a harmonious city," "building a harmonious enterprise," and "building a harmonious countryside."

In 2008, the sensational opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics heightened the Confucian notion of *he wei gui* ("harmony is precious") and relentlessly projected the image of harmony (*hexie*) and abundance (*furao*). By privileging harmony, the party-state decidedly evokes a sharp contrast to the Maoist ideology of class struggle and offers a new rhetorical regime to "depoliticize and signify the more humanistic approach of the new leadership" (Zhang 2010:215). Harmony can be read as a national allegory that is exerted to craft a new vision of the society and the legitimacy of the Party. Indeed, avoidance of disturbances and chaos (*luan*) has been the guiding principle of modern Chinese politics, in stark contrast to the Maoist emphasis on crisis, social revolution, and class struggle. The horrific politicization of life, in Agamben's words "the state of exception" that seized the entire nation in a political and biopolitical paranoia, yields to a discourse of depoliticization and harmony as a new collective horizon around which personal and public lives are summoned. As chapter five illustrates, harmony as the sanctioned depoliticization also normalizes what the teacher is and should be as a pedagogical agent in a different political time.

Harmony strategically mobilizes a sentiment of familialism and national consanguinity to construct a homogenous national imaginary. Ethnically, the rhetoric of *xiongdì jiemei* (brothers and sisters) is invoked to celebrate cultural differences among the 56 officially designated ethnic groups and their amicable coexistence and unity. Politically, "harmony" is employed to sublimate ideological differences between the mainland and its SARs (Special Administrative Regions

including Hong Kong and Macao), between the party politics and societal dissention.

Diasporally, it is used to build a greater Chinese nationhood by linking the mainland, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities into the notion of home (*jiayuan*). Ecologically, harmony is touted as a mode of peaceful and reciprocal co-existence with the environment. As a politically correct slogan, discourse of harmony frequently resurfaces in China's diplomatic dialogues with its global counterparts, as well as in its effortful propagation of moral exceptionalism, such as via the spread of the Confucius Institute around the world.

Yet anyone who follows media coverage about China in the recent decades will also notice the escalating social discord and polarization. Like many other politically charged lexicon, harmony becomes a floating signifier producing a linguistic veneer that conceals as much as it reveals. My research contests the "harmony" discourse by offering a nuanced account of the dilemmas and maneuverings occurring in and around the embattled site of the school. I present narratives of friction, friction of bodies, pedagogies, money, power, commodities, policies, agendas, and dreams rubbing with (and against) each other and creating an oft-times jarring cacophony. In a sense, friction and harmony are both sides of the same coin, and the mirage of a Chinese modernity forever in the making.

Politics of Ethnography

What directed my gaze and enabled the narrative to take the form it does bears upon the methodological and philosophical underpinnings of ethnography as a mode of inquiry and a practice of textual representation. During my 16-month stint in Qiandongnan, the daily field-notes and journal entries I kept amounted to over one thousand pages of texts, in addition to numerous policy documents, textbooks, news articles, student homework, exam papers, teacher evaluations, etc. Pragmatically, to "tame" the unwieldy amount of information, I started with multiple rounds of coding, including *in vivo* coding (identifying concepts/themes used by informants themselves, see Strauss and Corbin 1990), coding for contestations and

controversies (see Spradley 1979: 199-201), focused theoretical coding (see Saldana 2009: 155-167), and ongoing thematic coding through reading literature (see Willms et al 1990).

Coding is both a heuristic and a reflexive device. While a code is a word-concept that *signifies* what goes on in the “data,” it begs questioning what constitutes “data” and what “signification” means in ethnographic interpretation and representation. What we take as ethnographic evidence is naturalized and sustained by the logics of empirical realism, the idea that what is real is what is observable, and vice versa. The deep-seated belief in the univocal essence of reality and an equally univocal language to capture such essence is often attributed to Western logo-centrism and its metaphysics of presence, especially under the auspices of Kant’s universal Reason and Descartes’ “substance” that “requires nothing but itself in order to exist” (1640[1955]: 275, cited in Jardine 1998:14).

The mechanics of how I moved through “data” bears upon such onto-epistemological baggage as to what constitutes ethnographic evidence and how ethnography embeds certain notions of reason, knowledge, and objectivity. It is part of what made those stories “pop” for me in the field, “represent” themes gleaned from the transcript, and “congeal” into narratives flowing throughout the manuscript. Meanwhile, I am inspired by insights from poststructural literature that calls for destabilizing, rather than naturalizing, the themes and concepts thus generated. To think of ethnography as an uncanny encounter between scripted narrative logic and proliferations of signs, between perpetual flux of “events” and temporary coherence of meanings is a productive place to begin. In the scope of this manuscript, I have certainly not been able to capture the full flux of “events.” What I have left out, such as the analysis of ethnic rituals, religions, and lineage as well as content analysis of textbooks, are choices I made which has given the project its current shape and focus.

Admittedly, the stories in the ensuing pages are all written within the methodical and epistemological parameters of ethnography, yet the inadequacy and indispensibility of such

mode of inquiry constitutes a living doubt that has accompanied me in every stage of the project. I have stumbled my way through writing, narrating, and analyzing, with full awareness that the world is an ongoing process of mattering and the version of mattering rendered in this dissertation is but one of its possibilities. Regardless of what license the ethnographer to narrate the stories, the stories always already come beyond the texts. There is no singular, unproblematic journey of ethnography that could yield an “authentic” understanding of social worlds. Ethnographic facts are simultaneously “raw” and “cooked,” conditioned by a complex set of epistemological relations for their historical emergence. Theories are always already “written” and “under erasure,” so to speak, while the ethnographer adopts “a mode of inquiry that remains close to practices” and attentive to “assemblages” that are “the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic” (Collier & Ong 2005: 4 &12).

To write is to know, but such knowing is part of the “problem” (suspended in quotes) that infuses the methods of *ethno-graphy*, namely, the writing of a people as a way of knowing. In other words, instead of revealing social cultural patterns, the written account is limited by what cannot be allowed into speakability (Butler 2005:121). I want to spell out this methodological anxieties at the outset to, at the very least, see it as a limit to be tested and an inadequacy to be challenged, to defamiliarize what is taken for granted, to rethink the conditions of possibility for how the vehicle of our report is shaped by and shaping narratives around them, as interpretation is always already conditional and partial.¹⁰

What questions can I ask of the plenitude, the overabundance of things (and signs) that were collected as “facts” but already narrated and entangled, made recognizable in part by something else, what Foucault calls the unconscious history of reason and regime of truth? How would I, in my interpretive move that is inevitably idiosyncratic, conscious, yet ambivalent,

¹⁰ As Foucault puts, “if interpretation can never be completed, this is quite simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation” (1967/1998: 275).

reconcile the ontological dichotomy of subjectivity/objectivity and work my way out of the entanglements into new entanglements? This is the long-lived crisis of ethnography; but I think it's also a personal crisis—a positive one, fortunately—that leaves one anxious about and serious in questioning the parameters of what constitutes fieldwork and the “fiction” of the field, a set of practices not of a discreet, singular tenor but as complex trajectories of a historical “I.” The very ground from which I perform these questions and the very ground that makes these questions intelligible is part and parcel of the history of reason in which I am caught. In writing, my obligation lies in telling the stories not as if they were well lit and neatly presentable, but with a recurring doubt of the methodological primacy, which gives a sense of the interpretability of the world and at the same time remains sensitive to the need for restoring life to its ambiguity, fluidity, and unintelligibility (Lather 2007; Osberg & Biesta 2007).

Chapter One: Introduction

The bus threaded through layers of terraced lands. The field was so lush and green that the color seemed to have condensed into liquid drops striving to press a permanent imprint on my body. Outside in the scorching sun, newly planted rice was growing long and strong. With occasional gusts of wind, the tall, thin sprouts were blown towards the roadside, as if gracious hosts craning their necks in anxious anticipation of guests. From time to time, an unwieldy eighteen-wheel truck would honk by in anxious haste, loaded with sands and gravels, churning up dust storms to blur my vision of the summer field. It was early July of 2009. The construction of two national highways was in full force that meandered through villages in Qiandongnan towards the coastline. Patches of exposed earth were visible at a distance: they used to be farmlands and were now expropriated for the road construction. As the bus wound up and down the mountain road, it was interlaced with passing clusters of wooden abodes, brick houses, and thatched huts; bent figures dotted the summer field and blended into a distance of green.

During my many months of sojourn in Qiandongnan, the Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in Southeast Guizhou Province (see figure #1 & 2),¹ I shared numerous bus rides (short- or long-distance) with the mountain dwellers. The rides were usually chaotic yet vibrant, full of loud chatters and laughter, cigarette smoke, and blaring techno music. On this humid summer day, passengers were getting restless in the bus. The sticky, subtropical air were assailing every inch of their skin, leaving trails of perspiration on faces, backs, and palms. Men rolled up their pants and sleeves, women took off hair scarves to wipe off their faces, kids produced handfuls of sunflower seeds to crack off the boredom. Loaded with passengers who carried bags, buckets, reef-basins, shoulder poles, poultry and babies, the bus made frequent stops in designated village-hamlets, or anywhere at the yell of *caiyijiao* (passengers' request to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the images in this manuscript are taken by the author.

“step on the brake”). Each stop generated a flurry of activities—women scurrying off with crying babies and flipping chickens, men loudly greeting those standing on the roadside, the driver climbing on the bus roof to excavate sacks and boxes, vendors peddling fruits, corns, or stinky tofu to empty-stomached passengers, and eager faces digging for packages delivered by relatives from another points of the voyage. Soon, the bus door would slide close and pick up the remainder of its journey.



Figure#1 Map of China, courtesy of china-holiday.com, retrieved 07/07/2012 from <http://www.china-holiday.com/english/chinamap/chinamap.htm>



Figure#2 Map of Guizhou, courtesy of chinaexploration.com, retrieved 07/07/2012 from <http://www.chinaexploration.com/ChinaMap/images/guizhou%20ofmap.jpg>

Traveling in Qiandongnan is indeed a sensory-loaded experience. Roads are roughly paved and full of potholes; landslides are frequent during rainy seasons. Many of the roads' sharp twists and turns are littered with carcasses of wrecked vehicles—buses, trucks, motorcycles—which, due to various reasons, had failed to negotiate the steep mountain grades. The sight of such deadly scenes often makes one's heart miss a beat, adding to the popular perception that life in Guizhou, the province known as the “Kingdom of Mountains,” is fraught with danger, vertigo, and uncertainty.

Indeed, for many first-time travelers in Qiandongnan, their experience is colored by a variety of labels associated with classic “out-of-the-way” places described by Tsing (1993) — “primitive,” “rugged,” and “exotic,” occupying the bottom rung of the modernization ladder. Yet, while urban tourists lament *c'est la vie* when they are bouncing on the broken seats inside the packed bus, they are also overwhelmed by the bright, raucous, and pulsating world of everyday life: sensational MTVs blaring from the mounted TV in the bus, printed advertisements on seatbacks for SPAs, message salons, and nightclubs, satellite dishes spouting on rooftops, mobile phones becoming household items. As the multi-strand narratives and consumptive ethos seep into daily life, a vision of Qiandongnan as bucolic, pristine, serene, and unchanging is no longer (if ever) an accurate depiction.

On the other hand, as the proverb depicts Guizhou as a province “without three acres of flat lands, three days of fine weather, and three cents to rub together,” the language of poverty and isolation prevails in popular narratives and social science reports on this region. It forms a set of normative representation—spatially bounded, socially immobile, economically stagnant, and culturally backward—through which places like Guizhou and Qiandongnan are talked about and acted upon. Yet, even though Qiandongnan is a region that has the earmarks of “traditional” cultural practices, including subsistence farming, spirit worship, gift giving, and relative isolation,

even though such practices have been repeated through generations, each repetition is a difference that haunts the straight line of the developmental teleology. With people, goods, information traveling along the zigzag country roads, the dense network of communities and kinship in Qiandongnan are imbricated into the modalities of a translocal China.

As much as the cities, the countryside beholds the society's deepest aspirations, conundrums, and desires. Traveling in Qiandongnan, one is frequently greeted by roadside bulletin boards printed with enlarged messages, such as "Today's education is tomorrow's economy;" "Fewer and superior births bring a lifetime of happiness;" "Developing rural tourism, building a new socialist countryside." These signs hint at the heightened salience of rural issues—including but not limited to education, birth planning, and tourism promotion—in the re-imagining of the countryside and the remaking of the Chinese nation. The salience is bolstered by the popular image of the rural residents as having lower education attainment, greater inclination to have more children, and lacking market entrepreneurialism.

Slogans written in such didactic vein about national goals are hypervisible across the countryside, as a literal extension of the rural landscape. They work to incorporate the people in Qiandongnan into an assemblage of discourses and form the common script of the modern ethos—no matter how fragile and provisional the virtual roof of the "modern" is—through which the people come to dwell in various encounters, imaginations, and intertwinements.

All these are happening during a period of rapid urbanization² and correspondingly, "the emaciation of the rural" (Yan 2008:25-52). Urban-centered development annuls the countryside

² More than three decades after the implementation of the reform and open door policy, China has at present about 40% of its population living in urban areas, a fast growing percentage compared to 9% at the beginning of the 1980s. See Deng et al. 2009. At its current speed of urbanization, according to a New York Times article, China is consuming 40% of the world's cement and steel in construction, which will lead to the majority of its people living in cities in the two decades to come. See *Fire Trips Alarms about China's Building Boom; Censors Respond*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/17/world/asia/17shanghai.html?scp=5&sq=shanghai%20fire&st=cse>

as a field of dearth; labor migration as a core post-Mao developmental strategy turns the countryside into a backyard that provides surplus labor to China's manufacturing boom; ethnic and rural identities are continually (re)appropriated for economic imperatives such as tourism promotion. It is against such background that this dissertation sets out to examine the dilemmas of education at a crossroads of developmental registers in the heterogeneous rural China.

In particular, the dissertation seeks to situate rural education—upheld as the ticket out of poverty—at the center of the analysis and unravel its polemic relationships with state rural revitalization agendas, audit culture, tourism, and translocal labor migration in two village-towns of Qiandongnan. It illustrates how schooling is lived in everyday predicaments and maneuvers and deeply entangled with other rural governing strategies. I explore the fraught experiences of village students, teachers, and residents as they juggle amorphous, disjointed, and contradictory processes that constitute the broader ecology of rural China.

The escalating educational disenchantment, especially among rural ethnic youth, has been widely recognized as a chief challenge facing the reform-era party-state. Education in tandem with other state modernization agendas constitutes a significant nexus of power that orchestrates social changes as well as engendering pedagogical, economic, and cultural debates in rural China. They align with the discourses of economic development, poverty alleviation, and urbanization that are simultaneously espoused and contested by government bureaucracies, rural residents, commercial establishments, and scholarly communities. As China becomes the successful story of education and garners growing visibility in the global arena, rural education at a crossroads provides a physical and symbolic lens through which to examine the complex pedagogical struggles, today more than ever, in forging and negotiating new postsocialist citizenry and subjects.

The central puzzle I seek to address is: how do we understand the profound

disenchantment and high attrition rates among rural ethnic youth,³ despite the nationwide educational desire for success, despite the state's relentless efforts to compulsorize basic education, and despite the century-old folk belief in jumping out of peasantry into scholar-officialdom through academic success? My study approaches this puzzle with a series of related questions: (1) What kinds of pedagogical warfare are being waged in the embattled site of the school, the quintessential institute of the nation-state, where the "care" and "shaping" of the child purportedly take place? (2) How do government schools in rural ethnic settings continually fail to achieve their *raison d'être* yet maintain cultural legitimacy and images of success, despite the inconsistencies, contradictions, and fraudulences in their daily practices? (3) What overlapping processes coexist with the struggles within the schools and how disenchantment inside and outside the school reflect and reinforce each other? (4) What are students' life trajectories after they graduate or drop out, when the school walls crumble, to speak metaphorically?

Conceptual Issues: Theorizing Modernity, Subalternity, and Nation-State

The intersection of three major conceptual issues forms the basis of my inquiry: modernity, subalternity, and nation-state. Education, state-ordered schooling more precisely, sits at a crossroads of such conceptual matrix: it is often deployed by the nation-state as the impetus of modernity and the remover of subalternity (be it economic, social, or cultural), while simultaneously producing new forms of exclusion and marginality. The major analytical onus of this project is to tease out schooling's entanglement in China's modernist projects that bear upon its subaltern rural ethnic "others," through which new forms of othering and alterity arise.

³ Elsewhere, Hurtig (2008) explores the ways in which secondary school students in a rural town in Venezuela experience and navigate the conflicting promises of formal education and the wider contour of social change, linking youth's lives to the larger contradictions of patriarchy, global economy, gender, and schooling,

Modernity is a vague and tirelessly debated concept. Many scholars have grappled with its (dis)enchantment, challenged it for being static, ahistorical, and teleological (Gaonkar 2001; Schein 1999, Rofel 1999; Abu-Lughod 2005; Hirschkind 2006), and as the spurious child of western capitalist domination. Regarded as a lure rather than a threat, modernity is said to have spread across the globe over the longue duree of transcontinental contacts, “transported through commerce, administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions, propelled by nationalism, and now increasingly steered by global media, migration, and capital (Gaonkar 2001: 1). This echoes the indictment of the academic assumption that “the West invented modernity and other modernities are derivative and second-hand” (Ong 1996: 61).

Criticized as a crippled term, the concept of modernity is charged for reducing the differentiated, relational, and dynamic sociohistorical processes to pure instrumentality, for flattening multiplicities to a linear, historicist development trajectory. Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), for instance, in his study of Hindu Bengalese in northern India, provokes an intriguing sense of conundrum in the formation of Bengali modernity. On the one hand, he invites a reconsidering of whether it is possible to write any kind of history that does not index back to European modernity as the birthplace. On the other hand, Chakrabarty argues that the homogenizing claim of modernity is as much a yet-to-come as already embedded in local everyday experiences that both advance modernist values and perpetuate its antithesis.⁴

Similarly, the unidirectional and univocal narrative of modernity is hardly sustainable in China, the quintessential nation-state that has oscillated between the periphery and the center in its global influence and undergone multiple centers and peripheries within.⁵ The meaning of

⁴ See his account of *adda*—male gathering for informal conversations in an assortment of urban spaces (parks, rooftops, coffee houses, college dorms) for an illustration. Chapter 7.

⁵ For instance, the series of atrocious encounters with the western imperial powers since the mid-nineteenth century precipitated China’s downfall from the zenith of civilization to the underdog of feudalist isolation and capitalist

modernity in the Chinese context is intertwined with China as a geopolitical concept and a fluctuating sociocultural landscape. From China's first convulsive encounters with western powers during the Opium War (1839-1842) to the May Fourth Movement (1919) in advocacy for "science" and "democracy," from the devastating years of the Great Leap Forward (1956-1958) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in search for communist modernity to more than three decades of relentless economic growth since the Reform and Opening (1978), the Chinese nation has always positioned itself within ongoing debates regarding tradition, reform, development, and modernization.

Specifically, the dramatic social changes over China's long 20th centuries have made modernity a recurring yet elusive figure. From isolationism to open-door policy, from communism to socialist-capitalism, from planned economy to market liberalization, China rehearses its idiosyncratic linear narrative of "backwardness" to "progress," with each subsequent era approaching, but never quite arriving at what Lisa Rofel (1999) describes as a modernity perpetually deferred. If China's embrace of modernization indicates the reflexivity over its off-centered positioning on the global stage, its "holdout" population—the rural ethnic "others"—provides points of anchorage for the modernist projects of re-centering.

The desire to uplift the "holdout" population on par with the putatively more modernized Han Mandarin-speaking Chinese, who are simultaneously looking towards the western geopolitical centers as standard-bearers of the modern, produces a distinctive pattern of Chinese modernization that runs a double current. This double current is mediated by wider forms of ethnic and cultural politics both inside and outside China, and further complicated by

penetration. Since the end of the last dynasty Qing, Chinese society was further subject to ruptures by both the regimes of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. The center of China, whether the physical site of Xi'an, Nanjing, or Beijing, or the symbolic domain of Han cultural heritage of Confucianism, has also fluctuated through various encounters at the ethnic frontiers, such as with the Tibetans and Uygur. See Tu 1994.

China's endeavor to disaggregate from an "undifferentiated global modernity"⁶ by claiming unique Chinese characteristics yet at times remain virtually unintelligible outside the China-West binary.

I arrived in Guizhou in early 2009 to begin my 16-month-long stint of fieldwork during an impressive moment of China's global positioning. The worldwide financial crisis begun the previous year had damaged many national economies, but not the confidence of the Chinese lawmakers. The rest of the world, once again, watched China in its miraculous soft-landing and relatively speedy recovery from the global financial quagmire. In both interviews and casual conversations, I seemed to find the Guizhounese less bothered by the financial crisis but exhibiting a decidedly future-oriented development momentum. Tourism programs were swiftly underway in many villages in Qiandongnan, executed under the auspices of the provincial tourism bureau and its local offices. Likewise, the compulsory education scheme termed the Two Basics Project (TBP) was being broadcast with broad strokes, often written on bulletin boards side by side with tourism promotion commercials. Tourism- and TBP-related anecdotes, complaints, aspirations became frequent conversation topics I had with the people in Qiandongnan, integral to villagers' imagination and appropriation of the "modern."

What struck me were the ways the modernization strategies were calibrated on particular images of Qiandongnan—picturesque landscape, quaint customary rituals, low levels of schooling, and socioeconomic deficiency. Qiandongnan's drive for modernity is articulated in a longstanding narrative of "lack." Ethnic peasants are often denounced in popular imagination as deficient in quality, excessive in numbers, and low in *wenhua* (literally translated as "culture" and indicating one's level of education). The narrative of the modern is juxtaposed with the narrative of the subaltern. On the one hand, subalternity points to a subjectivity predicated upon

⁶ See Ivy (1995: 5) for similar portrayal of Japanese modernity.

social, cultural, and economic differentiation. On the other hand, it is closely linked to the so-called civilizing mission of the Chinese state and its essentialist, evolutionary depictions of the Han as the “modern” and “advanced,” and the rural minorities as “backward” and “uncivilized” (Harrell 1995). The formation of the exclusionary matrix along the rural/urban and ethnic lines is repeatedly instantiated in the modernist policies and discourses of the Chinese state.

Yet the modernist dichotomies do not simply superimpose on the messy social terrain and become static, even if people do not dismantle the categorical differences (rural versus urban, minority versus majority, deficiency versus quality) that type them as the subaltern. Therefore, a fruitful question to ask is whether subalternity merely takes the form of people positioning themselves vis-à-vis state-authorized modernity, or perhaps also a repositioning through deploying the very codes that type them as modernity’s outside. As Schein contends, “the modern is usefully thought of not only...as a discursive regime that shapes subjectivity, but also as powerfully constituted and negotiated through performance” (1999: 361). Schein (1999) suggests that even though official imageries paint the Chinese Miao with backward primitivity, the Miao people do not tacitly subscribe to the imposing social order. The Miao “mimic” what is scripted as modern through acquisition of consumption practices and display of culturally-sanctioned “good taste,” what Butler calls “subversive repetition” or “subjected reiteration” (1996: 111), through which markers of subalternity become objects of theatrical play and reflexive distancing, thus are rendered less durable.

Notably, several key works also challenge us to consider subalternity not as a categorical outside, but rather: as dual processes of subject-making—both being made and self making (Ong 1996); as the populace’s performative practices vis-à-vis the state’s pedagogical dictation (Bhabha 1990); as creating “double consciousness” (Gilroy 1993) of being in and out of

particular notion of “civility,” as the ways people inhabit and consume, rather than ostensibly subvert, sanctioned social norms (Mahmood 2005).

Building on the insights, in this study, I’m interested in the particular cultural historical moment where the regime of modernity and the governing apparatus of the Chinese state bear upon the subaltern subjects in Qiandongnan, and how village teachers, students, and residents engage in performative practices that both conform to and displace the state’s pedagogical/developmental dictum. Whether through the Miao and Dong people’s own notions of “the educated” person (juxtaposed with and contesting the state’s *suzhi*/quality curriculum campaign), through village teachers’ re-appropriation of the market in their entrepreneurial moonlighting, through the schools’ conscious manipulation of enrollment statistics to meet the audit demands, or through the dropout students’ haphazard “making it” on the factory floor, schooling is entangled with other modernizing strategies and lived in everyday (dis)enchantment, performances (both on- and off-stage), and pursuit of the good life. Far from carving a separate space to state-sanctioned modernity, the people (re)constitute the grounds for the enactment of the modern in particular ways, as they strategize and forge pragmatic adaptations of the state modernization dictum.

Many anthropological works have taken stock of state power and modernity at the turn of the century (Chu 2010; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Mueggler 2001; Taussig 1997). There has been, however, a lack of attention to schooling in the studies of nation-states. Given that China has long deployed education as a governing technique (Bakken 2000), as yet another staging of the modern, unpacking the disjunctured movements in and around the school provides a lens to the idiosyncratic governing of the Chinese state in its nation building and modernization. While the Chinese state is continually palpable in shaping everyday life and integral to the calculus of being and becoming “modern,” it is not seen as merely bureaucratic

institutions, but as, more fruitfully, discursive social processes made “real” through various encounters, disruptions, and re-imaginings (Liu 2009; Zhang 2010; Yan 2008; Zhou 2005). I will try to unpack the disenchantment towards schooling not as a counterdiscourse to the modernist formula of education-to-the-social-rescue, but as an intertwinement of the Chinese state’s dissonant rural practices, modernization strategies, and the shifting subjectivity of the “subaltern.”

In this introduction chapter, I contextualize the study by laying out a series of development policies in Qiandongnan, and in rural ethnic China more broadly. I problematize the rural/urban divide and the accompanying binaries (developed/underdeveloped, core/periphery, modern/traditional) that routinely frame our thinking. I discuss the shifting discourse of the rural as political project and highlight how the tropes of education, tourism, and labor migration have long served to incorporate rural ethnic residents into the state and its modern governing strategies. I end with a historiography of Guizhou’s lengthy incorporation into the central administration; a historicization of how the richly elaborated cultural space of Qiandongnan is a recursive moving target between the margin and the center, as an unevenly governed frontier and a targeted site for development. This, I hope, will provide the discursive context of postsocialist rural China to understand the contested processes of schooling, and its entanglement with social changes, market forces, and state discipline.

The Vicissitude of the Rural as Political Project

In China as elsewhere, the rural is a study in contradiction. It has become a term loaded with mixed emotions—hope, empathy, nostalgia—and an ideal locus to invoke development rhetoric. The problematization of the “rural” mentality (*nongcun yishi*) as malady and backwardness is often sutured with the nostalgia for the communal bond and interpersonal amicability in the countryside. Sometimes experienced as an out-of-the-way place severed from

the “modern” order of things, sometimes emotionalized as “a last base for retreat for bodies injured, souls trampled, and hopes lost in the city” for peasants-turned labor migrants (Yan 2008:227), and at other times pathologized as breeding social diseases of gambling, lethargy, and corruption, the vast social space of the rural is anything but easily characterizable. In their own narration, villagers in Qiandongnan often express ambivalence towards the place called home (*jiaxiang*). “We don’t belong to the city, but there is no way out in the countryside,” as many of them would say. There is an acute sense of self-marginalization among the rural residents and an intense desire to improve their social positioning in the larger society, which has spurred waves of labor migrants to “jump” the rural scale and “float” towards the urban manufacturing workforces.

The shreds and noises of the rural dissolves the stereotype of China as a harmonious singularity—a singularity of harmony fabricated by global fanfares such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Where the sonorous voice of China dies down and the relentless image of harmony and abundance thins out, stories grow dense and dissonant in the nation’s rural ethnic landscape.

Desire, Fear, and Emaciation of the Rural

The discursive context of rural China where this ethnography is situated has undergone drastic epistemic shift; and a historicizing of the concept of “rurality” in the Chinese imagination is necessary. *Nongye* (“agriculture”), *nongmin* (“agrarian folks”), and *nongcun* (“agrarian village”) are three immediate words that describe the vast foundation of the Chinese society. Over 800 million Chinese, or two-thirds of the population, are of rural residential status. The shared character *nong* in *nongye*, *nongmin*, and *nongcun* designates the inseparability from the soil/land, which has largely shaped the social dynamics, interpersonal exchange, and daily functions of the countryside. “Chinese society is fundamentally rural,” said the eminent

sociologist-anthropologist Fei Xiaotong six decades ago, suggesting not only the predominantly agrarian population makeup, but also a subtle, collective tie to the land and an “earthbound” livelihood. Indeed, the centrality of the “rural” and “earthboundness” (*xiangtu* 乡土) is prominent in Chinese cosmology.

Yet, the narratives surrounding the rural identity have never been static or constant in Chinese history (Huang 1998:1-4). In the past century, the countryside has shifted from being the major contributing factor to Communist victory (1930s) to the experimental site in China’s structural reforms (1980s), from the surplus labor reserve (1990s) to the locus of the rural revitalization campaign (2000s). On the one hand, the Confucian orthodoxy⁷ depicts the peasantry as “quasi-nobility,” second only to the scholar-officials, whose humbleness, frugality, and loyalty lay the foundation of harmony for the ruling regime. On the other hand, peasants suffered perpetual powerlessness and hardship both as a result of human-nature conflicts and despotic rulership throughout the dynasties. Periodically, peasants engaged in violent rebellions and turmoil, which solidified an image of barbarity still associated with the rural folks today. As a perennial underdog, peasants have been caught within the agricultural cycle of prosperity and dearth, and the dynastic processes of growth, decay, and rebirth.

During the Mao era, peasants were depicted as the most oppressed and exploited, living in the shackles of the “three big mountains” (*sanzuo dashan*), namely imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. The countryside was fortified as the wellspring of communist consciousness and revolutionary creativity, where liberation was most powerfully crafted. In the 1930s and 1940s, Mao advanced his mass mobilization theory of “encircling the city with the

⁷ Confucian orthodoxy is a much-contested normative claim with different sectarian influences asserting interpretations of a particular body of texts and teachings across different historical periods. One of the debates was waged by the famous neo-Confucian school during the Song and Ming dynasties, which rejected superstition and mysticism (derived from Daoism and Buddhism) in favor of a more secular and rationalist form of morality, ethics, and metaphysics. See Tu 1985.

countryside” (*nongcun baowei chengshi*), a strategic move that positioned the rural as the *da houfang* (support base) for the Communist Party’s eventual overtaking of the cities. This strategy had changed the status of the rural from the invisible underclass to the highly visible political mass in the revolutionary quest of the Communist state. During the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the rural was further elevated from dejection and subservience, and turned into a moral high ground where urban literati were sent to be “re-educated” by the peasants in order to purify their capitalism-contaminated minds.

Since the last quarter of the 20th century, the rural is further sutured with the zealous remaking of China in its global competition for power and wealth. In China’s political discourse of national harmony and abundance, the countryside becomes both an excess and a lack. On the one hand, the rural is once again depicted as *da houfang*, a support base that, this time around, provide abundant surplus labor for the growth of the manufacturing industry. On the other hand, China’s rising Gini coefficient⁸(0.496 in 2006, per Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) is attributed to the stubborn rural problems such as peasants’ low educational attainment and lack of market entrepreneurship. The high illiteracy rate in the countryside is deemed a national pedagogical burden; the heroic figure of the Maoist revolutionary peasant has subsequently faded into oblivion. The visibility of the rural as both excess and lack is amplified in the popular portrait of peasants-turned-labor-migrants as massive yet lacking *suzhi* / “quality.” In the work of Michel Foucault, such a status of “surplus visibility” can be a “trap” that incorporates the rural into a disciplining surveillance by national statistics, market, educational and social programming (1975/1977: 200-208; also see Patai 1992). The rural is visible only as something outside of, and morally, socially lower than, the norms.

⁸ Geoff Dyer. Income Gap in China Widens. *Financial Times*, 27 December 2006, 5.

What constitutes the rural is not natural, given *a priori* but the convergence of historically discursive and socially constructed themes and practices. One important policy that legitimized the relative hierarchy between urban and rural status is the household registration known as the *hukou* system. In the mid 1950s, the newly founded PRC implemented the *hukou* system to control rural-to-urban mobility. According to the regulations, households were categorized as either agricultural-rural *hukou* or township-urban *hukou* by their residential location and occupation. While the urban *hukou* granted access to welfare benefits such as subsidized housing, education, health care, and transportation, rural *hukou* holders did not enjoy such privileges. Whenever possible, rural residents sought to overcome institutional hurdles to obtain urban *hukou* status (Wu & Treiman 2004). In recent decades, however, the state's preferential rural policies (including agricultural subsidies, cooperative medicare scheme, abolition of agricultural taxes, and free basic education) have to some extent mitigated the relative hierarchy of rural and urban *hukou*. Though still *de jure* in place today, the stringent place-based *hukou* system has been considerably relaxed since the reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, and in the recent flux of rural-to-urban labor migration that serves as a necessary condition for urbanization and China's burgeoning manufacturing industry.

In the early 1980s, China's post-Mao administration introduced rural reform as a measure of structural adjustment. The household responsibility system was established to distribute lands that were previously owned and managed by socialist communes to individual households. This measure annulled the Maoist production brigade system (*shengchan dui*) in which production and consumption were linked to a work-points-based (*gongfenzhi*) collective regime. With decollectivization, one's productivity and consumptive behaviors were no longer determined by the work points one earned; and the collective ethos was gradually replaced by the discourse of individual responsibility for one's own wellbeing (*zili gengsheng*).

Today the household responsibility system has been *de facto* eclipsed by the large-scale labor migration involving more than one hundred million peasants on an urban-bound journey. Not only has labor migration transformed the mode of agricultural production, it has also engendered a radical shift in rural-urban relations. Villagers swarm urban centers to perform manual labor as factory workers, domestic maids, gardeners, repairmen, interior remodeling workers, security guards, and restaurant waitresses. Although Fei Xiaotong's famous characterization of rural China as "earthbound" (2002) still holds considerable sway to this day, a more accurate depiction of the rural is perhaps translocality of various modes, which renders the rural/urban binary ever more tenuous and dubious, rather than a simplistic either-or (Schein & Oakes 2006).

From the cradle of the Communist revolution to the target of social reforms to the labor reserve of migrant workers, the rural continues to be a moving target in Chinese historiography. In recent decades, while many lament the emaciation of the rural in relation to the rapid gentrification across the country, it has not necessarily meant the disappearing of the rural altogether. Granted that the glistening rise of the city has substantially inscribed the rural into its dominant social and economic landscape, whether through employment opportunities or sustained cultural assimilation, the rural on the other hand also offers new spatial desire and alternative imagining to the topsy-turvy of urban dwelling. Due to the promotion of ethnic cultural tourism, and due to the modern nostalgia for the "exotica", the rural ethnic landscape offers a space of escapism and occupies a fascinatingly ambiguous zone—at times coarse and rugged, at times fresh and earthy, and at others rejuvenating and tantalizing—to examine the vortex of changes and the multiple hues of China's post-reform palette.

There are at least two different, contradictory epistemic modes that construct the rural, ethnic as both the target of critique for poverty, inertia, and slothfulness, and as the object of

nostalgic enchantment with the bucolic and pristine. One is a realist, negative stereotype that mirrors a historicist/teleological desire to align the margin with the center; the other is an aesthetic imagination that transcends the historicist vision. It is precisely through this double line of movement, of imagination, that the rural (and the ethnic) obtains its ambiguous presence, its material and symbolic forms of meanings.

The existing boundaries that partition the society along the rural-urban, ethnic minority-majority line⁹ has been rendered more ambiguous by the magnitude of changes sweeping across China. The massive labor migration performs an act of “scale-jumping” that troubles the partition by physical mobility of migrant bodies. Through at once resisting and performing the received regional boundaries and ethnic distinctions, rural ethnic migrants negotiate their positions and forge an alternative mode of participation in the national economy. Han, the still potent signifier of national prosperity, is subject to the simultaneous co-existence of its heterogeneous others, those who cross spatial partitions and contest material disparity by a de-spatialized yearning and imagining. This is, in Bhabha’s term (1990), a performative moment in the rural ethnic people’s being in the presence of the nation, as impermanent subjects susceptible to the changes of history. As Judith Butler also pithily points out, even the reiteration of norms “dissimulates the conventions of which it is a *repetition*” (1993:12). In such repetitive act, the binaries are not lost or resolved, but continually drawn and redrawn.

⁹ I borrow the notion of “partition of the sensible” from French philosopher Jacques Ranciere in his radical theorization of the political. Ranciere aptly defines “partition of the sensible” as the condition of visibility and sayability through particular distribution of what is “capable of being apprehended by the senses” in ways of seeing, ways of doing, and ways of being (2004: 85; also see Biesta 2010:540). He further elaborates it as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delineation that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” (2004: 12). The shared commonality thus presupposes an *a priori* division between the visible and invisible, normalcy and outcast, such as the queer vis-à-vis the heterosexual normality. Even though “distribution of the sensible” is often provoked in poststructural critique of identity politics (see Ruitenberg 2010; Biesta 2010), its epistemic proclivity is also pervasive in other contexts such as the formation of the exclusionary matrix along the rural/urban and ethnic lines.

The City and the Rural in the Making of Suzhi

To add another layer of complexity to the contested labels of the city (*chengshi*) and the rural (*nongcun*), I now turn to how both terms have been deeply entangled with the image of the school and the discourse of *suzhi* to produce fractured narratives of the ideal citizenry.

In a thought-provoking article, Hsu (2008) argues that during Mao's regime, the school functioned as a metonym for the city. Both the school and the city were depicted as dangerous repositories of bourgeois sentiments and capitalist insurgency. Associated with hierarchical elitism, the school was conceived as an affront to proletarian egalitarianism. In a similar vein, the city was condemned for its susceptibility to western influence and cultural decadence. While the school was jettisoned and marginalized,¹⁰ the vast rural landmass, on the contrary, was extolled as the savior and purifying ground for the "educated yet contaminated" minds. It was hailed in the glorified image of saving the city (therefore the nation) by the countryside. Knowledge from the soils, the factories, the farmlands, and from workers, peasants, and soldiers was valorized over book learning that took place in school. The body of desirable *suzhi* was primarily rural, menial, and "revolutionary" who showed ultimate dedication to the communist cause.

Towards the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, the pendulum swung. The connotations of the rural in relation to the city drastically shifted. The city and the school were no longer seen as the symbol of decadence and the incubator of bourgeois ethos, and the countryside was no longer regarded as the fountain of life and hope of the future. In China's scramble to get onto the fast lane of globalization, the once recalcitrant ideological markers

¹⁰ Collections of propaganda posters during the Mao era showed that the images of the school and the classroom were notably absent in state propaganda and public imaginaries, whereas production activities in the factories and farmlands were conspicuously abundant. See Min, Duo, and Landsberger 2003.

were abandoned¹¹ and the spatial strategy refurbished such that the city has now been placed above and beyond the “untamed” rural hinterlands and the “degraded” ethnic margins. The post-reform (post-1978) era envisions the city as the hallmark of progress and modernity, and pathologizes the rural and minority areas as backward and unenlightened for lack of schooling.

Within this reconfigured spatial order, the discourse about the school and the way the *suzhi* body is imagined has also changed in no small measure. Like the ever-growing city, the school has been attached escalating importance. It is impossible today to imagine a Chinese county, township or even a remote village-hamlet without a school. In fact, the school is often the best-equipped building that outshines many village houses. The nation-wide boom in school building in recent decades is part and parcel of the manifestation of the acute educational desires (Kipnis 2011). Even though the school is still susceptible to the party ideological indoctrination, it is considered fore and most as the pathway to economic prosperity, technological advancement, and higher *suzhi* of the populace. The image of the school is espoused to replace the rural as the savior of the Chinese nation by providing a ticket out of “backwardness into modernity, out of ignorance into ‘quality’, and out of the countryside into the city” (Hsu 2008: 30). The *suzhi* body celebrated in the post-reform era is thus unambiguously urban, educated, and market savvy.

The status re-ordering of the city and the countryside was enacted not simply as a result of ideological mutation, but intricately linked to the shifting construction of the ideal citizenry in the Chinese imagination. Today, the state economic dictum hails urbanization as an important

¹¹ Deng’s famous dictum, “A good cat is one that catches mice, no matter white or black,” declares a pragmatic approach to and ideological tolerance of capitalism versus socialism (white versus black cat) as long as China would speedily catch up on the fast lane of development.

index of development¹² and seeks to subsume the “sunrise to sunset” agrarian production into its modernist telos. Thus the rural and its putatively uncouth, chaotic, unenlightened population (especially given its sheer size¹³) are, once again, perceived as the most pressing concern to the nation’s overall population quality and developmental trajectory. It is within such shifting geopolitical and ethnic partitionings in rural China that this ethnography is situated.

***A History of Participation in Nation-Building:
Geopolitics of Guizhou and Qiandongnan***

Primarily resided by agrarian populations who identify themselves, culturally and linguistically, as the Miao and the Dong, Qiandongnan is located in one of China’s least developed regions, Guizhou, a province of ethnic mosaics,¹⁴ plagued for centuries by material scarcity, and yet, perplexingly, termed the “precious land.” The Miao and the Dong are two groups of ethnic minorities conventionally known for their remoteness (*pianpi*) as the peasants and herders of China’s “interior,” a remoteness that signifies both geographic and moral distance in the Chinese imagination. As Litzinger notes (1994: 206), *pianpi* for one denotes a physical inaccessibility of rustic, faraway places, and for another a developmental chasm of the stigmatized site of lack, malaise, and dispossession from the metropolitan hubs. The language of poverty and remoteness provide a set of norms through which places like Guizhou and Qiandongnan are talked about and acted upon.

¹² Measured by the ratio of urban versus the total population within the household registration (*hukou*) system, China’s level of urbanization in 2000 reached 36.22 percent, a figure that the state planning commission vehemently sought to further raise in order to catch up with the more industrialized countries. See Wu 2003.

¹³ According to the 2000 census, China’s rural population numbered 810 million and comprised of 64% of the country’s total population. More than 80% of the nation’s primary schools and 64% of its junior middle schools were found in rural regions. See Zhang & Zhao 2006: 262.

¹⁴ Guizhou boasts the presence of 49 of the 56 ethnic groups in China, with ethnic residents accounting for 37% of its total population, according to the 2004 census. See *Guizhou: A Province of Immigrants*. 2006. Panoramic China Book Series. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.

The etymological vulgarization of *pianpi* does not fully capture the complex historical trajectory of the region and its people, and its convoluted entry into modernity. Historically the outer reaches of the empires, and inhabited by a multitude of ethnicities, Guizhou has been constructed as a frontier with an unevenly governed populace where borders and orders are regularly contested. Known as the “Kingdom of Mountains” that is principally comprised of mountainous terrains (92.5%) and karst topography (73.6%), Guizhou is endowed with rich mineral, archeological, and tourist resources.¹⁵ Yet, due to its inhospitable topography, unpacified non-Han ethnic residents, mystifying indigenous lifeways, and harsh climate and living conditions, Guizhou was named as a province only during the Ming dynasty (the second last dynasty in Chinese history) in 1413. Its incorporation into the empire had been a lengthy process.

Situated closely above the southwest frontier of China, today’s Guizhou lies on the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, adjacent to Yunnan Province to the west, Sichuan Province to the north, Hunan Province to the northeast, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region to the south. Guizhou’s strategic position en route to resource-rich Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangxi provinces, its burgeoning mining and timber industries, as well as the influx of Han Chinese settlers in the eighteenth century had made it compelling for the Qing rulers to bring the province under the imperial jurisdiction.¹⁶ Efforts to assimilate its peripheral groups into the empire were ceaseless, yet not without ruffles and conflicts.

One of the means was via Confucianism-based classic education. Scores of public schools (called “*yixue*” 义学) were established to primarily cater to non-Han children in order to sensitize them to Confucian values that were considered indispensable for a smooth-functioning

¹⁵ Ibid. Preface, pp. 16.

¹⁶ See Hostetler 2001, Chapter Four, for detailed discussions of this issue.

society (Rawski 1979: 57-58). In the village of Longxing, one of my field sites, one sees such early form of acculturation in the naming of the communal drum towers after the five Confucian virtues of *ren, yi, li zhi, xin* (i.e. benevolence, justice, rituals, wisdom, and trust 仁义礼智信). These names were given by clan elders who had been educated in classic Confucianism through *yixue*. An excerpt from one Miao album—a genre popular in 18th-century imperial China that used prose, poetry, and illustrations to represent minority ethnic peoples—also powerfully reveals the logic of pacification through education adopted by the Qing court: “If we distribute education and thus transform the frontier, first the Miao will change into ordinary subjects, and then those people will forget that they were once Miao. Then will there be a need to be assiduously on our guard [for rebellions]” (Ibid. p.186)? Efforts were apparent to tame the indigenous minorities through education so as to avoid military confrontation.

Another measure to incorporate the multi-ethnic frontiers to the central administration was through increasing bureaucratic penetration. During the Ming dynasty, the *tusi* system was established. Known as the governing of barbarians with barbarians, *tusi* system appointed indigenous hereditary headsmen (*tusi*) to rule over their own tribal members. During the Qing dynasty, the *tushi* system was gradually replaced by a central regulatory system when rotating officials were appointed to ethnic frontiers for direct rules. This process is commonly referred to as *gaitu guiliu* (改土归流, literally, shifting the *tusi* system to the regular system of rotating officials) (Smith 1970:301).

In the process of turning the hostile population into docile subjects, more aggressive means were also used, such as land encroachment and confiscation by Han settlers, establishment of walled military township by Qing soldiers, suppression of indigenous festivals and rites, and forced conversion of the indigenous garbs and hairstyles into those of their Chinese “brothers and sisters” (Smith 1970:263; Hostetler 2001: 123-24).

When bloodshed and cruel forces were not viable or effective, other less confrontational and more symbolic means, such as the garnering of ethnographic information about indigenous groups, were sought after. This culminated in the compilation of the famous Miao Albums during the Qing rule. The Miao Albums are commonly referred to in Chinese as the *Miao man tu* (namely, Illustration of Miao Barbarians), or *Bai Miao tu* (Illustrations of the Hundred Miao), with the appellation Miao indicating all indigenous people, not specific to the present-day Miao ethnic nationality. As a unique ethnographic genre, the content of the illustrations include livelihood, courtship practices, religious rites, birth and burial, seasonal festivals, and other distinctive characteristics of various non-Han groups. According to Hostetler, these albums conveyed a sense of “a collective ‘we’ that came to constitute the multiethnic nature of the Qing dynasty and later the People’s Republic of China” (2001: 179).

Whether through peaceful means of education, brutal measures of land encroachment and military occupation, or symbolic technique of ethnographic depiction, the indigenous people in Guizhou have historically been linked to the central state’s administration over many centuries in various ways: from the barbarian frontiers to the bastions of military strongholds, from resource-rich areas to ethnic cultural Disney-lands, from the mystery-shrouded domiciles of shamanistic masses to capitalist reserves of itinerant laborers, yet never quite in sync with the standards of the state (Schein 2000; Oaks 1998; Hostetler 2001).

Guizhou’s variegated ethnic, cultural, and linguistic composition is the result of centuries of migration, traffic, tributary mission, and trade, which testifies to its complex implication in China’s imperial expansion, regional exchange, and global positioning (Naquin and Rawski 1987: 199; Moseley 1973: 25-26; Schein 2000:5-6). Such an implication debunks the image of inertia, insularity, and timelessness generally associated with this mountain province. In the mid nineteenth century (during the reign of the Qing dynasty), Guizhou started to be heavily

populated by Han Chinese (primarily merchants), and gained increasing visibility in the imperial administrative order (Hostetler 2001). Cultural encounters, intermarriage, and most importantly, state schooling contributed to the improved relationship between the ethnic minorities and the Han, especially through the educated indigenous elites who spread and popularized the Han culture (Litzinger 2000).

Ethnic Markers and the Politics of Naming

As mentioned before, Guizhou was named as a province only during the Ming dynasty in the early fifteenth century. The incorporation of this frontier region into China's imperial reign had been a lengthy process. In this section, I hope to unpack the shifting historical conditions by which categories of ethnic distinction get produced, especially in the context of Guizhou. Rather than taking "ethnicity" as a natural population category, I hope to illustrate that ethnic labels are dubious markers historically entangled with empire expansion and nation building in Chinese society. The problematization of "ethnicity" as a normative social construct will also shed light on the convoluted incorporation of Guizhou and Qiandongnan to projects of empire building and statecraft.

During the last dynasty, as the Qing court expanded its administrative reach and territorial boundaries, it became imperative to incorporate diverse ethnic groups into the empire through systematic naming and categorization. Techniques of cartography and ethnography were employed to directly observe and gather information about indigenous customs and lifeways, which led to increasingly complex taxonomies¹⁷ and rapid growth of categories¹⁸

¹⁷ The naming was usually based upon observable traits of the group, including the color of dress (e.g. *hong* (red) Miao and *hei* (black) Miao), hairstyle (e.g. *changjiao* (long horn) Miao), dress style (*changqun* (long-skirt) Miao and *duanqun* (short-skirt) Miao), dwelling, occupation, etc. Each group was again subdivided into smaller categories based on other distinctive traits.

¹⁸ The number of identified groups increased from thirteen to eighty-two in a period of over two centuries during the Qing reign. See Hostetler 2001: 136.

(Hostetler 2001). Guizhou was especially visible in such projects for its ethnically diverse population makeup.

Colorfully illustrated gazetteers, manuscripts, albums were compiled by official representatives of the Qing court to educate the officialdom about the customs and rituals of the ethnic people for more effective imperial rule. Thus direct and confrontational mode of population control gradually gave way to more benign mode of population governance through “scientific” and “numerical” depiction and classification of peoples. This was in tandem with a rhetorical shift from depicting ethnic groups as belligerent to viewing them as subjects of the benevolent emperor. The representation of the “others” in organized, empirical forms of ethnographies/cartographies reflected a shift in ways of viewing and depicting the world, in ways the empire related to its populace, and in what constituted knowledge.

In the Qing imperial discourse, the appellation “Miao” lumped together a wide range of non-Han peoples who had disparate customs, spoke mutually unintelligible dialects, yet did not fit into any existing ethnic category.¹⁹ These people were conveniently grouped under the same label “Miao” for their shared status of putative primitivity. In today’s China, the Miao and the other 54 minorities constitute less than 9% of the country’s total population, while the largest group Han accounts for the majority. In Guizhou, the Mandarin term “Miao” (苗) is used to primarily refer to the largest of the seven²⁰ major non-Han groups in this province.

Etymologically, the word Miao designates at least three different meanings in Chinese language. Firstly, it means “sprout” as in the young seedling. Secondly, it indicates resurgent

¹⁹ At one point, as many as forty-four variations of Miao were enumerated. See Hostetler 2001: 139-42.

²⁰ The seven ethnic groups include the Miao, the Zhongjia (the current-day Buyi), the Gelao, the Yi, the Yao, the Zhuang, and the Dong, whose naming and categorization are based on the ethnolinguistic criteria established by the Chinese state.

features of ethnic savages²¹ and is often used interchangeably with another derogatory term “*man*” (蛮) as in “*miao man*” (苗蛮 Miao rebels). Thirdly, it refers to what is known today as the Miao/Hmong ethnic group, residing in various southern provinces such as Hunan, Guizhou, and Yunnan,²² as well as in South Asia, North America, and Europe as a result of transnational migration.

All three connotations of the appellation “Miao” are important to understand ethnic politics in China. The image of “sprout” carries association with youth, vitality, beginning, and above all, an unmistakable connection to earth. Since in the early ages the indigenous people were primarily agrarian and dependent on rice cultivation for survival, the image of “sprout” signifies the critical role of farming and an earthbound livelihood. The second meaning lumps together different ethnic groups (such as the appellations of Yi Miao, Yao Miao, Dong Miao, etc.) and carries disparaging portraits of the indigenous peoples as barbarous, unrefined, and hostile. Pejorative taxonomy of “raw” (*sheng*) and “cooked” (*shu*) were also coined to describe the extent to which indigenous people showed obedience and submission to the imperial administration. The third meaning is widely seen in the identification of Miao zu (Miao nationality 苗族)²³ both by the ethnic people themselves and in the official and popular discourse.

²¹ It does not specifically refer to the Miao ethnic group or the Hmong in present-day south Asia or America.

²² The three major sub-groups concentrated in Hunan, Guizhou, and Yunnan are primarily identified as Xiangxi (eastern) Miao, Qiandong (mid-western) Miao, and Yunnan (western) Miao respectively.

²³ Many western sinologists acutely criticize the derogatory connotation of Miao zu (see Schein 2000; Litzinger 2000), as implied in the second meaning of “Miao.” It is noteworthy, however, that my informants in southeast Guizhou were largely nonchalant about such an appellation. Unlike the western presumption of ethnic discrimination in China, people themselves generally accept the appellation of Miao and argue against a confrontational view of ethnic relations in China (except perhaps for the extreme separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang). They often speak about “*wo men Miaozu jiushi zheyang*” (“we Miao people are just like this”) and take up the appellation as their natural identity marker. This suggests to me, instead of associating the state-designated ethnic markers as exclusively violent, we need caution when using the conflictive dichotomy between the state and the governed, and be attentive to more fluid, ambivalent ways that people come to identify themselves.

Similar to the Qing ethnographic/cartographic projects, under the aegis of the newly founded PRC, an ethnic identification campaign (*minzu shibie*) was launched in 1956. To incorporate ethnic minorities into the statecraft for more expedient population governance, Chairman Mao urged intellectuals and officials to go to minority areas to do “minority work.”²⁴ Ethnologists were called upon to study, describe, and classify ethnic groups and garner “accurate”, “scientific” knowledge of the indigenous peoples. The ethnic classification campaign was based on the Morgan-Stalinist²⁵ definition of ethnicity as sharing “common language, common territory, common economic life, and a typical cast of mind manifested in a common culture” (Heberer 1989: 30; Guldin 1994; Mullaney 2006). The campaign also adopted the Marxian-Morganian evolutionary paradigm in the sorting of different ethnicities on a developmental hierarchy. With a historicist style of reasoning, ethnic minorities are viewed as latecomers in the waiting room of modernity (Gaonkar 2001), as alterity around the norm, and as symbols of cultural quiddity.

The arbitrary and contested nature of the grouping is apparent in the ethnic identification campaign. At one phase of the campaign, it was reported, as many as over one thousand groups self identified as ethnic minorities in order to claim legitimacy and preferential policies from the state.²⁶ After some synthesis, the number was later significantly tampered to the present-day fifty-six, as the officially recognized number of ethnic nationalities in China. According to many Chinese scholars, the Miao and the Han are like two big baskets; whichever

²⁴ A peculiar feature of social science research in China is its pragmatic orientation towards policy making. Other technologies deployed for the “minority work” included the introduction of biomedicine and scientific rationality to rid off indigenous superstition and shamanistic healings. See Liu 2011, pp. 32-35.

²⁵ The 19th-century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan published his theories on the evolutionary stages of human groups in a book titled *Ancient Society* (1978). His theses were later endorsed by Friedrich Engels and adopted by countries following the Marxist orthodoxy.

²⁶ The information was obtained from my various conversations with Chinese ethnic studies scholars throughout my fieldwork in Guizhou. Also see Gladney 1998.

ethnic group didn't belong elsewhere ended up in either basket, resulting in a great deal of identity confusion.²⁷ The tidy ethnic markers are inadequate to account for the messy politics of naming. As Bourdieu (1977: 164) contends, "every established order tends to produce...the naturalization of its own arbitrariness." Such naturalization of arbitrariness was a pragmatic strategy for the nascent Chinese state to exercise its population control through classification and naming.

As Sewell suggests, the cultural strategy of such state projects is "not so much to establish uniformity as it is to organize difference... to hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize, or marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal" (2005: 172). Such projects could also be seen as a pedagogical desire to make "legible" the mysterious, less traveled-to, and unknown terrains and peoples, so as to enable a systemic propagation of values and practices indispensable for the governing of the empire or statecraft. Coexisting with the hope for a smooth functioning society, there is also the fear for internal ethnic separatism. By bringing diverse people under close scrutiny, both the Qing cartographers/ethnographers and the Maoist ethnic identification campaign worked to define the boundary of citizenship and territory, solidify "ethnicity" as an axis of identities in population reasoning, and reinforce a unified symbolic center towards which homage, tribute, and obedience are to be paid. Yet the unity sought and never found—as the next section shows—has to be continuously worked upon, even across cultural particularities and cosmologies whose chasms were too steep to reconcile.

Rural Collectivization and the Turbulent Years of State-Orchestrated Catastrophes

Along with the rest of rural China, villages in Qiandongnan underwent intense governmental campaigns and "minority work" in the late 1950s. A newly founded socialist state,

²⁷ Many people would not identify themselves by the ethnicity designated on their national ID card.

China was engulfed in a zest for speedy realization of the communist utopia through extreme collectivism of both public and private domains. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), people's communes (*renmin gongshe*) and production brigades (*shengchan dui*) were established across the country, replacing the kinship-based, small-scale subsistence farming with a collective regime. Production brigades and production teams became the organizing units to oversee agricultural activities, the allocation of rationed meals, and the operation of the communal dining system. Each brigade member obtained certain meal rations based on the work points (*gongfen*) he/she earned. Dining must be carried out in communal dining halls; and no private/familial kitchens were allowed. If cooking smoke were detected in a household, family members would be subject to *pidou* (i.e. physical beating and stoning, and anti-revolution ideological brandishing). Such totalitarian campaigns were described as the state's "ritualized methods" (Mueggler 2001) to "both mobilize the masses and enmesh them through engagement in public performances" (Liu 2010:36).

Embroiled in the collective performances of such state rituals, ethnic communities in Qiandongnan suffered particular deprivation. Under the aegis of rural reforms and political collectivization, the clan-based, lineage-oriented folk social networks were abruptly torn apart. The traditional pedagogical sources (the spiritual headmen, the ritual experts, and shamans) became targets of political attacks, physical tortures, and thought liberation (*sixiang jiefang*). For instance, in my field site Majiang, during the 1950s and 1960s, the Miao agricultural experts in charge of subsistence farming and labor rituals, commonly referred to as the *Huolu* Head (活路头), were brandished as the Four Olds²⁸ (*si jiu*) and target of elimination. In the meantime, an egregious agricultural campaign named *shen'geng* (深耕 deep plantation) was launched.

²⁸ Four Olds was an ideological term coined during the Cultural Revolution to refer to Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. One of the stated goals of the Cultural Revolution was to eliminate the Four Olds.

Peasants were ordered to dig deeper into the earth when planting rice (hence “deep plantation”) and grow soybeans in watery rice paddies, even though the soil conditions were not amenable to such practices. Furthermore, sulfur mining was also launched in the remote villages in Qiandongnan to speed up China’s industrial revolution. In village elders’ accounts, everybody in Majiang (including children and teachers) was forced to participate in the mad race towards modernization.

Not only did such a race of insanity drive the people and the communities to deprivation and cause productivity to further plunder, agricultural chaos along with the natural disasters translated into massive famine and starvation²⁹ during the late 1950s and early 1960s. To prevent hungry farmers from stealing soybeans, brigade heads soaked the beans in human waste and locked up harvest rice grains in a storehouse, which led to the famous incidence of storehouse plunder (抢粮事件 *qiangliang shijian*) in Majiang’s history. As an elder villager recollected:

Production decreased between 1958 and 1959, but the county government wanted us to report unbelievably high yields. Everyone knew that an acre of land didn’t even produce 100 kilograms of rice that year, but the government insisted that we report several hundred kilos per acre. They wanted us to work magic, and to say that “learning great skill brings great results.” All of our rice was piled up in the storeroom waiting for a superior to come and inspect it. We were starving to the point of death, without a single grain of rice at home (Wang & Wang 2008: 181-3).

Irrational campaigns such as *shen’geng* and sulfur mining were to teach villagers “great skills” and bring “great results.” However, it came about at the expense of the destruction of

²⁹ Nationwide, the estimated death caused by famine was nearly thirty million (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997: 16).

local knowledge in substance farming and resulted in agricultural retrogress. In Majiang, the graveyard in the *fengshui* forest of the Dongyin tribe buried many nameless villagers who starved to death during the disastrous years. The present Head of Labor recounted the bitter memories of his youth with lingering fear:

Every day, at least seven or eight people died of starvation. Hungry and energy-depleted, villagers couldn't even manage to properly bury the dead. My father (the then Head of the Labor) knew very well shen'geng was not going to help our productivity so didn't actively promote it as the brigades required. Because of his non-cooperation, he was later put into jail and died of beating and stoning shortly after. I myself escaped with my family to a neighboring county and spent three years as street beggars before the Great Leap Forward was finally over and we could return home.

The deprivation was exacerbated by the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 that ostracized ethnic customs as feudalistic legacies. In both of my field sites, schools were suspended, shamanistic healing banned, household ancestor shrines disallowed, ethnic cultural relics (such as the Dong drum towers) forcibly torn down, and the courtship singing/dancing purged and blamed for breeding licentious hedonism. Fear of the spirits and ghosts, the so-called feudalism contamination, was linked with a pedagogical anxiety to re-order the rural landscape to align with the "scientific" developmental reasoning. The indigenous authorities and knowledge systems were reconstituted into a new social epistemology that ordered what is "permissible" and "proper" to think. Ironically, such epistemology as ways of reasoning had to be repeatedly maintained through fabrication and manipulation of statistics, a practice seen in the exaggeration of productivity during the Great Leap Forward and echoed by the contemporary educational audit culture (I will discuss this in greater details in Chapter four).

Contemporary Guizhou and its Meandering Path to Modernity

Today, a “mystique-shrouded” mountain province, Guizhou is not particularly well known even among many Chinese natives. The little people do know about it is well captured in a proverb that describes it as a place “without three *li* of flat land,³⁰ three days of fine weather, or three cents to rub together.” In 2001, per capita annual income for farmers in Guizhou was RMB 1412 (USD 200), 62.3% of the national average. Middle school and high school enrollment rates in the province, 65.4% and 57.6% respectively, were also among the lowest in China (Zou 2009:25). Besides, Guizhou also suffers from environmental degradation, including desertification and water shortage, due to overexploitation of timber and mining industries. The language of the social science provides a set of normative parameters in the portrait of Guizhou and brings an urgency to change.

The image presented in the popular wisdom and social science reports is a constant nuisance to local Guizhouese who, for decades, have put a high premium on development in order to catch up with the rest of China. In the broader national scheme of the Grand Development of the West,³¹ the importance of rural development has also been promoted to an unprecedented height. The local Guizhou government endeavors to shake off impoverishment and destitution principally by three measures: constructing roads to improve the accessibility of remote mountain villages, promoting minority cultures as tourist attractions, and enforcing nine-

³⁰ One *li* is equal to 0.5 kilometer.

³¹ The Grand Development of the West, also known as Open Up the West (*xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发), has been a highly publicized campaign since its initiation in 1999. It aims at reducing the growing disparity between eastern coastal regions and western inland areas of China, as well as preempting the threat of political instability fueled by ethnic tensions. If one consults the map, Guizhou does not seem to be strictly located in western China, yet the notion of “west” in the campaign has been an imprecise socio-political construct that is more metaphorical than geographical. With indicators on population, income, infrastructure, educational attainment, etc., the “west” is generally characterized by high rates of poverty, low school enrollment, poor infrastructure, and large concentration of minorities. During the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1995-2000), the “west” was further defined as inclusive of the following regions: Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Tibet, Yunnan, Sichuan, Chongqing, and Guizhou. The list has since been revised and expanded by the central government to include other provinces and municipalities, some of which are located in the eastern region (Holbig 2004: 351).

year compulsory education. All three measures, in addition to the popularization of TVs and cell phones in rural households, contribute to the rapid translocal flows of people, commodities, sights and sounds that, since the late 1980s, have turned the landscape of Qiandongnan into an ensemble of desire and despair, leaving great impacts on village children's livelihood.

During the twentieth century, the province of Guizhou became a key site of economic maneuvers, minority policies, and cultural work. Although one third of Guizhou's population belongs to officially designated ethnic minorities, they have not been perceived as a threat to the Chinese state as much as the Tibetan and Uyghur people still do. Instead, what commands attention is poverty, a contested category of governing in and of itself, in this fiscally strapped, predominantly agrarian province.³² The infusion of capital targeting at the under-exploited resources and the speedy construction of highways, railroads, power plants, airports, and dams have yoked Guizhou, the once "dormant" southwest region noted as China's "internal colony" (see Spencer 1940; Goodman 1983; Oakes 2004), into a long-desired path of modernization.

Under the aegis of Open Up the West, Guizhou has experienced a bust of infrastructural improvement, new economic opportunities, increased education and investment, and expansion of state capacity. Besides, in recent decades, Guizhou is frequently featured in mass media as "harmonious coexistence of various ethnic groups" where "the quiet environment, quaint buildings, exquisite fashions, unsophisticated folk customs and hospitality of the local people hold a great appeal to visitors from afar."³³ From the Maoist Long March that established military buildups in the mountainous Guizhou, to the post-liberation land reform and collectivization, from the Dengist economic liberalization to the present-day tourism boom, the

³² According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Guizhou's average household consumption level and per capita living expenditures are the lowest in the country, and rural per capita net income is second lowest after Tibet. See China Statistical Yearbook, 2002. Beijing: Statistical Publishing House, 2002, pp. 68, 344, 347.

³³ See *Guizhou: A Province of Immigrants*. Introduction. 2006:5

Miao and the Dong and other minority people went from “being savage and insurgent to being backward and culturally exotic” (Schein 2000: 10-11).

Rural Development in Qiandongnan

If Guizhou is often considered a peripheral member of the prospering China, southeastern Guizhou (namely Qiandongnan) is more decidedly constructed as a remote, underdeveloped, and slowly changing agrarian enclave lagging behind its metropolitan capital Guiyang, behind the coastal economic zones, and behind the western geopolitical centers. The triple sense of lateness and the poignant anxiety to catch up has shaped its pro-growth developmental strategies. Such strategies are centered on particular conceptualization of the rural and the ethnic as visible social categories and problems, both to be preserved/revived and to be transformed/assimilated.

In 2003, the strategic import of the “three rural issues” (*sannong wenti*)—namely the issues of agriculture (*nong ye*), peasants (*nong min*), and rural communities (*nong cun*)—was highlighted in the central government’s eleventh Five-Year Plan.³⁴ Both policymakers and researchers have come to see the thorny and multi-dimensional rural issues as hindering the country’s modernization, and generated rounds of heated debates with regards to the solutions. In 2006, the three rural issues were further highlighted in the policy directive of “Constructing New Socialist Countryside.” With urbanization identified as key to rural progress (Deng et al. 2009), on the national level, a number of measures have been implemented for rural development: enforcing compulsory basic education, promoting rural tourism, building roads,

³⁴ The policy directive is part of the 1990s intellectual and social movement termed the New Rural Reconstruction (NRR) initiated by Wen Tiejun, a Renmin University agricultural economist, as well as a number of scholars, students, grassroots activists, and state agents. Market was criticized as the cause rather than solution of rural issues, and new cooperative social organizations were promoted to reconstruct rural life. See Day & Hale 2007.

and granting preferential rural policies (including the abolition of agricultural taxes, the provision of agricultural subsidies, and the establishment of rural cooperative medicare system³⁵).

Firstly, China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) declared 2006 as the Year of Rural Tourism. Tourism was upheld as crucial to constructing the new socialist countryside, beneficial to urban leisure, and pivotal to forestalling the loss of “extant tradition” in the process of modernization (CNTA 2007:93). Thanks to its diverse ethnic composition, picturesque landscape, and rich lifeways, Qiandongnan is marketed as a scenic spot for cultural tourism. In the late 80s and early 90s, Qiandongnan’s tourists were primarily western travelers (including the Japanese). The 1990s, however, witnessed the steady rise of domestic tourism in Guizhou (Oakes 1998: 169).

Even though tourism was not a new development strategy in Qiandongnan (see Oakes 1998; Chio 2009; Tan et al. 2001), the 2006 national push for rural tourism emphasized the dual goals of attracting tourists and external investors for countryside revitalization. In a 2000 speech, the director of Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau noted tourism as key to “solving the problems relating to agriculture, the countryside, and the farmers” (Cornet 2009: 197). Under the auspices of the National Tourism Administration and the Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau, funds were allocated for village makeover. For instance, both my field sites were recipients of such funds and underwent aesthetic renovation and “facelift.” In this context, a new rural-ethnic-scape is constructed as crucial to tourism development and the making of a forward-moving Qiandongnan.

³⁵ See http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/05/content_218920.htm for more details. The rural cooperative medical insurance scheme is a policy initiative aimed to extend affordable medical service to the country’s vast rural population who had been left out in the national medical provision for decades. The policy has created some remarkable ramifications. Whereas in old days rural people sought barefoot doctors and shamans when illness occurred, nowadays, western medicine and diagnosis becomes a standard practice.

The village-scape touted as tourism attraction has particular implications for the local livelihood. Cut along mountain ridges or on steep inclines, layered rice terraces are spectacular to the tourists' eyes yet present hardship for the cultivators. For generations, mountain dwellers subsist on few patches of arable lands scattered far and wide over the hilly terrains.³⁶ Rather than an aesthetic quaint visuality, villagers' livelihoods depend on a *working* landscape³⁷ and physical labor of climbing, digging, and tilling (see figure #3). Besides, tourism is daily experienced in villagers' passing through the cobblestoned street filled with the dins of tourist footsteps, and living with the visual and sound-scape of staged ethnic performances. In my research, I'm particularly intrigued by how the cultural politics of tourism plays a pedagogical role in shaping the contour of rural schooling, and how the Miao and Dong youth come to negotiate and live with tourism as part of their educational experience (see chapter five).



Figure#3: Terraced rice paddies as working landscape.

³⁶ There is a joke about a farmer having 78 tiny pieces of rice plots. One day after work, he sits on the edge of the terrace, counting his plots. No matter how hard he tries, he can find only 77 pieces. Disappointed, he stands up and picks up his hat from the ground and gets ready to go home. And alas, the last piece of land lies underneath his hat. This joke depicts the dearth of arable lands for highland ethnic minorities.

³⁷ See Raymond William's *Border Country* (1960) for a similar comment on the different appreciation and appropriation of "place" by dwellers and visitors.

Besides tourism, Qiandongnan witnesses gradual increase of labor out-migration since the early 1990s. During the first few decades of China's market reform, the state relaxed mobility restrictions previously posed by the household registration system. The early 90s was a time when most Qiandongnan villagers still depended on subsistence farming, pig husbandry, and occasional artisanal occupations (such as carpentry and stone masonry) and lived an earthbound life with little cash income. In village elders' recollection, it was a time without nightclubs, internet bars, or even steady supply of electricity. The major leisure activities were singing epic songs, performing skits or plays, and visiting friends and relatives in different tribes (*zhai*) and subvillages.

Meanwhile, in China's special economic zones, growing capitalist expansion had demanded cheap labor to fulfill low-skill, long-hour menial tasks. This spurred some brave-minded villagers in Qiandongnan to seek salarized jobs in coastal cities in the early 90s. They found work in construction sites, restaurants, nightclubs, domestic chambers, and factories. In those early years, stories of entrapments and long-distance bus robberies abounded to deter the fainter hearts from pursuing self-made dreams in the cities. At that time, most of the migrants were male, as it was unthinkable for women to emigrate and sell their labor beyond the boundary of home and kinship. The world outside the patrilocal community was considered danger-prone and not suitable for women whose chastity would be called into question.

Since the late 1990s, however, labor migration has literally become a rite of passage for most village youth; a great majority of villagers in Qiandongnan, male and female alike, have ventured to the coastal areas. Many do eventually return home after a few years of migrant life to settle down with meager cash savings, leaving behind fizzled adventures in the cities. Although there was no systematic migration statistics available in my two field sites, based on the scattered information I gathered from village cadres, officials, and local residents, an

estimated 90% households in both villages had at one point or another experienced labor migration during the past two decades.

Road construction has been another important event in Qiandongnan since the turn of the new millennium. Even though to this day many satellite villages are still confined by extreme remoteness and inaccessibility, it is the local government's primary goal to endow every village with at least one paved road so as to connect the people with goods, technologies, and the wide sociopolitical systems of the mainstream society. During my fieldwork, an inter-provincial highway (named *Xiarong gaosu* 厦蓉高速) and a cross-regional railroad (named *Guiguang gaotie* 贵广高铁) were being built, passing through villages in Qiandongnan, accelerating material transaction in this once hard-to-reach area. The developmental strategy of road construction reflects a deep-seated folk belief—"To become rich, one must build roads first (*yao zhifu, xian xiulu*)"—depicting the intricate linkage between road connectivity and wealth generation.

In one of my field sites Longxing, the nearby road construction had brought influx (though temporary) of construction workers and project managers to dine and shop in the village. More vegetables, meat, and alcohol were in demand, so were restaurants, family inns, karaoke bars, mahjong clubs, and miscellaneous goods stores. This gave village people income opportunities, and linked them to a cash economy more than ever before. Whereas a mere decade and a half ago, the trip from the village to the county seat involved one full day of crossing hills and valleys on an unpaved road accessible only by foot or horse caravans, now the same distance can be traveled in a matter of a few hours by means of motorcycles or public buses. The recent opening of an airport (2006) in the county seat of Liping has further reduced the time for tourists to reach Longxing, with flights connecting Liping to Guiyang, Guilin, and Guangzhou.

If tourism and road construction are considered catalysts for development, education is heralded as the most significant “soft” landmark of a modernizing Qiandongnan. High level of illiteracy and low level of universal basic education in Guizhou (with its middle school and high school enrollment rates among the lowest in China, see Zou 2009:25) is seen as ruptures of China’s educational modernity and hindrance for the sustainable implementation of the initiative to Open Up the West.

The pragmatic logic of “education for development” is sutured with the master narrative of modernization and promoted via the project of *wenhua fazhan* (cultural development) in Qiandongnan with a double register. The first task of the project is to capitalize on ethnic culture and folk heritage as the local comparative advantage and develop commercial tourism and crafts industry, the so-called modernizing through doing “cultural work.” The second task is to improve the educational attainment of the region, with the notion “culture” used in a problematic manner to indicate level of schooling as one’s “cultural worthiness.” Here, the mode of *wenhua fazhan* draws on two subtle appropriation of “culture,” one as exploitable resources to enact touristic “authenticity” (i.e. cultural tourism), the other as the marker of the moral-pedagogical supremacy of the Han-centric state-sponsored schooling. This is reflected in the government’s compulsory education scheme known as the “Two Basics Project” (TBP, *liangji* 两基)—i.e. universalization of nine-year basic education among school-age children and elimination of illiteracy among adults aged 15-45—to upgrade human resources for poverty alleviation and social development.

Since the 1990s, a number of education initiatives have been implemented, including the National Project on Compulsory Education in Poor Areas (NPCEPA) and various support programs channeling funds from schools in affluent eastern provinces to disadvantaged western regions (Zhang & Zhao 2006). In 2001, the central government allocated a modest 100 million

RMB to provide free textbooks to rural students in western China.³⁸ Resources allocated to rural sectors increased over the five years of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), under the aegis of the Scientific Development Paradigm (*kexue fazhan guan*) linking the improvement of education and human resources to the “scientific” rationality. Since 2006, a more progressive policy called Two Exemptions and One Subsidy (TEOS) was put into place on a national scale to eliminate tuition (first exemption) and miscellaneous instructional fees (second exemption), and provide subsidy to defray living costs for boarding students (one subsidy) whose families are below certain income level³⁹ (Brock et al. 2008; Wang 2008).

TEOS’ main catchment area is the “underdeveloped” western regions characterized as “peripheral” (*bian 边*), “impoverished” (*qiong 穷*), and “ethnic” (*shao 少*). The elimination of miscellaneous school fees was first implemented in western provinces in 2006, extended to the central provinces in 2007, and to all provinces in 2008, with costs shared among the central state, provincial, prefectural, and county-level governments (Brock et al. 2008). Targeting at the reduction of out-of-pocket costs for basic education, TEOS marks a new approach in promoting universal basic education (*pu jiu*) and equal school access through student financial assistance. Other policies include consolidation of rural schools by moving children into township schools from understaffed, ill-resourced remote teaching points (*jiaoxue dian*) that often have multi-grades taught consecutively in the same room by the same teacher (*fushi jiaoxue*).

Whether through the massive scale of state-sponsored road construction or the compulsory technologies of universal basic education, whether through the influx of pleasure-seeking cultural tourists, the out-floating of peasant-workers, or the ubiquitous presence of the

³⁸ Statistics indicate that over 80% of the nation’s primary schools and 64% junior middle school are located in rural areas. See Zhang & Zhao 2006: 262.

³⁹ Each province has its own subsidy standard, which generally ranges from 20 to 30 RMB per student per month, or 200 to 350 RMB per student per year.

television and mobile phones, change is a sustained theme in Qiandongnan. The parochial, solitary, and sequestered rural life once depicted by Fei Xiaotong (1999), where people lived from birth to death in the same village-hamlet and where customary rituals and communal intimacy reigned the order of things, is no longer, if ever, an accurate account of the life in Qiandongnan.

Ethnographic Context, Research Design, and Methodology

Both Xjiang and Longxing are the administrative village-township seats and touted as the most visited places in Qiandongnan, representing the Miao and the Dong people respectively. They were carefully chosen as the field sites for a number of reasons, including their commensurate popularity as ethnic tourism destinations (as evidenced in media coverage and guidebooks, volume of incoming tourists), strikingly similar tourism planning strategies (cooperation of county, prefectural, and provincial governments with private companies), comparable size (both are marketed as the largest enclave of their respective ethnicity in the country), compatibilities of folk customs,⁴⁰ equivalent proportion of village labor out-migrants,⁴¹ and most importantly, homologous educational policies.

In Qiandongnan Prefecture, the Dong and the Miao make up the majority of the population. Both are depicted in media slogans as ancient nationalities who are industrious and brave, sincere and kind, and patriotic towards the motherland, whose cultural practices and coarseness of rural “authenticity” (*yuanshengtai*) are appropriated for tourism consumption. Both peoples depend upon subsistence agriculture of wet-rice cultivation, with the main crops

⁴⁰ Despite linguistic and geographic differences, the Miao and the Dong in Qiandongnan share a number of characteristics such as musical virtuosity, subsistence rice farming, shamanism, ancestor worship etc.

⁴¹ In both villages, per the residents’ own rough calculation, nearly 90 percent of the households have had labor migration experience at one time or another. Although the recent spike of tourism has attracted a sizable number of returnees, an average household still has at least one family member working outside the village.

being rice and corn, supplemented by soybean, peas, cotton, and potato. In both Majiang and Longxing, besides rice farming, villagers engage in cow and pig husbandry, and occasionally, artisanal occupations such as carpentry and stone masonry. In recent decades, subsistence farming has been supplemented by factory-work, logging, and tourism.

While the Miao settle mostly in the northern mountainous part of the prefecture, the Dong reside on lower southern plains along the Duliu River. Historically, the better-off ethnic groups tended to occupy more fertile lowlands, whereas less powerful ones were forced to seek dwellings on high hills. Compared with the highlander Miao who were considered barbaric and rebellious in their encounters with the Han, the Dong were historically subject to fewer repressive measures and generally had more peaceful and harmonious co-existence with the Han. Presently, the Dong has a population of 3 million,⁴² residing primarily in Guizhou (55%), Hunan (28%), and Guangxi (10%). The Miao has a population of 8.9 million⁴³ nation-wide, scattering mostly in Guizhou (48%), Hunan (14%), and Yunnan (12%). Each has several subgroups marked by distinct dialects, festivals, songs, clothing, and architecture, who are spread in southwestern provinces. Despite the intra-group differences, the Miao and the Dong obtained minority status during the 1956 ethnic classification campaign.

Known as the thousand-Miao-household village (*qianhu miaozhai*), Majiang is touted to be the largest Miao enclave in China. Located in Leishan county, Xjiang is tucked in the deep valley of the Bala River and the hidden terrains of Mt. Leigong. Leigong Mountain is the geographic peak (with 2,178 meter summit) of the mountain range locally known as *Miaoling* where the Miao rebels made their last retreat during their confrontation with the Qing imperial authorities. Majiang's strategic import as well as historical legends of Miao uprisings against dynastic oppressions (such as those led by Zhang Xiumei and Yang Daliu) initiated its distinct

⁴² See Cornet 2009:195.

⁴³ Data obtained from the Majiang Ethnological Museum.

position in the geopolitics of Qiandongnan. Today's Majiang is conveniently situated some 37 kilometers from the county seat Leishan, close to the borders with Taijiang County to the northeast, and Kaili Municipality to the northwest. Officially the name of the administrative township (*zhen*), Majiang is more often associated with the grand village, i.e. Majiang proper, which is composed of eight natural villages with more than one thousand households and over five thousand Miao villagers concentrated in a single massive community. First-time visitors to Majiang are unfailingly impressed with its charm: patches of rice paddies cascading on the mountain slope and layers of wooden houses neatly spreading like fish scales at the foothill of the Mt. Leigong.

Longxing is a village-town situated in the Duliu basin in the southeastern corner of Qiandongnan, tucked away in the locally revered Mt. Sasui at the bottom of an enclosed valley. With 4000 or so inhabitants living in some 800 households, 95% of whom are of the Dong ethnic nationality, Longxing is the designated administrative center of 22 outlying village hamlets (political division called *cun*) and 52 tribes (geographical division called *zhai*), with an area of 130 square kilometers. Longxing proper borders Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and sits some 65 kilometers away from the county seat Liping. It is divided administratively into three villages of Upper Longxing, Middle Longxing, and Longxing, and traditionally composed of five clans or "drum tower groups" each represented by elders (*zhailao*) (Geary et al. 2003; Cornet 2010). Promoted to be the archetypal Dong village-town in southwest China, Longxing boasts five drum towers, five wind-and-rain bridges (also called roofed-bridges or flower-bridges), five opera stages, the Ganlan style wooden housing, and a scenic river (Longxing river) meandering through the village.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The Dong people traditionally prefer to build dwellings in close proximity with water for concerns of frequent fire hazards.

Surrounded by vast expanses of highland terraces and virgin forests that are packed densely and sloping gently into curved plains, Majiang is marketed as the world's largest Miao village and the "living fossil" of Miao history and culture. Similarly, Longxing is touted as one of China's most attractive ancient towns for its idyllic scenery, distinct Dong lifeways, as well as the resounding melodies of Dong polyphonal singing. Majiang extends its charm through row after row of mountain-side houses on stilts closely-knitted like fish scales; whereas Longxing, nestled in a maze of luxuriant rice fields stacked zigzag like mossy pancakes, exhibits the famed Drum Towers, Flower-Roofed Bridges, and Dong Opera Stages.

In a sense, both Majiang and Longxing are at once real and fabricated, tangible and imaginary. The media often portrays them through images of pastoral fantasies and vivid cultures, emblematic of nature and tradition, and sometimes sexually titillating. While the exoticism offers escapist pleasure to urban travelers, the ethnic peasants inhabit an immediate space of impoverishment, a consumerism brought by the tourist economy, and a hope for a better future through participation in the developmental scheme of tourism, mass education, and income-seeking labor migration. Whereas the urban sophisticates indulge the desire of "escape *to* nature" by setting foot on the artificially embellished ethnic enclaves, "escape *from* nature" becomes the prime *raison d'être* for the Dong and Miao youth who seek new membership in a world "out there" (a word more refined and alluring than the rugged and austere life on the soil), a desire partially nurtured by schooling.

To many urban travelers who set foot on Majiang and Longxing, they may well appear to be backwater places catching up with the fast moving train of China's economic ambition, traveling from the ex-primitive to the neo-modern world in hurried commercialization. Yet, due to the recent tourism boom and their administrative status as the village-township, both Majiang and Longxing have become the socioeconomic hub and the magnet for the surrounding

region.⁴⁵ They boast more income opportunities and outshine neighboring highland village-hamlets where lands are less fertile and life's hardship more abundant. Tourism has expanded the horizon of the good life for the local people, and attracted residents from nearby villages to come and work as shopkeepers, vegetable/fruit vendors, and hotel staff. Indeed, marketization has become a *modus operandi* in how villagers fashion their life and relate to each other.

Under the auspices of the National Tourism Administration and the Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau, both Xijaing and Longxing received funds for village makeover. The 2008 grand staging of the Guizhou Tourism Development Conference featured Majiang as its main site, which decidedly marked a turning point in Majiang's history. Seeing the Conference as a rare opportunity to promote tourism, now a vital part of the Kaili-centered regional economy, and to attract external investment, local governments invested heavily in construction to recast Majiang through a new face-lift.

The demolition and construction peaked in early 2008 as Majiang was getting ready for the Conference to take place in September of that year. Pebbled roads were paved throughout the village; scenic spots were designated and signs put up; a brand new performance square and riverside business road were carved out of the requisitioned farmlands; ticket houses were installed at gates to collect and sell park entries; two well-equipped public restrooms were put to use and staffed by attendants. Although Majiang was already known as one of the earliest tourist sites in Qiandongnan, by that summer, it had appeared drastically different, well groomed and "civilized" (*wenming*) with a deliberate aesthetics. The manicured image of the properly gated village enclave—with enclosed and monitored spaces—echoes the perceived cultured-ness associated with urban dwelling. At night Majiang looks like a dreamy city with the starry neon lights brightening up the hillside of houses; sometimes it still feels like a village when one

⁴⁵ On market days in Majiang, for instance, hundreds of people from near and afar converge to trade goods varying from agricultural produce, household items, pirated DVDs, clothes, pesticides, farming tools, pastries and candies.

ventures off the beaten track into the back alleys to be greeted by house dogs and pig roars; other times it seems like a country girl who recently underwent a plastic surgery and donned on ostentatious costume and makeup.

The official slogans touted the restructuring as a giant step forward in Majiang's development. The media also joined the effort to sensationalize (*chaozuo*, literally "stir-fry") Majiang as a model of ethnic cultural tourism. *Chaozuo*, a process of media or official packaging and maneuvering, has produced a representation of Majiang as a pop star, a brand name, a hit story of tourism success in Qiandongnan. Colorful brochures, news clips, MTVs, government-solicited books, and an entire Ethnological Museum were dedicated to the embellishment of the village and the increase of its value among potential investors. As part of the *chaozuo* campaign to attract instantaneous public attention, the prefecture spent a hefty honorarium arranging for the popular intellectual celebrity Yu Qiuyu to visit Majiang. As a result of a few days of brief sojourn, Yu conjured up pages of cultural commentaries in an article titled *Majiang: An Answer to All in the Name of Beauty (Majiang, yong meili huida yiqie)*, painting an ethnic paradise as remedy of modern melancholy. A stone plaque engraved with his writing was set up by the newly constructed performance square where tourists swarm to have pictures taken. Yu was later also invited to Longxing and produced a similar piece named *Longxing: The Journey Home (Longxing: yexu shi guitu)*.

While Majiang has garnered a considerable amount of public attention, Longxing has also begun to vie for recognition. In the early 1990s when domestic tourism was still a novelty, Longxing received primarily adventure-seeking foreign backpackers most of who were from France. Thanks to the 1986 debut of the Dong polyphonic choir singing at the Golden Autumn Arts Festival in France, the Dong and their musical talents captivated the highbrow Parisian

audience. Since then, the Dong Grand Choir, known as Kgal Laox in their own language and *dongzu dage* (侗族大歌) in Chinese, is reputed as the “crystal creeks of oriental symphony.”

Around 1994 and 1995, the number of tourists showed a noticeable sign of increase. A collaborated project between the Norwegian and the Chinese government established four ecological village museums in Guizhou, one of which is Longxing’s neighboring village of Tang’an. This also brought more tourists to Longxing. By the beginning of 2000s, Longxing had received sufficient amount of publicity in national and regional newspapers, guidebooks, and tourism websites. In 2004, it was designated as the scenic spot of import in the county of Liping. In 2005, in a competition sponsored by the Chinese National Geographic Magazine, Longxing received the status of “one of the six most charming ancient towns in China” (*zhongguo zuimei de xiangcun guzhen zhiyi*). In 2007, it was further listed among the top 33 most appealing tourist destinations in China by the American Fashion magazine and the National Geographic Magazine. In 2010, the successful enlisting of the Dong Grand Choir as the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage gave a further boost to the visibility of the Dong community.

Indeed, the espousal of ethnic tourism has become an accentuated background for the study of rural education. As much as the school is the educational apparatus of the state (Althusser 1971), rural tourism and other developmental programs symbolize the larger apparatus of power that tempers the effects and meanings of schooling.

Fieldwork in Qiandongnan

I carried out the main part of my field research in sixteen months between 2009 and 2010, dividing my time roughly equally between Longxing and Majiang. My connection with Qiandongnan dates back to two summers in 2006 and 2007 when I conducted pilot studies while serving as a volunteer for a local NGO for an English teacher training program. I made

acquaintances with many teacher trainees, some of whom later became my key informants. As a result, Majiang and Longxing were carefully chosen as the field sites because of their many aspects of similarities discussed earlier. Since then, I have kept in touch with some of my informants through emails, QQ (a popular online chatting program), letters, postcards, and phone calls.

By the time I arrived in Qiandongnan in early 2009, Majiang had already finished the grand village makeover, whereas the embellishment of Longxing had just begun. Wanting to experience firsthand the village transformation and its impact on schooling, rather than reconstructing it from interviews, I decided to start my fieldwork in Longxing. I was introduced to the village by a former teacher-trainee, with whom I acquainted during the summer volunteer program. Thanks to his introduction, I received immediate welcome and access to the daily activities of the schools (both primary and middle school). I lived in a rent room in the house of a schoolteacher's, and later moved to a farmer's family to live with a couple in their early fifties who tended the fields for a living. The couple had a son and a daughter, both married with a child. The daughter worked as a bartender in the village tourist street, while the son and the daughter-in-law had migrated to find jobs in Guangdong, leaving behind their child with the grandparents, my hosts. Occasionally during short visit stints, I would seek accommodation at the village youth hostel, thus collecting viewpoints from diverse social actors. I carried out the main part of my participant observation at the middle school and offered myself as a volunteer teacher. My daily activities included classroom observation, informal interviews with teachers and school staff, conversations with students, parents, and villagers, and conducting occasional home-visits and teaching duties. Meanwhile, I spent time observing and participating in miscellaneous communal events and collecting oral histories from village elders.

I moved to Majiang around October after establishing considerable rapport with the residents of Longxing and gathering a sizable amount of data about rural schools in Qiandongnan. I wanted to compare my preliminary findings in a similar context. The two villages are located at two far ends of the prefecture, making it a challenging task to travel in between. The journey involved three legs of bus trips totaling 13 hours or so, which usually took more than one day due to the precarious road conditions and haphazard bus schedules. Towards the end of my fieldwork, travels between the two villages became even more unpredictable, with roads frequently blocked and buses rerouted for the construction of the inter-provincial highway and railway that ran through Qiandongnan. Fortunately, the second part of my fieldwork went rather smoothly with my own heightened ethnographic sense of the region. My hosts in Majiang was a diligent Miao couple in their late forties who made a living as farmers and market vendors. I was introduced to them through an acquaintance who was optimistic about the connection because the male host used to serve as one of the tribe leaders in Majiang. When he later retired from his duties, he converted his house into a family-inn-cum-restaurant and started tourism business, with the help from his high-school-dropout son. This living arrangement presented me with a first-hand picture of everyday experience and narratives of education and tourism.

Like in Longxing where I learned Dong, I spend considerable amount of time learning the local language in Majiang, using it as an important opportunity to converse and establish rapport with villagers. Even though Mandarin is the official language of the educational system and the media, most people in this part of the country preferred to use variants of the Guizhou dialect among friends and colleagues, and speak their native tongues (such as Miao or Dong) among fellow villagers and kinsmen. Those who conversed only Mandarin were clearly set apart in the local social scenes. I carried a notebook with me everywhere I went, jotting down words and

phrases of the Miao and Dong languages, marking the pronunciation with a mixture of Mandarin, my native Fujianese dialect, and English whenever I felt their phonetic features came close to what I was hearing. The locals were amused by my effortful attempts and my notebook scribbling. At times they questioned me with “What is the use of learning our language? You’ll find it irrelevant outside of this mountain region,” indicating there were other things in which to better invest my time. At the same time, they “rewarded” my efforts by giving me a Miao name⁴⁶ and gradually only remembered me by that name. The naming, to me, was a sign of recognition and acceptance, and the strengthening of bond over time.

The length of time I spent in the villages afforded me the luxury of gathering data without pestering people with pre-formulated questions and without too much reliance on technology, such as taping and recording. I conducted the fieldwork primary through informal conversations, with little formal note taking in the presence of my participants. I situate the study in places that are not self-evident locations for a typical “school ethnography”—classrooms, school compounds, corridors, village streets, markets, households, performance stages, rice fields, drum towers, roofed-bridges, restaurant dining rooms, factory floors, and so on. I was able to fully participate in community events and engage in daily activities such as meals, outings, games, farming, fishing, births and burials, which provided me with a more nuanced picture of local lives and social dynamics. I spent as much time outside as within the schools, learning about such things as kinship, indigenous social organization, festivals, local politics and patterns of meaning making.

⁴⁶ My Miao name was given to me by some middle school teachers, and refers to a type of vegetable commonly used in making pickled fish soup. In the Miao community, females are usually named after natural objects that are important to an agrarian livelihood, such as vegetable, flower, bird, water, rice, and so on.

Inside the school, I was introduced as Ms. Wu, or sometimes Dr. Wu.⁴⁷ To many students, my presence was nothing short of a curiosity and a welcomed diversion to their dreary school routine. In the beginning, I often ran into muffled giggles and subdued glances in the hallway. My appearance and demeanor clearly set myself apart from the familiar social milieu. As time went by, as I made every effort to engage in students' daily activities, such as in ping-pong matches after school and in outings on market days, the initial guarded reservation started to wear away. It was clear to them that I "hung out" in the office often and had apparent ties with their teachers, yet I was not someone who would judge them harshly by the same standards. Inasmuch as they were concerned, I was an obviously older person⁴⁸ from a different social world, didn't neatly fit in the existing institutional role, and maintained a separation from the authoritarian culture of the school.

The bulk of my fieldwork took place in 2009, a year with a calendar-ful of ceremonial events, among which were the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the 50th anniversary of Tibet's liberation and incorporation into the Chinese society, and the 20th anniversary of the 1989 pro-democracy movement and the Tian'anmen massacre. The sensitive political conditions of the year had partially shaped the contour and possibility of my fieldwork in distinctive ways. In one sense, as a Chinese citizen and the "homecoming" researcher, I was generously received by local communities and viewed with respect and, oftentimes, curiosity. On the other hand, because I came from a foreign university, my prolonged presence in the villages was highly visible and the ethnographic experience entangled with local politics.

⁴⁷ To the locals, one who enrolls in a doctoral program is commonly referred to as doctor, an appellation that blurs the distinction between degree candidacy and degree conferral.

⁴⁸ Students generally were not concerned with my age, as adolescents tend to have only vague ideas of what happens beyond early twenties.

Ethnographer is not a common occupational category that most people were familiar with. At times my extended stay raised the eyebrow of the local state authorities who were afraid I was the academic spy from the “west” and would disclose unfavorable information to make China “loose face.” At others, the village teachers urged me—in their mind, someone well educated and not liable to the local bureaucratic restriction—to publish articles and speak for them, which often put me in ethical dilemmas. I had to avoid direct confrontation with officialdom while keeping a balanced emotional and moral engagement, an unease that stayed with me throughout the fieldwork.

As in any fieldwork, different stakeholders of the community like, trust, interact with the researcher to different degrees (Eckert, 1989: 34). Ethnographic emplacement is, after all, a theoretical ideal that could perhaps never be obtained. Familiar unfamiliarity, outside insider, emplaced displacement, such paradoxes are prevalent themes in the everyday practicality of fieldwork. Walking a fine line to hopefully obtain a reasonable balance is all that can be endeavored for, which makes ethnographic knowing even more contingent and aporetic. When necessary, I have concealed certain details to protect my informants, altering or deleting markers that would make them easily identifiable. Pseudonyms were also used to maintain anonymity.

Born and raised in one of China’s most affluent southern provinces, and affiliated with a university abroad, I was regularly recognized as an “outsider” socially, economically, and culturally by my informants. I was acutely aware of my privileged position granted by my education and the institutional and financial support⁴⁹ I had received. My ethnographic experience was also influenced in great part by the gender role I played in different settings, as social interactions are always shaped by broader patterns of meanings regarding gender,

⁴⁹ The ethnographic portion of the research was jointly funded by the International Dissertation Research Fellowship of the Social Science Research Council, as well as the Tashia Morgridge Distinguished Wisconsin Fellowship.

identity, and status (Golde 1986; Lewin 2006). Doing fieldwork in my late twenties, I received incessant inquiries about my marriage status and career plans. I was often gently scolded with good-natured advice that there were more sensible things to do for my age, in particular, marriage. As I advanced my intimacy with the community, people in their repetitive manner had even exhorted me, half-jokingly, to consider settling down in the region. I remained an “observer observed” just as much as an “observing observer.”

On the other hand, in the locals’ eyes, I represented the fabulous image of success beyond the bounds of regular village womanhood, living an “easy life” on overseas grants. They expressed puzzlement with regards my presence in their midst and with heightened awareness of their own positionality: why would an American-educated person come all the way to this remote mountain enclave to study the villages and the schools? Indeed, they know very well that schooling had offered me the access to mobility and the possibility to bridge social worlds. To them, I am not an average tourist; I am a symbol of good life with bountiful blessings—well educated, socially mobile, linguistically and culturally versatile, possessing the desired “*suzhi*” offered by schooling, family background, and personal endeavor. As they continued to voice their bewilderment and admiration, it was brought home to me the centrality of schooling in people’s understanding of a good life.

Yet, I was never an oppositional Other to the residents of Majiang and Longxing. What better describes me is perhaps the “inappropriate/d other,” to borrow Chu’s reflection of her own foreign-native spectrum of difference in her fieldwork among Fuzhounese Chinese (2010: 16). In the least, I share an overlapping positioning with my research participants as their Chinese co-nationals. My positionality does not stand still, however. During my fieldwork, the varieties of exchange I have experienced cannot be compartmentalized into the neat binary of insider/outsider. I was at times perceived as threatening western-educated researcher, at others

assimilated as a “local” woman—especially after considerable rapport was built and my linguistic capacities improved—and treated as an intimate friend and a family member. I was welcomed by the villagers as someone who was interested enough in the Miao and Dong people to willingly “endure hardships” (*chiku*) of living there for a prolonged time. The labels of “teacher,” “researcher,” and “sister,” “auntie,” etc. affixed to me increased my sensitivity to my multifaceted identities of being within and outside the ethnic culture, of being on a cultural continuum where China sometimes represented a Self and sometimes slipped as an Other, and sometimes the Self-Other distinctions collapsed altogether. My own biography and the transnational routes I’ve engaged in afford me with a series of affinities and connections, and at the same time, pose limits on the type of narratives I can offer.

Chapter Two

The Two Basics Project (TBP): Compulsory Education and its Participatory Limits

Traveling in Qiandongnan, one often passes by roadside bulletin boards displaying enlarged messages “Today’s education is tomorrow’s economy;” “Today’s dropout is tomorrow’s poverty;” “Nice years of hardship for parents is a lifetime of happiness for a child.” This reflects a common practice across China: party slogans are emblazoned to preach ready-made remedies for issues of pressing concern. As Hansen and Steputat argue, the state makes itself “real and tangible through symbols, texts, and iconography,” even though the local everyday practices may go beyond “the state’s own prose, categories, and perspectives” (2001:5). Such state-sponsored narratives imprinted on the landscape do not simply function to mobilize the masses; they constitute a particular way of seeing and believing—a habit of thoughts—to be embraced for a greater good. Formalized display of slogans works to create and maintain an obscure matrix of social reality (Lu 2004: 49) and undergirds the projection of the party-state as the uniformed voice of the “people as one” (Anagnost 1997: 98).

In 1986, nearly four decades after the founding of the People’s Republic, China legislated compulsory elementary and middle school attendance, making basic education (grade one through nine) a legal obligation. While the state mandates nine years of schooling free and compulsory, through propaganda discourse such as those displayed on the enlarged billboards along the highway, to many rural ethnic residents, schooling does not change one’s destiny as much as the slogans claim. When I spoke to the Miao and Dong interlocutors in Qiandongnan, a great number of them expressed doubts about whether schooling is a

worthwhile pursuit given its cost and occupational outcome.¹ Instead of seeing education as the panacea to poverty, they have their own calculation. For many, they know very well they have little practical chance of continuing beyond junior middle school (catchment level of compulsory education); and to follow the state scheme of schooling, the cost is high and the benefit is unpredictable. Yet another invisible cost is related to the absence of school-going members from attending household chores and agricultural duties.

This suggests several sensibilities: the “opting-out” by rural ethnic population from China’s long-standing efforts to “uplift” the “peripheral” people into modernity through education; people’s re-appropriation of schooling in light of its exchange value for a better life rather than as public good and patriotic symbol; their disenchantment with the claims of schooling as a source of prosperity and their embrace of work as a more realistic path to social mobility. In the words of some rural parents and students, it is highly risky to empty one’s bank account in the vain hope of securing a good life through education. A great many middle school students drop out, often with the tacit consent of their parents, to work at low-skilled and low-paying factory jobs in Guangdong—a coastal province prominent in labor-intensive manufacturing—seeking a self-making dream that the school fails to bring to fruition. For them, schooling means little more than fulfilling the minimal requirements for becoming assembly-line workers.

What causes such profound discontent given China’s centuries-old Confucian ideology that sings high praise for learning and the state’s unrelenting efforts to compulsorize basic education? What happened to the cherished folk belief in obtaining the ultimate social status of scholar-officialdom through education (*xue er you ze shi*)? To understand the disenchantment in

¹ This is quite different from the findings that suggest an acute desire for academic success among Chinese students (Kipnis 2011) and the quest for elite status and transnational citizenship through study abroad, especially among the Chinese singleton generation (Fong 2011).

China's rural ethnic education is to understand the ecology of contemporary Chinese society and its project of uplifting "the rural" and "the ethnic" from the national burden to national assets through a variety of social policies.

This chapter unpacks the disenchantment through examining one facet of the ecology of rural schooling, i.e. the state's compulsory education policy commonly known as the Two Basics Project, or TBP. I will explore how the policy's universalist understanding of education jars with a rich array of cosmologies, episteme, and subjectivities to encumber students' participation. The Miao and the Dong people have their own notion of the "educated person" (Levinson and Holland 1996), yet they are often considered "illiterate" under the policy frame. Instead of merely examining what factors contribute to the policy failure, the analysis questions the very "progressive" ideals and teleological visions at work in China's educational programming, and challenges binaries such as literacy/illiteracy, cultured/uncultured, modernity/traditionalism. I will now turn to the discursive practices through which schooling is mobilized as a compulsory technology of the Chinese state, through a brief examination of China's education policies.

Village Schools, Nation State, and Compulsory Technologies

Poor and unschooled, one can never remove the root of impoverishment; well-off and unschooled, one's prosperity will not last long.

-----Roadside message

The nation, society and the family must all ensure the education of the nation's citizens. This is necessary for the development of modern productivity and modern life and is an indicator of modern civilization. The basic education of our nation is still very backward and this is in sharp contradiction with the urgent need for our nation's people to construct a prosperous, democratic, civilized modern socialist society.

Section Two of the Decision on Educational Structural Reform 1985²

² Cited In Kong (2008:14), Also see Tsang (2000) for documents on the 1985 Reform of the Educational System.

A sentiment of eagerness can be discerned from the above quotes, which present a school-to-the-social-rescue model in which prosperity and schooling are woven into interdependency. Just as the educational craze speaks to the well-to-do urban parents' sense of social insecurity,³ the state ordinance of compulsory education legislates a collective anxiety. It is still a widely claimed belief—though at times dubious—that the school needs to, and will, redress the cycle of poverty among the “lesser” population, however that “lesser” is defined in geographic (remote, rural), economic (low-income), or cultural (ethnic minority) terms. Even though we have little reason to believe such ontological validity of the school is still self-evident today, it cannot be easily brushed away.

“Learning for development” seems the predominant way of thinking about education, with school upheld as the “solution” of underdevelopment, especially of the peripheral regions. Despite decades of decentralization, China maintains an educational system with the nation-state as a central arbiter of learning. Noticeably, in almost every Qiandongnan village I traveled to, no matter how remote it is, the school stands as a visible marker of the state's moral and pedagogical supremacy, such that some argues the school *is* the state in the village (*cunluo zhong de guojia*, see Li 1999).

This can be seen in the weekly flag raising ceremony as the salutation to the paramount symbol of the state; the young pioneer initiation when first grade pupils are conferred the red scarves and pledge dedication to communism; the learning of national history and geography via a curriculum replete with state-sponsored memories and dictums; the participation in the

³ The sense of insecurity is exacerbated by the fact that due to China's birth policy most urban children are “singletons” and the “only hope” of their family (see Fong 2004).

communist youth league (*gongqingtuan*) by politically aspiring adolescents.⁴ In addition, with mural exhibition of party slogans and wall decorations of images and quotations by designated celebrities, the Chinese schools are bombarded with discourse (*wenzi hongzha*) that sanctions what is thinkable and permissible in the pedagogical space (see figure #4). As Coe puts, “Schools are one of the most sustained zones of contact most people have with the state, and they become a way for the state to attempt to reach and shape its populace” (2005:4). Bourdieu also argues that the pedagogical mission of the state is to “produce and impose (especially through the school system) categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things of the social world—including the state itself” (1999:53).



Figure#4: A primary school covered with state edicts stressing the centennial importance of education and curriculum reform to the Chinese nation (photo courtesy of Ruan Yuan).

Needless to say, across the globe schooling is widely employed to fashion national culture and develop national economy, as the nation-state’s witness and emissary (Bloch 2004;

⁴ China has arguably one of the most centralized and bureaucratic educational systems in the world. With many aspects of schooling strictly regulated by the state to maintain uniformity, public schools across the nation share some constant features.

Coe 2005; Kaplan 2006). It is rooted in the historical ideal of “education for social efficacy,” which, although widely circulated across time and space, has particular historical reasoning in the Chinese context. This can be discerned from Confucian writings:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the empire, first ordered well their own state. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost of their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things (Legge 1861:221).

Confucius links learning and extension of knowledge to human perfection, and ultimately the betterment of the imperial governance. Significant about the linkage is the belief that humans can, and must, be worked upon, self-consciously and meticulously, so as to cultivate ideal personhood (*junzi*) and by extension, bring about the virtuous order of the state. The affinity between individual learning and state governing heralds the state as the sovereign authority of learning and as guardian of values and agent of change. The cultivation of personhood and the efforts towards human perfectibility⁵ is not only the zest of the Confucian enlightenment—as quoted—but also the zest of the modernizing Chinese nation-state.

⁵ The cultivation of personhood is an essential element of classic Confucian moral doctrine. It is based on the assumption that cosmic forces, inexorably influenced by human actions, determine the stability of social and political affairs. Therefore, human actions need to be rectified and perfected to achieve the ultimate virtue *ren* (i.e. benevolence) and greater social harmony. The ledgers of merit and demerit were introduced as a category of morality book (*shanshu*, literally “good books”) in the 16th and 17th centuries to record one’s daily tally of “good” and “bad” behaviors in order to teach people to do good and avoid evil (Brokaw 1991). The perfectibility thus cultivated is one that ultimately contributes to larger schemes of cosmic order, which was particularly emphasized in time of social change and shifting values.

According to the National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development⁶ (2010-2020), a twenty-two-chapter comprehensive document approved by the State Council and released in May 2010, the schools nationwide will adopt a humanistic approach to promoting equity, quality, and innovation in order to realize education modernization by 2020. The Outline lays out the strategic goals and direction of Chinese education for the next ten years: to modernize the world's largest-scale education system; to form a learning society; and to transition from a country abundant in population (*renkou daguo*) to one rich in human resources (*renli ziyuan daguo*). In order to “orient education towards modernization, towards the world, and towards the future” (*mianxiang xiandaihua, mianxiang shijie, mianxian weilai*), a spirit advanced by the late party leader Deng Xiaoping, the Outline states:

The contemporary world is undergoing drastic development, transformation, and adjustment and is witnessing economic globalization, advancement in science and technology, and fierce competition for human talents. Our country stands at a critical moment of reform and development. We are advancing comprehensively in economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological civilization, while deepening reforms in information and technology, industrialization, urbanization, marketization, and globalization. Meanwhile, pressures from the population, natural resources, and the environment are increasing. All this points to the urgency to improve the overall quality of the citizenry and cultivate innovative human capital. The future of China and the revival of the Chinese nation rests crucially upon its human talents and education.⁷

⁶See http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-07/29/content_1667143.htm for the Outline (a.k.a. 《国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要》)

⁷ Author's translation.

With a sense of excitement and urgency, the Outline pledges universal literacy⁸ by 2020 through solidifying compulsory education, raising fiscal expenditure in education to 4% of GDP⁹ by 2012, and reorienting distance-education system to promote life-long learning. It addresses a series of educational issues of public concern, including burden of homework, efficacy of high-stake testing, campus safety management,¹⁰ unequal access to quality education, and privatization in higher education. In the usual jargony and formulaic tone, full of flattered proses and empty clichés, the document spells out the top reform priorities in a cluster of three interlinked keywords: universality, equity, and quality. As typical of Chinese legislative documents, such discourse functions as a floating signifier and a rhetorical device. Yet it reflects China's continual reliance on instrumental use of law to effect changes and rectify problems, part of the global trend of using legislation to effect education reforms and address social and national goals (Law 2007). It also indicates a shift of concern from quantitative provision (access) to quality of schooling.

Education policies in China are thoroughly wedded to a functionalist premise that links education to economic efficiency, better jobs, greater wealth and social good. Within the functionalist premise, education works to maintain social cohesion and national belonging among culturally, linguistically, and ethnically heterogeneous populace, and provide occupational and social skills for economic development (see Durkheim 1956). If, as Durkheim (1963) contends (see also Yeatman 2001), law indicates social consensus in how the subject is morally and juridically constituted, the enforcement of compulsory education indexes the

⁸ The Outline mandates that no child shall be allowed to drop out due to family financial difficulties.

⁹ China's fiscal educational expenditure was 3.48% of GDP in 2008, lower than the world average of 4.5%, according to a Xinhua news report. See http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-07/29/c_13421364.htm. Some in the Ministry of Finance argue, however, that the 4% goal is challenging to meet as other sectors such as agriculture, science and technology, health care, and social security are also vying for state funding.

¹⁰ This is in partial response to the devastating 2008 Sichuan earthquake that wiped out millions of lives, many of who were school children dwelling under unsafe school houses.

interpellation of the child-citizen as a universal right-bearing subject in service to the nation. Within the legislative orbit of compulsory schooling, education is both a right and an obligation that holds citizenship and the state in a binding treaty. The state's custodial responsibility is translated into the school's tutelary function to ensure the minimum length of education as a child-citizen's obligatory salutation to the nation. It is worth noting that the cultural legacies of Confucian self cultivation/perfection in service to social harmony are espoused as the moral foundations upon which the bureaucratic/judicial apparatus of compulsory schooling is built. The moral and juridical constitution of the child, in a sense, mutually enhances each other in the state educational discourse.

Brief History of China's Compulsory Education Policies

Two themes are constant in China's educational reform: the popularization of nine-year compulsory education and the recognition of rural education as the greatest obstacle to its achievement. Based on the belief that the country's competitiveness in the global arena depends on equipping the largest stratum of manpower with basic literacy, both themes have been intertwined in a number of policy documents released since the 1980s. The 1986 "Law on Compulsory Education" marks the first of such major efforts, stipulating the gradual extension of universal basic education to all school-age children regardless of gender, ethnicity, region, religion, and family socioeconomic status.

By 1994, after one and a half decades of reform and opening up, Chinese society was in a prime position to revisit its national education strategies. The 1994 Outline of Educational Reform and Development (*jiaoyu gaige he fazhan gangyao*) fulfilled just this purpose. Upheld as the blueprint for building a socialist educational system with Chinese characteristics, the 1994 Outline sets the twin goals to universalize nine-year compulsory education and eradicate

illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults by 2000, an ambitious undertaking commonly referred to as the Two Fundamentals/Basics Project (TBP, *liangji*). Three stages of the implementation of TBP are specified: the first stage (1994-1996) involves affluent coastal municipalities that accounts for 40-45% of the population; the second stage (1997-1998) covers the medium-range developed regions, about 20-25% of the population; the third and the last stage (1999-2000) targets the least prosperous parts of the country, roughly 15% of the population concentrated in western inland regions.¹¹ Affluent coastal provinces located around the two burgeoning economic zones (the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta) took universal junior secondary education (*pujiu* 普九) by flying colors in the late 1990s, when rural schools in Qiandongnan were still struggling for universal primary education (*puliu* 普六).

Just a year after the 1994 Outline was proposed, a joint initiative by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance was also put to effect. As suggested by the title, the National Project on Compulsory Education in Poor Areas (NPCEPA), it highlights the principle of using education as an aid program for poverty reduction. With the first priority given to universal primary education and then universal junior secondary education, the comprehensive intervention of NPCEPA was put forward in two phases (1995-2000 and 2001-2005). Some of its measures¹² include providing basic school facilities, training teachers and principals, distributing free textbooks, and improving ICT. It also established a regional assistance program channeling resources from coastal municipalities to inland provinces, and mobilized international donor communities (Zhang & Zhao 2006: 266). NPCEPA primarily targets rural ethnic regions and links educational investment with productivity enhancement and poverty

¹¹ Policy Document entitled "Circular of the National Ministry of Education Concerning the Implementation of Popularizing Nine-Year Compulsory Education and Eliminating Illiteracy among Young and Middle-Aged Adults." No. 19940901.

¹² To aid the implementation of TBP, which falls under the scope of NPCEPA, the Ministry of Education allocates annual per student expenditure (*sheng jun jingfei*)—70 RMB per primary schooler and 150 RMB per middle schooler—to rural schools in designated counties.

reduction. The language of “poverty” is sutured with the ordering impulse of the state to transform nation building into the making of a productive human resource through compulsory schooling.

Recently, the “National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” reinstates the necessity to strengthen rural education by increasing educational expenditure on basic infrastructure including lab equipments, libraries, sports facilities, and dormitories. Since 2000, budgetary inputs from the central government became the chief source of funding for rural compulsory education, gradually eliminating substitute teaching and education surcharges previously imposed on farmers. As a result, the share of government spending out of total national expenditure on rural education increased from 62 % in 1999 to 81% in 2004, granting school building repairs, eliminating textbook fees and miscellaneous school fees, and dispensing living allowances for boarding students (Ding 2008: 55).

By the beginning of the 2000s, however, TBP did not meet its stated goal and timeline in many of the inland provinces, including Guizhou, which spurred the State Council to add another 10 billion RMB (2003-2007) to aid the western areas. In 2004, the “National Action Plan for Advancing Education Development” was released, proposing further interventions, including curriculum reform for quality education, in-service teacher training, promoting distance learning and vocational schools (Zhang & Zhao 2006). In 2006, the “Two Exemptions and One Subsidy Policy (*liang mian yi bu*)” was implemented to further public expenditure on rural education, eliminating tuition and miscellaneous fees and providing small sums of living subsidies for boarding students from low-income families.

To optimize teaching resources and promote quality education, in 2004, the Rural Primary School Merger Program began in earnest to expand rural boarding schools and to close up “teaching points.” Teaching points are usually remote primary schools with extreme resource shortage, which cover only two to four grade levels, often with one or two teachers teaching and supervising students in the entire school. Relocating students from teaching points in village-hamlets to larger boarding schools in center village-towns becomes an unstoppable trend in rural China. In the governmental rationality, teachers in township centers are better trained and capable of offering a wide range of subjects, and better educational resources are more readily available, such as science labs, libraries, and sports amenities. Boarding students could receive “two exemptions” of tuition and miscellaneous fees, and “one subsidy” of a small sum of living expense (thirty to forty RMB weekly, equivalent to five to six U.S. dollars), if the earning of their family falls below the state designated poverty level. Local families, however, are not too sanguine about the idea of having their children, especially daughters, board in larger schools for five or six days a week away from home. The Rural Primary School Merger Program has fueled heated local debates (Pang 2006). Given that schooling barely transitions to salarized economic opportunities, many parents are indifferent towards the constant pendulum swing of state education initiatives.

With the combination of measures, by 2010 when I concluded my fieldwork, after an intense round of national inspection (*guojian*), China had declared the success of universal basic education (TBP). By then, the last cluster of provinces (including Guizhou) had boarded China’s fast moving train of educational modernization. Despite TBP’s ambitious pronouncement of close to zero attrition rate and 100% grade promotion, in both Majiang and Longxing, over 30% students opted out of the cycle of basic education, making universal literacy an unattainable goal.

Alongside, beneath, and intersecting the mantra of TBP lie incommensurable ways of knowing and reasoning that do not always correspond with the compulsory script. In the following, I will take a close look at such incommensurability, how it provides important insights to why the liberatory perspective of TBP often meets with resistance and disenchantment.

Participatory Limits as Situated Subjectivity

On a hot and humid summer morning, barely seven o'clock, the roadside market in Longxing was teeming with commotions. Vegetables were being unloaded from trucks and scattered onto wooden counters. Umbrellas were being pitched up; water buckets, stools, and scales were being put out. Leefang, an eighth-grade dropout, sat on a stool, cracking soybeans while awaiting customers. When I asked her what she was doing there, she answered with a naughty grin, "School is over for me; I am a vegetable girl (*cai guniang*) now, because I suck at school and our family is poor." The early summer heat produced shiny sweat on her tanned skin and thickened the long fringe of hair hanging on her forehead.

Meanwhile, her parents were unloading sacks of vegetables from a secondhand truck they recently purchased. The mother was a husky-voiced woman with dry, wrinkled face. She had barely finished third grade and had little facility in Mandarin. The father was a dark, bony man in his early forties who recently came back from migrant work in Guangdong Province. When I asked why he decided to come back, he shrugged, " We worked on the construction site eleven hours a day and got paid about one hundred kuai. After daily expense on foods, bus fares, phone calls, and cigarettes, half of the pay was gone. It was tiring work with very little money. So I decided to come back; we are poor here but it is home nonetheless. And nobody is there to boss you around." With the purchase of the pickup truck, he started vegetable vending, and his daughter and wife helped out during off-seasons when there was little to do in the field.

The nearby highway construction had brought contract workers and project managers to dine and shop at Longxing, which increased the demands for goods and offered cash opportunities for villagers. When I asked the father what he wanted for Leefang now she was out of school, he sighed:

We can't afford to keep her in school. Every hundred kuai she makes would help. Plus we need her to take care of the house chores and her little brother. And she is not really interested in school after all. China already has too many talented people. Even college graduates have a hard time finding jobs these days, let alone our kids in the remote mountain village. The teaching quality here is poor, and we don't have any social connection (*guanxi*) to help our children get jobs. If I keep my daughter in school, she's not going to make it after all. She will still end up working in factories. So why waste the time and the money? Besides, schooling makes them lazy and incapable of farm work.

Every day before dawn, Leefang and her parents would set out in the rattling truck towards a neighboring village to get their wholesale produce, which they would then retail at the Longxing market. In her usual jovialness, Leefang showed me a handful of dog-eared bills she made that day: "One hundred kuai this morning. Pretty good. Some days are good and some days are bad." Later on, when the construction workers left and the vegetable sales went down, Leefang found a temporary job at a local restaurant, helping to cook, serve, and clean dishes, making 700 kuai a month.

There is a gender dimension to dropout, which, although not the focus of this study, deserves some explanation. Throughout China's long agrarian history, manual labor has been a major source of survival and male offspring were needed to carry out farm work, provide for the household, take care of aging parents, and carry on familial lineage. To date, in China's rural

regions, there remains a strong preference for sons. In circumstances when household resources are scarce, male advantage becomes apparent: higher school enrollment rate, more nutritional input, greater parental attention and familial investment. As Leefang's story reveals, one of the reasons she dropped out was to help look after her younger brother. Although I was unable to obtain the statistics on the proportion of female dropouts in Majiang and Longxing, many participants did express the belief that educational attainment of girls is less valuable because girls are expected to marry and not inherit the family lineage. Literature on gender and schooling in rural China indicates that rural female school enrollment at the primary and junior secondary level (Grade 1-9) has historically lagged behind that of males and that girls are more likely to drop out when household cash income is in shortage and when parents have to choose between sending a son or a daughter to school (see Connelly & Zheng 2003; Hannum 2002; Davis et al. 2007).

Leefang told me if she had her way she would like to have finished 9th grade and gone to a vocational school. "I don't want to be selling vegetable or doing temp jobs for the rest of my life. People say I have a talent with my tongue. I want to be a tour guide or a sales lady." Yet her dream was dampened, too early, by the survivalist exhortation from her parents and the debilitating experience at school.

During 7th grade, I could still understand the subjects. Then in 8th grade, they became so difficult. I was in the lower track, and sitting through the classes was a torture. We are *chasheng* (underachievers) and our teachers only cared for students in the higher track. They were disrespectful and often called us stupid cows. Sometimes, they disgraced our parents too. I just couldn't stand that.

While teachers focus on high achievers for maximal test results and personal promotion, the unrelenting rod of exams has transformed teacher-student relations and cast learners like Leefang into a category of deficiency.

Leefang's dilemma echoes numerous cases I encountered in Qiandongnan. The operative principle is no longer that cash-strapped families strive to provide for their children's education so that they could be gainfully employed in the future. What's at issue is that schooling's mediocre outcomes can hardly justify monetary investment (often astronomical for villagers) and time investment (often conflicting with significant life events, such as marriage).

Although dropout has not been a severe concern in the primary level,¹³ it is a simmering issue among junior secondary students. In my observation, middle schools in both villages experienced as high as 30% a dropout rate, which complicates the Ministry of Education's official estimates of 11% in rural areas (Moxley 2010).¹⁴ In Longxing Middle School, for instance, the enrollment roster of 2009 recorded a total of 890 students, yet only around 300 were actually attending school.¹⁵ Despite the economic diagnosis of TBP that attributes dropout primarily to household financial stringency, when I speak to my interlocutors, a litany of

¹³ This is because the law requires universal promotion of primary students to junior secondary level regardless of their academic performance, and because it is the folk belief that basic literacy/numeracy is indispensable to earning a livelihood in the contemporary world.

¹⁴ According to a recent survey of 17 middle schools in 14 rural counties across 6 northern provinces, conducted by the Rural Education Research Institute of the Northeast Normal University, dropout rates were running at about 40%, an alarming figure well above the controversial national average of 3 percent for junior middle schools (Li 2004). Another study carried out by the Central Committee of China Association for Promoting Democracy has identified similar dropout rate of 40% in rural junior high schools (*China Daily* 2005), in contrast to the Ministry of Education's estimates of 5% in urban areas and 11% in rural areas (Moxley 2010). As is well known, accurate statistics are notoriously difficult to obtain in China, partly due to the sensitive political environment and the oft-conscious manipulation of "numbers" to project desirable national images. Despite the persisting problem of availability of data, in general, ethnic minority children are found to have higher dropout rates than Han students, and rural children higher than urban students (Postiglione 1999).

¹⁵ To ensure the local compliance with the Two Basics Project, regular inspections by different administrative levels (county, prefectural, provincial, and national) are conducted to assess school enrolments, attrition rates, and other performance indexes. What often happens is, however, dropout students are summoned back to sit in classes so that the school can pass the audit. Backstage maneuvers are frequently used for the sake of meeting the inspection demands, which further complicates the meaning of official statistics. I will explain this in greater details in chapter four.

reasoning is brought to bear, although realities are far more complex than what these rubrics suggest: (1) lack of cash in rural households; (2) education as confinement, boredom, and a recurring sense of failure; (3) difficult, uninteresting curriculum and repetitive drilling for tests; (4) dim job prospects; (5) schooling as a delay of marriage, work, and family responsibilities.

Firstly, even though villages in Qiandongnan have been granted Two Exemptions and One Subsidy (TEOS), according to villagers' own calculation, the proclaimed "free" education is never free. Children need pocket money, money for school uniform and supplies, and occasional fees for supplementary lessons, which add up to a handsome amount not easily locatable for average rural households. For many families, letting children finish middle school, hence fulfilling TBP's requirement, is a stretch of their financial limits. High school¹⁶ (which is not free) is a luxury for a selected few, and investing in a college degree is tantamount to betting on a lottery. With dim employment prospects, the investment return is hardly predictable. In farmers' down-to-earth reckoning, the money and time could be more wisely spent on doing petty business or working in factories earlier in life.

Secondly, school weariness, disinterest, and fatigue are often cited to be the top contributing factors to soaring dropout. Education experts¹⁷ blame the entrenched system of spoon-feeding, rote learning, and testing as the leading cause of attrition. Despite the government campaign to revitalize the countryside, rural schools continue to deliver an urban-centered, urban-bound, cookie-cutter curriculum. Teachers continue to teach to the tests, and testing remains the most important way of winnowing out students and evaluating teachers.

¹⁶ High school tuition varies from region to region. Generally, going to a public high school in Qiandongnan costs around three thousand RMB per year for tuition and an additional two thousand RMB for books, room and board. In villagers' assessment, investing on high school and college education requires a total of forty to fifty thousand RMB, which might be an effortless spending for urban wage earners yet an astronomical amount for peasant households with little cash incomes.

¹⁷ See the study on rural dropout at the junior secondary level conducted by the Institute of Rural Education at Northeastern Normal University (released in May 2010), cited in Moxley 2010.

Thirdly, the idiom of *guanxi* (nepotistic practices through social connection) has exacerbated schooling's declining relevance to social mobility. Exam scores do not singularly determine one's educational trajectory. *Guanxi* (having proper social connection) serves as an important political, social asset to help one navigate the educational and employment market and negotiate with gatekeepers (Kipnis 1997; Yang 1994). As villagers in Qiandongnan like to put, "We *laobaixing* are the most unfortunate lot, with neither *guanxi* nor *benshi* (competence). All we can do is to use our bare hands to make a living." *Laobaixing*, which literally means "a hundred last names," is a generic term frequently used to refer to the common folks or the ordinary public. Lacking the essential social lubricant *guanxi* and the economic means to grease the web of personal connection, the *laobaixing* of peasant descent are put to a decided disadvantage at the start of an educational race.

Fourthly, schooling's waning relevance to employment is increasingly a national and transnational phenomenon. As many have asked, what purposes does schooling serve with the new dictates of the economy offering fewer and fewer jobs to youth of all backgrounds except the most privileged cream of the crop (Aronowitz 2001; Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994; Rifkin 1995; Willis 2003)? In China, employment uncertainty is exacerbated by a number of factors.

Despite the country's robust growth towards a knowledge economy, the value of higher education seems rapidly waning. The depreciation of college credentials is partially due to the expansion of tertiary enrollment and the commodification of higher education. Under the aegis of privatization, the number of tertiary institutions has increased drastically across the country¹⁸

¹⁸ The total number of college graduates in 2009 totaled 5.31 million, a voluminous increase from 848,000 a decade ago when former president Jiang Zemin announced plans to bolster higher education in 1998. See Yao, Bin. Seeking Educational Excellence. In *Beijing Review*. June 3, 2010. Retrieved July 14, 2010 from http://www.bjreview.com/Cover_Story_Series_2010/2010-05/31/content_276033.htm.

and produced graduates far in excess of the employment capacities of the society. Every year, hundreds of thousands of graduates from the growing crop of third-tier colleges cram job affairs and compete for employment in low paying sectors as sales persons or office clerks.

Additionally, with the centralized work assignment system¹⁹ long obsolete, one's employment trajectory is subject to the vicissitude of the market. The work assignment system is traditionally known as the "iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan*) that guaranteed lifelong employment with steady income and welfare benefits in housing, medical care, education, ration coupons, and retirement pension. Getting a college education and graduating into a government work unit was traditionally considered an ideal career path. For rural farmers especially, education was associated with a pathway out of peasantry and into state employment.

Still today, many rural people hold that only civil service careers that offer stability and security can be counted as real jobs.²⁰ With the planned job assignment system long defunct, one of the few pathways to state officialdom is the civil servant examination. Every year, millions of college graduates complete fiercely in the exam for slim chances of obtaining the coveted "iron bowl." The state is still perceived in a paternalistic light; and its centrality still holds considerable sway in shaping social imaginaries of the good life.

¹⁹ Under the planned economy, college graduates received job assignments in line with the national development needs and obtained lifelong employment in work units (Agelasto & Adamson 1998). However, since the early 1990s when China started restructuring its state-owned enterprises through corporatization, the direct work assignment began to decline. Within two decades, the elimination of a state job tenure system and the transition to a contractual, market-based, and informal employment is now largely complete. The expanding field of China labor studies has documented the drastic decrease of employment in the state sector, in the thirty years since reform, from 78.3% to 21.9% of the total urban employment (Kuruvilla et. al. 2011: 1).

²⁰ The personal experience of a young Miao female well illustrates this point. In her mid-twenties, Lee worked at a clerical position in a small college at the prefectural capitol Kaili. After obtaining her bachelor's degree, Lee was implored to get a "real" job by her father. He made it clear that she would not fulfill her filial duties if she ended up *dagong* for a company. *Dagong*, i.e. working for non-state sectors or private companies, are not deemed real jobs, for its contract-based and unstable nature. Having state employment, however, is described in the local lexicon as "eating the emperor's rice" which brings prestige and security. Lee recalled her apprehension, "I had to think carefully of what my father said. For a while, I was under a lot of pressure and didn't dare to call home until I got an offer at my current position. I was afraid to disappoint my parents."

Now regarded as inefficient, rigid, and wasteful of talents, direct job assignment is replaced by market logic of supply-demand and the self-enterprising ethos. The fading of guaranteed job assignment and the rise of a market mechanism have enabled a shift from seeing job allocation as national duty to individual responsibility, and from the “traditional employment mentality” to the admonition to “create your own rice bowl” (Bray 2005: 179). Today’s average college graduates live an unpredictable life of what many Chinese sociologists wittily called “the ant tribe” (*yizu*). While tighter government oversight on wages and concern over income-gap-induced instability led to increase of blue-collar wages by nearly 80% between 2003 and 2009, the salaries for college graduates stagnate.²¹ The dim employment prospects and lackluster earning of college graduates²² profoundly altered people’s attitudes towards education and mobility, especially in an economy still largely dependent on labor-intensive manufacturing.

Today, many Miao and Dong youth finish schooling inexperienced for a soil-bound life; nor do they have credentials for salarized jobs in urban centers. Compulsory basic schooling prepares them, mostly, for factory assembly lines where their youthful bodies and dreams are intertwined with the manufacturing boom. They are often targeted as “at risk” of dropout and blamed for their myopia in compromising their own social mobility and the national pledge of universal basic literacy. Yet, if the school becomes a massive dropout factory that shunts students to China’s humming assembly lines, it begs more than simply blaming the victims.

²¹ Jacobs, Andrew. China’s Army of Graduates Struggles for Good Jobs. *New York Times*, December 11, 2010. According to the article, college graduates’ salaries decrease if deflation is taken into account.

²² According to a New York Times discussion, in China an average college degree-holder’s monthly salary is only \$44 more than that of an average migrant worker. See What is a College Degree Worth in China? *New York Times*. December 2, 2010.

Some ethnic scholars²³ in Qiandongnan offer a telling analogy: “For rural ethnic people, to follow the state’ compulsory education is like a dwarf attempting to catch grapes high up on the vines. The height is too prohibiting and their efforts oftentimes result in disastrous falls. Many have to pay hefty prices for a share of the grapes; and many others choose not to even give it a try.” Indeed, rather than conceiving education as rights and obligation, people adopt beliefs and make decisions about education based upon available resources and contingent livelihood (Liu 2004: 17). Reasoning is always local and situational, as it occurs against the background of a particular subjective or intersubjective web of beliefs (Bevir 2010: 432). This suggests that educational strategies and practices involve not only the securing of assent around the state-sanctioned organizational template, but also contingent decisions made in constantly changing contexts. The soaring educational desire in Chinese society has not gripped the population uniformly, nor do all people take advantage of the educational opportunities in identical ways.

It is misleading to suggest, however, that the Miao and Dong villagers reject schooling *tout court*. Their disenchantment is perhaps better understood as ambivalence. Entering rural households, one often finds school awards displayed on the wall, even for children who have long quitted school. The sometimes faded and dust-covered award certificates serve a quiet and banal rejoinder to the popular critique that rural minority residents do not value schooling, and mark the centrality of education in folk beliefs.

In the old time, villagers told me, before there were government schools, wealthy households would hire private tutors to educate their sons, less well-off families followed suit by paying with in-kind compensation (such as rice grains). It was a widely held folk conviction that

²³ The information was obtained from a group interview I conducted with three ethnic scholars who held academic positions in Kaili, the Prefectural Capitol of Qiandongnan.

the learned and knowledgeable would not be taken advantage of.²⁴ The Miao and the Dong people have historically associated education with tangible improvements on one's wellbeing and defer to those who are knowledgeable and can better navigate the social world. Obtaining an education and subsequently a scholar-official position ("eating the emperor's rice," so to speak) is traditionally deemed a family glory and an extraordinary accomplishment.

Given that the aspiration for scholar-officialdom through education is generally associated with Han culture, it begs some explanation as to where the ethnic communities stand in relation to such Confucian cultural norms. The Miao and Dong locate themselves not only in their own ethnic traditions, but also as inheritors to the Confucian beliefs acquired through centuries of ethnic encounters. For instance, in the village of Longxing, the five communal drum towers were named after the five Confucian virtues of *ren, yi, li, zhi, xin* (i.e. benevolence, justice, rituals, wisdom, and trust 仁义礼智信). These names were given by clan elders who had been educated with classic Confucianism in public schools called *yixue* (义学) during the Qing dynasty (Rawski 1979: 57-58). Suffice it to say, centuries of trade, intermarriage, and state schooling contributed to the sustained acculturation of Guizhou's ethnic groups into the imperial jurisdiction, resulting in encounters and imbrication of cultural norms (Hostetler 2001).

Today, educated elites in the villages such as teachers, agricultural officers, bureaucrats, petty entrepreneurs, and medical personnel are envied for occupying privileged positions, directing community development projects, and representing the position of authority. My own presence as a U.S.-affiliated researcher only amplified the enthusiasm towards schooling, which, for many, could bring people to far away places, such as the fantasy world of

²⁴ This belief is well depicted by a widely circulating Dong song named *yang er yao dushu* (养儿要读书), written by a revered historical figure Lu Dayong, a native of Longxing and a prolific song writer who was imprisoned by the Qing court for his incendiary songs against the imperial rule. This particular song exhorts the importance of learning for the young in order to gain practical wisdom, obtain good livelihood, and garner communal respect.

North America. In fact, despite the disenchantment, schooling continues to be a significant part of children's lives and a shared institution among most community members.

In fact, Miao and Dong farmers are keenly aware of the declining value of their agrarian knowledge, and often invoke their lack of education, in comparison to the Han Chinese counterparts, to explain their daily hardship. In the local lexicon, one who obtains higher social status through education is depicted as golden phoenix flying out of the constraints of the deep mountain valley. Throughout my work, I have come across many relatively well-to-do parents who willingly invest in learning aids and afterschool tutoring and invest to help their children gain an advantage over their peers. They complain that tourism and commercial encroachment has increasingly marginalized schooling and strangled the cultivation of local talents.²⁵

Instead of expressing a wholesale disillusion, the Miao and Dong villagers exhibit a wide range of perceptions towards schooling: from viewing it as a governmental resource to an unwelcomed confinement; from an entitled opportunity to a bureaucratic oversight imbued with condescending policies; from a pathway to social mobility to the conduit of mainstream Han culture.²⁶ Their disenchantment is perhaps better understood as ambivalence rather than total aversion to schooling. The ambivalence, as I see it, springs from the aporia around the school as both potentially alienating yet also potentially integrating, both a source of frustration and a source of edification, both a mechanism of social reproduction and a mechanism of social redistribution. Because of the wide continuum of grey area the school occupies, it also produces fluid subjectivities, lines of flight, and leakages that challenge the finite totalities of the state pedagogy.

²⁵ See chapter five for the analysis of the entanglement of village schools in tourism-centered development of Qiandongnan.

²⁶ Although the Han culture is by no means a homogeneous entity, schooling does provide students a conduit to linguistic facility in the official language, and apprentice them with the customs, manners, and values upheld by the mainstream society. For instance, the school timetable centers largely on the Han calendar, often to the exclusions of ethnic festivals and holidays, which I discuss briefly later in this chapter.

Termed as a national pedagogical crisis, dropout can perhaps be seen as one variation of, rather than mere opposition to, the state mandate that schooling needs to create self-reliant citizens with social and economic autonomy. When learning outcome measured by exam scores dampens the prospect of social mobility, when state-sanctioned curricula bring little value to lived realities, when education becomes a burden and a stigma, rural ethnic youth turn towards alternative routes, often by way of dropout, to achieve social, economic self-reliance that schooling fails to bring. It is a withdrawal from an empty promise of social mobility and the moral high grounds promoted by the state linking education with the preservation of the nationhood. In this light, the focus shifts from the usual interpretation of dropout as denial and out-of-joint to seeing it as a situated agency in response to dilemmas, and a pragmatic critique of the limit-points of schooling.

Epistemic Dissonances

I will now turn the analysis to epistemologies often overlooked by the state-sanctioned criteria of learning. Needless to say, ethnic minority experience in state schooling is not monolithic. It was not my intention to essentialize the ethnic cultural logic. In fact, the term “ethnic” (as much as “indigenous”) is highly contested and associated with official and popular imageries that paint the ethnic people with backward primitivity. The term also invokes a dichotomy that nativizes the “other” as befitting a separate frame of reference and consigns them to the waiting room of modernity (Gaonkar 2001). This section challenges the dichotomy by paying close attention to students’ cultural communities and their embedded epistemic schemata. The epistemic domains of the cultural communities are both constituted by the state project of schooling and open up spaces to appropriate and disrupt the state project. In other

words, epistemic dissonances are at once consequences of and a driving force in the reproduction of dominant epistemic order.

Abstraction, Regimentation, and Compartmentalization

In Miao and Dong epistemologies, how one learns about the lands, animals and plants involves a complicated whole of lifeway, rather than through abstract taxonomies. Knowing is a matter of survival: to know is to become competent in worldly existence. Knowing is a continual process of becoming; learning, being, and becoming are tightly interwoven into organically interrelated coherence. Before mass schooling was institutionalized, children were taught life skills, such as farming and animal husbandry, by their adult kinsmen, and skills necessary for courtship such as embroidery, singing and *lusheng* (a reed pipe instrument) by communally selected and revered “experts.” Transmission of knowledge occurs through oral instruction and bodily experience. Learning took place around cooking stoves, on dinner tables and in the fields, without stringent demarcation of time, and had little to do with sitting down for grueling lessons and tests. In such a pedagogical mode, learning is intuitive; literacy is extra-linguistic; learning and aesthetic enjoyment becomes inseparable.

To Miao and Dong villagers, animals, plants and inanimate entities (such as rocks, bridges, and rivers) all possess various degrees of spiritual power. This is seen in the practice of polytheism (e.g. bridge worshipping) and the controversies surrounding the construction of highways. For villagers, ease of roads does promise convenience of livelihood; yet the highways would cut through the spirit arteries of the mountain, infringe upon the mountain god and invite bad karma to all living beings. Villagers’ invoking of mountain spirits is not dissimilar from the discourse of *feng shui* surrounding urban construction projects in Hong Kong. Whereas the rural minority people are blamed for their superstition and ignorance, modern-day Hong Kongers’

concern for *feng shui* is more likely viewed as a practical wisdom towards ecological living (*shengtai* 生态). Whereas the latter's savvy of geomancy is espoused as sensitivity to unchecked urban expansion, the former's beliefs are condemned for obstructing economic modernization.

From my observation, the village people resisted seizure of mountain lands not only because they mistrusted the ways the intrusive state-business coalition manipulated their collective resources but also because they valued their spiritual domain. The *guanxi* to be carefully maintained is with numerous deities that populate the landscape as the wellspring of life energy. The world is seen as relations and connectivity, without strict compartmentalization between the human and nonhuman, in which the spirit is forever dancing in between realms and all beings are cohabiting an intricate world of reciprocity. The reciprocity must be properly maintained in order for humans to survive and thrive. This suggests there is more than one way to "know," more than one way to represent the world, or rather, there is more than one imaginary domain called the world.

Schoolwork, however, reconfigures vernacular knowledge and its epistemological/cosmological order through the regimentation of time and the premium placed on abstraction. Rural life, on the other hand, is seasonal and round-the-clock, with daily routines adjusted in accordance with the agricultural cycle. In the Dong highland village-hamlet Huanggang, for instance, meal times are highly irregular, with dinner served as late as 10:30 pm, especially during the harvest season. Many children there experience maladjustments after moving to townships to attend middle schools, due to regimentation of day schedules and the

prolonged confinement in the classroom;²⁷ some dropped out for inability to cope with schooling's temporal algorithm. The following is an excerpt of field notes written during a visit in late October 2009.

Entering the village Huanggang, I was greeted by golden ears of glutinous rice grains, neatly stacked on erected wooden shelves, evaporating an earthy, soothing fragrance. The staple of many Dong communities, glutinous rice is one of the two prides of the villagers, as the harvest from Huanggang is well known for its unique fragrance and texture. Besides glutinous rice, Huanggang is also famous for its communal fondness and virtuosity in singing.

Late October was the harvest season. It was also the quietest time of the year in the village, with no undulating sounds of singing, as farmers went to bed earlier to recuperate for the next day's labor. I was told that after harvest, singing would again be audible nightly, penetrating the nocturnal mountain village.

In Huanggang, nearly everybody could sing, including the children. During the day, primary schoolers went to class with fertilizer-sacks-turned-schoolbags dangling on their thin shoulders; in the evening, they sat in perfect postures to repeat what the community song teacher had just sung. According a song teacher, students might not remember much in the textbooks, but could easily memorize many lyrics, because life here was lived in songs. In a pedagogy of songs, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic development is intricately linked.

²⁷ See previous discussions on the Rural Primary School Merger Program that aims to consolidate teaching resources by shutting down schools in sparsely populated communities and relocating students to larger boarding schools in center village-towns.

Yet learning through the route of being and unsayability has been largely purged from the compulsory education scheme, in which the logocentric, codified form of school knowledge privileges abstract words that circulate from textbooks to exams. What people know, what it means to gain proper skills, and how they relate to the act of knowing are battles waged on uneven field in which certain conception of knowledge and knowing are favored over others.²⁸

Deeply educative and illuminating, the folkways of knowing remain nevertheless illegitimate. Knowledge and knowing is only recognized when labeled and dressed up in books, when tied to modernist theme of nationality and development. Nation-formation, while achieved through promulgating universal/unifying literacy, creates and sustains some forms of bonding while cutting off other possibilities and immanentist modes of being. With the state as the central arbiter of knowing, the total significance of human life gets packaged into a vision of unity, inducing the immense variety of social worlds and meaning making into a master view and a singular perspective. School pedagogy dismisses the sacred approaches to the world and constitutes new secularized ways of perceiving social life: ways that prevent “primitive” and “superstitious” cosmologies and allow only ‘legitimate’ knowledge with scientific rationality.

Ordering Adolescence as Serialization of Life

While agrarian life is organized around perennial labor and seasonal cycles, the modern concept of time associated with planning and efficiency moves pupils along grade levels and developmental categories (on the axis of childhood-adolescence-adulthood). Adolescence and youth are oftentimes used interchangeably as a site of intervention, reflexive of the deepest

²⁸ In a similar vein, anthropologist Paul Nadasdy (2003) questions the intellectual baggage of the term “knowledge” when it is applied to First Nations people’s perception of and relationship with the world they inhabit. It is not my point, however, that it is the same battle and the same universalizing apparatus governing both China and the First Nations. There is no universal that is not already particular. Nor does the battle simply involve opposite episteme. Rather, it is an assemblage of converging yet dissonant episteme through which learning is situated and differences/hierarchies of knowing are produced.

social anxieties and hopes.²⁹ The fear for mass illiteracy seems to legitimize schooling's prolongation of adolescence as en-rout-to but not-yet adulthood, a liminal stage with which many children are eager to part.

For students and parents in the Miao and Dong villages, however, adolescence occupies a different realm of meanings. It is associated with one's fertility-ready status and household responsibilities. In the mountains, age and time are marked on different axis. From my observation, children are more appropriately depicted as miniature adults who undertake "fulltime" labor by the age of seven or eight and engage in intra- and inter-familial duties. They acquire basic skills of labor by observing and emulating kinsmen. While treated at school as oversized children whose growth needs to be monitored by incessant testing and merit-based tracking/ranking, at home, students are given adult roles such as attending household chores, looking after younger siblings, and helping out on the rice terraces. As work is regarded as life's essential, the relationship between children and adults and between age and work has not been as distinguishable as rendered by the modern-day mass schooling.

In the school's lexicon, adolescence is a period characterized by emotional immaturity, latent sexuality, and behavioral puerility that need to be closely monitored. For instance, students' body images are subject to strict regulations. Long hair, popular among young females in Dong and Miao communities, must not be let loose to its full length, as it is seen as too

²⁹ Some scholars have suggested the conceptual lens of "youthscape" to capture the amorphous, uneven forces shaping the social category of adolescence/youth (Maira & Soep 2005); others have focused on age as an axis of calibration that targets adolescence/youth as such for the state to "define subordinate populations in order to effect their control" (Mizen 2002: 12). Since the turn of the 20th century, schooling across the world has been closely linked to the ubiquitous conception of youth/adolescence as evolutionary stage en route to adulthood, controlled by raging hormones, peer-oriented, and signified by age (Lesko 2001). Couched in the language of biology and developmental psychology, youth/adolescence becomes particular human kind to be administered, ordered, and tamed through comparative standards of social sciences and rules of schooling (Popkewitz 2010).

provocative for licentious minds. Dating is strictly forbidden, as adolescents are considered too young to know what love is about.

To Miao and the Dong people, however, schooling conflicts with vital life events such as marriage, childbirth, and earning a livelihood. To students, schooling seems to perpetuate adolescence rather than enabling them to grow out of it, and they anxiously anticipate a life free from such a developmental category. Upper division secondary schoolers are anxious for a life beyond school even when they know they will most likely not graduate to a job or apparent social mobility; at least they could be fully adult and free from the infantilizing school routines and domineering teachers. Parents are equally eager to see their children move on with life rather than perpetually suspended in the state of adolescence. For them, schooling extends adolescence too far, puts children into prolonged immaturity, thus inadvertently making them unmarriageable.

Getting married, both for girls and for boys, is a *rite de passage* indexing the transition from childhood to maturity in the Miao and Dong cosmologies. “Children of us poor people need to shoulder family responsibilities in early ages (穷人的孩子早当家),” so they say. This often means early (adolescent) marriages are still practiced and to some extent, preferred. In the indigenous mode of reasoning, marriage has historically functioned to enlarge one’s circle of kinship and expand one’s safety network and social belonging. During my fieldwork, I have observed a handful marriage ceremonies and befriended many newly-weds. The following field-note excerpts speak to the significance of marriage in strengthening and extending one’s kinship ties.

It was an icy winter morning. As usual, I woke up to the dins of footsteps on the creaking wooden floorboards announcing the beginning of a new day, though today was rather

unusual. I went downstairs to find a houseful of commotions. My host lady was making crunchy *ciba* (sticky rice) toasted to a delicious golden brown in a giant wok. Her husband and a few male kin had just arrived with a live pig tied upside down by feet to a bamboo rod, together with two big jars of home-brewed wine carried on a shoulder pole. Wedding gifts continued to arrive from relatives and friends, announced by staccato dins of firecrackers, including quilts, bed sheets, cloth, candies, embroidered Miao overcoats, and sometimes a full set of female silver attire.

Today was the second day of my host's son's wedding, a cook day in a continuum of feasts. Outside the house, the pebbly floors were awash with dins of footsteps, gossips of women who sat cleaning and chopping leafy vegetables, shrills of children scurrying around jovially with noisy plays, high-pitched voice of singing from the neighbor's house where tourists were being entertained, and muttering of elderly men lounging in the sun. While the relatives were helping out with washing, chopping, and cooking, the hosts bustled about to keep everybody in good humor. Soon, baskets of cabbages, leeks, and peppers were cleaned and piled up, pigs slaughtered and meat chopped up, ready for the day's feast. When one family was celebrating a marriage, every one in the extended kinship came to help. Marriage became a communal feast when one's kinship and life circle was sustained and extended.

Both of the newly-wed were barely 18 years old; and neither made it through high school. The groom went to Guangdong to work in a factory but due to maladjustment to the coastal weather and cuisine, he eventually returned to his native Majiang and found work in a hotel's catering department. The bride, also from Majiang, performed ethnic songs and dances for a living. She decided to quit her job after marriage to help with her husband's family business. "We've bought a computer and we wanted to get the words

out about our family inn so that we could have more customers. Either way, it is all about living a life.” When I was appreciating her beautifully embroidered wedding dress, she told me it was made by her mother. “It is not uncommon even today that a mother would start making the embroidered wedding dress for the daughter soon after the girl was born. Marriage is a big thing and we Miao people marry early. We often hear our parents say, ‘You’ve got to marry sooner or later.’ In the old days, parents often arranged marriage for their children when they were still very young.”

Contrary to the individualizing ethos of schooling that espouses responsibility for one’s self-improvement, marriage is considered an *affective* strategy to obtain kinship protection against life’s adversarial circumstances. Many dropouts quickly take up the role of parenthood and family duties. They refer to those being schooled as “little brothers and sisters” who do not have the grown-up’s know-how of worldly livelihood. In official narratives, early marriage is depicted as a backward practice keeping ethnic communities from educated modernity. Such critique is itself the product of a particular episteme that relies on developmental fabrication of youth as social category to demarcate life, order population, and effect state control (Mizen 2002:12). Instead of reading practices such as early marriage as out-of-joint, I question the very conceptual foundation of “youth” as an axis of calibration and serialization of life, upon which rests TBP’s progressive ideals and thus its participatory limits.

The “Educated Person” Contested

Since neither the Miao nor the Dong have a written form of their language, ancestral history and traditions were transmitted primarily through songs. Mythical past captured in songs serve to inspire the living. Ability to sing (*hui changge*) is a revered character, or “literacy”/

“*suzhi*”³⁰ to use the modern educational parlance, which not only gains one communal respect but the admiration of the other sex in courtships.³¹ Musical virtuosity has historically been a very important part of everyday life, indispensable in meals, courtship, festivals, guesting and hosting. The Miao and the Dong people speak with mellifluous accents and used to proudly profess that their children learned to sing as soon as they began to speak and learned to dance as soon as they began to walk. In the past, young boys and girls studied singing with a song teacher in the evenings. In learning to reach adulthood, indigenous rituals such as singing become a very local force endowing individual experiences with particular vividness and meaning that make for the good life.

In both the Miao and the Dong villages, the “educated persons” are communally revered song experts, shamans, and the head of labor (*huolutou* 活路头), who ironically are hardly characterizable as being “knowledgeable” and “literate” in the modern pedagogic sense, as most of them received very little formal schooling. Their educatedness is, undoubtedly, grounded in the most tangible necessities and aesthetics of an agrarian livelihood and cosmic order: that the heads of labor direct the seasonal cycles of planting, cultivating, and harvesting; the song experts transmit tribal histories, teach the young, and nurture the communal bonds; and the shamans navigate the worlds of life and death for protection, cure, and blessing. Their selection and recognition by the community is continuous and unceasing, through a network of reciprocity and fraternity. Their intuitive understanding of melodies, esoteric abilities to connect spiritual realms, and intimate familiarity with the environment are not transferrable through

³⁰ The Chinese term *suzhi* is roughly translated into English as human “quality.” Since the 1980s, the term has permeated popular and policy narratives to mark an increasing concern on the “qualitative” makeup of the population. See chapter three for an in-depth discussion of *suzhi* in China’s recent curriculum reform.

³¹ Men or women who could not sing or play musical instruments were not seriously considered as potential marriage partners.

linguistic abstraction or compartmentalized categories. It is only through an embodied process of watching, listening, and doing can one gain a modicum of competence in those skills.

A Dong song expert once described to me how she became one. “At the beginning, people liked my singing, so they came to my home often and sent their children here to learn. We sat down to sing nightly. As time went by, before I knew it, I became the song teacher (*geshi* 歌师).” Similarly, when asked to describe their “learning” experience, people often exhibit an unknowingness: “I don’t know. I just picked it up.” In it, the way of thinking about pedagogical efficacy does not project a means-end dichotomy or outward (urban)-bound teleology; nor does it privilege preconceived didactic plans or educational goals. A song expert could remember hundreds of songs by heart and enjoy communal respect as the cultural authority. She/he does not obtain “qualification” through professional assessments and certification, she/he simply becomes by being one. Being and becoming, teaching and learning, are intimate and inseparable, spoken about in the same breath, and intertwined in pedagogical indeterminacy and aporia.

However, the spread of national compulsory schooling enables a “flattening” and “eradication” process such that education is “uplifted” from the wild profusion of human existence and “sutured” with “tomorrow’s economy” of the country. This also indexes a redefinition of knowing along a biopolitical line for the production of “desirable” qualities of the child-as-future-citizen of the nation. Yet, discussions of “quality” and “learning” are seldom put to a comparative context. Singing, embroideries, and virtuosity in indigenous instruments, as well as the local construction of the “educated persons” were categorically rejected during the modernization campaigns (1950s to 1970s) for their putative irrationality and superstition. Today such skills are largely obscured in a school curriculum replete with secular-rational knowledge

(see Sidel and Sidel 1982), and viewed at best as symbolic pastimes partially revitalized by tourism. The binary idiom of modernity and backwardness has ordered the monolithic concept of literacy as normalcy and dismissed the lived domains of rituals and worldviews that have long carried educative functions.

Revivalism as Marginality

Despite their educative functions, ethnic rituals were historically brandished as the “four olds” (old ideology, old culture, old habits, and old customs) and as targets of “clean-ups” for their putative irrationality, idiosyncrasy, and superstition. A turbulent decade of the Cultural Revolution witnessed the party-orchestrated purging of “retrograde” ritualistic elements from all sphere of life, especially in China’s ethnic hinterlands. With the rise of rural cultural tourism in the recent decades, rituals once considered antimodern are being revived for their amusement potential (*yule*) and commercialized value as “tradition”(*chuantong*). In terms of schooling, ethnic cultural elements have shifted from being target of cleansing to target of curricular inclusion, endorsed by the revivalist agenda to recuperate *chuantong* (“tradition”) for tourism boom.

In both Majiang and Longxing, the regional ministry of education has allocated funds for textbooks, teacher training, and program development to incorporate ethnic history into school curriculum. Yet in actuality, the ethnic cultural class is either not taught or taught in a perfunctory manner because it is not a subject of exam. The orbit of testing has directed attention away from non-testing subjects and relegated ethnic classes to extracurricular activities. Teachers have little incentive to teach ethnic classes, and many believe they are doing students a disservice if they do not maximize time for test preparation. After all, virtuosity in singing, *lusheng*, and embroidery is not recognized by current testing/evaluative system, even though it

has shown increasing market value in a tourism economy. Besides, the teachers themselves feel incapable of teaching the ethnic curriculum as their own training has been largely focused on Han civilization-centered academic content. In addition, the allocated funds are often dissipated with red tapes and bureaucratic roadblocks.

On the other hand, customary rituals such as the *lusheng* festival and the Miao New Year, lifecycle events such as weddings, births, burials, and *manyue* (feast for a new baby's first full month of life), as well as ceremonies related to agricultural productivity are plentiful around the year. They provide occasions for ethnic villagers to celebrate, mourn, and bond. Parents expect that their children would participate in these occasions so that they grow up with the same values and social bonds that have been part of their collective life.

For instance, the Dong *lusheng* festival is a celebratory ritual to give gratitude for harvest and wish for a bountiful year to come. The Dong people believe the loud sound of *lusheng* would make the rice grain grow fuller (*baoman*). On the day of the festival, different tribes would participate in a contest to see whose *lusheng* music is the loudest. Feasting and making of glutinous rice wine (*tianjiu*) is accompanied by reciprocal guesting and hosting and much inebriation. On the day of the grand contest, unmarried young girls would put on full attires and carry buckets of rice wine with shoulder poles to serve the *lusheng* contestants.

While the community requires adolescent girls to perform the ritual, the school calendar demands them to attend classes as the festival is not recognized in the academic timetable. Despite their tourism popularity, ethnic festivals remain largely invisible in the national designation of holidays that are almost always in sync with state-endorsed Han customs, such as the Spring Festival (*chunjie*) and the National Day (*guoqing*). Schooling's regimentation operates on a different time register and sits awkwardly with the revivalist agenda.

Provincializing Literacy

In both the Miao and the Dong language, although the concepts of “teaching” and “learning” do exist, there are no equivalents to the Han Chinese word “education” or “literacy.” The difficulty of translation is more than an issue of vocabulary. “Literacy” as a pedagogical intervention is contingent upon the state as the arbiter of knowing. Yet the conditions linking learning to literacy, to the civilizing mission of the state, as exemplified by the slogan “Today’s education is tomorrow’s economy,” are institutionally and epistemologically unattainable in the Miao and Dong cultural logic.

In the Chinese state’s efforts to revive the “new socialist” countryside, compulsory basic education and universal literacy are packaged together in the scheme of TBP. Universal literacy enables the making of national subjects in diffused geo- and temporal-scape. In a sense, compulsory literacy creates the unity of nationhood in a pedagogical sense, just as the notion of contiguous historical time enables imagined community of the nation-state (Anderson 1983), and the technology of territoriality produces the nation-state spatially (Winichakul 1994).

As the above analysis illustrates, the emergence of literacy orders educational experiences across different timespaces to be homogenous unity, drawing and redrawing boundary lines around who is educated/educable and who is not, and codifying the dynamic process of knowing into sanctioned categories of literacy/illiteracy. In such a knowledge/literacy matrix, rural ethnic people are often stigmatized as illiterate and *wenmang* (文盲, literally “character blind,” i.e. unable to read Mandarin characters). Whereas both the Dong and Miao languages exhibit great linguistic nuances,³² only facility in the official language (Mandarin

³² As Fei (1992) argues, in a farming society with shared ancestral ties to the lands, tightly knit spatial arrangements, and repetitive patterns of labor, the working literacy is spoken rather than written systems of communication.

Chinese) counts as legitimate criteria of school competency. The imperative is to harness students with proficiency in Mandarin (calibrated on the standard Beijing dialect), touted as “lingua franca” that everyone needs to master in order to succeed in life.³³

In both villages I observed, Mandarin serves a symbolic status marker and a signifier of one’s level of education. Upheld as the language of independence and sophistication, it is juxtaposed with the Miao and the Dong that are viewed as parochial tongues keeping people in the backwaters of the mountain valley. What language is included or excluded in curriculum indicates the legitimation of school knowledge on a “high” to “low” spectrum (Jankie 2009), which is an instance of stage reasoning widely practiced in historicism (Chakrabarty 2000). The official language functions not only as a tool for translocal and interethnic communication but also as a means to minimize differences. Touted as the language of reason and modernity, a unified national speech drowns out other syntaxes and grammars and flattens out unevenness in epistemologies and reasoning.

Students, many of whom hear Mandarin for the first time in school, find it difficult to think and converse in the official language, the medium of instruction from kindergarten above for all subjects; having lessons in Mandarin contributes to their alienation from school.³⁴ I was often told that ethnic rural children do not know how to speak properly compared to their urban counterparts because they are wild (*ye*) and too engaged with hands and feet. When learning is reduced to linguistic abstraction, when students daily encounter very different epistemic registers, school knowledge is resisted partially because of its irrelevance and great experiential remove from the livelihood.

³³ While Mandarin is the mandatory medium of instruction, the general practice I observed in Majiang and Longxing is that teachers use a combination of Miao/Dong and Mandarin for the first few years and then switch to “Mandarin only” for the rest of the compulsory years. The timing of the switch varied from class to class, depending on the teachers’ inclination and facility in Mandarin. It is not uncommon to find teachers interspersing sentences in Miao/Dong to explain academic contents throughout middle school years.

³⁴ When it comes to learning English, the challenge is redoubled as it is two steps removed from students’ native tongue.

Nevertheless, when suggesting epistemic dissonance, I do not mean to juxtapose school and community as purely oppositional. My argument is not simply to glorify ethnic epistemology; rather it is concerned with universal literacy suggesting an already-signified space, reinscribing patterns of censorship and marginalization, sanctioning what counts as “literacy” and what not, who counts as the “educated person” and who not, what is proficient and what is deficient. It is concerned with the ways in which literacy is framed as the emancipation of the marginalized child-citizen from the irrationality of their cultural logic, and the ways such framing enacts “double gestures of inclusion and exclusion” (Popkewitz 1998) that both uplift and lock the indigenous people in place. Others have also contested the notion of universal literacy and emphasized that it often excludes ways of being that are considered appropriate by specific social, cultural groups (e.g. Gee 1996; Reder 1994; Street 1995).

The concept of literacy operates in a macro-conceptual space, solidifying the nation-state as a priori sovereign of knowing and foreclosing the possibility of alterities and “a necessary speechlessness that has nothing to do with voice and yet still has plenty to say” (Baker 2010: 224).³⁵ What it means to know and to learn gets (re)packaged in recurring binaries such as literate/illiterate, science/superstition, modern/tradition. At stake here is the enfolding of a liminal epistemic space that speaks in alternative grammar into a fixed syntax and an official teleology.

Coda

This chapter examined the educational disenchantment and massive dropout in two rural minority schools, in the context of the Two Basics Project. Despite the culturally specific values

³⁵ As Baker (2010) has also argued, commonsensical concepts such as “literacy,” “equality,” and “curriculum” form a normative frame that brings with it the ontological baggage of logocentrism.

and practices in these two communities, the governing techniques and pedagogical struggles are also characteristic in other parts of China, as evidenced by existing scholarship on China's minority education (Postiglione 1999; Hansen 1999; Gladney 1999; Zhu 2007; Harrell 1996) that investigate educational disparity across ethnic lines and the assimilation regime of state schooling.

Cultural theorists, in a thought-provoking way, regard the school as a transnational institute, a site all nation-states "have" and "share," where pupils are socialized with informed way of seeing, being, experiencing, and sensitized to the motif of the nation-state (see Stambach 2010; also Kendall 2007; Meyer 2004; Ramirez 2003). Public schooling around the world shares a secular-modern theme that seeks to cultivate modern mentality, exorcize superstition and ignorance, instill principles of market economy and democracy, and bind citizens to the nation-state and territory (Inkeles 1974; Stambach 2010; Bloch 2004; Tooley & Dixon 2005). Within a secular-modern framework, not only is the school's visual space demarcated, classified, and sequenced to move the child along axes of grades, levels, and competence, it also infuses common worldview through mandatory curriculum and bestows a sense of order, linearity, and hierarchy.³⁶ By disciplining the otherwise chaotic stage of childhood and adolescence, schooling has the effect of making homogenous subjects that "fit" the framework of the secular-rational nation-state as an imagined community (Anderson 1983).

As this chapter has demonstrated, however, such "fitting" is never so neatly ordered, as public schooling is repositioned amidst contradictions and contestations. Yes, it still sits within

³⁶ The school is targeted for normalization of differences through principles of literacy, numeracy, and cultural competency, and an epiphenomenon simultaneously producing universalizing categories (e.g. lettered and unlettered) and individualized markers (e.g. years and level of schooling). The school as a chamber of instruction is organized around templated and sequencing notions of time and space, within which the child is biologized, monitored, and apprenticed via a progressive network of knowledge and reason. Within the operative mode of schooling, one reads a salvationist ideology that struggles for the "soul" of the child, and sanctions who the child is and should be (Popkewitz 1998).

the modernist myth that education leads to social mobility, better jobs, greater societal good and national success; yes, the scramble for credentials and social reproduction of elitism is still widely observed today; yes, schooling in many cases remains the state-driven catalyst for a particular kind of change, as a site of hope and fear being shaped by and shaping people's ideals and experience. Yet, what's also true is that the school is increasingly displaced from the anchor of the education-to-the-social-rescue model, as part and parcel of the constant shifts in the broader ecology it is situated within, and as a discontinuous space within which the child experiences disparate standards of worthiness and criteria of being. Such experience may bear little resemblance to the modernist state agenda, if not outright contradicting the rationality.

Instead of asking what factors lead to the policy failure of the Two Basics Project, my analysis challenges the “progressive” and “universal” undertone embedded in TBP and points at its limit-points that theories of justice and rights often refuse to engage. In my account above, I have tried to foreground the complicated web of relations, epistemologies, and lifeways that preexisted and coexist with institutionalized schooling. I have attempted to illustrate how the production of “reason” as effects of power effaces episteme and cosmology of the lifeworld, encumbers students' participation, and begets the successful failure of TBP. This approach has allowed me to reconsider what is at stake when relying on commonsense binaries such as literacy/illiteracy, cultured/uncultured, modernity/tradition.

Students' withdrawal from compulsory education perturbs the “naturalness” of schooling and suggests its limit-points as ineffectual attempts at social emancipation.³⁷ The withdrawal enables a pause on the normative assumptions about the role of schooling; the normativity is

³⁷ The withdrawal needs not put them into yet another sort of “community”—a community in denial of national pedagogical agenda and a deviation from the norm. Such process of community-forming and the theoretical frameworks driving the wider problem of naming and labeling have already been well contested (Baker 2009).

disturbed and forced to encounter other sensibilities as to what constitutes as learning, knowing, and being. The withdrawal, more appropriately seen as ambivalence, also produces a fuzzy terrain that neither totally negates nor endorses the emancipatory claims of compulsory education; rather it points to a liminality in the “structural aperture between the constituted and the unconditional, between order and its beyond” (Baker 2009: xxvi).

Chapter Three

New Bottles, Old Wine: Governing “Quality” and the New Curriculum Reform

For decades, Qiandongnan’s subpar performance in basic education (Grade 1-9) has been characterized as a state of emergency, with rampant student attrition and dropout. In chapter two, I have analyzed how universal basic education has become a prime goal to incorporate the Miao and the Dong people into China’s educational modernity. In recent years, the quantitative provision of schooling (as expressed in TBP’s policy objective of “universal basic education”) is further bolstered by the qualitative concern for raising *suzhi* of the rural ethnic population through promoting *suzhi* education. Promoting *suzhi* education and raising *suzhi* of the population is a set of intertwined goals in China’s education policy making, to transform the rural ethnic population into new kinds of citizen-subjects for the nation’s future.

What then is *suzhi* and *suzhi* education? Despite its lack of semantic specificity in the Chinese language, *suzhi* (素质) is roughly translated into English as “quality” and linked with other related notions such as *pinzi* (品质) and *zhiliang* (质量) to connote the essential characteristics/substance of individuals, groups, and populations. A general consensus among the Chinese is that “such a thing as *suzhi* exists, that its level is too low in the Chinese population, that the collective *suzhi* of individuals produces the *suzhi* of the nation as a whole, and that raising the *suzhi* of children is a particularly important step” (Woronov 2009: 568).

In this chapter, I engage with the uptake of *suzhi* in China’s recent curriculum reform in the context of rural Qiandongnan. Following the previous chapter’s discussion on compulsory basic education, this chapter illustrates the *suzhi* curriculum reform as yet another compulsory technique of the Chinese state, indispensable in elucidating the disenchantment and complex ecology of rural education. To facilitate the nationwide campaign on developing education for rural revitalization, *suzhi jiaoyu* has been implemented in order to “uplift” the ethnic peasants from the national burden to the national asset. The contour of the curriculum reform cannot be

disarticulated from its involvement in, and indebtedness to, the project of nation building. It also cannot be disarticulated from a particular style of reasoning about ideal citizenry (*suzhi*) that becomes recognizable as modern subjectivity since the early 1980s. The assertion of the rationality is strongly palpable in compelling the “unification” of curriculum practices across the nation to reconstruct China’s 21st century learners, citizens, and workers.

My goal in this chapter is not to evaluate whether *suzhi* education has been successfully implemented in Qiandongnan. Instead, my objective is to problematize the very notion “quality” through probing the ways the keyword *suzhi* is deployed both inside and outside schools, both presently and historically, in China’s cultural politics. Rather than taking “quality” and “quality education” as a universal telos, I take issue with the conceptual foundations of *suzhi*, how it functions as a moving target in the formation of ideal citizen-subjects, and how it embeds an ontological divide that codes and differentiates human bodies on a hierarchy of values.

My approach in this chapter is three-layered. The first section gives a brief etymological overview of *suzhi* and maps out its cultural politics in contemporary China. It elucidates how the corporeal politics of *suzhi* embed the differentiation of bodies and the fabrication of the “others” through a civilizing mission. The second section surveys *suzhi* as the historical project of making the ideal personhood. It examines how in Chinese historiography *suzhi* constitutes a moving target, rather than a static structure, in the formation of educational subjects. Thirdly, the chapter draws from my ethnographic research in Majiang and Longxing to investigate everyday pedagogical struggles in the *suzhi* curriculum reform. The empirical accounts illuminate how the reform sustains the ideal of pedagogical emancipation in a context that resists, ignores, and contests the logic; and what kinds of practices and tactics are employed to fabricate the successful “front” of the reform despite “backstage” contradictions. The lens of performativity is harnessed to move beyond the traditional “fidelity” or “loose coupling” theory. Furthermore, I examine the odd juxtaposition of the official discourse of *suzhi* education with folk epistemology

to challenge the universal notion of “quality,” and suggest undecidable interstices in the production of pedagogical subjectivity.

In a sense, the first two layers of analysis map out the historical assemblage of reasons behind the *suzhi* discourse-practices. To grasp the complex dynamics of the curriculum reform, an etymological and genealogical understanding of *suzhi* is essential, as what transpires in local schools is intertwined, historically and philosophically, with the larger domains of China’s cultural politics. As well, the phenomenology of the curriculum reform described in the third section adds nuances to the system of reasons by bringing into view the rich specificities of the dissonant working of *suzhi* on the ground. I hope this chapter would further inform the disenchantment of compulsory schooling in rural ethnic China and shed light on the dilemmas and fragmentations daily experienced by rural teachers and students.

Suzhi: Etymology and Cultural Politics

One of the most pregnant yet slippery terms in contemporary China, *suzhi* has permeated popular and policy narratives since the 1980s. The common word “*zhi*” in three related words—*suzhi* (素质), *pinzhi* (品质), and *zhiliang* (质量)—is rendered as “essence” or “substance,” whereas “*su*” on the other hand, denotes “pure,” “basic,” and “original.” The English translation “quality” doesn’t quite capture the capacious nuances of the word.¹ While the word “quality” conveys a neutral, benign essence of what it describes, *suzhi* has taken up a “sacred” and “salvationist” overtone to demarcate human bodies in the hierarchical order of Chinese society (Kipnis, 2006).

¹The difficulty of locating equivalences across languages is not just an issue of translation or vocabulary. It indexes a cleavage in frames of reference, a theoretical aporia in locating traveling discourses in cross-cultural research, and the provincialism of particular concepts in the guise of a universal standard and reason. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* and Bernadette Baker (2010) in *Provincializing Curriculum? On the Preparation of Subjectivity for Globality* speak elegantly about the limitations and inevitable theoretical aporia in doing transnational, cross-cosmological research and the critiques of European ethnocentrism. Both works have provided considerable insights to my own thinking of the *suzhi* discourse-practices in China.

A ubiquitous word manifest in media, literature, and the policy domain, *suzhi* appears both in the discourse of backwardness and in the discourse of social distinction. On the one hand, rural poverty is often attributed to the “low *suzhi*” of its residents, who are seen as a hindrance to China’s swift modernization, thus deserving less income, power, and social status. On the other hand, as part of a greater anxiety over educational competition, the *suzhi* craze has intensified in the practice of childrearing and launched China on a mad race towards elitism. Affluent urban parents vie to enroll their children in extracurricular activities to foster *suzhi* tastes and dispositions.² *Suzhi* is seen as an abstract yet transferrable value that, if acquired, through education primarily, could bring economic profits and social prestige.

Like the word “religion,” *suzhi* is rooted in the intuitive portion of the language that constitutes what Pratt calls the “planetary consciousness” (1992) to naturalize the everyday use of the word. Despite its apparent naturalness, *suzhi* demarcates the boundaries between those possessing it and those who do not, in China’s differentiating social strata (Anagnost, 2004, p. 190). For instance, peasants-turned-migrant-workers are deemed to be of low *suzhi* because of their lack of education, sheer numbers, and potential threat to the social order,³ in contrast to the urban elites who consume educational training, nutritional supplements, sports, and clothes in pursuit of *suzhi*’s plenitude.

To illustrate why *suzhi* works so effectively as rhetoric and as a means of practicing demarcation, the etymological exposition of the term is worth commenting on, as it embeds a conceptual split and a complex movement between two ends or poles, a reading partially

² As a *New York Times* article vividly depicts, wealthy parents in Shanghai take their children abroad for them to learn Western-accented English and purchase private lessons of fine manners and lifestyle training, including ballet, golfing, polo, and even the Japanese finishing school. See French, 2006.

³ Although their labor is forever implanted into the built environment of the city, they are viewed as social malaise creating overcrowdedness, poor hygiene, and security threats, and purged in periodic sweep-cleaning efforts (such as during the Beijing Olympics in 2008) to preserve the city’s orderly and sanitized image.

inspired by Agamben's thought-provoking treatment of the term "people." People, an apparently benign and all-encompassing term, indicates both an undivided body of citizenry (people) as well as the subject that is inferior, ordinary, unfortunate, the "other" of the dominant and the aristocratic (People).⁴ The nuance of distinction is easily discernable from the title *A People's History of the United States*,⁵ precisely in its manifest compassion and empathy towards the oppressed masses.

In a similar vein, I suggest the concept of *suzhi* is brought into noticeability through a conceptual split, functioning as the biopolitical fracture of what cannot be included into the whole of which it is already a part. In other words, *suzhi* is both a generic, unitary term indicating the pure essence or characteristics of the human body and the population, as well as a *divisive* mechanism that demarcates the inassimilable remnants, the anachronism, what has yet to be realized. The *suzhi* ideas-practices engender the typing of the people into developmental categories on a hierarchy of civility. The "I" is related to other "I's" on a *suzhi* continuum, which works to measure the developmental distance from one individual to another, one province to another, one ethnic group to another.

For instance, Qiandongnan is decidedly considered to be a remote, primitive, underdeveloped periphery of China, and its residents associated with such labels as rural,

⁴ For instance, the same term—the Italian *popolo*, the French *peuple*, the Spanish *pueblo*, the English *people*, etc.—embeds a double meaning: the naked life (people) and the political existence (People). Agamben elaborates on the integration of the bare life (a.k.a. *zoe*) into a body politics (i.e. *bios*) in the oscillation between the two poles (people and People): "On the one hand, the *People* as a whole as an integral body politic and, on the other hand, the *people* as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; on the one hand, an inclusive concept that pretends to be without remainder while, on the other hand, an exclusive concept known to afford no hope; at one pole, the total state of the sovereign and integrated citizens and at the other pole, the banishment—either court of miracles or camp—of the wretched, the oppressed, and the vanquished" (2000, p. 31; italics and capitalization original). The distinction of *zoe* and *bio* is also discussed elsewhere. See Agamben, Giorgio. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁵ See Zinn, Howard. (1980). (1st ed.) *A people's history of the United States*. New York: Harper & Row. It is a widely claimed non-fiction by historian and political scientist Howard Zinn who presents American history through the eyes and voices of the working people—women, blacks, native Americans, war resisters, impoverished laborers, etc.—rather than from political and economic elites.

ethnic, exotic, uncivilized. Depicted as standing in *suzhi*'s shadow, the poverty, illiteracy, and traditionalism of the region can no longer be tolerated in light of the modern biopolitical project that seeks to incorporate Qiandongnan into the *suzhi* metanarrative of the Chinese state through developmental strategies such as compulsory education, ethnic cultural tourism, and road construction. The state's plan to eliminate the lowly, dejected, have-not's, as part of its modernist zeal, will, firstly, relegate them to the opposite pole of continuous exclusion and, secondly, subjugate them to a master plan of *suzhi* realization. Hence the ambivalence of the civilizing mission: by turning in full compassion towards the people, it paradoxically targets its negation and erasure.

Based on the above analysis, *suzhi* functions as a corporeal politics in at least two senses. Firstly, it is linked to the biopolitical project of making the nation through making its citizen-subjects. Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, have consistently emphasized the importance of transforming China's large population from a national liability to a national asset by raising the *suzhi* of its people. The search for population quality becomes ontologized in the expression of the ideal corporeality, corporeality not merely in the physiological sense (such as height, weight, and physical conditions of the body) but also in intellectual, moral, social, and cultural terms (such as manners, tastes, etiquettes that the body exhibits). Thus, human life becomes a frontier for the realization of Chinese modernity that seizes upon the body as the register for social, economic, and ideological transformations. The site of the body (together with its embodied competencies) becomes the condition of possibility for the nation's renewal.

Secondly, within the regime of *suzhi* cultivation, the body becomes an excessive focus for social and familial intervention. Individual parents invest intensely in child nurture to plan a head-start for the child's educational competitiveness. Collectively, the national eugenic rhetoric

of “superior birth and superior childrearing” (*yousheng youyu* 优生优育) is enacted through stringent one-family-one-child family planning policies. Individual and national strategies to develop latent potential in the population have turned the body into a political field of nation building and a pedagogical field of self-realization.

In sum, this section demonstrates a double movement of hope/fear, inclusion/exclusion embedded in the corporeal politics of *suzhi*—the hope of progress through raising population quality and the fear for the incivility of the internal others. The next section will further illustrate, using a genealogical approach, that *suzhi* is not only a double register but also a historical moving target in the formation of the ideal citizen-subject.

A History of Suzhi as Ideal Personhood

In a sense, China’s quest for *suzhi* reflects not simply an anxiety about the perceived “backwardness” of the internal “uncivilized,” but also an attempt to maintain the relative superiority China has historically enjoyed in the global arena, as the (once) zenith of civilization and the cosmic center, as revealed in the name “Middle Kingdom” (*Zhongguo* 中国). Today, *suzhi* is further bound up with a dictum to modernize, develop, and prosper. The yearning for *suzhi* is seen in the governmental directive of “raising the quality of the people as a whole,” the population policy of “superior birth and childrearing,” and the educational goal of “cultivating socialist citizens with well-rounded development in virtue, wisdom, athleticism, aesthetics, and labor (*de, zhi, ti, mei, lao* 德智体美劳)” (Sigley, 2009). A slippery term without a single definition, *suzhi* functions as a floating signifier in the imagination of the ideal national body and imbues different policies with seeming coherence (Murphy, 2004). This section seeks to denaturalize such planetspeak by historicizing the shifting modes of rationality that condition how the ideal personhood has been conceived from era to era.

That *suzhi* embodies an idealized system of conduct by an orderly body of certain physical, mental, and affective attributes can be traced to Confucius' time, if not further back. The Confucian exemplary individual, a.k.a. *junzi* (君子), engages in strenuous self-cultivation through observation and practice of ritual proprieties (*li* 礼). *Junzi* symbolizes the ultimate moral conducts of filial piety, moderation, diligence, respect for education, and propriety. Such an aesthetic style of the self constitutes the pathway to the highest virtue called *ren* (仁), roughly translated as "benevolence." Confucius pronounces that "[The *junzi*] sets his mind on the Way [*dao* 道], depends on virtue [*de* 德], relies on benevolence [*ren* 仁] and enjoys the arts [*yi* 艺]" (Legge 1971, cited in Kim, 2006, p.111). In Confucius' words,⁶ he who is able to nourish and realize his own natural tendencies through learning is called a *junzi* (Wu, 2011, p.4). As the poetic embodiment of educational ideals and a venerable life worthy of pursuit by all members of the society, *junzi* is the epitome of *suzhi* in Confucius' time. The *suzhi* embodied by *junzi* is the Way, the natural tendencies linked with the collective wellbeing, and an ever-expanding selfhood entwined with the continual progress of good government and harmonious society.

Another *suzhi*-like approach could be detected in China's adoption, during the early years of the Communist reign, of the Soviet model of the ideal citizen as both ideologically correct and technically savvy (*youhong youzhuang* 又红又专). In the political irrationality of the Cultural Revolution, millions of youth were "sent down" to the countryside (*xiafang* 下放) to engage in physical labor and to be "re-educated," by "eating bitterness" and living a life of material scarcity and adversity. Learning was bifurcated into knowledge of the "red" (*hong* 红) and knowledge of the "expert" (*zhuan* 专) with the former indicating one's political and moral

⁶ "What Heaven (*tian* 天) commands (*ming* 命) is called natural tendencies (*xing* 性); drawing out these natural tendencies is called the proper way (*dao* 道); improving upon this way is called education (*jiao* 教)." See Wu 2011: 4.

allegiance to the party ideology and the latter designating technical and professional skills. In the name of furthering the communist cause and preventing bourgeois infiltration, manual labor and the knowledge of the “red” were emphasized, in contrast to the intellectual labor and knowledge of the “expert,” as a critical makeup of a desirable citizen.

Since the 1980s, the ideal citizen has shed much of its ideological tenor. The term *suzhi* circulates widely in debates among scholars, educators, and policymakers (Yan, 2003; Anagnost, 2004; Woronov, 2009; Sun, 2009; Wilcox, 2009; Sigley, 2009). It is not only reflected in state educational programming (such as Education for Quality) but also in the social cultural ethos of the entire Chinese society. This ethos is seen in the mushrooming of publications on *suzhi*-oriented childrearing, with topics ranging from nutrition, cognitive and physical development, to character formation and moral training. Fostering the *suzhi* of the children is further compounded with an anxiety⁷ about the global positioning of the Chinese society in response to the increasingly knowledge-based economic competition. The ideal personhood is talked about using a series of descriptors including creativity, life-long learning, problem-solving, scientific spirit, and well-roundedness. These cultural parameters affixed to *suzhi* solidify the linkages between China’s 21st century learners/citizens/workers and the nation’s continual prosperity.

In sum, the “ideal type” of the child-citizen has shifted from the poetic characters of the Confucian *junzi* to the Soviet model of “both red and professional,” from the Maoist sent-down youth’s capacity to tolerate hardship to the five-part embodiment of comprehensive talents (i.e.

⁷ In the early 1990s, a joint summer camp attended by Chinese and Japanese teenagers led to a mortifying tale of Chinese children’s low *suzhi* in comparison to their Japanese counterparts. The Chinese teenagers were inferior in terms of physical strength, mental endurance, and the ability to tolerate hardship and delay gratification. This brought the Chinese educational system the humiliation of seeming to only produce bookish learning rather than worldly citizens of adaptability and creativity. This episode spurred a national sensation and rounds of heated debates on the future of Chinese education and its citizenry. See Sun, Yunxiao, *Embattled Summer Camp*, http://blog.zol.com.cn/544/article_543267.html, retrieved 9/10/2010.

virtue, wisdom, athleticism, aesthetics, and labor 德智体美劳), and to what appears today as innovation, problem-solving, and sophisticated consumer taste. The cultivation of *suzhi* remains a moving target in Chinese historiography and an empty marker continually filled with differential meanings and significations. In what follows, I will turn to the most recent iteration of *suzhi* in China's progressive education reform called *suzhi jiaoyu*—the focal point of this article—to examine how it is understood and contested in everyday pedagogical practices in rural ethnic Qiandongnan.

Suzhi Education and Curriculum Reform

The above analysis provides the broader cultural and historical context in which the discourse and practices of *suzhi jiaoyu* are situated and operate. What transpires in school can never be disassociated from the larger domain of nation building and the reigning ideologies of what constitutes the “educated person” (Levinson & Holland, 1996). As much as *suzhi* is a floating signifier with changing meanings across social and historical settings (Kipnis 2006), the term *suzhi jiaoyu* is also ambiguously translated as “quality education,” “education for quality,” “quality-oriented education,” “competence education,” and “character education” (Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p.242). Despite the lack of consensus in its definition, *suzhi jiaoyu* has received public support nationwide and is generally hailed as a progressive movement to rectify China's recalcitrant, exam-oriented educational system.

What, then, is *suzhi jiaoyu*? It indicates a two-fold meaning: fostering the *quality* of the child-citizen through improving the *quality* of the curriculum-pedagogy.⁸ Both notions of “quality” are slippery to define. When used to describe a person, “quality” nebulously encompasses one's physical conditions, civic mindedness, social-moral attributes (such as diligence, creativity,

⁸ Of course, the school-based curricular reform is extended to family-based childrearing and the larger social environment that are also targets of intervention in order to raise children's quality.

entrepreneurialism, patriotism), etc. Similarly, when describing the curriculum-pedagogy, “quality” is a broad term lumping together an array of reform measures including homework reduction, removal of test-score-based ranking and tracking, elimination of supplementary after-school lessons (*buxiban* 补习班), improvement of extracurricular activities, and implementation of child-centered pedagogy.

Based on the belief that overemphasis on high-stake testing hinders creativity and innovation, Chinese lawmakers, at the end of the last century, passed two initiatives to push for educational reform: “the 21st Century Action Plan for Invigorating Education” (the Ministry of Education (MoE), December 1998) and “the Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education” (the Central Committee and State Council, June 1999) (Li & Li, 2010, p. 211). In 2002, the MoE further launched the “Program on the Reform of the Basic Education Curriculum,” a.k.a. the “New Curriculum Plan” (*xin kegai* 新课改), to revamp the present *yingshi jiaoyu* (exam-oriented model) with a more child-friendly one (*suzhi jiaoyu*). The overall aim is to gradually undermine the heavy emphasis on academic achievement and bring about well-rounded student development, a task that can be traced to the 1999 Action Plan.

The new curriculum reforms the receptive styles of learning of rote memory, and mechanical training, encourages the students to have hands-on experience, participate in the exploration of knowledge, learn to search for, acquire and process new information. The students are also trained to develop the ability for critical analysis, problem solving, communication and cooperation. (MoE 2001, Section I, sub-section 2, reprinted in Zhu, M. 2002: 258. Unofficial translation from Chinese)

The vision of the MoE (2001) was that by 2010 China’s curriculum reform at the basic level (Grades 1-9) would achieve positive results in two areas: changing from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy, and shifting from subject-defined curriculum to one integrative of

different types of knowledge (Carney, 2008). Student-centered pedagogy is upheld as the core measure to combat rote-memorization and spoon-feeding and cultivate individual “quality.” Nothing entirely novel, the 2002 *xin kegai* is consistent with China’s ongoing attempt to combat the century-old exam-oriented education system⁹ and the increasing demand for student creativity. A more ambitious aim of *suzhi jiaoyu* to prepare China for a global knowledge economy oriented towards technological advancement, industrial competitiveness, and life-long learning is reflected in former Premier Zhu’s “Go Global” imperative (Zhu, 2002).

When pertaining to the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan, the rhetorical impacts of the “New Curriculum Plan” are far-reaching in at least three aspects. First, it aims to better harness basic education to redress the cycle of poverty, and by extension, the growing wealth-gap across regional and ethnic lines. In the 2003 policy directive of “constructing new socialist countryside,”¹⁰ the neologism *suzhi fuping* (*suzhi* poverty relief) was coined as the core developmental strategy (Yan, 2003; Anhui Daily, 1998). The linkage between *suzhi* and poverty reduction is deployed so that raising *suzhi* of the rural peasantry—primarily through education—is believed to have positive impacts on the maximization of human potential, the unleashing of market growth, and the ultimate eradication of poverty.

Secondly, the *suzhi* curriculum reform is linked to the overarching policy of the Two Basics Project (TBP) with the twin goals to universalize nine-year compulsory education and

⁹ China’s traditional emphasis on examinations as a pathway to officialdom could be dated back to its Imperial Exam System (*ke ju kaoshi zhidu*) that was first introduced during the Sui Dynasty and lasted for over 1300 years until the end of the Qing dynasty. The Imperial Exam System was established initially as a mechanism to select imperial governors among civilians through a special exam called “Ba Gu Wen” based on classic Confucianism. Rising from the ordinary folk to the royal palace had been the dream of ancient scholars who pursued a life of text memorization as the only way towards officialdom. This was in line with Confucius’ exhortation to apply oneself to be a state officer after becoming learned (*xue er you ze shi*). See Li & Li, 2010.

¹⁰ In 2003, the strategic import of the “three rural issues” (*sannong wenti*)—namely agriculture (*nong ye*), peasants (*nong min*), and rural communities (*nong cun*)—was highlighted in the central government’s eleventh Five-Year Plan. In March 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao identified the historical task of the Chinese Communist Party as “building a new socialist countryside,” highlighting rural revitalization and poverty alleviation as crucial to the Party’s legitimacy.

eradicate illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults. While universal basic literacy has long been achieved in China's affluent urban sector that is now enveloped in a *suzhi* scramble towards social prestige, Qiandongnan is stigmatized as a latecomer lagging far behind on national educational indexes, with its inferior basic education plagued by long-standing issues of dilapidated facilities, under-qualified teachers, and rampant dropout. As part of the state's unrelenting efforts to make basic education compulsory, *suzhi jiaoyu* is bundled with TBP in order to bring stubborn regions like Qiandongnan on board China's fast moving train towards educational modernization. The measures include increased government funding, teacher training, compensation to financially stripped households, consolidation of underperforming teaching facilities, and most important of all, implementation of student-centered pedagogy.

Thirdly, *suzhi jiaoyu* is entangled in a series of rural development strategies in Qiandongnan that embroil the contested process of schooling in tensions with the larger ecology of market forces and state discipline. In China's zealous remaking of the rural, the countryside has become both a *da houfang* (大后方), a support base that provides abundant surplus labor for the manufacturing boom, and a national pedagogical burden with low *suzhi* and mass illiteracy. Through participating in multiple modernization agendas (such as compulsory schooling, rural-to-urban labor migration, state-sponsored road construction, and promotion of ethnic tourism), the rural ethnic residents in Qiandongnan navigate the *suzhi* regime in pedagogical, economic, and cultural terms.

Suzhi in Paradoxes: Narratives of Qiandongnan

I will now turn to a close-up picture of the dissonant workings of the *suzhi* curriculum reform in Qiandongnan. This section seeks to illustrate how the everyday practices of the teachers and students fabricate a "successful" front of reform despite hidden contradictions on

the backstage; how the corporeality sanctioned by the reform sits in a jarring relationship with the folk conception of ideal personhood to trouble the progressive undertone of the *suzhi* regime. This, I hope, will cast a fresh light on the school-centered *suzhi* discourse-practices, as what Foucault calls the “familiar [yet] poorly known horizon” (1997, p.144) in contemporary China.

Discipline or Punish: The War on Child-Centeredness

In cultivating the *suzhi* citizen-subjects, the *suzhi* curriculum reform produces incongruity between the policy scripts and the subterranean processes that transpire in everyday classroom practices in Qiandongnan. Within the policy domain, a contested “front” emerges around the notion of child-centeredness. While *suzhi jiaoyu* is juxtaposed with *yingshi jiaoyu* (test-oriented education), teacher-centered pedagogy and corporeal punishment is criticized as begetting conformity and repressing individual creativity, thus fundamentally at odds with the ethos of quality education. According to the new curriculum guidelines, the tutelary relationship needs to shift from one of submissive obedience to teacher authority to one eulogizing student agency. In deliberating new learning strategies, teachers are to create an affective ambience of collaboration and approach teaching with empathy. A more egalitarian pedagogy is upheld where learning shifts from a relationship to others (obedience to authority) to a relationship primarily with oneself (rights and responsibility to determine one’s own conduct).

One could easily locate a heightened emphasis on individual learners within a secular-modern paradigm that celebrates the Deweyan notions of experiential learning, progressive pedagogy, and democracy. Arguably, the endorsement of such transnational pedagogical ideals reflects China’s desire for membership and legitimacy in the global community. The focus on inclusion, emancipation, and protection of children is also embedded in the discourse of children’s rights promoted through transnational entities such as Save the Children and the UN

Convention on the Rights of Children, and is taken up by national policy initiatives, such as the Law for the Protection of Junior Citizens (*wei chengnianren baohu fa* 《未成年人保护法》).

The spread of student-centric pedagogy has been analyzed from many fronts, as the one-size-fit-all techno-rational approach to education (Tabulawa 2003), the commodification of education spurred by economic globalization (Torres 2002), and as the penetration of neoliberal state ideology and western interests (Olssen 1996; Apple 2001). What interests me is the shifting systems of thinking that have enabled the “talk” of individual empowerment, rights, and lifelong learning as the regime of truth in contemporary China. The issue is less about China’s adherence to a newfangled doctrine, or of its membership in a global community, than its becoming part of a collective “we,” a present with particular precepts, mottos, and systems of reasons.

The student-centered reform rhetoric rests upon the philosophical-political-economic precepts of freedom, choice, emancipation, and equality. Presented as universal, these precepts mark how we think about the educated person and the means by which to educate, in relation to quality/*suzhi*. In fact, these keywords and the varieties of sentiments they mobilize have pervaded educational reforms across the global timespace such that it is almost impossible to think about a national curriculum that does not follow, or at least attempt to follow, these precepts. The impossibility suggests the intricate intertwinings of national imageries in the global horizon and that national curriculum reform is always-already transnational.

Despite the increasing demands for *suzhi* education nation-wide, the majority of the teachers in the two village schools I observed were cynical and bitter about it, dismissing it as a stigma that demarcated them from city teachers and as out of joint with their immediate reality. To illustrate this point, the vice headmaster of Longxing Middle School described his encounter, during a summer training session, with a private schoolheadmaster from Zhejiang, one of the most affluent coastal provinces.

His school has money and good infrastructure to implement quality education. Their teachers' annual salaries range above 150K and the school charges 40K per student per year for tuition. Even though it is expensive, many wealthy families still compete to enroll their children and some end up bribing the school for putting the children on the acceptance list. What do we have here? We are a poor school. We are still struggling with *yingshi jiaoyu* (exams) and how to make students score better, how can we have time to deal with *suzhi jiaoyu*. Let the rich urban schools worry about it. Plus, unlike the urban children, our mountain kids are wild little monsters and have no self-motivation in learning. If we practice child-centered teaching don't use discipline, we are doing our students a disservice.¹¹

Indeed, while private secondary school can charge astronomical tuitions and boarding fees from willing parents, remote village schools in Qiandongnan are often plagued by lack of resources, aging and untrained teachers, underperforming students, and worse of all, massive dropout. Teachers often talk about *suzhi jiaoyu* as a developmental stage marked by advanced teaching facilities and superior academic performance, feasible in urban centers but incongruous with the resource-deprived, exam-heavy rural reality. In the headmaster's words, child-centered teaching is not suitable for mountain kids who have "no self-motivation in learning" thus need external goading in order to achieve. Adopting child-centered pedagogy means decreasing the much-needed external discipline, which would negatively affect how much kids learn thus doing them

¹¹ A few months later I had an opportunity to visit the private school that in the words of the village headmaster was a successful symbol of quality education. The school runs elaborate extracurricular activities, including clubs, recitals, and games, as well as daily self-monitoring contests in which students rated themselves on hygiene, friendliness, work ethics, time management, etc. From the self-monitoring contests, the school then chose two "good habits" each week to promote among all students. According to the headmaster, this was to "systematically cultivate well-rounded personality (*quanmian fazhan*) through experiential learning (*tiyan xuexi*)." A wide range of cosmopolitan ethos is embodied and normalized in such extracurricular practices as "natural" and "desirable," exhibiting what a *suzhi*-child is and should be.

a “disservice.” For him, it is the exam result that counts and that determines whether students can ultimately obtain academic credentials and social mobility.

Yet it would be oversimplistic to take his words at face value and argue that *suzhi jiaoyu* is indeed something out of joint with the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan. In my observation in Majiang and Longxing, the child-centered curriculum policy penetrated everyday teaching practices and was often interpreted begrudgingly as loss of teacher authority. Discipline, a technique deeply instilled in local teachers’ professional life, was forfeited by the reform’s lofty-sounding rhetoric of decentralization and egalitarianism. To many teachers, the call for student-centric pedagogy as “quality education” had infinitely complicated their daily practices, if not made their life downright miserable, especially when bundled with TBP, the compulsory education law. Mr. Long, a senior teacher who had taught Chinese for twenty-five years in Majiang Middle School, lamented that he did not know how to teach any more.

In those early years, even though living and teaching conditions were harsher, we felt a sense of acknowledgement as teachers. Students were much better behaved. We felt satisfied when we knew we could help them learn. Before 2003, before TBP, we could make students repeat grades if their performance was too low. We could even expel students if they were constant troublemakers. Students would feel shameful for repeating grades, so they worked hard to catch up.

Now, things have changed. In 2003, the education experts in Beijing handed us with the *liangji* (TBP) policy. According to *liangji*, we can’t scold students or give them corporeal punishment. We cannot make them repeat grades. We need to get everybody in school and move them ahead at the same speed. Before, we say a student performs poorly because he or she doesn’t study hard; now they say a student performs poorly because

the teacher is lousy. Whatever happens, we are to blame now. And the students know that very well.

To be honest, *suzhi jiaoyu* and TBP have made a huge mess of our life. With TBP, we cannot let one single student quit school or make them repeat grades, regardless of their performance. And with *suzhi jiaoyu*, we are supposed to put students at the center and not use discipline. Now you walk in a classroom and see half the class sleeping, and the other half minding their own business, talking and fighting with each other as if the teachers were nonexistent. You are disheartened.

Students do not want to be here, but we have to make sure they do so that we could pass the TBP inspection. Students can be very uncooperative because they know the teachers are powerless now. If we try to discipline them, they would threaten to drop out and talk back to us like this: "Don't make me want to drop out; otherwise you will have to show up at my home to persuade me to come back. Why don't you save the trouble now and let me be?" They know we teachers must beg them to stay in school now, according to the law. Now we are like shepherds looking after a group of unruly monsters.

Teaching is like playing music to deaf ears (*dui niu tan qin*). After a while, we've learned to accept that as long as we make sure nothing major happens to students' safety, we are good. Teaching becomes a chore that we trudge through every day.

The quote indicates palpable disenchantment and disempowerment felt by the teachers. They were mired in a two-way drudgery: if they resorted to discipline, their practices were at odds with *suzhi jiaoyu* and students would threaten to drop out; if they accepted the status quo, students would not learn or perform to the testing standards. Either way, village teachers were to blame. Even though Mr. Long seemed to suggest a stark contrast between when classroom discipline was legitimate and when *suzhi* pedagogy was enacted, as if the two were

fundamentally incommensurate, the discrepancy assumed between *suzhi* and discipline is spurious.

The spuriousness is underlined by the shifting narratives of the body as a site of intervention. Corporeal punishment was previously deemed legitimate for the purpose of edification, to the extent that teachers could use shame as disincentive to urge students to learn and behave, that they could “make students repeat grades” and “even expel students if they were constant troublemakers.” Now, with the more blatant form of punishment pathologized, it is superimposed by a more subtle form of discipline. The very act of this negation enables a new disciplinary front that hinges upon the school’s humanistic-liberal mission to “rescue” and “emancipate” the child, to cultivate a particular kind of citizen-subject in line with the national modernist quest, a discipline invisible yet no less pervasive.

The body cast in the negative light of corporeal punishment is now at the center of nurturing, democratic pedagogies espoused in *suzhi jiaoyu*’s student-oriented policy scripts. As the teacher said, “with *suzhi jiaoyu*, we are supposed to put students at the center and not use discipline” even if they “walk in a classroom and see half the class sleeping, and the other half minding their own business, talking and fighting with each other as if the teachers were nonexistent.” The body of the child is now placed in a space to be nourished and cared for, to be ensured that “nothing major happen to their safety,” rather than penalized and punished. And the teachers live a life as if the “shepherds looking after a group of unruly monsters.”

If, in the past, the bodies of students were subject to physical/verbal punishment for misconducts, now the bodies of both the students and the teachers are subsumed in a capillary realm of discipline that Foucault suggests is integral to the governmentality of the modern soul (see also Popkewitz, 1998). With the shift from corporeal punishment to corporeal politics of *suzhi*, the body continues as a register for educational transformation and as a site of social

administration. The discourse of individual rights bespeaks an absent presence of a corporeal politics that disciplines the inner subjectivities of both students and teachers. Such discipline is part of the perpetually mutating order of things as readable signs inserted in systems of signification (Grosz, 1995), producing a fragile, fuzzy, and fluid pedagogical space that legitimizes particular ways of teaching and learning as *suzhi*, that construct the child citizen and also govern the inner subjectivities of the teacher.

The agenda of “centering the learner” clearly presents a departure from the Confucian pedagogy that emphasizes teacher seniority, rote learning, and proper ritualistic conducts of students. Schooling had been traditionally viewed as a key locus for acquiring essential “rituals and ceremonies” rather than individual discovery (Cheng 2001). One’s academic success was cast in the moral light of lineage glorification more than the exemplification of individual talents. The stress of respect, group harmony, and collective order had for centuries occupied the core of the Chinese educational ethos.

Historically, within the framework of disciplined instruction, learning primarily took place by chanting and reciting classic scriptures, and teacher dictation was not considered a punishment but a necessity for the good of the child. The teacher was likened to the burning candle and the gardener of seedlings who enlightened and nurtured others to his/her own diminution. Teacher authority had been construed in affective terms as an extension of parental care—intensely emotional yet intrinsically unequal, benevolent yet capable of disciplining, and requiring children’s respect. The more archaic appellation for teacher was *xiansheng* (先生), literally one who was superior in age and wisdom and whose virtues and conducts were to be emulated by students. The true student was not only the seeker of knowledge but of morality, rituals, and propriety, who showed the utmost reverence and obedience to the teacher.

Now, under the aegis of *suzhi* curriculum reform, how the teacher-student relationship is

conceived and what constitutes the proper way of doing pedagogical work has markedly shifted. The emotional and moral overtone that used to characterize the pedagogical relations, and the image of the teacher as the self-sacrificing figure have slowly eroded and given way to a liberal notion of teaching where students are “invited” to curricular activities so as to maximize the pleasure in learning. In the words quoted above, teachers live a life of the shepherds looking after a group of “unruly monsters,” and their disciplinary authority is swept under the discourse of learner-centeredness and constantly threatened by student disrespect, hostility, and worse still, legal ramification.

Just like the idea of “learning is doing,” the idea of “teaching is facilitating” is now the new order of things that defines teachers and teaching. The discourse about “facilitation,” “student empowerment,” and “participatory teaching” is mobilized, at least rhetorically, to define teacher competence and teaching quality. Clearly, the proper way of teaching has nothing intrinsically “proper” or “natural.” As McWilliam (2004) points out, the idea of a proper teacher is the product of the historically contingent “regime of truth” that shapes what is acceptable and normal and operates on the body and soul of both the teacher and the student.

Suzhi jiaoyu on- and off-stage

Child-centeredness is one of the many contested fronts to be meticulously maintained in the *suzhi* curriculum reform. The “proper” image of the teachers as affective facilitators of learning, rather than rigid disciplinarians and impassive deliverers of knowledge, is another front to be carefully monitored. Test scores still work as the sole criteria of the legitimacy of the school, thus another normative front that must be kept. Based on my observation of everyday

classroom practices in Majiang and Longxing, I argue that what was exhibited on the overt fronts of *suzhi* education was twisted at the backstage, through students' and teachers' appropriation of the policy lexicon in ways that both mimicked and ruptured the reform scripts. I argue that it was through repositioning themselves in relation to the master code of *suzhi* and *suzhi jiaoyu* on the front and backstage that the pedagogical actors in Majiang and Longxing came to negotiate their marginal social status as partial, incomplete reform subjects. The variously defined *suzhi* and *suzhi* curriculum-pedagogy were repeatedly constituted through acts that were symbolically performing the policy script on the front stage and displacing them in acts of mimicry and mockery on the backstage.¹²

Whereas the student-centric language re-inscribes what *ought to be* the “proper” way of teaching and constructs discipline/punishment in a negative light, on the whole, village teachers managed to “talk the talk” without adhering to the rhetoric in their instructional practices. They both held physical discipline as imperative — to beat the devil out of the students for their own good, so to speak— and regarded it as “the weapon of the weak”¹³ that they had to avail themselves of in order to keep their own safety and sanity. Mr. Chang, a ninth grade Chinese teacher at Longxing Middle School, once confided in me while we were proctoring a mock exam together.

¹² In a similar vein, Louisa Schein in her thought-provoking article “*Performing Modernity*” (1999) invokes the notion of performativity to depict the on- and off-stage practices by the Miao minority in China as a way to mark off their putatively “nonmodern” status. Schein contends that the Miao people engaged in what Victor Turner (1986, p.24) calls “performative reflexivity” to meditate upon the codes, statuses, and legal rules that make up their public social positioning. “People not only position themselves vis-à-vis modernity through multifarious practices but also struggle to reposition themselves, sometimes through deploying the very codes of the modern that have framed them as its others” (Schein, 1999, p.363-364).

¹³ This is a famous phrase coined by James Scott in his widely cited *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) where he advanced provocative definitions of resistance through a classic ethnographic study of peasant rebellions in a small village of Sedaka in Malaysia.

Teaching here is a test of your psyche. If you are not psychologically strong, you are going to have heart attacks or go crazy. One of our female teachers was reduced to tears many times. She simply couldn't handle the public humiliation by the students who openly challenged her or threw chalk at her. For us male teachers, we just have to resort to violence (*baoli*) sometimes. We have to be very straightlaced and iron-fisted in order not to let the students get an upper hand. *Meibanfa* (we can't help it), but they are the God now and we teachers must pray that they will set their mind on study a bit more.

In my observation of the two schools, the teachers' sense of alienation was discernable.

Conscious of their waning authority, many considered teaching an unappreciated task where they were often confronted with hostility, an unrewarding job that hardly paid the bills, and a dull lifestyle that begot alienation and spiritual lethargy. Indeed, the village teachers inhabited a contradictory space. On the one hand, in average villagers' minds, they occupied the envious position as state employees with steady income, the privileged lot who "ate the emperor's rice" (*chi huang liang*) so to speak. On the other hand, village teachers were conscious of their low status in the hierarchy of professions and the embarrassing salaries received. As well, they completely lacked control in curricular matters (including choice of textbooks, mechanism of testing and evaluation, and were at the whim of national curriculum policies). But within the environment of the classroom, they could be authoritarian commanders with total control, known as "meek dictators" (see similar depictions of Indian village teachers by Sarangapani 2003, p.72).

Unconvinced or unable to appreciate the new curriculum reform, the teachers were nonetheless in no position to change the status quo and were held responsible for opting into the *suzhi* regime. However, the realities of classroom hostility had driven them, with frustration and helplessness, to a perfunctory compliance at best. In the backstage, public scolding was

commonplace, and corporeal punishment was not infrequent. I often saw students furiously chastised in the headmaster's office, or worse still, sent home for as long as a week. Any sign of wandering off the "good student" path was immediately spotted and punished. Girls and boys alike reported having been kicked by female teachers' high heels or slapped on the face when they misbehaved in class. Derogatory sarcasm still peppered teachers' talk, even though it was condemned as harmful and forbidden in the *suzhi jiaoyu* framework.

This was dramatized by a haircut episode I witnessed in Longxing Middle School. I was asked by a 9th grade English teacher to substitute for his evening session¹⁴ and help the class correct answers on an exam paper. In the middle of my instruction, a few male teachers arrived at the door, each with a pair of scissors in hand. Admonishing the students to keep their hair trimmed neatly, they started walking down each aisle, cutting off hair that they viewed as inappropriately colored or excessively long. I later found out that this was part of the routine housekeeping that would occur periodically during the school year, especially before the national school inspection. "Students should know their job better by now; they are here to study and not to wear funky hair and clothing," I was told. Besides hairstyle, other practices such as makeup, body piercing, jewelry, and clothes were also subject to strict regulations. Students were not allowed to wear jewelry or nail polish or make-up of any kind. No flip-flops or high heels. Skirts were discouraged. Long hair, which was popular among young Miao and Dong females, must not be let loose to its full length, as it was considered too provocative for licentious minds.

The haircut episode was a dramatization of backstage maneuvering that ruptured the child-centered, humanistic front of the *suzhi* curriculum reform. Yet it was not simply a negation

¹⁴ In both Majiang and Longxing middle schools, evening sessions were commonly held after dinner break from 7-9 pm during weekdays for the teachers to provide additional instruction and drill their students on tests. Even though the practice was officially outlawed by *suzhi jiaoyu* reform in order to reduce homework burden, in Qiandongnan it was still widely used among village schools trying to catch up in the exam-oriented race.

of the reform, since it maintained another front that required the *suzhi* student to be appropriately attired with particular aesthetic and hygienic virtues. The teachers might appear to be the authoritarian executors of the “event”; yet the very “problem” of teachers dictating the appearance of the students and orchestrating orderliness must be “problematized.” The deployment of specific techniques (scissors) to get rid of the “excesses” is part and parcel of what is called “the regime of appearance” that regulates “how people and things should look that combines aesthetic, scientific, political, and moral discourses” (Dussel, 2004, p.86; Perrot, 1994; Roche, 1994). “Proper” hairstyle, just like other good habits and cleanliness, is repeatedly espoused as part of the ritualized cultivation of the *suzhi* body as well as the “soul” (Popkewitz, 1998; Rose, 1990). Such a “surgical incision” (Grosz, 1995) of haircutting is a powerful intervention of the school in the fashioning of the self—the extracting and removing that take place on the body—and enacts a double strategy of both eliminating the “excessive, diseased, or unaesthetic from the body” (Dussel, 2004, p.89) and inscribing into the soul what it ought to be yet lacks. To reiterate, the child-centered, humanistic front was ruptured on the backstage by the teacher-centered, coercive “surgical incision” which, ironically, maintained another front that sanctioned the *suzhi* child-citizen as properly attired and comported. This indicates that the *suzhi* reform often speaks in a tongue that is forked, producing messy undercurrents and contradictions.

As for the students, their bodies were at times standardized and flattened, as in the haircutting incident, at times differentiated and demarcated, as in the cases of ranking and tracking, and oftentimes caught up in both processes. Even though tracking has been banned by the quality education reform, it was still rampant inside these schools. In both Majiang and Longxing middle schools, after every monthly exam (*yuekao*), students were ranked by their scores and the first one hundred names would be announced on the school’s bulletin board.

The term *chasheng* (差生, literally, poor performer) was coined and used to label students on a hierarchy of competence (good versus poor). Inside the classrooms, higher and lower achieving students were physically separated into different seating areas. Given that teachers were evaluated on test scores for salary raises and promotion, favoritism was a common practice. During my many conversations with students, I asked why they seemed so uninterested in learning. A group of 8th graders in Majiang Middle School once told me in disgruntlement:

The teachers rank us into good and bad students. Because we are *chasheng*, they dislike us. Our homeroom teacher is so unfair. He is soft-spoken when talking to the good students but so rude to us. He calls us unruly cows! In physics class, when the teacher demonstrates lab stuff, he always stays close to the corner where good students sit. We never have a chance to take a good look at what he was trying to show. When there was an essay competition, the teacher called on good students to submit essays, and said, “for the rest of you, it doesn’t matter if you submit or not.” We feel hurt.

Ranking and favoritism was another instance of backstage maneuvering that both affirmed the normative front of testing and ruptured the egalitarian, progressive overtone of *suzhi jiaoyu*. Beneath its professed worldviews of meritocracy, the operative mode of the school hinges on both marked inclusivity and unmarked exclusivity. Students who fell below the achievement bar were ostracized and their motivation dampened. Yet, despite the draconian school ambience, students managed to engage in their own playful backstage mockery of the testing regime through youthful expression in clothing, cosmetics, cigarettes, alcohol, and pop music. Girls still colored their nails, put on variously shaped earrings, and dated in secrecy.

They would skip classes to go shopping on market days¹⁵ and return to spend the evening at the internet café chatting online, downloading music, and engaging with virtual realities.

Self conscious of their own “status group” that distinguished them from other “normal” students, much in the same light as the “ear’oles” depicted by Willis (1977), students in the lower track unanimously referred to themselves as *chasheng*, and more dramatically, some even sewed or painted the words on their clothes to demonstrate the very label that stigmatized them. Such a self-identification with the official label expressed students’ cognizance of, and precocious receptivity to, social and academic hierarchy, and could be understood as students’ embracive negation of the school’s categorization through repetitively citing and embodying it. Their very repetitive citation of a given discourse that “constructs” and “subjugates” them, i.e., their very act of self-deployment of the *chasheng* label that signifies them as the “poor” students, is seen as what Judith Butler calls “subversive repetition” (1990, p. 147) and “subversive citation” (1995, p. 135). It is subversive because such repetitive citation puts the students at the junctures of language that opens up spaces for resignification and disrupts the categorical codes used to keep them in place.

With a kind of “civil disobedience” and “conformist rebellion,” students exercised a form of care of the self in what Foucault calls the “aesthetics of existence” (1983/1984, p. 348) through which the self is constituted in, and by, deliberate and “historically analyzable practices” (p. 369). The deliberate marking of the body as *chasheng* with cheerfulness and pride was a playful move in which students found sociality and group identity through both resistance and

¹⁵ Market days occur once every five or six days in both Majiang and Longxing when vendors from neighboring villages gather to sell vegetables, candies, fruits, clothes, small household appliances and electronic gadgets. Market days are popular among the youth and provide consumer goods to satisfy their consumptive desires.

accommodation to the codes that typed them. Such an account¹⁶ that students gave of themselves by wearing their labeled identity on their sleeves, so to speak, furnished a linguistic occasion for students' self transformation. The transformation was, paradoxically, by virtue of the very language in which they had been labeled. In the process, students not only "disclosed" and "publicized" themselves as *chasheng*, but acted on schemes of intelligibility while, at the same time, subjecting them to rupture and contest. Such is also a tactical¹⁷ crisscross—albeit partial—of the institutional enclosure of individual students into finished categories and a perpetual attempt at unsettling and reconstituting authoritarian narratives. Through public display of the "self" in the form of bodily marking, children exhibit a precocious receptivity to official discourse and a creative negotiation of their school identity. As poststructural feminist scholarship suggests (Mahmood, 2005, p. 22), norms are not only solidified and/or subverted, but also inhabited, consumed, and performed in myriad ways.

In a sense, the village teachers and students performed cosmetic compliance of the *suzhi* curriculum reform, and occupied a fuzzy terrain of mimicry and mockery. As Bhabha states, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (1984, p.126). The mimicry I observed in both village schools is both a mimicry of the many "fronts" sanctioned by the *suzhi* reform and a slippage between the reform lexicon and the everyday tales of classroom life, the backstage practices of discipline and punishment, the playful exhibition of youth culture, and the publicized aesthetics of categorical self-fashioning. Such slippage destabilizes the

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the effects and consequences that giving an account of oneself has on oneself, see Butler's reading of Foucault's later work in Butler, 2005, p.111-136.

¹⁷ See de Certeau (1984) for an influential use of the notion "tactical" in revealing the informal means ordinary people re-appropriate languages, symbols, artifacts, etc in everyday situations and in doing so subvert the representations that are institutionally imposed upon them.

progressive aura of the curriculum reform, rendering less tenable the normative discourse of what constitutes *suzhi* and *suzhi jiaoyu*.

The famous Chinese adage—*xin ping zhuang jiu jiu* (new bottle with old wine)—is often evoked to describe “quality reform” as retaining the old essence while superficially changing the language. For many, the latest reform drama is yet another doomed battle against the prevailing exam machine, no more than filling the new bottle with old wine. Despite its emancipatory rhetoric, the curriculum reform embeds old form of disciplining conceived in new guise. In many village schools of Qiandongnan, teachers continue to teach to the tests; and testing remains the most important way of evaluating teachers and winnowing out students. Students and teachers are still subject to long school days (starting with one hour of morning review session before the first class period, ending with two to three hours of evening review session, with weekends and holidays often taken up for supplementary lessons and drilling), and various forms of exams remain a constant pressure for the teachers to keep the students up to the testing standard. The “quality” campaign is still to a large extent assessed by quantitative criteria, to quote the teachers’ joking punch line, “education for *suzhi* is still education for scores,” with “*suzhi*” rhyming with “score” (*shuzi* 数字) in Mandarin Chinese.

Provincializing Suzhi/Quality

Now I will turn to the juxtaposition between the official *suzhi* discourse and folk interpretations of learning to understand why *suzhi jiaoyu* has met with disenchantment in rural ethnic Qiandongnan. It is not my intention to homogenize the Miao and the Dong into one unitary “indigenous” cultural identity,¹⁸ standing as a counterpoint to the state’s civilizing

¹⁸ In fact, the term “indigenous” is highly contested. It is associated with official and popular imageries that paint the Miao and the Dong with backward primitivity and as antithesis of the modern. The term “indigenous” also invokes a plea for cultural quiddity that nativizes the “other” as befitting a separate frame of reference and consigns them to the waiting room of

agenda. In the scope of this study, I do not have the space to tease apart the rich specificities in the Miao and Dong learning experiences; I focus instead on the commonalities observed in both villages. My purpose is to show that alongside, beneath, and intersecting the *suzhi* mantra lies an immense wealth of beliefs, values, and ways of knowing not always commensurable with the state-sanctioned criteria of learning. Such epistemic dissonance provides important insights to why the new perspective of *suzhi jiaoyu* often meets with resistance and disenchantment.

During my oral history interviews with village elders, I learned that in the past, when formal schooling was unavailable for the majority of the populace, the Miao and Dong children were taught life skills such as farming and animal husbandry by their adult kinsmen, and skills necessary for courtship such as embroidery and singing and *lusheng* (a reed pipe instrument) by communally revered experts. Expertise in such skills constituted desirable personhood and helped a person gain communal respect, especially the admiration of the other sex in courtships. Ability to sing (*hui changge*), especially, is a revered attribute, or “*suzhi*” to use the modern educational parlance. Musical virtuosity has historically been a very important part of everyday life in the Miao and Dong village societies. To this day, songs are still sung when welcoming guests, celebrating births and burials, asking for blessings from local deities, commemorating the legendary origins of the ethnic group, and developing romantic relationships during courtship.¹⁹

Without written scripts in their languages, songs are repositories of ethnic histories and folklore capturing the richness of everyday wisdom and the profoundly spiritual. Agricultural

modernity (Gaonkar, 2001). To that end, I use *indigenous* and *folk* interchangeably, focusing on the particular, the unassimilatable, and the incommensurable.

¹⁹ In many Miao and Dong villages, ethnic singing was interrupted during the national famines in the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s-1970s, and has been on the decline since the 1990s as a result of social encounters with the larger Chinese society.

information, legendary tales, melancholic chants, and practical advice are all woven into intricate lyrics and melodies. For instance, the Dong Grand Choir,²⁰ known as *Kgal Laox* in Dong and *dongzu dage* (侗族大歌) in Chinese, has traditionally served as an important medium to teach the Dong people about history, philosophy, social responsibilities, laws, and aesthetics. The Dong proverb “Foods nurture the body; songs nurture the heart” (*fan yang shen, ge yang xin* 饭养身歌养心) well depicts the existential values of singing. In the Dong language, to sing songs is literally “doing” songs (*dor kgal*), which indicates singing as an intricate part of daily activities that people naturally “do.”

I learned that in the past, almost all Dong children belonged to clan-based, same-sex singing groups from the age of ten and spent many evenings together learning a repertoire of songs from a song expert. Participation in a singing group is generally viewed as a criterion for group membership, indicating mutual respect and communal bond. This is evidenced by the opening line of a song: “If you don’t sing, friends will say you are proud; Sit down and sing, and friends will say you are good and honest” (Ingram, 2007, p. 94). The significance of songs goes beyond the context of singing. The Dong regard singing as an important form of socialization and entertainment, as one of the normal activities that one “does” on a daily basis, as a welcomed change from the farming routines. Through learning to sing, social structure and patterns of daily life (such as teacher-student interaction, allocation of different musical responsibilities, clan-based identities, gift-giving) are also reinforced.²¹

²⁰ Since the 1986 debut of the Dong polyphonic choir singing (*Kgal Laox*) at the Golden Autumn Arts Festival in France, the Dong and their musical talents have captivated western audience. Recognized as a form of National Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2006 and included on UNESCO’S Representative List of the ICH of Humanity in 2009, *Kgal Laox* is reputed as the “crystal creeks of oriental symphony” and has appeared in various forms of national and international media in recent years. Since 2000, *Kgal Laox* has received increased publicity in government-sponsored tourism promotion as a symbol of the pan-Dong identity. See Ingram 2011.

²¹ In recent decades, with the increase of labor out-migration, tourist influx, and compulsory schooling, children are no longer expected to learn to sing, yet singing is still considered an important part of daily life.

Indigenous rituals such as singing and courtship used to serve a very important function in socialization. After a day of strenuous physical labor, young and old alike gathered around an intimate charcoal fire in the village drum towers all night long to converse and express their tender feelings through songs.²² They sang songs mimicing water gurgling, cicadas chirping, and roosters crowing to soothe fatigue and hardship as well as to initiate a courtship. Courtship, a ritualistic passage to adulthood, they believed, performed a more valuable pedagogical function than schooling. As the saying goes, “One year of courtship outweighs three years of schooling” (*du sannian shu buru nao yinian guniang* 读三年书不如闹一年姑娘). Through singing, young people expressed their respect and tender feelings for members of the opposite sex, indicating an intention to consider them as marriage partners.

In both the Miao and the Dong language, learning and knowing takes on very different ontological and epistemological registers. While the logocentric, codified form of school knowledge privileges abstraction and taxonomy, it sits in jarring relation with embodied vernacular knowledge that is transmitted in a more performative, embodied mode and has little to do with sitting young people down for grueling lessons and tests. In the Dong communities, for instance, the communally revered song experts are hardly characterizable as being knowledgeable in the modern pedagogic sense. Most have never attended school, often can not read or understand Mandarin Chinese. Labeled as *wenmang* (literally translated as “character blind,” i.e., unable to recognize Mandarin characters), yet they have learned hundreds of song lyrics and melodies by heart.

²² Due to the courtship elements, Miao and Dong songs were targets of purge during the Cultural Revolution that castigated capitalist indulgence and personal abandonment. To the nation’s political elites, music performance of the ethnic populace represented an expression of cultural stagnation and anachronism and posed a threat to the hard-won normative social order. Ideologically charged party music was then propagated as a regime of value to selectively ennoble particular music forms over the other and govern the aesthetic and moral conduct of the populace. For the ethnic people, however, the indigenous music forms valorize group affiliation and cultivate ethnic belonging.

In the past, village elders told me, a song expert would be invited from another clan to live and teach for an extended period of time in order to prepare for a festival performance. Despite material scarcity, villagers willingly contributed grains and meat as in-kind compensation to the song expert. To this day, a song expert would be referred to as a source of cultural authority, even if he/she were considered illiterate in the modern educational sense. Such musical expertise is “non-sentential,” to borrow Maurice Bloch’s phrase (1990), which cannot be expressed via compartmentalized categories, or transferrable through formal instruction or abstract pedagogies. It is only through watching, listening, and doing, a process that does not project a means-end dichotomy or outward(urban)-bound teleology or preconceived didactic goals, can one gain a modicum of competence and “*suzhi*” in musical virtuosity. In such a pedagogical mode, learning is intuitive; literacy is extra-linguistic. Acquiring knowledge/skills and aesthetic enjoyment becomes inseparable.

Today, such “qualities” as singing, embroideries, and virtuosity in indigenous instruments are marginalized in the modern classroom curricula that are text-based and exam-oriented, urban- and outward-bound, and that aim towards what is stipulated as the *suzhi* citizenry: patriotic and productive, technologically-savvy and problem-solving. Heidegger speaks of the withdrawal of “forgottenness of being” in which the natural propensity of knowing is abandoned under the dominant mode of calculative thinking, sorting, and naming (1999). Similarly in the Miao and Dong communities I observed, learning through the route of being and custom has been largely purged from the technologized, professionalized, managerialized compulsory education scheme. At stake here is the enfolding of a liminal epistemic space that speaks in alternative grammar into a fixed official category of *suzhi*.

Each school subject comes from a complicated web of relations that often get obscured in the “common sense” of what school is about and ought to do (Gustafson, 2009, p. 203). The

rich ethnic ways of life I observed in Majiang and Longxing suggest intuitive forms of epistemology and different systems of valuation of human qualities that exist side by side with the mainstream notion of *suzhi* and learning. Rather than pitting them against each other, I argue that villagers live through such juxtaposition with ambiguity. On the one hand, ethnic ways of life are never static. Over the past decades, the Miao and Dong lifeways have undergone significant changes. With urban-bound labor migration, mandatory state schooling, and the rise in tourism and TV viewing, fewer and fewer young people still claim proficiency in ethnic singing and dancing. Indeed, there is an acute sense of self marginalization²³ and an intense desire for acquiring Chinese literacy and the mainstream form of *suzhi* to function in the larger society. On the other hand, even if viewed as backward and obstructing social progress and *suzhi* acquisition, folk lifestyles and epistemology continue to serve as a significant force in the Miao and Dong people's social identification.

What people know, what it means to be a person of "quality," are battles waged on an uneven field in which certain conceptions of knowledge and ideal personhood are favored over others. The binary idiom of modernity and backwardness has produced the homogenous concept of quality/*suzhi* and habitually dismisses the lived domains of rituals and worldviews that have long carried educative functions. Such is the effective obsession with modernization that "coincides with the biopolitical plan to produce a people without fracture" (Agamben 2000, p. 34) by reducing "heterogeneous human subjectivities into a presumed universal equivalence [a.k.a. *suzhi*]" (Yan, 2003, p. 494).

²³ A familiar refrain I often heard during my fieldwork in Qiandongnan goes like this: "Our village is too poor and backward. We have low *suzhi* and live like frogs at the bottom of the well (*jingdi zhiwa*) and only see a small patch of the sky. Unlike us, the city people are well educated and able to travel, even abroad, and have seen a much larger world." The local villagers share the popular interpretation of *suzhi*, and view their own positioning in the lower social echelon as a lack thereof.

Coda

In this chapter, I approach *suzhi* curriculum reform as another compulsory apparatus of the Chinese state and engage with three layers of analysis to unpack the reform in the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan. The first two layers map out the etymological and philosophical foundations of the reform through probing the ways the keyword *suzhi* is deployed in China's cultural politics. I argue that *suzhi* functions as a moving target in the formation of ideal citizen-subjects and embeds an ontological divide that codes and differentiates human values with a civilizing agenda. As I have shown, what counts as *suzhi*/quality is ever unstable and contested, its boundaries are constantly drawn and redrawn, and the ways of being and becoming the ideal Chinese have also mutated remarkably through time. Based on the conceptual discussion, the third section draws from ethnographic accounts in Majiang and Longxing to investigate the dissonant working of *suzhi* curriculum reform on the ground. I examine the bifurcated (front and backstage) classroom practices and the odd juxtaposition of the universalist ideal of *suzhi* education with folk epistemology. As Tsing argues, "universal dreams and schemes [can only be] charged and enacted in sticky materiality of practical encounters" (2005, p. 1). The *suzhi* curriculum reform is such a universal scheme that enacts messy contradictions, ambiguities, and incommensurability.

The effort to propagate *suzhi* as a national educational strategy points to an already-signified space, stratifying what counts as quality and what doesn't. As Baker (2010) argues, provincializing commonsensical concepts points to productive interstices to reengage with grand narratives in educational research. We need to investigate the conditions of possibility that renders *suzhi*/quality the universal telos to see how it paradoxically embeds discontinuities and disparate systems of reasoning that encumber students' participation. This means, counter-intuitively, to think about education and quality not just in terms of rights and law, but with a

productive aporia that bears witness to schooling's limit-points and to pause at times of impasse rather than hastening towards a general, permanent solution. It also means setting aside, momentarily, existing predications about schooling as the location for the presencing and production of norms of human quality/ability, to allow for the fertility of differences to enter and enable crossing of non-crossable borders in social thinking and programming.

Chapter Four

The Emperor's New Clothes: Unlocking Educational Audit Culture in Qiandongnan

Basic education in Qiandongnan has been declared a national emergency since the early 2000s, alarming policymakers with high attrition/dropout rates that affect many village schools like a stubborn epidemic.¹ Long-standing symptoms are diagnosed as detrimental to the realization of universal basic education (decreed by the Two Basics Project, or TBP), including dilapidated facilities, crowded classrooms, dearth of resources, and poorly trained and underpaid teachers. To regularly monitor the performance of rural schools, with dropout prevention as the prime target, a comprehensive inspection system is established at multiple bureaucratic levels² to assess multiple indexes of TBP, including teacher qualifications, school infrastructure and safety, use of technology³ (e.g. science/computer labs and multimedia classrooms), and quality education (operationally defined as presence of extracurricular programs). Under such demands, village teachers and students face a proliferation of performance audits throughout the year, straining to meet not only the compulsory yardsticks of standardized testing but also constant scrutiny of inspection.

For students and teachers in Qiandongnan, educational audit constitutes one of the most sustained domains of contact they have with the state. They receive audit officials on a regular basis who conduct formalized performance check to monitor the progress of TBP and

¹ In the two middle schools I observed, approximately one third of the students who enrolled in the 7th grade had dropped out before finishing the 9th grade. Chinese middle schools consist of grade seven, eight, and nine.

² Rural schools in China currently operate under a multi-level administrative system—county, township, and village—with the county government taking primary responsibilities, while supervised by the provincial and central governments in terms of overall planning and financing.

³ The use of technology and distance learning has become a newfound fervor in China's *suzhi*/quality education discourse. As China is modernizing, its educational system is also undergoing a technological overhaul to be on par with western educational superpowers, mainly the U.S. Mandatory online training courses developed by top universities on the coastal areas (such as in Beijing or Shanghai) spread to remote mountain schools, further encumbering village teachers' life. Ironically, most village teachers find the mandatory online courses a waste of time and yet another useless and irrelevant practice in their professional life.

the implementation of general educational directives. As an official in the provincial Ministry of Education once described to me in an interview, he lived a life like a firefighter dashing around to attend to constant emergencies. School inspection is one mechanism through which to address the “urgent” state of basic education in Qiandongnan.

This chapter examines the multi-layered educational inspection in order to illuminate these questions: How do village schools maneuver and cope with the audit demands through bifurcated performance on the front and back stages? How do they continually produce disenchantment yet maintain legitimacy, despite controversies and fraudulences in teachers’ and students’ daily practices? I situate the audit drama observed in two village schools historically within the Chinese genres of governing and the global narrative of accountability. The analysis highlights the performative and political aspects of a controversial educational audit culture, and sheds light on the costs and consequences borne by rural schools behind China’s successful story of education.

Performance Audit: A Pluralized Site of Governing

Before I describe the audit events observed in Majiang and Longxing, the conditions of possibility for educational audit to become an “event” in this particular context need to be properly understood. On a global scale, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed an “audit explosion” in diverse social and national contexts (Collier 2005; Strathern 2000; Kipnis 2008; Shore 2008). Since then, the politics of auditing has popularized a matrix of terminologies—accountability, standards, measurement, and outcome—in everyday language to enact what Power (1997) calls “rituals of verification.” For instance, against organizational goals, employee performance is measured, assessed, and verified. Coined by anthropologists, “audit culture” is a term describing conditions under which the techniques of accountability become a central principle to organize human conducts and institutional practices, and ensure compliance with particular

norms and regulations (Shore 2008:179).

Not a recent event, performance audit hearkens back to the scientific managerial revolution initiated by F. W. Taylor in the late 19th century. Audit was then primarily oriented towards productivity enhancement on the assembly lines. It was closely linked to the rational-secular principle of efficiency and progress. In contemporary societies, performance audit goes beyond the Taylorist concern for productivity to the governing of individual conducts through what Foucault calls “the techniques of the self” (1977). It is about production of particular kinds of subjects who exercise self surveillance and live in a state of risk calculation, in what the sociologists have called “risk society” (Beck et al., 1994), the “political economy of insecurity” (Beck 2000:2), or “crisis of trust” (Power 2004).

Evaluation of school practices and outcome is a feature of contemporary audit culture. It involves a complex ensemble of procedures, calculations and tactics through which school subjects are constituted and regulated. Educational audit is closely linked to a wide appeal to “reform” as a solution to multifaceted educational issues. Like a “policy epidemic” (Levin 1998), education reform spreads across the globe and has arguably mobilized a technique of auditing and statistical numeration (Ball 2003).

The spread of audit culture as the organizing principle of social institutions and relations, especially in the Anglo-Francophone contexts, has been analyzed primarily through the lens of governmentality. The governmentality approach links the audit culture to state population control and managerial interests in inventing self-directed, self-enterprising, and self-monitoring personhood (Dunn 2004:20; Hursh 2005; Klees 2002; Strathern 2000). The famous dictum “conduct of conduct” derived from Michel Foucault is often invoked to describe how the system of reason behind audit—sometimes referred to as “regulated self-regulation” (Shore 2008: 281)—has implicated all of us in its webs and profoundly shaped the way we think and relate to each other and ourselves.

Two closely interrelated strands of argument are distinct in the theorization of audit culture as the crafting of selves. First, some literature views the rise of audit culture as a shift in governing rationality from direct control/intervention to indirect desire management in producing “governable, industrious, and responsible individuals” through problematizing those “who are not seen as governable, industrious, and responsible” (Kipnis 2008: 279). Closely related is the second strand of argument that views audit culture as “governing from a distance.” Such technique of governing from afar induces desired behaviors not through close bureaucratic command but through “calculative choice of formally free actors...according to a rationality of a market *type*” (Collier & Ong 2005:13, italicization original).

In the Chinese context, there is a wide range of more ambiguous governing principles, including China’s socialist legacy, bureaucratic officialdom, Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, to name a few. These principles do not easily coalesce into a singular analytic of governing or a loose, ahistorical system of reason, but are intertwined with multiple mentalities and ways of seeing and believing. In what follows, I will briefly analyze such a governing complex, which sets the stage for the audit events to occur.

Firstly, China’s still largely centralized one-party system renders the audit mechanism an ideological contour. The Communist Party bases its internal governance on a highly complex web of performance audits. To measure social, economic, and ideological development within the party hierarchy, numerical targets, quotas, and outputs are often utilized (Zhao 2007; Kipnis 2008; Huang 1995). For instance, district cadres are given quantified targets on taxation, agricultural output, external investment, enrollment rate of school-age children, percentage of household compliance with the one-child policy, etc. Intangible items such as ideological awareness, spiritual civilization (*jingshen wenmin*), and (when it comes to schooling) quality education are also concretized in statistics. The statistics includes the number of subscription to party newspapers and publications, the amount of official slogans on public display, the number

of political essays written on the party's recent policy directives, the frequency of extracurricular contests in the school, and so forth. Every aspect of the cadres' work is given numeric evaluations, which are then closely tied to their pay raises and promotion.

Throughout the year, higher-level authorities are sent down to conduct inspections, which largely involves verification of forms and quotas. Failure to fulfill the quotas would result in the blockage of promotion, tarnish of one's political career, or forfeiture of school funds. The result is that grassroots cadres often direct most energy upward to their superiors rather than downwards to the population they serve (Zhao 2007: 73).

The result is also seen in a wide range of counterstrategies to fabricate outcomes or cosmetic compliance to meet the audit demands. For instance, party newspapers and magazines would be subscribed yet piled up on office floors unread; propaganda essays would be churned out overnight by copy-and-paste plagiarism which no one reads; minutes of non-existing meetings would be invented; show-cases would be painstakingly staged to hide what actually goes on behind the scene. As Kipnis argues, more than assessment, performance audit has become the organizing principle of the entire field it is supposed to assess (2011: 156). As Shore and Selwyn (1998) also point out, dealing with the culture of performance audit has itself become "performance" both in the theatrical and sociological sense. This is particularly true when audits involve high stakes of one's career and livelihood, as we will see in the case of village teachers.

Secondly, the spread of performance audit is related to a concern for scientific management (Zhao 2007:66). The zest for scientism has penetrated China's political and public discourse in the recent decades. In the official parlance, "scientifically oriented" development is a guiding principle of the party leadership, epitomized in the Scientific Development Concept (*kexue fazhanguan*) popularized by President Hu Jintao. Performance audit has taken up the

dictum of scientism to enact efficiency, transparency, and accountability in order to curb corruption in the party.

Scientism as a system of reason undergirding performance audit is contested by another Chinese style of governance commonly referred to as formalism (*xingshi zhuyi*), which means perfunctory compliance with the policy without adhering to its substance/content. Formalism is seen in the subscription of party newspapers that are never read, and the display of party slogans that no one really cares about. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the coupling of formalism with scientism has ironically exacerbated what school audit sets out to tackle and produced a hollowed façade.

Thirdly, performance audit is further complicated by the peculiar characteristics of Chinese officialdom, the political milieu of China's reform-era educational dilemmas. This is illustrated by a sociological study of township governing cited below.

Some cadres have no idea how to fill up their day. They'll read the smallest advertisements in the paper several times over. A newspaper and a cup of tea, that's a day's labor. But when they get fed up, it's time for an inspection of "grassroots work." They will happily go for a tour, or perhaps score some points [on the annual assessment] by calling a meeting. They loaf around, eating and drinking for a few days, picking up "souvenirs." ...As far as higher levels are concerned, convene a meeting, write a memorandum, issue a document and then carry out inspections. That's it. But down in the township, no matter what the circumstances, no matter what difficulties you face, the task has to be completed—no one is going to do it for you, or take responsibility (Gu 2006: 101-102).

The point is that Chinese officialdom, which is widely acknowledged by scholars, policymakers, and ordinary Chinese citizens as capricious, ineffectual, and wasteful, has bred a bureaucratic regime of inspectors at the expense of social burden and local distaste. With a heightened consumptive zest, conducting inspection has increasingly become a favorite official pastime. It is associated with a “banquet culture”⁴ that is glorified, and elaborate corporeal luxuries that are everywhere revived as a highly visible marker of one’s political clout.⁵ As an illustration, the annual spending on banquets by state cadres amounted to 12 billion U.S. dollars in the year 1995(see Kipnis 1997; also Farquhar 2002:146). As I will illustrate, in their encounters with inspecting officials, village schools incurred significant amount of debts under the consumption-driven audit demands.

Fourthly, scholars have argued that China’s long history of statecraft and traditional treaties on governing—including but not limited to Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism—has produced a multitude of governing techniques not dissimilar from the putative “western” problematics such as “governing from a distance” and “conduct of the conduct” (Kipnis 2011: 7). Although I do not have space for a detailed excursion into a comparison of these treaties, I want to briefly examine how in their own genres of reasoning they exhibit a variety of ways “governing” has been imagined.

For instance, Classical Confucianism links the principle of self cultivation and self discipline to the broader practices of state governance:

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were

⁴ The profusion of banquets rules all surfaces of life: business deals and political coalitions are solidified over meals and entertainment, so are more affective domains of friendship and courtship.

⁵ After more than three decades of reform, the Maoist ethics of asceticism and altruism is rewired to accommodate a burgeoning consumption desire, and the state officialdom is reconstituted in new modes of moral/ethical configuration.

then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole empire was made tranquil and happy. [Legge 1861:221-223]

The Confucian exemplary individual is one who engages in strenuous self-cultivation to achieve optimal moral conducts, a process through which one's own good is ultimately linked with the continual progress of good government and harmonious society.

Legalism, on the other hand, capitalizes on individual's selfish nature and advocates for a government that applies consistent measure of reward and punishment so that citizens will *learn* to be law abiding through *calculating* potential costs and benefits (Liao 1939: 36-51, 278-280; cited in Kipnis 2008: 284). Although the self is differentially conceptualized in the two cases—one in a moral sense and the other in a legalistic sense—we could possibly argue that the ethos of “governing at a distance” is already nascent in that governing is either morally or legally effective in influencing individual behaviors from afar. Consequently, we could possibly also argue that what we call “governmentality” today has perhaps always already existed before being “named,” in timespaces quite distant from the Anglo-Francophone industrial context. As Nicholas Rose also acknowledges, “The name [governmentality] merely individuates an assemblage which may have been in existence for a long time before it was named, and which may outlive its naming” (1999:28). The naming is a readaptation of multiple attempts that have existed, continue to exist, and confluence in human societies.

Instead of seeing the spread of performance audit as diffusion from the so-called West to the rest, some scholars argue for a modified genealogy of audit culture that arguably took roots in imperial China. China has rich legacy and historical techniques for assessing people, Kipnis argues (2011: 150-152), whether through imperial exams, elaborate evaluation system for communist cadres, highly evolved technique of assessment in business accounting and

bureaucratic performance, or through numeric point systems for registering one's moral and evil deeds (Brokaw 1991). As Bakken (2000:245) also contends, in the contemporary world the Chinese might be "the most thoroughly evaluated people of us all." I will now turn to the audit events in Qiandongnan.

Educational Inspection as Orchestration

One day in May 2009, a high-profile official from the provincial Ministry of Education came to Longxing, accompanied by a delegation from the county and prefectural education bureaus. They were to execute the last round of TBP audit before the province of Guizhou received the national inspection in June. If Guizhou passed the national audit, it would be one of the last few provinces to declare the success of TBP, hence universal basic education. For months, both the primary school and the middle school prepared hard for this day. The teachers talked about the graveness as *caomu jiebin*—"every piece of tree and grass is turned into a warrior"—a saying that depicts the grand scale of involvement and critical importance of the event.

Audit Preparation Craze

On the morning of the visit, the primary schoolyard was turned into a cacophony of noises and buzzes. A red scroll of banner was hung up across the raised cement stage on the playground, announcing welcome message to the inspectors. The school cancelled the morning classes to enlist students for some final cleaning. Teachers were busy handing out new uniforms recently ordered for this special day. The uniform was an upper garment made with shiny, thick spandex that resembled the traditional Dong indigo-dyed coat.⁶ After a while,

⁶ While the Dong cloth is entirely handmade with natural ingredients, including the cotton, the yarn, and the indigo dye, the uniforms are machine-made and mass-produced with synthetic materials.

everybody, including the teachers, had put on their new outfit, turning the schoolyard into a shiny sea of imitation Dong attires. The ambiance was quite festive (see figure #5).

A group of students was selected to greet the delegation with the Dong welcome rituals. Girls wound up their long hair into a bun on top of their head and decorated it with colorful plastic flowers; boys wore a cloth wrap (in the shape of a turban) around their head. Dressing up for the inspection is not a matter of simple formality. Read semiotically, it is an act of claiming both the place and the moment as “event” and marks the bodies in costumes with readiness for a show. While the shiny garment is a vulgar imitation of the Dong attire, as I soon found out, the collective upstaging of the audit event was a mimic of a sanctioned visuality.



Figure#5: Students in school uniforms gathered on the playground before the inspection.

In a short while, the entire school gathered on the playground that had been partially dug through and left in disarray by the tourism company. Headmaster Yang stood on the stage, lecturing solemnly on top of his voice:

Remember the inspection today is very important. I hope every one will listen carefully.

First of all, be polite to our guests. Greet each one of them. Show your ultimate respect.

Secondly, keep the school clean and do not litter. We've been working so hard for the past few days and we must demonstrate the cleanliness to our guests. Thirdly, do not talk loudly or stare at our guests. Fourthly, they require a smoke-free environment so teachers please put away your trashcans for the moment. Also remember, if asked, we are "not" a boarding school. We are not going to show the poor conditions of the students' dorms.

While Yang was speaking, heat gathered. The students were getting fidgety as their bodies were enveloped in insulated synthetic materials.

The middle school, meanwhile, also bustled with sounds of nailing, mopping, and sweeping. Some teachers were potting the flowerbeds with patches of lawn they had just purchased. Students were fetching water, mopping floors, and wiping windows. Chalk butts, candy wrappers, cigarette cases were meticulously removed from the ground; trashcans were painted with fresh green. Political slogans were neatly copied on the wall, featuring the May 1st International Labor Day and the 90th anniversary of the May 4th Youth Movement in China's modern history. Commemorative photos of school activities were hung up on the hallway; party slogans such as President Hu's motto of *Eight Graces and Eight Shames*⁷ were retouched with fresh paint.

The usually congested and dreary teachers' office was decorated with plastic boutiques. Inside the office, some teachers were momentarily resting their heads on the desk, sleep-

⁷ Eight Graces and Eight Shames, known in Chinese as *ba rong ba chi* (八荣八耻), is a set of moral codes (eight couplets of do's and don't's) developed by President Hu Jintao and promoted as the virtue standards for all Chinese (especially party cadres) and as the moral foundation of social harmony. The Xinhua New Agency provides the English translation: "Love the country; do it no harm. Serve the people; never betray them. Follow science; discard ignorance. Be diligent; not indolent. Be united, help each other; make no gains at others' expense. Be honest and trustworthy; do not sacrifice ethics for profit. Be disciplined and law-abiding; not chaotic and lawless. Live plainly, work hard; do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures." Eight Graces and Eight Shames have been widely promulgated in schools, public spaces, and state work units. See http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/18/content_5220576.htm, retrieved on May 3, 2012.

deprived and overworked. A Mr. Huang, who was introduced to me as *juzhang* (head of a bureau) from the county seat, was there to supervise the preparation. He complained to me Longxing Middle School was the worst in the entire county both in terms of infrastructure and student dropout rate. Because of its “unfortunate” location in a popular tourist spot that inspection officials like to see, he said, they had to make sure the school wouldn’t cause trouble or make the county “loose face.” Indeed, as we shall see later (in chapter five), the strategic location of the school with a panoramic view of the village had created tensions among profit-seeking tourism developers, local villagers, higher-up educational bureaus, and teachers and students themselves.

Audit Spectacle

At around 11:15am, two vans slowly turned into the parking lot in front of the primary school gate, dropping off a dozen mid-aged men. As the guests approached the school gate, the team of fully attired girls and boys started singing the road-blocking songs (*lanlu ge*) and served the cadres with locally brewed rice wine. In the Dong culture, offering road-blocking rice wine accompanied with singing and *lusheng* was an indispensable social etiquette to welcome guests. Through singing, the hosts urge the guests to drink up the home-brewed delicacy. Only after that would the guests be “allowed” into the hospitality of the house or the community, hence the name “road block.” Also present at the welcome ritual were the village head, the director of the education station, the middle school headmaster, as well as a dozen tourists who were attracted by the scene. Following the welcome, the inspection team was led to the schoolyard. After fifteen minutes of walk-around, with brief stops at the classrooms and the teachers’ office, the group headed towards the library and the science lab.

Both the library and the science lab were on the TBP checklist, and both held as indexes for quality education. In them, books, lab facilities, as well as wall plaques framed with party

slogans were purchased with state funds allocated for TBP. According to the teachers, such items were required procurements but they ate up large sums of TBP expenses and were mostly ornamental.⁸ In fact, they were rarely used and covered in dust until the day before the inspection. This, however, was beyond the radar of the auditors.

The delegation then came to the document room where binders of TBP materials were neatly shelved. The official pulled off a few binders and flipped through the prints; he asked a few routine questions, such as the enrollment figure and the number of teaching staff, and whether the students were speaking Mandarin in class.⁹ Shortly afterwards, the morning inspection concluded with group pictures; and the delegation left for lunch hosted by the two schools and the village government. The students who performed the welcome ritual each received one kuai (15 U.S. cents) as compensation for their “labor.”

At the lunch table, it was decided that the middle school was crossed out from the afternoon schedule, as the escort cadres were afraid that the school’s dilapidation might raise eyebrows. Instead, they suggested that the delegation inspect the adult literacy class, which was part of the twin-components of the Two Basics Project, aimed to eliminate illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults. To fulfill the goal, the primary school was put in charge, with each teacher allocated a number of illiterate peasants “under their tutelage.” Security deposits were deducted from the teachers’ monthly salaries to hold them responsible for their assigned

⁸ In the Dong village-hamlet Huanggang, a shiny trashcan made of stainless steel standing against the dilapidated wooden schoolhouse cost 300 kuai of the TBP funds, more than the monthly salary of a substitute teacher. The TBP funds that traveled through gnarly bureaucratic pipeline mostly had to be spent on purchase of school supplies and propaganda items, such as classroom posters. Supplies disseminated through the official route cost three or four times more than those purchased directly from the stores.

⁹ Mandarin as the national tongue is primarily promulgated through schooling. In rural ethnic regions especially, it is promoted as a means through which people can trade up for higher social status and economic standing. In Qiandongnan, Mandarin is the de jure instructional language in schools, though a mixture of Mandarin and ethnic languages usually co-exist in lower grades of primary school.

pupils. Due to peasants' lackadaisical attitude towards the literacy campaign, the school often had to pay for them to show up in classes, or pay someone else to sit in during inspection.

This last-minute decision caught the primary school teachers off guard, who were otherwise quite accustomed to capricious requests¹⁰ from the "above" (a vernacular way of referring to the supervising party bureaus and officials). By now, it was only one hour left before they needed to gather the class. Many of the villagers were working in the field and either could not be reached or were not willing to come. Many teachers cancelled classes to make phone calls or go to the fields in order to find their "assigned" villagers. In desperation, several male teachers asked their wives to come to their rescue by playing illiterate peasants. Some even turned to me half-jokingly, "Ms. Wu, we could have used your help to if only you had some wrinkles on your face and callus on your hands. Then we could have you dressed up in Dong clothes and pretend one of the adult students." It spurred a round of laughter in the staff room. On this humid early summer afternoon, the primary school staff room smelled of everybody's life mixed together, with a cacophony of humming fans, murmuring computer keyboards, squeaking chairs, whistling paper, nervous conversations, and the intervening school bell.

After an hour or so of frantic searching, the school was finally ready for the show. Two dozens women were summoned to the distance-learning lab waiting for a lesson on scientific pig husbandry. Sitting on benches narrower and lower than their body dimension, the women giggled and chitchatted in high-pitched voices, filling the air with palpable restlessness. They wore the characteristic dark-blue Dong jackets, as told, which were apparently rarely used, judging from the stiff sleeves and fresh shine of the indigo dye. As they were getting rather loquacious, a teacher walked in with a sheet of paper, instructed them to sign their names, and

¹⁰ Last-minute requests from higher-up bureaucrats were frequent in both village schools I observed, which often involves class cancellation for village cleaning or performing welcome rituals for inspectors of various kinds.

reminded them that they would each receive 10 kuai (1.5 dollars) for their participation. The request sent them tittering, as their callused hands deft at gutting the fish, nursing the baby, and ploughing the field were clumsy with the pen.

At around 3pm, the provincial official and his chaperons arrived. They were offered the teachers' lounge to rest, where trays of fruits and plates of melon seeds were served, and cups of piping hot tea infused the air with fragrance. On the wall hung award certificates of the school and several red silver banners announcing welcome messages. Also on display were photographs (with captions) of the school's previous reception of state agencies and party cadres. The facilities (including a TV and a sound system) and furniture were donations from the coastal sister city (*jiemei chengshi*) Ningbo and the Tensent Co. (founder of a popular online chatting program). Usually left in disarray by teachers who, after a mahjong game, hurried to class on the sound of the bell, the lounge was neatly straightened and mopped spotless today.

Yet the delegation took little time to relax and moved on to the distance-learning lab to observe the adult literacy lesson on pig husbandry. A video excerpt was being played on the TV screen, showing what kind of compounds should be used to stimulate pig growth.¹¹ As the instructor hummed along, the heat produced sweaty brows and lethargic looks on the women's faces. The official concluded the lesson by emphasizing the importance of scientific agriculture and asking the villagers to talk about how they had increased productivity because of the training they received. When the villagers stammered, the teachers were asked to speak on their behalf. The entire class was videotaped for inspection records. Shortly after, the audit crew called it a day and left for sightseeing around the village.

¹¹ In my observation, village households mostly feed pigs with meal leftovers, surplus veggies and corns, and plants from the fields or ponds. Very few would use chemical compounds. Technological transfer via literacy training ironically buttheads with the smaller-scale, more eco-friendly methods already well practiced in the community.

In the evening, the delegation was nourished with the elaborate Dong long-table dinner¹² (*changzhuoyan*) and entertained with staged performance of singing and dances where villagers and schools students dressed up to the nines to showcase their fine hospitality (see figure#6). At such moments, the school audit became a complex sensorial fabrication nestled within a sight/sound/inebriety matrix, within which the dysfunctional tissues of rural ethnic schooling were dismissed out of the realm of the visible.



Figure#6: Students singing on the stage to entertain the inspection delegation.

Behind the Audit Spectacle

As the compulsory apparatus of TBP, educational audit functions to assess school practices for achieving universal basic education. Despite the progressive rationale of accountability monitoring, the audit drama I witnessed reveals an acute sense of irony that went into the fabrication of a façade. Behind the audit scene were controversial maneuvers that made possible the façade and were lived daily by students and teachers in Qiandongnan.

¹² Long table dinner is an elaborate feast in the Miao and Dong communities, where exquisite dishes and home brewed rice wine are served on a long table (about four to five meters long and one meter wide) with diners sitting along both sides, as a way to welcome special guests and celebrate important events (such as birth, burial, and harvest).

Fabricating School Data

As the local-level state units, village schools in Qiandongnan are effectively “hollowed out,” as staff members are forced to divert attention away from proper duties to frequent inspections (Smith 2010). Boggled down by the escalating workloads of the inspection, village teachers are busy—busy filling out forms, busy catching dropouts, busy arranging meals and banqueting with state inspectors, and busy coping with ever-changing audit demands.

Anecdotes about TBP data administration became a mainstay of my conversations with village teachers. The sea of data required by TBP could be roughly divided into eight categories, with each further detailed by medium- and long-term goals, regulatory measures, recording guidelines, and assessment indexes. These eight categories are (1) school leadership and management; (2) level of universalization (*puji chengdu*) of TBP; (3) teacher training and qualification; (4) school infrastructure; (5) educational expenditure; (6) implementation of quality education; (7) school safety; and (8) elimination of adult illiteracy.¹³ To cope with the overwhelming demands of paperwork, each school designated a data administrator who worked under the supervision of an ad hoc unit called education station (*jiaofu zhan*). Data administrators from different village schools within the same township regularly gathered at the education station for intense periods of form-filling and roster-making. The amount of audit-related paperwork was often joked about as the hallmark of the centennial significance (*bainian daji*) of TBP.

Mr. Jiang, a geography teacher in Longxing Middle School, used to work as a full-time TBP data administrator. For an entire year, he was exempted from teaching to prepare documents and forms for various inspections. He was in constant social frictions with his

¹³ Information obtained from internal policy documents at the schools.

colleagues (since he had to assess their performance) and family members (since he was inattentive to household duties).

There were more than thirty forms to fill out, and we had to fill them out multiple times for different inspectors. Each copy is different. Most of the data are faked anyways. After a while, even we ourselves don't know what is real any more. We work hard every day; but mostly our efforts are meaningless.

One day my mother got very ill and sent for me, but I couldn't leave the school because I needed to work for an inspection team from the provincial education bureau. When I finally had time and rushed home, my mother was very unwell and upset. My mother-in-law wasn't happy with me either. Many a time she cooked meals and waited for me, but I was too busy to show up.

In 2006, some officials from the National Ministry of Education came for a preliminary inspection. I stayed up for ten nights in a row to finish the forms; by the time the inspectorate left, I crashed. I was hospitalized for twenty days at the county seat and then transferred to another hospital in Hunan. When I came back, I was so weak I wasn't able to walk up two flights of stairs to the classroom. My colleague Wei, who took up my job when I was ill, hurried to me and said, "Here, take it back. I don't want to do this any more."

Yet Jiang had the slightest intention to resume the job; and Wei had been on the position ever since. He was often in his office filling forms and matching data until the wee hours. One day, Wei was distraught about two pieces of documents requested by the inspectors, titled "Proof of Improvement of Teaching Conditions" and "Societal Contributions and Charities Received." His predecessor Jiang, who was well experienced and seemed to have a knack for handling such requests, came to his rescue: "Just go online to see what have been written. It doesn't matter if

it is relevant to our school; it is not. We just need to hand in the materials for completing the records. Nobody is going to read them anyway.” And sure enough, with Jiang’s advice, Wei quickly forged the two documents and included them into data binders.

Persuading Dropouts

As much as school data could be forged, the physical presence of dropouts could also be orchestrated *ad hoc*. Dropout prevention has been a systematic target in educational audit in Qiandongnan. Yet it is also a most challenging task in the daily functions of rural schools. As a ubiquitous propaganda printed on many school walls depicts, “One is disqualified for *dagong* (migrant work) without a middle school diploma; with nine years of schooling, one gains competence for *dagong*” (初中未毕业, 打工不合格; 读书读九年, 打工有本钱). The slogan hints at the pervasiveness of *dagong*-related dropout as a social “problem,” and portrays compulsory schooling as the basic qualification to livelihood.

The negative register of “dropout” enters over and again into educational discourse to enact a set of proactive and remedial strategies. Responsibility systems and regulative mechanisms are put into place, such as linking teacher salary/promotion to dropout prevention, imposing fines on parents for noncompliance, and conducting home-visits to persuade dropouts to return (hence the name “dropout persuasion,” 劝访). Persuasion trips carry a few functions, including propagating TBP and its legal ramification of noncompliance; identifying reasons for dropout/attrition; persuading dropouts to return and resume studies; enhancing responsibility and incentives among village teachers and cadres¹⁴ to curb dropout; and strengthening thought-work (*sixiang gongzuo*, i.e. ideological work) to correct the view that “book learning is useless” (Wang 1989). When dropouts have left home to find work or refuse to come back to school,

¹⁴ Persuasion trips are often jointly conducted by schoolteachers and village officials. The presence of the officials, in particular, is held indispensable, as they represent the state authority for law enforcement.

coercive measures are often taken, such as confiscating familial possessions (such as pigs, cows, and TVs). Frequently, dropout substitutes would be arranged for passing inspection.

One weekend in late spring 2009, right before the provincial inspection, I joined the teaching crew of the Longxing Middle School for the final round of home visits. Our team was assigned the village of Daolin, a remote hamlet some 12 kilometers from Longxing and not accessible by public transportation. In a beat-up jeep overloaded with seven passengers, I shared the front seat with the village party leader (*shuji*), while five teachers crammed on the back in a zigzag way. A recent rain had left the road in a slimy condition, littered with a mixture of animal droppings and swampy mud. The vehicle halted several times while ploughing through the gnarly surface. Occasionally, some student figures would come into view. This very road took many to and from school on a weekly basis. They hiked home every Friday afternoon and returned with their weekly supplies on Sunday.

An hour and a half later, the jeep ended the 12-kilometer journey and pulled over in front of the village gate. It was high noon. The entire place looked empty; most houses were locked up. We were told that many peasants were still working in the fields, and many others had left to find work in China's southern coast. Occasionally we ran into little children playing with rocks and twigs, most of who were being looked after by elderly kin.¹⁵ While waiting, we cooked lunch at the village secretary's house with the 5 jins (around 6 lbs) of pork we brought, since Daolin did not have a meat market due to dwindling number of residents.

After lunch, we made a few fruitless attempts, greeted mostly by locked doors. The only house we visited was the parental home of Luo Aimei. Aimei's grandma was mending a rice sack when we entered. She told us Aimei was already married and working in a factory in Guangdong, and asked us to come back when her parents returned from the hills. Inside the

¹⁵ There is a local saying, "if one visits ten households, in nine of them one would find only children or elderly people."

plank-walled, dimly-lit living room of the household, three things called my attention: a wall calendar capturing Mao, the still-worshipped legendary Chairman of Communist China, in his exuberant youth, accompanied by a text saying “the Party's grassroots mobilization is the foundation to promote social harmony;” an exotic beach scene featuring sunshine, palm trees, and idling barges—the stereotypical modern pastime for the well-off; and a propaganda poster showing innocent, knowledge-thirsty faces of rural children, captioned with “We, too, can have a promising future,” espousing the importance of education (see figure#7). On the opposite wall displayed Aimei’s many school awards (see figure#8). Apparently, the family took pride in that Aimei used to be a rather promising student.



Figure#7: A bricolage of images on the wall of a rural household.

While the teachers commented on Aimei’s situation as unfortunate, I couldn’t help but wonder to what extent such banal displays in the household interior confounded the official theory that dropouts are simply myopic in rejecting schooling and compromising their own social mobility. Instead of the quick adjudication, the bricolage of displays could perhaps be seen as indication of a polymorphousness: a desire for the good life, a nostalgia for a bygone era, a promise of future gestured to by education, and the immediate conditions making livelihood a

pragmatic choice. In the spatial assemblage, the moral high ground of universal basic education is met with a moment of silence, the saying and unsaying around it, and a different kind of middle voice that speaks the undecidability between participation and nonparticipation of compulsory schooling.



Figure#8: Wall display of Aimei's school awards in her parental home.

Frustrated, there was nothing we could do but wait. We waited at the village secretary's house until after sunset. We had better luck this time as most households were back from the field. Aimei's father was not prepared to find a crowd of guests entering his house in the middle of dinner. It was clear from his moody complexion that we were not welcomed. The two girls and one boy by his side were Aimei's younger siblings who were still attending school. After a long trying day of waiting, the teachers moved directly into the purpose of the trip with little formality. The headmaster explained that according to the law, he should send his older daughter to school, and demanded Aimei be brought back immediately. The father did not look agitated, though annoyed; he had his reply ready.

"I am the only breadwinner of this house. How could I afford to send all of my children to school? Aimei saw that we are poor and wanted to help out. She is married and is in Guangdong now."

“But education is free these days. Your argument does not make sense.”

“We have little money,” he repeated.

“In any case, we need her to send her picture and we need you to pay one hundred kuai now for the diploma.”

“But other people whose children dropped out wasn’t charged anything.”

“Do you know it is against the law if you don’t send your child to school?”

Seeing that he was no rival in arguing with the teachers, he stood up abruptly, leaving his guests in the dim room without a host. After some negotiation, it was eventually decided that Aimei’s younger sister, who was in 5th grade, sit in for her sister on the inspection day.

Not surprisingly, the persuasion trip did not bring back one single dropout, but the teachers did gather some photos and a few hundred kuai. On our way back, the headmaster explained to me that the money collected from dropouts’ parents was not interpreted as a fine but as processing cost of the diploma. Ironically, he said, dropouts could still get middle school diplomas because the school kept their names on the roster in order to pass inspections and obtain student expenditure from the TBP fund. In some cases, students who got their diplomas did not attend middle school for a single day. To my amazement, he added that since the diplomas only cost a fraction of the money collected, the rest actually would be spent on arranging for substitutes to sit in during graduation exams and inspections.

The headmaster described the persuasion trip as a formalistic ritual that was both trying and ineffectual.

High officials would not care to come to such remote place. We teachers must come; we have to, so that we won’t be blamed for not doing it. We know very well this is not going

to bring back dropouts; at most we would collect some money to fake the result. And students don't care. Most of them are willing to pay for no-show. Middle school diplomas are so easy to get these days from underground workshops. It takes no more than a few minutes to make counterfeit certificates at rather cheap costs. And the students know that.

Faraway village-hamlets like Daolin are indeed out of the radar of the national inspectors. Yet students are in every sense yoked in the social dynamics and tactics (such as the opportunist practice of fraudulence) that put the Chinese society "in play." As much as the school diploma can be forged and purchased, the inspection apparatus requires cunning, fabrication, and collusion that jar the official story of China's educational success, and order what is visible and invisible, what appears and disappears. People joked about the audits in private anecdotes by revisiting the familiar tale of the emperor's new clothes, as if ridiculing the emperor who put on a public show of his naked body clad in imaginary clothes.

Deciphering State Officialdom

The mundane state technique of inspection can be a highly disturbing event to those forced to take part in the concoction of the ceremonial display. Teachers, whose professional life is thinly spread among audit paperwork, testing, catching dropouts, and entertaining inspectorates are its most acute critics, even though such criticism can only be voiced surreptitiously.

Whenever inspectors come, we have headache. The higher position the inspectors occupy, the more superficial the whole business is. Their entire itinerary is prepared by those escort cadres who try best to show the exemplars and hide the problems. Most inspectors arrive right before mealtime, go to banquets right away, take a nap, and start

working late in the afternoon. Sightseeing and entertainment also take up lots of time. Because our village is a tourist spot, there are many inspectors yearlong. We cannot jeopardize our relationship with them but we are a poor school and don't have much funds to squander.

Rural schools across the country have been operating at considerable amounts of debts since the implementation of TBP. In order to meet the paperwork demands and coordinate visits from numerous audit-conducting bureaucrats, the schools had incurred significant budgetary expense on printing and banquets. They spend a large sum of the state allocated TBP funds cultivating networks through meals, entertainments, and business trips, often to the embitterment of the teachers. The teachers often complained that the school spent thousands on banquets each year but was very tight-fisted in rewarding them. Educational audit creates a constant drain on village schools; and villages that are promoting tourism attract more inspection teams and therefore run up higher debts. Between 2002 and 2003 TBP-related debts incurred in each of the provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Anhui, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Sichuan ran up to more than two million RMB, with an average rural primary school in Hubei having 200,000 RMB in debts (Zhang 2004: 44).

While officials act like firefighters dashing around to "amend" educational emergencies, teachers have to cope with a proliferation of audits and assessment that occupy a major part of their professional life. Once a teacher in Majiang talked about entertaining the inspectors as *yi tiao long fuwu* (一条龙服务), i. e. providing chain service. "The service we provide is like an assembly line, from breakfast to lunch to dinner to nightclub. Nighttime entertainment is especially costly. If you go to a bar, the costs are ten times higher than the normal prices for regular items such as beers and snacks. But most inspectors like to go to those places. And we pay a high price for the sake of networking." The teachers often evoke images of fat-bellied

bureaucrats who reap personal benefits from inspections (such as free-ride tourism, souvenirs, paid meals and lodging) as a pestering cause of the school's increasing indebtedness.

Local people responded with similar sneers that cadres were “eating state money” and embezzling public funds to fatten their own pockets. The Mandarin character for the word “official” is ironically composed of two mouths under a canopy (官); and village people often joke about officials being those who eat a lot (with two mouths) but are protected above (under the canopy). “Eating” is here spoken about both matter-of-factly and figuratively to connote illicit consumption of public goods and the chipping away of state resources by its own bureaucrats, which produce jarring social frictions and local distress, especially in circumstances where resources are scarce and daily sustenance uncertain.

The euphemism of “eating” forms the basis of critical discourse in and around school inspections. In Chinese cultural logic, eating has always carried consequences well beyond the dinner table,¹⁶ especially with a heightened consumptive zest after more than three decades of reform. The manifestation of political prowess in outlandish consumption has become a distinct feature of Chinese officialdom. The disenfranchised rural residents are quite aware that well-positioned government officials are among the small group of the *nouveau riche* who elicit a sizable share of the social wealth, and dissipate public funds on banquets, entertainments, and red tapes. While peasants deplore the greedy and wasteful practices of the bureaucrats, they often invoke the puritan ethics of Maoist cadres who exemplified asceticism and altruism, despite the era's ideological trepidation. The consumptive fervor of the contemporary state officialdom is cast in the Maoist legacies of moral service and egalitarian ideals that have not been completely erased from China's postsocialist palette.

¹⁶ Anthropologist Judith Farquhar has written extensively on the political dimension of senses (such as appetite) in contemporary China. See Farquhar 2002. Political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart examines the use of a similar metaphor in the cultural contexts of Africa, in *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly*, 1993, Longman Group United Kingdom.

On the one hand, the party-state's moral exhortation of service to the nation, containment of selfish impulses, and spiritual civility (*jingshen wenming*) has by no means disappeared; it still circulates widely in radio broadcasts, official editorials, and school textbooks as part of the "harmony" (*hexie*) discourse. On the other hand, the propaganda sobriety is overshadowed by the consumption craze involving multiple levels of state agents in the pursuit of private pleasures. In fact, the two modes of the state officialdom—communist/socialist puritan exhortation and the unending crave for consumer luxuries—are permitted to coexist and even compete, with the former providing stability for the latter to thrive (see Giroir 2006). It is within such seeming incommensurable social space of the Chinese state, sometimes likened as a complex "social elephant" (Liu 2009), and its reform-era paradoxes that the educational audit culture is situated, debated, and negotiated.

Performative Efficacy and Formalism

As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, although the framework of governmentality provides a useful tool in critical studies of audit culture in industrial societies (Strathern 2000; Power 1994, 1997; Webb 2005, 2006; Shore and Wright 2000), it cannot sufficiently explain the complexity of Chinese school inspection. Admittedly, there is some element of self-discipline (such as the data administrators' diligent handling of paperwork) and calculation (such as of village teachers' collective reticence for fear of potential career risk) in people's response to inspection; yet "technology of the self" or "governing from afar" is far from adequate in interpreting China's school audit. As much as the state is not an *a priori* determinant of the audit procedures, the self-regulation is at best piecemeal, perfunctory, and performative. While the ideal of universal basic education requires the village schools to think like the state by rendering themselves accountable for the ideal, counterstrategies in meeting the audit demands constantly transgress the ideological roof. The number of "students" present on the inspection

day says little about the actual enrollment, just as the number of articles written and published on party propaganda does not indicate the ideological commitment of the schoolteachers.

The politics of inspection is more appropriately understood through a genre of practice particular to the Chinese social-cultural milieu, commonly called formalism (*xingshi zhuyi*), through which educational audit generates rhetorical window dressing, rather than genuine compliance.¹⁷ Formalism provides a technique of appearance management, through which the effects of school audit are coded prior to the actual occurring of the audit, and has little to do with how the parties involved genuinely think of or judge the circumstances.

In this sense, formalism also enables performative utterances that Foucault (2010:61-73) speaks of as non-assertion, disassociated with the values or beliefs of the agents. It is the job of the inspectors, who are institutionally endowed with status and authority, to eventuate the audit procedures and adjudicate whether a set of milestones has been met. The inspectors engage in a type of speech act, a performative utterance so to speak, that doesn't carry risk nor necessarily convey their beliefs. They simply speak the tongue of the policy scripts. Similarly, on the other hand, those being inspected do not carry out audit procedures with ideological commitment. Rather, as many of my informants facetiously described, they were paying superficial lip service for the sake of getting by. In other words, the Chinese audit regime operates as a predefined ritual in which one does not bind one's act in an ethical pact/contract; and a shared understanding of formalistic efficacy determines what can and cannot be revealed.

Many village teachers also attribute formalism to an outdated Maoist legacy of fulfilling planned production quota. During the Great Leap Forward, for instance, through intense collectivization of the agriculture and industrial sectors, unrealistically high production outputs were set as targets in order for the country to rapidly transform into a modern society. Despite

¹⁷ The meanings of governance are distinctive in the Chinese context, and reducing the audit apparatus to yet another incidence of authoritarianism or corruption misses the nuances of the Chinese social political settings.

the outrage of nation-wide grain shortages, the ideological roof of those targets forced the local agents to exaggerate agricultural productivity and bluff the higher-ups in performance audit. As a result, the collectively concocted agricultural “miracle” along with natural disasters led to massive famine across the country.¹⁸ Through invoking the Maoist legacy and the acrid pain and fear involved, rural teachers in Qiandongnan lament a similar insanity in the ritual of educational audit, which to them works as an old weapon appropriated to wage a new battle and delivers only numerical and visual façade.

Meanwhile, the construction of a facade almost always depends on a particular sociality and knowing collusion among the spectators and the inspected, including the teachers, students, villagers, and ironically, audit-conducting state officials, who not only co-produce the image, but in doing so also tacitly consume the image. Images/spectacles carry a significant function in contemporary China,¹⁹ projecting particular state-sanctioned meanings through both physical objects (such as propaganda billboards erected along highways) and social rituals (such as school audit). Images serve a pedagogic device through which a collective subjectivity is articulated. As anthropologist Yan Hairong contends, images “project a depth of interior subjectivity and incite a desire in the spectator to inhabit and embody the images both subjectively and corporeally” (2008:163).

¹⁸ During the Great Leap Forward, the “three hard years” between 1959 and 1962 witnessed an estimation of 30 million deaths (five percent of the population) due to poverty and severe food shortage (See Yang 1996). In Majiang, for instance, behind the tribal abodes of Dongyin, amidst the large grove of trees known as the village’s *fengshui* forest (or spirit grove), there lies a hill of unclaimed graveyards. The inhabitants were nameless victims of the nightmarish years of the Great Leap Forward when a collective fever to “boost” agricultural harvest plunged the entire nation into manic fabrication and exaggeration of productivity, wiping out population with famine and malnourishment.

¹⁹ For instance, the country’s myriads grand productions (such as the Opening of 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo) bear witness to the power of spectacles in mediating the nation’s identity as harmony (*hexie*).

Rethinking the Political Through the lives of Village Teachers

As teachers, we hold on to a job that is tasteless like chicken bone (*jilei* 鸡肋) but we couldn't afford to discard (*shizhi wuwei qizhi kexi* 食之无味, 弃之可惜) because after all it is our source of livelihood (*weile shengji* 为了生计). Year in and year out, we are like machines, going to classes, proctoring tests, grading papers, banqueting with inspectors; our aspirations have long withered away.

Today we are just like servants with layers of bureaucrats (*guan*) sitting on top of us and ordering us around. We have no choice but to do as we are told because we can't afford to lose our "rice bowl" (*fanwan*, "means of livelihood"). We have children and family to support. Even though we are aware of the lies, we can't do anything about it. This is a large net that binds every one of us together. If one makes trouble, a lot of others are going to be involved.

--Longxing middle school teachers, focus group interview

Village teachers describe themselves as exhausted professionals who have no power besides wielding authority behind the closed classroom doors. In addition to test-scores-based evaluation, they are subject to numerous performance audits all year long, including inspections, propaganda testing, and curricular competitions (such as standard Mandarin pronunciation, oral English, and lesson delivery). They are also burdened by variegated occupational tests and ongoing *jingsai* and *pinggu* (contests and evaluation). They are often required to submit essays and journal articles on propaganda topics such as President Hu's "Scientific Development Concept" (*kexue fazhan guan*), or on trendy pedagogical themes such as student-centered and technology-facilitated instruction. These tests are mandatory and often open book with answers provided at online databanks. Test administration fee (usually five to ten yuan per teacher) were collected from the school, which, in their words, was an occasion for the higher-ups to generate income, yet another folly, wasteful practice in their profession.

Encumbered with bureaucratic and audit demands, they often invoke the old metaphor of servitude to explain their embitterment in the nation's pedagogical discipline. In the Maoist discourse, feudalist servitude was said to be finally bulldozed away by the benevolent new

People's Republic—a fresh slate on which independent citizenry could be rewritten. Ironically, the old metaphor of servitude reemerges eerily in village teachers' self perception and self negation.

Teachers' self-perception as indentured servitude and their collective reticence towards the inspection regime needs to be understood in the context of China's pro-development and de-politicization rhetoric, and the ways in which pedagogical logic and social logic bear upon one another. To do so, a historicization of teachers' sociopolitical positioning in China's pedagogical (dis)order is necessary. During the Maoist years (the Cultural Revolution in particular), educated intellectuals (especially the teachers) were considered threats to the Party and the nascent socialism. As a then popular slogan portrays, the more one learns, the more anti-revolutionary one becomes. In the battle against bourgeois reactionaries and "class enemies," teachers were branded as the "filthy underclass" (*chou laojiu*) and sent to labor camps to cleanse their minds that were deemed contaminated by feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism.

A decade later, with the renouncement of Maoism and ontological rectification (*bo luan fan zheng*), the feudalist (*feng*), capitalist (*zi*), revisionist (*xiu*) labels imposed on teachers began to visibly loose ground. In the aftermath of the Maoist radicalism, China's leadership was increasingly concerned about the "lost ten years" caused by the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, there was a nationwide endeavor to restore social and pedagogical order (Yan 2008: 67). Upon the fall of the Gang of Four and the subsequent decease of Mao, in the year 1977, the national college entrance exams were reinstated, schools reopened, and denounced teachers rehabilitated to resume their profession.

The teachers' renormalization is sutured to the renormalization of the political order in post-Mao China, with a shift from ideological commitment politics to suspending the ideological

from the economic. As the former Party leader Deng Xiaoping's famous "cat" theory urged, a good cat is one that catches the mice, regardless of its political color. The country has since embarked on a pragmatist path of economic development, which discourages ideological debates about whether the country is still aptly seen as socialist, or more appropriately capitalist. The "ideologically blind" development model was justified as a necessary "make-up lesson" that China has missed due to Maoist negligence of the market law.

As the reform era advances, the ideological remnants of commitment politics are slowly fading away, while a new significance is infused into a depoliticized pro-growth agenda. Influential domestic writers on Chinese politics, such as Wang Hui, lament the trend of depoliticization in China and the alarming rise of a technocratic state (Wang 2006). Writing on rural migrant women serving as urban domestic workers, Yan Hairong (2008:11) also comments, "For the Chinese State, postsocialism is an enforced separation of the political from the economic and an enforced depoliticization of 'development,' 'productive forces,' and 'the market.'" In this context, the separation of development and ideology is deemed possible, and in fact, preferable.

Ironically, as the ideological baggage is collectively cast aside, so too is the independent political will of "speaking," as the teachers are exhorted to refrain from "talking politics." Exhorted by the higher-ups to concentrate on teaching and not to talk about politics (*bu jiang zhengzhi*), the village teachers inhabit a fettered space in which they juggle persistent audit demands and an antipolitical sentiment extolled in the name of harmony and orderliness. *Bu jiang zhengzhi* (no talking about politics) becomes the unstated professional motto for the country's vast numbers of teaching forces, whose political subjectivity is largely suspended and

discursively sanitized in contemporary China's pedagogical politics.²⁰ They often invoked the Cultural Revolution's cruel humiliation of their predecessors to shed light on their present dilemma. If it was then the ideological fervor, now it is the depoliticization sentiment—couched in the patriotism of service to the nation—that underwrites their predicament.

The crisis of village teacherhood in Qiandongnan was dramatized by the death of three teachers in early 2009, whose lives were taken in a traffic accident during a home-visit trip to persuade dropouts. The tragedy was silenced in the mainstream media, “harmonized” as the teachers bitterly put it, in the state's low-key handling of the trauma. By keeping the tragedy hidden from the public gaze, and preventing teachers from exercising independent critiques, the state effectively shirked responsibility of a crises-ridden rural education. The county Education Bureau later issued a safety caution, and the families of the deceased received a negligible compensation of twenty thousand yuan (roughly three thousand U.S. dollars), which exacerbated the anger of other village teachers. Yet their exasperation could only be voiced in private moment of mourning. In bereavement, they shared a moment of “speaking bitterness” (*suku*) and lamented their devaluation and servitude in the rhetoric of depoliticization and harmony.

Out of worldly concerns, village teachers chose to guard their employment security by dwelling in conformity, reticence, and political mainstream. They repetitively told me they could not jeopardize their career and livelihood by speaking up against the “emperor's nudity,” the deception and fraudulence of inspection. This is not surprising given that in China being conventional—blending in, so to speak—is regarded as a great source of stability in life; to do

²⁰ This is especially true for primary and secondary schoolteachers in rural ethnic settings. Foreseeably, one might argue that with the avail of the worldwide web, political discussions are more readily possible despite the state's sanitizing of the formation of critical masses. Yet what is important to my analysis here is the teachers' embeddedness in a discursive discourse frame that patrols what is allowed into the realm of speakability.

otherwise would bind one to a different type of speech act (i.e. free-spokenness) and would invite risk and danger. As the caveat goes, “The gun shoots the bird that sticks its head out.”

The teachers’ collective inertia, sanctioned by the antipolitical discourse, should not be simply interpreted as compliant and quietist, and as erosion of teacher subjectivity all together. The compliance work that teachers daily engage in has in it an element of assertion that carves a stage for performance and needs to be appreciated for its political significance. To do so, it involves a more capacious understanding of the political not merely as sanctioned by the nation-state or defined by emancipatory/reformatory agendas. As Judith Farquhar puts, “a more generous definition of the political, one that does not presume liberal democracy as its natural setting or emancipation as its aim, can show how even compliance works on the dispositions of power in public” (2009: 555). It is a different way of locating the political that troubles the emancipatory *raison d’être* of compulsory schooling, and opens up possibilities to rethink the slippage within the audit/accountability apparatus.

While the discourse of depoliticization discourages popular engagement in critical discussions, Farquhar (2009) suggests that in contemporary China a political *habitus* is nonetheless discursively present in daily benign acts; its significance has been altered profoundly but never diminished. Drawing from her study on Beijing’s public park users and their life nurturance practices (*yangsheng*), she argues that one’s ability to effect change in oneself is oftentimes imbricated in specific modes of being, becoming, and desiring, even if these acts are crafted in sanctioned discourse. As a feature of public life that came into fashion since the 1990s and heightened by international sports fanfares such as the Olympics, calisthenics practices for bodily fitness has been widely endorsed by the state and considered as apolitical or antipolitical (Mind your own body and health, but not the politics!). Yet the passionate disciplining of the body to achieve health and the claim of rights to city public space constitutes

a collective assertion and a practical form of “peopling” the city. Rather than gazing at the ideological utopia as their revolutionary predecessors did, people now gaze at the immediacy of their bodies as the site of intervention in the national development, an act both carnal and political. Farquhar thus urges for a more expansive notion of the political that takes into account the creativity, hopefulness, self-conscious maneuvering within the lifeworld, and the generative potentials arising out of the everyday disciplining of the body.

In a similar vein, the village teachers do not consider themselves rebellious or politically incendiary. In diverse forms of scapegoating, they often appear meekly enslaved to the compulsory technologies and audit culture in China’s educational reforms, and much of what they do is practical getting by in a cumbersome professional life. Yet reading it as the thorough depoliticization, docility, and hence a lacuna of the political would miss the point, since the political and the personal, the public and the private are ineluctably intertwined in China’s post-socialist landscape.

In their private speech act that parodies the state officialdom and the audit spectacle as the emperor’s new clothes, village teachers exhibit a particular sensitivity and a tactic to maintain an efficacy in an otherwise chancy political environment. Criticism of the legitimacy of the state and its bureaucrats are pervasive in private conversations. Even though this form of speech act is usually ignored or considered ineffectual whispering, it is part of the strategies developed within the lifeworld that fold the symbolism of the nation into the private space. Through public perfunctory performance and private speech acts, the teachers are indeed a polyglot mix of sociable, desiring, vengeful, melancholic, political bodies. Even cultivation of clientelist ties with officialdom through bribery and banquets can be seen as forms of popular resistance to state monopoly (Yang 1994) during a time of sanctioned depoliticization.

Coda: Dancing in Chains

Despite all the fuss, Longxing didn't make the provincial list for the national inspection. Its apparent unpreparedness had alarmed the provincial policymakers who selected other villages (including Majiang) that were considered better positioned to receive the national inspection. In Majiang, similar audit tales abounded. On the day of the national inspection, the officials from Beijing were ceremonially received with elaborate welcome rituals and the traditional Miao long-table dinner (similar to the Dong long-table dinner described earlier). Enraptured with the exotic nourishments and half inebriated, the inspectors only took cursory walk-around on the playground without even entering the school buildings. The tiresome piles of paperwork the teachers had spent a year putting together were left unscrutinized. That the school was on the verge of being wiped out by tourism planning (see next chapter) was also beyond the radar of the inspection fanfare.

In June, the province of Guizhou successfully passed the TBP audit and proudly declared universal basic education. As the teachers described, it was a "peaceful and drama-free success" despite their anxiety and apprehension (*youjing wuxian* 有惊无险). Relieved the drama was finally over, the teachers were glad they could return to their normal life. But the assumed "normalcy" of the pedagogical life is always already tension-ridden; in fact, the audit drama is part of what constitutes the normalcy of Chinese education.

Ironically, when school audit appears to offer the possibility to identify the limit-points of compulsory education, it creates closure around the imagined educational utopia. The technique of audit is a messy, unpredictable, and awkward terrain that fragments the emancipatory *raison d'être* of TBP through "accountability choreography" (Webb 2006) of deception and complicity. TBP's cookie-cutter mode of educational planning and assessment compels village schools to

spend already strained resources falsifying outcomes in order to meet the audit demands. Within the rituals of formalism, educational inspection only bears out what the policy scripts presuppose, while weeding out signs jarring to the predefined image.

On the other hand, the technology of school audit is far from engendering homogenous conformity. The pedagogical subjects are both constituted in and knowingly re-narrate the audit regime. The overt compliance and the covert manipulation of inspection demands form odd ethnographic juxtapositions and interstices. It is such interstices that constitute a critical analytic moment to understand the profound disenchantment of education in rural ethnic China. It is such interstices that reveal the participatory limits of TBP and illuminate how rural schooling fabricates and sustains the image of success despite its hidden contradictions and ironies.

By reading the actors' (especially the village teachers') compliance of the audit apparatus as political, one does not romanticize resistance by presuming dissent as natural, inevitable, or desirable. De Certeau's (1984: xx) reminds us that everyday tactics that involve "a logic articulated on situations and the will of others" can accommodate even nonaction as resistant politics. Poststructural feminist scholars also inform us that "agentive" capacity is not only manifested in acts of subversion of norms but also in culturally and historically specific ways through which one inhabits norms (Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 1990). The political envisioned as such leads us to a fuller appreciation of the daily maneuverings and routine responses to state audit demands. Such a reading of the political does not cancel out the power of the dominant gaze; but it does show that the power is not enacted without a knowing struggle.

Occupying an educational and developmental crossroads, village schools in Qiandongnan have to often dance in chains. The dance is shaped by regimens of the curricular routines, ongoing struggles for funding and resources, jarring relationships with state

officialdom, and the audit apparatus that handcuffs them in ceaseless outcome fabrication. The audit drama, in particular, is choreographed and performed by multiple actors and conditioned by a complex governing apparatus, including (yet not limited to) Chinese officialdom, formalism, and particular style of self-monitoring in a depoliticized discourse environment. As the chapter reveals, the abstract audit gaze is brought to bear on the daily maneuverings of the students, teachers, villagers, and bureaucrats, and through which the emancipatory ideal of schooling is perturbed and renarrated.

Chapter Five: Tourism as Spatial Pedagogy and New Rural Literacy

Vignette one

It was eight o'clock in the evening. The staff room of Longxing middle school was still bright as daylight. The teachers were busy working on a "test" that was due by midnight; others were stealing a moment to leaf through the newspapers. The vice headmaster looked despondent, moving his fingertips lethargically on a beat-up computer keyboard, and signed: "we teachers are so tired and poor and dejected. We are busy all the time without accomplishing anything meaningful." The exam was administered by the county government to all cadres and civil servants, including teachers, to test their familiarity with the legislatures on land appropriation and urban planning. The school received the exam papers this morning from the village education station, together with a complete answer sheet. All that the teachers needed to do was copy the corresponding passages to fill in the blanks. They had been working on it on and off throughout the day. Some cancelled class to make time for the copying and joked about it as a calligraphic exercise (*lianzi*) that didn't involve the brain. It was only a "test" suspended in quotation marks.

Vignette Two

It was a Sunday morning. Normally peopled by loquacious vendors, the village street looked empty and deserted. A few days of rain had turned the dug-up ground into a slimy wetland, with construction debris piled up high on both sides of the road. The sky was overcast, dark clouds hanging motionless without a single breath of wind. Soon, the stillness of the atmosphere was dissipated by waves of rhythmic drumbeats approaching from the village gate. As the sound drew near, a sea of shiny ethnic attires and bright-

colored flags also came into sight. It was a parade day. Marchers were schoolteachers and students, led by a few government officials and village elders. They were filing through the village, tiptoeing on construction waste and swampy mud, accompanied by a loudspeaker-carrying police car broadcasting policies on land requisition, housing regulations in scenic spots, and punishment measures for noncompliance. When asked, most of the student paraders had little ideas why they were gathered on a Sunday morning, nor did they particularly care. All they knew was their teachers told them to dress up in ethnic uniforms and come beat the drums (figure #9).



Figure #9: Student paraders in uniform holding flags and tiptoeing on the dug-up road.

Throughout my fieldwork, I'd seen teachers and students participating in tests or parades on numerous occasions. These were administered to propagate government policies on land expropriation and tourism planning. Under Qiandongnan's tourism-centered growth model, lands and properties have been frequently requisitioned, often forcefully, for development purposes. This has resulted in great local confusions and contestations, and spurred the government to use tests and parades as tools to promulgate its policies, in addition to collecting fees.¹ Such propaganda schemes were repeatedly employed, indicating an official

¹ Test administration fees (five to ten yuan per teacher) were collected by corresponding government bureaus, which according to the teachers was another occasion for the higher-ups to generate income at the expense of village schools.

stress on “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo*) to eliminate local discords and to teach people “proper” ways of thinking and acting.

What is intriguing is the entanglement of village schools in tourism-centered development of Qiandongnan. As the above two vignettes aptly demonstrate, village schoolteachers and students were increasingly sandwiched by propaganda demands and called upon, often under duress, to perform as the surrogate state functionaries. This chapter takes a close look at tourism as another compulsory apparatus of Chinese developmentalist state and examines how the cultural politics of tourism renders school walls ever more porous with bureaucratic demands, commercial agendas, and state-business coalition. It illustrates tourism’s pedagogical functions in shaping the experience of schooling in Qiandongnan, the tensions and spatial politics in everyday lives, the changing notion of village teacherhood, and the disenchantment² in and around compulsory education as its discursive effects.

I divide the chapter into two parts. The first part starts with an introduction of tourism becoming a prime mover in thinking about development in contemporary China and how it works as a disciplinary apparatus to shape both the physical and symbolic landscape. I then zoom in to my two field sites to narrate the controversial touristification processes, what it means for people to live everyday lives under spatial intervention, how state agents and private actors are involved in orchestrating the transformation, and how school agents are ensnared in the spatial tussle of tourism administration and surveillance. In part two, I approach tourism from the lens of new village teacherhood and rural literacy to further explore the complex workings of

² I use the notion “disenchantment” with caution that it also embeds “enchantment” as the other side of the same coin, just as “hope” and “fear” are the inseparable double of the cosmopolitan episteme (See Popkewitz 2008).

tourism in fostering particular subjectivities, and how it also produces tricky and surreptitious creativities in everyday practices.³

Spatial Pedagogies: Tourism as Ballads of Development

In recent decades, tourism-centered development model is steadily gaining popularity in China. Despite its relative late start, China is said to have the fastest growing domestic tourism market in the world⁴ (See Chio 2009: 45; also Wang 2006). In Guizhou (and Qiandongnan in particular), while the late 80s and early 90s mainly saw western backpackers who were attracted by rugged topography and exotic lifeways, new roads and improved transportation have led to considerable growth of domestic tourists since the 1990s (Oakes 1998: 169). The promotion of rural ethnic tourism becomes an essential part of the state program to “open up the west” (*xibu dakaifa*).⁵ It is also bolstered by the naming of 2006 as the “Year of Rural Tourism” (*xiangcun luyou nian*) as well as the state’s 11th Five-Year-Plan (2006-2010) to “Build a New Socialist Countryside.”

The seemingly straightforward association between rural tourism and rural development emphasizes the “rural” as a distinctive category of governing for realizing social and economic progress (see Chio 2009). Furthermore, the suturing of tourism with another category—the ethnic—brings about an even more salient salvational tone of the development ballads: the doubly peripheralized population (rural *and* ethnic) could be uplifted by the desirable national policy of touristification. The ethnic marker also exoticizes the experience of cultural tourism by signifying *who* should be “toured” and *what* should be “seen.”

³ The movement of the chapter involves multiple registers in dialogues with one another, each offering a “witnessing” lens and entrance to the complexity of the phenomenon at hand. It is in the productive tensions between one and the other register, I hope, that the most provocative modes of inquiry emerge.

⁴ In 2007, domestic tourism comprised about 70% of total tourism revenue in the country. See Wang 2006.

⁵ See Introduction, footnote #23 for an explanation of this program.

Since visual representation is central to tourism, it falls upon the re-imagining and remaking of the “appearance” of the countryside to promote sightseeing. This often involves significant amounts of work directed at construction and renovation of village “places,” including local architecture, vernacular landscape, ethnic décor, public hygiene and amenities. The specific form of space operation carries pedagogical functions to impart “proper” ways of “seeing” (as tourists) and “being seen” (as the toured)—even if the “properness” is contested—and transform a lived domain into a visual “text” legible to the tourist gaze. In a way, it not only alters built environment but also fabricates new social landscape, new ways of thinking about what it means to be rural and ethnic, thus distinctly modern.

Space in this chapter is considered a vital part of control and surveillance of individuals in ways both productive and oppressive.⁶ Such technique of governing, which I will call “spatial regime,” is not just translated through geopolitics and territorial dominance by a sovereign entity (such as the state), but also seen in particular subjectivity and dispositions fostered through spatial reconfiguration.

The production of picturesque yet artificial village landscape and the manicuring of living spaces into park-like enclaves need to be regarded as spatial techniques of governing, underpinned by specific rationalities to order everyday lives that are both constituted and constitutive of this space. As an unstoppable force engulfing rural ethnic Qiandongnan,⁷ such techniques are churning up a spatial tussle involving state bureaucrats, business developers, village residents, schoolteachers and students in both villages I observed. It is the duel projects

⁶ Calling the present “an epoch of space,” Foucault (1986: 22) speaks of spatial practices as corresponding to apparatuses and manipulations that produce disciplines and structures of power. Spatiality is a tool of analysis integral to Foucault’s overarching concern of power; according to him, discipline in various institutional forms (e.g. the hospital, the prison, and the school) is above all a disciplining of space (see Crampton & Elden 2007).

⁷ While western tourists lament the fast eroding and vulgarization of ethnic lifeways in Qiandongnan as a result of Disneyfication and visual fabrication, such a style of touristification seems to fit well with the taste of China’s domestic leisure travelers. See *Lonely Planet (2009)*, the palm pilot of western travelers, for depictions on this.

of tourism's spatial ordering with regards schooling—both repressive through control and demolition and generative of particular subjectivity as the new rural literacy—that I hope to demonstrate in this chapter.

The Vernacular Modern and Spatial Fabrication

In the early 1990s, Majiang and Longxing were designated as signature tourist destinations in Qiandongnan and had undergone similar trajectories of tourism programming. Subject to the management of external corporate developers, both had experienced considerable “face” work. The “face” work involves spatial planning, alternation, and reorganization that are orchestrated by the urbanist cartographers to produce a visual facsimile of an imagined “ethnic authenticity.”

In 2008, the grand staging of the 3rd Guizhou Tourism Development Conference recast Majiang through a new face-lift. The conference gathered economists, development specialists, state officials, researchers, and celebrities to convene about tourism's potentials in the future development of Qiandongnan and Guizhou. Seeing the conference as a rare opportunity for publicity, local governments invested heavily in infrastructure building. As a main conference site, Majiang underwent a lengthy “plastic surgery” to be well groomed with a deliberate aesthetics. Rice fields were turned into a manicured tree park; pebbled roads were paved throughout the village; scenic spots were designated and signs put up; newly built or renovated houses were converted into Farmers' Happiness (*nongjiale*, i.e. local restaurant-cum-family-inns); ticket houses were installed at gates to sell park entries; a brand new performance square and business road were carved out of requisitioned farmlands, lined up with souvenir shops, tea houses, and night clubs. Although the village-town's geographic features remain, such as the mountains, wooden houses, and terraced fields, their importance has been re-signified in a tourism scheme and folded into the fabricated space of the village-cum-park.

The authorized production to make places “tourable” saturates places with the symbolic order and meanings (de Certeau 2007:255-256). Historically, vernacular landscape has been closely woven into everyday livelihoods and functioned as a *working* landscape rather than quaint tourist visuality. While layered rice terraces cut along steep mountain ridges present the physical hardship of climbing, digging, and tilling by the Miao and Dong cultivators, they offer a picturesque tourist spectacle. As the Tourism Development Conference concluded with much glamour and media hyperbole, Majiang’s agrarian past became fused with its present as a tourist destination. Neighborhood and domestic life has been thoroughly imbricated in the culture-cum-leisure mode of tourism and the village-cum-park communal space. Children drift through the village-park in early morning towards their classrooms, their schoolyard pierced by high decibel music from the performance square a short distance away. Villagers draw horses up the windy and hilly residential paths, carrying grains, charcoals, and daily goods to supply for the tourism marketplace. Farmers hiss geese home at sunset with long bamboo canes, walking rhythmic walks amidst the dins of tourist footsteps. Women untie the baby from a beautifully embroidered carrier and nurse it while chatting with neighbors, amidst fixations of the tourists’ gaze.

Everyday livelihood is intricately entwined with the orchestrated changes, which brought mixed blessings. On the one hand, villagers welcomed the many amenities that had come to the community, recalling days without paved roads, tap water, or electricity, when singing, *lusheng* playing, and embroidery were a dominant pastime. Nowadays, ethnic songs and dances are performed to entertain tourists on dinner tables and during welcome rituals, while less and less by the Miao and Dong themselves whose nocturnal pastime is consumed by televisions and games (e.g. mahjong, often involving some forms of gambling). Ethnic makers are “revived” and brought to visibility only with a price tag. For instance, villagers in Majiang are paid to wear

ethnic attires and perform reception rituals for tourists, twice a day three days a week at the village's main gates.

On the other hand, in Majiang while tourists relish the bucolic image of wooden houses-on-stilts (*diaojiolou* 吊脚楼) sprawling like fish scales on the hillside, admire the panoramic view of the thousand-household-village (*qianhu miaozhai* 千户苗寨), and enjoy the photographic moments of “going native” by donning colorful Miao attires (almost always machine-made, mass-produced, thus fetishized and vulgarized), local residents frown upon the vacant appearance and “over development” (*guodu kaifa*) of the new village-scape. Designed by a team in Beijing who apparently did not carefully investigate the Miao housing structure, the shops on the business road were ridiculed by the villagers as *sibuxiang* (uncharacterizably bizarre and quixotic). They exhibit a peculiar architectural blend of the traditional Han Chinese motif, the Miao and the Dong ethnic dwellings, and the modern décor of granite outer wall on the lower level. The villagers were bitter about this and saw it as tantamount to asking an ignorant urbanite to design wedding gown for a Miao bride and destroying what they call “authentic (*yuanshengtai*) image of Majiang.”⁸

Villagers also lament repetitive commercial encroachment on their farmlands and home community. In Majiang, within the current development scheme, farmlands are frequently requisitioned under the unbridled power of corporate developers joining hands with government interventions; public institutions including the schools, the hospital, and government work units are to be gradually removed from the scenic spot (*jingqu*) to make room for for-profit tourism enterprises. Distressed villagers often evoke the image of “cage” and “enclosure” to describe their present living. Marketed as harmonious coexistence of nature and human to cater for the

⁸ Yet what's important here is not authenticity (e.g. whether the constructed landscape really resembles the Miao customs); rather, the imagined experience of the exotic is what matters to the tourists and the developers.

latest trend of urban *shengtai* (ecological) living, the newfangled village-scape conceals tourism's intrusion on local livelihood and the backstage spatial operation and contestations.

Similarly, Longxing underwent a dramatic village makeover, catalyzed by the staging of the propaganda event of One Conference Two Festivals (*yihuilianjie*),⁹ for which it was chosen as the main site. State agencies at the county and village levels saw this a publicity-attracting opportunity that might speed up the village's socioeconomic development. Like Majiang, tourism programming in Longxing was managed by an external corporate. By the time of my fieldwork, the development corporate had signed a 50-year contract for exclusive control on tourism planning in the village, and had been making a series of not always welcomed changes. Despite the infrastructural improvement such as installing sewage system, paving roads, mending the river bed, and burying telephone wires underground, the company's presence in the village was met with profound dissension and resentment.

In the name of village beautification, public facilities such as the Cultural Station (*wenhua zhan*), Grain and Oil Station (*liangyou zhan*), and village government building were demolished; teachers' dormitories were razed to the ground, school playground dug up (figure #10), and private house construction or renovation strictly regulated. To the locals' distaste, communal Drum Towers and Wind-and-Rain-Bridges were wired with ostentatious neon bulbs and dressed up like artificial Christmas trinkets. Villagers were upset to see their ancestral heirlooms (the towers and bridges) meddled with by corporate hands, which to them was inauspicious and would invite misfortune. In the logic of profitability, public institutions and non-profit entities such as the school and the hospital are expelled from the village core, which was

⁹ "One Conference Two Festivals" refer to the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Liping Conference held by CPC Political Bureau during the Long March and the 23rd anniversary of President Hu Jintao's speech at the Academic Seminar of the Liping Conference, as well as the celebration of the 4th Kaili Ethnic Cultural Festival and the 3rd Liping Drum Tower Cultural Festival in 2009. Such grand production of festive commemoration is typical of China's statecraft and its visibility-driven political climate.

strikingly similar to what happened to Majiang. In village elders' recollection, the current wave of purging and demolition was reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution's sabotage of the ethnic cultural artifacts (such as drum towers, flower bridges, and opera stages) in the name of cleaning up the "four olds" (*chu sjiu*, namely, old mentalities, old cultures, old customs, and old habits). To them, the sabotage today takes a new form in the guise of tourism embellishment.



Figure #10: School playground half dug-up for making a tourist parking lot.

Local residents perceived of the official-sponsored developer as irresponsible and greedy intruder who turned their homeland and fellow dwellers into pawns in a chess game. In the name of village cleanup (*zheng zang zhi luan* 整脏治乱), usually before the arrival of higher-up inspectors or visitors, the development company and the government teams would patrol the community to assert disciplinary measures. Frequently, roadside vending carts were vandalized, fruits and vegetables confiscated, and housedogs forbidden and wiped out for "sanitation" and "aesthetics" concerns. Houses violating the scenic spot architectural standards would be torn down. Under the current tourism development model, the pristine, bucolic, and antique visuality is meticulously fabricated and maintained and that the ruffled and chaotic aspects of rural life must be purged out of sight (see figures # 11 and 12). In the quest for vernacular aesthetics, the rhythmic everydayness of rural life is violently altered to conjure up photographic "authenticity" (*yuanshengtai*) for urban travelers. By constructing and consuming a particular vision of the

ethnic rurality, tourism developers and urban travelers co-create an experience of the “vernacular modern.” In bitterness, farmers lament that village life is no longer like village life:

If you were here twenty years ago, you would see firewood neatly stacked up in front of each house. Villagers were proud of the exhibition of their hard work. Now we are forbidden to put anything in front of our house; pretty soon cows and horses will not be allowed to pass through the main street.



Figure #11: On a sunny day, villagers would dry cotton and fruits on the roadside, which was regarded obstructive to tourists and subsequently disallowed.



Figure #12: Pristine scenic view with decorated drum tower and roofed bridge.

In addition, the tourism company dug up the village main road to make a pedestrian path, which, when completed, would be inaccessible to vehicles or animal-drawn carriages. However, the company was sued for delaying the highway projects near Longxing, as the village road was a transit route used for transporting sands and gravels to the construction sites. Thus the road makeover was infinitely postponed, leaving piles of construction debris in the village center and causing great nuisance to the local community.¹⁰

Village Schools in the Remaking of Spatial Order

The “clean-up” regime was not only a manifesto against the spatial disorder perceived by the state-business coalition, but had deeper symbolic meanings. It was a pedagogical warfare facilitated by the local teachers and students who were forced to partake the official and commercial “thought-work” that they did not morally endorse. To facilitate the village cleanup and makeover, schoolteachers and students were invariably involved: classes were often cancelled for students to take to the street with dustbins and broomsticks (figure #13); teachers were pressured to partake and show political backing to the government-corporate-cosponsored projects (more details in the following section). They also participate in periodic propaganda campaigns under duress, such as the staging of parades and administration of occupational tests¹¹ illustrated by the two opening scenes of this chapter, to propagate tourism-related government policies and preempt local noncompliance and potential hostile reactions.

¹⁰ As a result, Longxing lost the privilege to host the “One Conference Two Festivals” celebration, and many were remorseful about missing a golden opportunity to gain tourism visibility through this government-sponsored event. The County Tourism Bureau later launched a hiking campaign to increase Longxing’s visibility among more adventure-seeking tourists in order to package it as a national scenic spot.

¹¹ Besides achievement-scores-based evaluation, teachers were also subject to variegated occupational tests, which most of them find yet another folly, wasteful and irrelevant practice in their profession. These tests are mandatory and always open book with answers provided at online databanks. Test administration fee (usually five to ten yuan per teacher) were collected from the school, which, according to some teachers, was an occasion for the higher-ups (*shangtou*) to generate income, and yet an added demand to their already encumbered life.



Figure #13: Village students summoned to clean up the street and riverbed.

Throughout my research, it becomes clear to me village schools have turned into de facto functionaries of the state providing social surveillance, mediating local affairs, and promulgating government mandates. The surveillance and mediating functions of the schools involve an array of issues roughly divided into two categories: “de jure matters” and “de facto matters.” The de jure matters include the provision of pedagogical programs, such as enforcing compulsory education, delivering state-sponsored curriculum, promoting village literacy to meet the audit standards. The latter is a grey area not decreed by law but practiced nonetheless in rural school’s daily routines. It includes settling disputes among locals, assisting state programs such as setting up satellite TVs in rural households,¹² organizing students to clean up the village, participating in propaganda tests and parades, overseeing family planning policy, and patrolling the village space in time of government-mandated demolition.

¹² Media isolation is charged as the major stumbling block to economic development in rural China. Part of the efforts to promote media connectedness in remote mountain terrains so as to cultivate market mentalities (*shichang yishi*), alleviate poverty, and distribute governmental directives, a policy was initiated in 1994 by the central government to realize *cun cun tong dianshi*, i.e. installing media hookups so that every village is connected to television (Hong 1998: 88). Teachers are integral to such grassroots production of media-hungry populace. They often spend the weekends going from household to household, setting up satellite dishes, and giving instructions to the hookups.

On the one hand, village school is like a state agent policing the social, moral, and pedagogical order as a form of local authority. On the other hand, the sites of the schools have become points of fierce contestations under the aegis of tourism development. Corporate developers seek to take over their locations for profit-driven ventures; the schoolyards are frequently converted into tourist parking lots or used as campgrounds for performance production teams; inspectors frequently come and take advantage of school audit for free-ride tourism (as discussed in chapter four). With the influx of tourists, construction workers, and officials, the school walls are becoming ever more porous. In Majiang, for instance, across the Baishui creek from the middle school compound is the new performance square, where busloads of tourists come daily to enjoy choreographed singing and dancing, and high decibel music is broadcast all day long, drowning out class instruction.

To understand the ways rural ethnic education is implicated in touristification, we need to examine the dynamics of spatial struggles producing palpable tensions among the schools, the locals, the government, and the corporate developers. In both villages I observed, there are three aspects of the spatial regime. The first aspect targets the sites of communal facilities located at the convenient village center, such as the hospital and the schools. As the commercial developers and government officials envision a tourism modernity, essential public facilities are being pushed out of the village core to make room for profitable business ventures. The justification is made on the ground to maximize economic development by separating non-profit services from commercial sectors. At the crossroads of priorities, the convenience and easy accessibility of tourist amenities have clearly outshone other community needs.

The second type of land dealing involves state requisition of farmland for construction of freeways and tourism venues. With the influx of tourists, a rapid monetization of agricultural bases is swiftly underway: land value has skyrocketed; more rice fields come under commercial

commands; and the primordial ties to farmlands and the agrarian livelihood begin to wither. This takes place during a drastic spatial ordering/restructuring that occurs across China through the technique of “demolition and relocation” (*chaiqian* 拆迁). As Zhang (2010:138) points out in a recent study on housing regime in Kunming, spatial ordering through “demolition and relocation” is not unique to rural China; it is also happening discursively in the metropolis. For instance, the preparation for the 2008 Olympics led to massive displacement of Beijing residents to make room for shopping malls, hotels, sports stadium, and freeways, in the same pattern as the preparation for the 1999 International Horticulture Expo in Kunming.

The third aspect of the spatial regime concerns zoning laws that mandate new houses be painted in a dark hue and bricks covered with tree barks to promote “ancient aesthetics.” Even though fire hazard is a big concern for wooden houses, bricks and concrete are not allowed to “show” in a tourist park where antiquity is tagged with high price value (what is preserved, however, is the visual facsimile of antiquity). Forbidding cement structure and maintaining wooden abodes are both part of the conservation campaign, and one is reminded of Latour’s prediction that “[m]aniacal destruction is counterbalanced by an equally maniacal conservation” (1993:69). Such “rescuing” of ethnic folkways often comes in various forms of disguise and destruction, often through violent means of demolition authorized by predatory developers-state coalition.

This was powerfully dramatized by a life-shattering event that occurred in Majiang where tourism augmented a new “spatial war.” A local family had been in intense dispute with the government agency for some time regarding its non-compliant (*buhe guige*) housing style. According to the tourism company and government staff, the newly built house was too tall and exposed bricks and concrete, which destroyed the harmonious style of the Miao dwellings and violated the scenic spot housing regulations. After some months of dispute and stalemate, the

family was labeled “nail household” (*dingzihu*, i.e. uncivil and stubborn just like nails in the wood) and “shrewd and unruly people (*diaomin*),” and seen as noise-makers and potential threat to the smooth orchestration of tourism in Majiang. They were given a deadline for self-demolition. For a while, the family did not take actions.

Then on an early morning following the celebration of the Miao New Year, a few hundred state employees from the village-town, the county seat, and the prefectural and provincial capitals arrived with two giant bulldozers, sending a chilling message to the otherwise festive tone. Soon the entire market area was cordoned off by bright warning tapes and uniformed personnel. A sense of graveness was touchable. While the bulldozers sent flying dusts, two unwieldy trucks parked side by side, loaded with broken furniture pieces and household items hurriedly piled up in disarray. There was a suppressed silence in the ambiance; even the vegetable vendors nearby tamed their usual loudness. In a short while, the brand new three-storey house was utterly dismantled and turned into a huge pile of broken bricks, tiles, and wooden beams. Torn strips of wallpapers were whistling in the wind. The debris of the crumbled house stood quietly, witnessing the sudden vanishing of an abode, together with the humming sounds of a vibrant family life (figure # 14).



Figure #14: A woman vendor staking out a stand by the rubble on a market day.

Many people were surrounding the blocked-off compound, including head teachers from both primary and middle school, but none of them were onlookers. Some teachers appeared uneasy and embarrassed when seeing me. As they later told me they were pressured to set good examples to the community by patrolling the demolition compound and showing political backing to the housing campaign. Some teachers bitterly called the repetitive cycle of construction and destruction the ironic exemplar of the party slogan “Scientific Development,” which they did not morally endorse yet had to perfunctorily espouse with detest and shame.

Similarly in Longxing, villagers planning to expand, renovate, or build new houses were required to pay a two-thousand-yuan deposit before they could begin the project. If the proceedings were considered *buheguige* (nonconformist), the deposits would be forfeited and worse still, the houses dismantled. In scenic spots (*jingqu*), private construction must undergo strict governmental approval. Getting clearance to expand or renovate one’s old house can be a tension-riven and lengthy process. The standards for deciding the legality of the housing structures were murkily defined, leaving much grey area for guesswork and interpretation as well as *guanxi* (backdoor networking) maneuvering. Despite the sanguinity that tourism ultimately benefits the local residents, the villagers see their life activities unduly regulated and grieve the encroachment of irresponsible development.

In a whimsical and unpredictable regulatory environment, even the appearance of the schools is considered a nuisance to the vernacular aesthetics and must be removed from the tourist gaze. Justified with the discourse of beautifying the village through putting the lands to the most profitable use, both primary and middle schools in Majiang and Longxing were forced to relocate, leading to an outrage among villagers. In Majiang, as part of the grand village makeover for the staging of the 2008 Tourism Conference, the sites of the schools once again became a major target. As the “alleyway news” (*xiaodao xiaoxi*) leaked out that the officials

were determined to demolish the middle school with a stipulated move-out day and build a performance stage on its site, villagers were furious. Many angry parents gathered in front of the government office building and staged a sit-down protest. Concerned about the eruption of potential unrests, the government eventually backed down and the middle school remained temporarily intact. Yet with the mounting commercial interests in lands at the prime village core, the middle school could not escape displacement in the end. During the 2009-2010 academic year, enrollment was significantly reduced, and the middle school was being downsized with a timeline to gradually evacuate and merge with a county-seat school. By the time of my fieldwork, the teachers were anguished about what would happen to them when the shutdown became eventual, apprehensive of being demoted to remoter village hamlets.

The primary school, however, did not escape the fate of demolition and relocation. It was razed to the ground and moved to a hill outside the village gate to make room for a new ethnology museum. Even though the new school buildings were apparently more spacious and modern looking, villagers lament the ominous geomancy of the site and worry about the safety of young children who have to walk quite a distance between home and school, multiple times a day,¹³ through the busy road filled with tourists and vehicles.

Similarly in Longxing, due to its premier location with a panoramic view of the village center, the middle-school compound was coveted by the corporate developer who sought to replace it with a luxury holiday resort. As envisioned in a proposal jointly agreed upon by the company and government agencies, a hotel resort at the prime viewpoint would become a new paradise for the urban elites and the embodiment of the village modern. With the allocation of state funds, farmlands some distance away from the village were expropriated for the new school site. Far from being a smooth process, however, the encroachment of school property

¹³ In Majiang, almost all primary school children are local, who usually go home for lunch and come to school again for the afternoon session.

and farmlands by powerful commercial-state coalition has generated numerous disputes. Farmers were reluctant to give up their lands for negligible compensations: some came to chase away bulldozers with rocks and shovels; others threatened to take their children out of school if it were to move to the new location. Students followed the outrage with earnest interest. They eave-dropped from adults' conversation that the new school was haunted and not safe for children.

While the location of the new middle school was still an unsolved riddle, situations at the current school site remained temporary and makeshift. There was little going on in terms of improving its dilapidated infrastructure and housing conditions. Housing-related complains came from embittered students and teachers who shared the same makeshift residential compound. More than twenty students crammed in a room of bunk beds in a ramshackle wooden structure. From time to time, missing of cups, toothpaste, and water tubs would turn intra-dorm relationship sour. The only personal touch were oversize posters of pop stars taped over the wall besides the bed. There are only two cement water tanks at both ends of the playground providing sporadic water supplies. In the few hours between the afternoon classes and the evening sessions, long lines of students filed back and forth carrying buckets of water from the tanks to wash their hair or do laundry. During the damp seasons, it was not uncommon for them to share the living space with hungry cockroaches and mosquitoes; public outhouses were a distance away and a constant nuisance in winter. Many students complained about the derelict conditions and insanitation of the dorms and took every chance to play truancy; they reasoned that they would at least eat well and sleep in comfort at home (see figure #15).



Figure #15: After school, students taking care of chores in and out of the dorm.

Similarly, the majority of the teachers relied on the minimal housing the school provided. After the tourism company took over Longxing's development, the staff housing on the main street shared by primary and middle school teachers was bulldozed to make room for a tourist hotel. Teachers were forced to seek rentals out of their own pocket and pay steep price due to skyrocketed land values. The middle school recently purchased a makeshift wooden structure from a demolished house and turned it into a temporary living quarter that many teachers now share. Mr. Zhang, who used to enjoy a unit at the staff housing before it was dismantled, now lives in a corner storage with slanted ceilings cut by the stairs above. This less-than-eight-square-meters space with the width of a queen-size bed was now both a bedroom and a kitchen that Zhang shared with his third-grader son. The cracked walls were covered with oil-stained old newspapers; the only cooking equipment was an electronic hot plate sitting in the corner on an old school desk, scattered with a few bowls, spice bottles, and a bundle of chopsticks. In the evening, the desk would be moved behind the door to make room for sleeping. Zhang jokingly called his room "the German Restaurant" because in the Dong language, the pronunciation of "beneath the stairs" sounds similarly with the pronunciation of "German" in Mandarin. Zhang

was playing with homonyms to invoke the exotic image and luxurious experience of western dining to accentuate the dismal realities faced by him and many other teachers.

Officials and commercial investors, however, blamed peasants for their myopia in causing the current stalemate and compromising the village's education and future prosperity. Once a cadre from the civil planning team (*shizheng jianshe dui*) expressed his frustration.

Folks here are very stubborn. The government has allocated funds to requisition lands and build the new school. But the peasants here are not willing to give up their lands. Some have agreed and accepted the compensation; others were stiff-necked and threw rocks at the bulldozers when they tried to approach the fields. They are very shortsighted. They are not aware their behavior is jeopardizing the education of the future generation. Where is the school supposed to be built if not on farmland? Do they think it could be built in the air?

He was resolute that the concrete school buildings marred the *yuanshengtai* (authentic and vernacular) aesthetics of the Dong wooden housing style and that the current location was better suited for a tourist resort or conference venue. His accusation resonated with a letter distributed earlier by the village government, which called upon Longxingers with grave urgency: "An important opportunity has arrived for our village to change its fate by turning into a reputable tourism destination. If you fail to participate and cooperate, you will become historical wrongdoers of the village." The blame of culpability was based on teleological belief in tourism modernity, which anchored its detractors—the non-cooperators—in the "wrong" side of history and concealed the political coercion that prevented them from asserting however little bargaining power they had.

The focal point is that the school is increasingly cornered and hampered in a developmental zest of tourism. In such a policing of spatial order, education becomes a central locus of disputes and sits uneasily between a spatial regime oriented towards tourism aesthetics and profitability, and an evaluative regime based on testing and auditing. On the one hand, as discussed in previous chapters, village schools are demanded to deliver compulsory education and demonstrate satisfactory outcomes for educational audits. As the pedagogical auxiliaries of the state, their primary function is seen in preparing citizens and redressing poverty by transforming rural ethnic populations from the national burden to the national assets. In their daily operation, village schools are consumed by myriads evaluative regimes of testing, monitoring, and audits that incessantly challenge their legitimacy. On the other hand, rural ethnic schools are engulfed by the development mantra of tourism and exhorted to “cooperate” with its spatial regime, which furthered stifles their ability to meet the evaluation and audit demands.

Suspended at the crux of forces, village schools are losing grounds on both fronts. They entanglement in a “space war” waged among government-backed business power, the land claims of the rural residents, and the pedagogical agendas set by the state compulsory law offers a poignant critique of the contradiction in rural education today.

Land Struggle and Official-Merchant Alliance

To further explore the ways village schools in Qiandongnan are implicated in the spatial struggles of tourism, I will now briefly examine the dynamics of land regime in relation to official-merchant alliance. Land expropriation as part of the Chinese style urbanization has left the livelihood of many rural households uninsured. Central control over land use accompanied by the rhetoric of local sacrifice for national progress has witnessed considerable amount of arable

lands lost to infrastructural building such as inter-provincial freeways,¹⁴ large-scale reservoirs, and tourism theme parks, leaving the locals understandably anguished. To understand the villagers' predicament in asserting claims with the paternalistic statecraft and commercial profit-seekers, one needs to understand the primordial importance of lands in an agrarian livelihood.

Despite the diminishing importance of agriculture and the increasing availability of waged income and manufactured products, land still constitutes a historical strategy to make claims of, and articulate a sense of, place as a spatial and spiritual nexus connecting to ancestral heritages and indigenous genealogies, linking the old and the new. Land persists as a significant and continuous base for livelihood, cultural operations, and political struggles. To this day the Miao and Dong people in Qiandongnan continue to conceive of land farming as essential to their livelihood and believe that those who know how to live off the land can survive better in the vicissitude of market economy. Every aspect of the social relations, beliefs and values, ritual practices, and the organizing principles of the Miao and Dong communities is deeply interwoven with land as the indispensable subsistence strategies and the sentimental tie to ancestry and Nature.

Many villagers treasure their accumulation of rice grains—neatly sacked and stacked in the storage—as the most vital household asset. Even though many villagers nowadays work as migrant laborers away from home and never get to consume their portion of the rice harvest, the elderly are unwavering in their belief that they are hoarding grains for the rainy days and that if the nation's current economic prosperity comes to a halt, those who know how to live off the land can survive. Indeed, such calculation is not merely trivial, given the symbolic meaning of rice to the Chinese cosmology, and given the massive famine and starvation half a century ago that brings acrid pain and fear to the country's collective memory.

¹⁴The local saying "if you want to get rich, first build a road" (*yao zhifu, xian xiulu*) reflects a newfound commitment to investing in mega transportation projects to induce economic development.

As Fei Xiaotong aptly observes, in rural areas, “the god represented in the most shrines is Tudi, the god of the earth. Tudi is the god closest to human nature; Tudi and his wife...take care of all the business of the countryside and...have come to symbolize the earth itself” (1992: 38). While urban dwellers scorn the country folks for their soil-stained appearance and mentality (*tuqi*), to the rural residents, the earth is the fountain of their livelihood. Generations of mountain dwellers use the most arable lowlands for rice farming and build abodes on hills where soils are less fertile. They name newborns after agricultural products, such as field, rice, plants, and fruits to remind themselves of the blessings of lands to the otherwise precarious and harsh livelihood.

The Miao in Majiang describe the rice terraces as their ethnic Great Wall built with ancestral blood and tears (*xuelei*). Highland rice terraces are considered the symbol of an epic history written with forced migrancy and repetitive encroachment by other ethnic groups. They have for centuries built homesteads in virgin forests and hilly mountains as they traveled the vagrant path. The Miao speak with awe of the fertile Mt. Leigong that surrounds Majiang with undulating hills, layered rice paddies, densely packed virgin forests, and steep green valleys. Legends about Mt. Leigong populate the memory of its inhabitants, linking to Majiang Miao’s ancestry and an agricultural substance living. Similarly, the Dong people express in epic songs their reverence of rice and farmlands that bestow blessings from ancestors and Mother Nature.

In addition, in a society where social welfare system is woefully inadequate to insure against the rainy days, rural families in China have to depend upon lands for sustenance and lineage transmission. While salarized urbanites could enjoy retirement pensions, rural people have to rely on the yellow earth: “When we are too old to farm the lands, we could rent them out and get one third of the harvest. That way we at least won’t starve.” With the fever of land expropriation, however, the amount of farmlands in both villages is dwindling. In Longxing, for instance, an average four-member household (two parents and two children) only has two *mu* of

lands¹⁵ about half *mu* per person, which is barely adequate. At the current requisition price of twenty-four thousand yuan per *mu*, the family could only receive around forty-eight thousand yuan in sum (roughly seven thousand US dollars). In distress, farmers lament what to pass on to the next generation now that they are landless and tourism seems only vaguely promising.¹⁶ “When the money is used up, what shall we do? What do we have to pass on to our children when they grow up?” Villagers are agonized by the repetitive demands from the government-business coalition to be “farsighted” and willing to give up lands in the name of tourist development.

What is more disturbing to them is that local governments seek to increase the profit margin of their informal revenue (*chuangshou* 创收) by expropriating lands with a negligible sum and selling them off at higher prices to developers, practically absorbing the price discrepancy into private pockets. Official rates for compensation¹⁷ are significantly lower than market rates with little room for negotiation. Many residents complain that the officials are the ones who profit from the land transaction and under-the-table bribes from business developers. Local Majiangers and Longxingers felt they had been short changed in a conspiracy. In early 2010, a few farmers in Majiang put up banners to silently protest the “sale” of their farmlands to private investors and the spread of state-orchestrated consumerism.

Such transaction of farmlands de facto increased local revenue in a considerable measure, to the extent that the term *tudi jingji* (land-induced economy) is coined by some Chinese scholars to describe the phenomenon. The new land-induced economic boom is made

¹⁵ *Mu* is the customary Chinese unit of measurement for area, whose conversion to acre is roughly calculated at 1 acre=6 *mu*.

¹⁶ Since the two road projects (inter-provincial freeway and railroad) requisitioned vast acres of farmlands in Longxing, many households have received compensation for loss of their lands. While some spend the money renovating their houses into family inns (the so-called Farmers’ Happiness) for a share of tourism profits, many squander it away in gambling.

¹⁷ Compensation involves only the loss of land-use rights, not the land, which belongs to the state according to the Constitution.

possible by the erratic appropriation of rural land in China, dubbed as the *xinquandi yundong* (new land enclosure movement).¹⁸ As anthropologist Li Zhang (2010:142) claims, in the operative mode of land regime in China, it is increasingly difficult to separate corporate interests from bureaucratic power as they are conjoined by clientelist tie and protégé relationship. In the case of Majiang and Longxing, an ambiguous “land economy” enabled by the entanglement of predatory commercial developers and the state has allowed for sporadic demolition and displacement in the name of rural renewal. Local residents have limited bargaining power. The displacement itself serves a powerful pedagogical function in “teaching” people about how rural governing is imagined and conducted, especially in orchestrating a new spatial order.

The strategic alignment between business enterprises and state elements creates a rare moment for profit making and the ways in which nonenterprise entities such as the schools are incorporated into the political market in today’s China. Scholars have identified similar historical processes called *guanshang heliu* (official-merchant alliance) in the nineteenth century China (Ma 1995, cited in Zhang 2002: 110). From the developers’ perspectives, business-state connections are undoubtedly lucrative. Maintaining a close tie with the prefectural and provincial government, and using power and pressure from the higher-ups, they can enjoy easy access to land and other key resources, even when it involves practices outside the parameters of the law. From the regional government’s vantage point, commercial developers’ work complement rural development in ways that the government is ill positioned to do. The purely profit-driven business motive, though oftentimes at odds with local interests, diverted local disenchantment with development agendas to a third-party, enabling the investors to boldly intervene where the government (who is legislatively vulnerable to civil outcries) could not. With the advance of marketization, many state bureaucrats are turned into profit-seeking and willing collaborators

¹⁸ Others have discussed a parallel land appropriation scheme by private developers and the subsequent dislocation of millions of households in urban China. See Zhang 2010: 39-44.

with business ventures as the latter provide luring economic benefits in exchange for legitimacy and protection from state officialdom.

On the ground, villagers often refer to the government officials as “running dogs” of the developers and often conflate the two when voicing their grievances. As many villagers put it: “The officials and the developers are sharing the same pair of pants, and their pockets become full.” While tourism boom brings profits to real estate developers, business entrepreneurs, and government officials, ordinary villagers are dismayed by the demolition and relocation of schools, withering of small family businesses outcompeted by corporate enterprises,¹⁹ and loss of farmlands to state-merchant alliance. The “grabbing” of the farmlands by the joint hands of the state and the private entities and the subsequent dispossession of rural families are likened to the historical image of land seizure in England during the Industrial Revolution.²⁰ Compared to the large number of landless workers resultant of land seizure in England, it is, in this case, China’s rural education and its students and teachers who are pushed around in this new round of land scramble—often in rushed, erratic, and coercive fashion.

Tourism, Rural Teachers, and Market Literacy

The politics of tourism, more than ethnicizing the vernacular landscape and engendering spatial orders, is about making particular kinds of subjects with new mentalities, dispositions, and aspirations. As part of the spatial regime that I spell out at the beginning of this chapter, this aspect of tourism is productive rather than repressive, generating specific rationalities integral to

¹⁹ Before tourism was state planned and commercially operated, the villagers had long been receiving visitors in their own way, earning additional cash through providing lodging, meals, and performances to the then more adventuresome tourists. In Majiang, villagers recalled old days when local performance troupes were still in demands. Now with the village gated and ticketed, and with the choreographed songs and dances staged daily by professionals on the new performance square, and with the sprouting of well-serviced hotels managed by wealthy developers, the folk way of running tourism is on the wane.

²⁰ Illegal land grab and the sales of seized plots to private real estate companies has also been a hot topic in China’s latest news headlines. Recently, China’s southern province Guangdong saw outbreaks of civil unrests against the collusion of the municipal government with developers in land seizure. See Jacobs, Andrews. Farmers in China’s South Riot over Seizure of Land. *New York Times*. September 23, 2011.

the ordering of everyday life. As the function of the spatial regime, the reconfiguration of space is also reconfiguration of personhood—both constituted and constitutive of the space—and the ways people live, will, and know. In this session, I explore how a new kind of village teacher and rural literacy emerge as a result of tourism’s spatial pedagogy in order to further explore dilemmas and entanglement of rural schooling.

Through the means of tourism, the vast countryside has been cast in the limelight of profit-seeking, private accumulation, and pursuit of market potentials. After more than three decades of economic reforms, the ideal personhood in China has shifted from one committed to the party-state ideology to one who’s able to rapidly accumulate and consume. The body’s self worth (quality or *suzhi*) is recast in a new language articulated through the master codes of market and entrepreneurialism.

Tourism has become a pedagogy that not only operates as a developmental apparatus but also postulates a new style of literacy reshaping the rural population with market consciousness and entrepreneurialism. This, when involving teachers, exerts a powerful effect in shaping the way they live, teach, and relate to students. As the “educated” government agents, village teachers serve as state-community intermediaries to instigate changes and promote modern sensibilities among the rural residents. Yet like the students and villagers, they simultaneously inhabit multiple spaces that vie to underwrite their existential conditions. The school is no longer (if ever) the only pedagogical domain that qualifies who they are and ought to be. With the blatant unleashing of self-interest in today’s China, the exhortation to “rely on one’s self” (*kao ziji*), and the mandate of development, the Miao and Dong village teachers are transforming into entrepreneurs who seize tourism opportunity to pursue personal wealth and assuage the predicament of an encumbered life.

Teachers and Moonlighting

It was dark and past sunset, yet the Friday night village Longxing exuded an energetic vibe. The neon lights of the pubs and cafes on the street sent off a murky hue to the otherwise dreary sky. Singing from the karaoke clubs permeated the damp mountain air. At a short distance, wooden houses and Flower-Bridges were well lit up by decorative bulbs. The tantalizing fragrance of barbecues evaporated from the roadside snack stands and mixed up with the early summer heat.

Nocturnal entertainments were abundant in this marketed tourist village. By the time I left the Maple Leaves Bar, a handful of middle school teachers were still inside playing drinking games and singing karaoke. The music was loud; the footsteps were swift on the dance floor; the lights were flashy and dreamy. As if they'd learned life was too short to be upset by every little thing—not that their worries could amount to any significant change—the teachers, the village's ordinary yet extraordinary lot, indulged at this very moment of alcoholic surreality. How they wanted to leave aside the distasteful school inspection; the unruly students, dissatisfying income, and unrewarding job. It was Friday night after all. Why bothers?

When entertaining officials or guests, the teachers would have to arrange elaborate restaurant meals and visits to night clubs; when a few of them get together, however, they prefer to all chip in to cook by themselves and play mahjong or go drinking afterwards. Nocturnal entertainments provided an opportunity to temporarily eschew the unpleasantness of a teaching life. Today was such an occasion. It was the grand opening of the Maple Leaves Bar, a multifunctional eatery-cum-dancehall-cum-karaoke-joint run by Mr. Huang, the middle school math teacher who had borrowed from relatives and the credit union for the business startup. Earlier that day, a celebratory cookout with his colleagues was held by the village creek where

sixteen *jin* (roughly eighteen pounds) of pork was barbecued on electric-fan-turned grids. Long, thin green peppers were thrown directly onto the charcoaled fire, and taken out shortly to mix with finely minced leeks, salt, and dry red pepper powder into a dipping sauce. Sitting on a calf-high wooden stool, I was entrusted with the task of turning meat, while watching the pork cutlets sizzling to a delightful brown and listening to chatters about the new business.

The Maple Leaves Bar took up the newly decorated first floor of Mr. Huang's two-storey wooden house. The house was located at the end of the bustling scenic street in Longxing where the village center met the farmlands with an optimal view. Seizing on its strategic location, Mr. Huang had tried to convert the house into a family inn, and later a precious stone processing workshop (*baoshi jiaogong chang*) that supplied to markets in Guangxi, a province within a short distance from Longxing. Both business ventures were long defunct due to lack of proper management. Yet Huang had not given up his entrepreneurial zest and dreamed of becoming successful some day in tourism business. He told me if the Maple Leaves Bar brought good income, he wanted to use the proceeds to open a foot-bathing salon²¹ (*zuyu*) in the near future. "I predict that it will be popular among tourists especially after they hike long hours in the mountain." So he reasoned. The morally ambivalent status of foot salons is perhaps quite fitting to the current status of Longxing, which, in its own ambiguity, is turning into a pleasure wonderland of sightseeing and corporeal enjoyment; and to the current status of village teachers, the overburdened petty bureaucrats who are allured by the commodity ethos and turning into entrepreneurs.

Village teachers in Qiandongnan occupy a most ambiguous status. In the schemed efforts of education reform and rural development, they are inevitably caught up in a web of

²¹ Foot bathing or foot massage is a popular entertainment in urban China where customers go to a salon to soak their feet in warm soup made of Chinese medicinal herbs and floral essence and receive a foot massage. Such foot salons are often viewed as morally ambiguous with undercover sex service where wealthy business people and government officials frequent for their entertainment-cum-business routine.

personal and professional contradictions, and have been, day after day, year after year, struggling to grapple a complicated social reality. Professionally categorized as quasi-civil-servants, they hold relative employment stability on the one hand, yet live in constant fear for failing to prove their efficacy as pedagogical functionaries of the state. This sense of insecurity has been exacerbated by the rapid market restructuring that has led to loss of jobs even among the urban educated, and intensified by the constant demands of the state audit culture (see chapter four). They see their employment safety net eroded by their vulnerabilities to accusations from both above and below. Besides, due to tourism encroachment, they are fearful about their own nebulous future and the gloomy possibility of demotion or job loss.

Many teachers came into the teaching profession because it offers a modicum of salarized stability, yet found their professional life thinly spread among fragmented disciplinary spaces of testing, paperwork, banquets, catching dropouts, mandatory audits, and sideline tourism business. The majority of the teachers have usually two or three years of normal-school training with a technical degree (*zhongzhuan*) or an associate degree (*dazhuan*), and have often located themselves along the lower end of a professional ladder and assumed that they have not “made it” to the finer place. They receive a meager monthly salary of around fifteen hundred yuan²² (roughly 250 US dollars), from which a couple hundred is deducted as security deposits for various compulsory policies they are liable to, such as TBP (see chapter two). While younger, less experienced teachers try hard to obtain seniority ranking and upgrade their pay scale through taking part-time courses,²³ senior teachers are considerably more lax in their teaching responsibility.

²² Within China’s current educational finance structure, systematic disparities exist in teachers’ income among different regions and schools, with rural ethnic teachers at the bottom of the compensation hierarchy.

²³ Rural teacher training is oftentimes yet another phony practice through which degrees could be purchased with money while very little substantial training actually took place. Throughout my fieldwork, many teachers sought my help for completing their

The contested and fragmented character of village teacherhood and the sense of self-negotiation drive teachers to seek alternative route of security. Aware of their own economic constraint and the conspicuous prosperity of the corporate developers who benefit from the political-commercial patronage, village teachers seek sideline tourism business to craft a “better” livelihood. Many started to moonlight in petty tourism businesses, such as running restaurants, Peasant Happiness Inns, karaoke bars, souvenir stores, or providing tour guide and vehicle rental service, to compensate their scanty salaries and tourism-escalated living expense.

In both Longxing and Majiang, the fledgling tourism industry provides an opportunity for teachers to *xiahai* (literally “jumping into the sea of the commerce”) without leaving their positions. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, *xiahai* has become a catch phrase to describe alternative career choice of formerly state-employed professionals. Compared to the job stability and security conferred by state employment (the so-called “iron bowl” system), *xiahai* offered a much more adventuresome yet profitable career trajectory that attracted many young and enterprising minds. A widely circulated aphorism at that time depicted the skewed income gaps of the society: “Those producing missiles do not make as much as those selling tea eggs,²⁴ those wielding surgical scissors do not make as much as those waving haircut scissors.” The saying depicts the devaluing of technical and intellectual expertise and the rising prominence of self-making merchants and entrepreneurs through *xiahai*. While state workers’ income stagnated, the rapid commercialization and privatization of the market and service industry brought unprecedented possibilities for overnight accumulation of wealth, as reflected in the

training homework, which to them is another bureaucratic hurdle to their next level of certification and doesn’t involve real learning.

²⁴ Here, in Mandarin pronunciation, “*dan*” rhymes in both missiles (*daodan*) and tea eggs (*chayedan*).

climbing number of the new rich. Despite the undulating “temperament” of the “sea of commerce,” if one survives the waves and storms, the margin of profits could be irresistible.

While *xiahai* indicates giving up one’s formal employment entirely so as to seek self-initiated entrepreneurship, village teachers choose a middle ground of moonlighting and see it as one of the few viable means to protect their welfare in an unsatisfying professional life. Compared to the haphazard itineration of migrant laborers, moonlighting at home while maintaining government employment seems to many a lucrative ideal.²⁵

Tourism as New Rural Literacy

The enabling conditions of teachers’ involvement in sideline business need to be cast in the broader social context. In March 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao identified the historical task of the Chinese Communist Party as “building a new socialist countryside,” highlighting rural poverty alleviation as crucial to the Party’s legitimacy. Coincidentally, the year 2006 was designated the Year of Rural Tourism by China National Tourism Administration. The suturing of poverty alleviation and rural development discursively postulates tourism as new rural literacy to foster market consciousness—a crucial component of the party’s scientific development strategies. Learning the literacy of tourism marks an important task for rural modernization.

Often talked about as the “software” of the country on which the improvement of its hardware (including all spheres of economic life, such as infrastructure, institutions, transportation, technologies, etc.) depends, *suzhi* is taken up to highlight the location of “cultural work” in transforming rural mentalities into market consciousness as the key to developmental problem-solving. The *suzhi* discourse expresses a *secular* concern for social change that also

²⁵ This coincides with the popular idea that being successful in tourism is not being mobile; that “making it” while staying at home is a much more desirable concept.

triggers a *sacred* register to ameliorate its “lack.” It is within such rhetoric that the campaign for new peasantry and new socialist countryside is put in place.

Tourism’s enactment of a particular sense of the self as the enterprising individual is posited vis-à-vis the earth-bound, kinship oriented peasantry. The refrain I heard over and over again throughout my fieldwork is that rural bodies lack initiatives and market mentality (*shichang yishi*) and need to be transformed into self-reliant and self-enterprising participants of a tourism market. Interestingly, the dilemma of the rural communities is identified as a lack of the desiring, entrepreneurial spirit. Within such logic, earthbound (*xiangtu*) experience and vernacular knowledge finds little articulation of value, with rural bodies reduced as a burden²⁶ and a lack considered detrimental to social progress and economic prosperity. In China’s strive to quickly settle accounts with “history” and achieve international recognition, the heroic glamour once associated with rural labor is in demise, while the technocratic logic of accumulation and consumption is upheld as a new site of social distinction.

The reform of the past three decades has turned the figure of the rural and the body of the peasant into a contentious allegory of social lack, retooling and reorienting the old vocabularies into a different telos. The condition of possibility for the production of burden is the notion of *suzhi* as the growing index of the population quality (see chapter three). *Suzhi* has been associated with a wide range of developmental descriptors, such as education, civility, productivity, market consciousness, and so on, to further mark the rural-urban dichotomy. In the post-Mao project of marketization, within the context of *suzhi* improvement, the countryside is discursively cast as *suzhi*’s lack. The rural ethnic bodies are relegated to a space of

²⁶ The production of the burden signifies the negation of the Maoist past when manual labor and peasantry was considered a strategic resource for the Communist cause, and a cultural arena where “women and men crafted the meaning of ‘liberation,’ proved their socialist moral worth, expressed their nationalist sentiments, and received their rewards” (Rofel 1999:122).

despondence and malady, and blamed for their own ensnarement in poverty and for tarnishing China's image as the "well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*).

What is reified through tourism programs is the "static" image of the rural as out of sync with the market-based, service-oriented development strategy. In a workshop organized by the County Bureau of Tourism to promulgate proper business etiquettes, the officials exhorted the villagers—most of whom were first time business owners of restaurants, family inns, bars, or shops—to learn the game rules of the market. The training session commenced with the opening speech by an official:

Longxing not only belongs to Qiandongnan; it is a brand name of our Dong people that should be promoted to the global market. We must remember that every tourist comes here with not only curiosity towards our culture, but with the ability to consume. If we are to profit from their visits, we must have clear ideas of their needs and more importantly, we must improve our own *suzhi*. Whatever you know before, you must not take it for granted. Tilling the lands (*zhongdi* 种地) and running business are entirely different. Now that you are doing tourism, you must get rid of old habit of thinking. If you don't prioritize market and service and if you don't improve your own *suzhi*, tourists are not going to come back and our village will not develop. When I say we must serve our customers well, I mean to say ultimately it is you yourself who benefit.

The kernel of the speech is that villagers must put aside their prior agrarian experience and transform from uninitiated bodies into a new kind of corporeality (*suzhi*)—*homo economicus* with entrepreneurial market mentality, who "desire" to change and actively engage in the privatized pursuit of wealth. This is described as "a process of reterritorializing the peasantry" through which the peasants acquire commodity consciousness by producing *for* the market

(Yan 2003: 499). Couched in a salvational overtone, tourism is depicted as not only capable of bringing income, but also improving peasants' *suzhi* (civility/quality). As the trainers continued:

Look around; look at your neighbors who have become rich. They are the exemplars of the kind of people you want to be. You must learn to master the basic service etiquettes, learn to speak Mandarin properly, learn to think ahead and be far-sighted about the market needs. These are all important *suzhi* that your previous life experiences haven't taught you and you need to improve upon. As the saying goes, one must sharpen his cleaver before cutting the firewood (*modao buwu kanchai gong* 磨刀不误砍柴功). That is why the staff from the County Bureau of Tourism comes here to give classes. We sacrifice weekends to help you.

Indeed, in contemporary China, the production of "the new peasantry" involves a promotion of *suzhi*, however murkily defined the term is, which codes individual's self-worth on the market-savvy, self-enterprising ethos and against agrarian beliefs/practices that do not follow such principle. The notion of self-enterprising and self-making is cast in a neo-Confucianist light that calls on individuals to pursue personal glory with private, dedicated efforts. The pedagogical mode of tourism offers such a performative stage for fulfilling the one's own worth in an increasingly privatized social milieu. As one of China's leading novelists Yu Hua aptly observes, "During the Cultural Revolution there was no stage for the individual, just the government. Now there is a stage for everyone. And you can see a show every day."²⁷ China has drastically transformed with "an ensemble of techniques that free up not only entrepreneurialism but also powers of the self" (Zhang & Ong 2008:2).

In such a social milieu, the civilizing mission of the village teachers was articulated in the transformation of the rural mass into enlightened national citizens, pushing them to adopt a new orientation of life and modernize with a new kind of subjectivity. I often heard teachers label

²⁷ See David Barboza. A Portrait of China Running Amok. *New York Times*, September 4, 2006, B1,7.

local social mores as “anachronistic” and “outmoded,” and admonish their students if they don’t study hard they are going to end up like their parents living an immobile soil-bound life.

You know, the peasant culture is preventing them from economic development. All they know is farming. Every day life is the same repetition of toiling with the land. They know little about what is going on in the wider world; they are so easily blinded by what they have here and do not strive to achieve more. We live in a different age and we are doing tourism now; if they keep this kind of backward mentality (*luohou yishi*), they are doomed to remain forever poor.

The remark portrays the peasants as yoked to the monotony of an agrarian life, incapable of querying their own predicament, unable to cast their gaze (*yanguang*) towards a wider contour of the social domain, and out of tune with the time. The peasants’ bondage to the repetitive agrarian cycles is dismissed as “blind” logic that is lack of logic; and their kinship tie and sociality with the native place is held as preventing them from “liberation” from the soil.

Reconstituting the Rural Teacher

Ironically, like the rural residents, village teachers are subject to the same developmental forces and tourism imperatives, and engaged in the cultural politics of self-making through appropriating market entrepreneurialism as a meritocratic form for social amelioration. They seek to rise above the encumbered life by “doing tourism” at home, imagining and fulfilling a “life worth living” (a key purpose for tourism; see Graburn 1989:26, cited in Chio 2009), thus redoubling their pedagogical roles as both the teacher and the entrepreneur.

However, it would be over simplistic to see teachers’ involvement in tourism as “natural” responses to market temptation or an abstract self commodification and submission to a consumer regime. Their participation in tourism partially derives from the hyperawareness of their ambivalent social position. On the one hand, they are liable to direct government scrutiny,

through the school audit dis-ease, state compulsory policies, and the pervasive business-official coalition; on the other hand, they are subject to the governing of market rationality and the idiom of self empowerment, a process termed by some as “destatization” or “depoliticization” (Zhang 2010). At the same time, they are also part of the earthbound peasantry who are allocated portions of rice paddies, farm the land, and feed on the harvest.²⁸ Yet, unlike farmers who are allowed to have two children, as state employees, teachers have to abide by the one-child policy or risk losing their stable job and income.²⁹ They often complain that being in a position that provides a share of the emperor’s rice is a catch twenty-two with difficult strings attached. The teachers are obliged to negotiate diverging forces and embody a living ambiguity as semi-bureaucrats, semi-peasants, and semi-entrepreneurs.

It will not be an overstatement to say that village teachers feel demoralized. Burnout is a common phenomenon. Boot-camp-like academic ambience and rigid evaluation mechanism has alienated not only students but also teachers. Like the students, the teachers are disciplined by a highly stringent academic routine, contained within crowded classrooms and noisy offices until the last bell rings. A normal school day starts at 7am and ends at 8:30pm, after which teachers on rotating shifts patrol the dorm gate to ensure no tourist enters the compound and no student is at large after curfew. Safety concern is on an all-time high as tourism has penetrated the local living environment and turned the school into a paramilitary camp. Weekends and after-school hours are frequently consumed by home-visits, persuasion trips (see chapter four),

²⁸ That village teachers are allocated rice paddies is the result of the recent amendment of China’s agricultural policies specific to certain ethnic minority regions, such as Guizhou. In other parts of rural China, teachers are no longer considered “peasants” or enjoy rights to land tenure.

²⁹ Some ended up in bitter divorce as their spouses couldn’t bear the thought of living a life with only one child, especially if the firstborn was a female. In Guizhou, the combination of rural residency and ethnic minority status permits a couple to have two children. Yet such leniency is not extended to rural teachers who are grouped under the category of state employee and therefore must strictly observe the one-child-per-family regulation. The birth control policy has had different iterations in different provinces. Some provincial governments allow a second child if the firstborn is a female, or if the family only has one child for two consecutive generations, or if the husband marries uxoriously. See Greenhalgh 1986; Honig and Hershatter 1988; Whyte and Gu 1987.

and supervising practices/rehearsals of student performance teams to meet the tourism demands.

No longer viewed as the once indisputable pedagogical authority, the teachers strive to relocate his/her identity and look for the effect of his/her labor elsewhere. Many pursue sideline tourism business and treat the job in a perfunctory manner, as if the monk striking the temple bell nonchalantly day in and day out (*zuo yitian heshang zhuang yitian zhong*), having little choice but being complacent with the status quo (*anyu xianzhuang*). “If we had our way,” many of them lamented, “we would have long left the job and started something else.” Village teachers’ demoralization has resulted in their perfunctory delivery of classes, afterschool gambling and drinking, schmoozing with bureaucrats, and moonlighting to supplement their income. Students and parents are fully aware of the penetration of school walls by bureaucratic and private interests and are disenchanted with the loss of professional conscience (*fubu zeren*) on the part of the teachers. They invoke teachers’ moonlighting and pedagogical irresponsibility to explain their waning interests and disenchantment in schooling.

Coda

Tourism is another compulsory apparatus of the developmentalist Chinese state. This chapter examines the ways in which rural schools are increasingly entangled in tourism-centered development of Qiandongnan through a two-fold analysis. The first part of the chapter introduces tourism promotion as the prime mover in Qiandongnan’s rural development and details its discursive spatial politics in shaping both the physical and symbolic landscape. It does so by exploring how the controversial touristification processes render school walls ever more porous with bureaucratic demands, commercial agendas, and state-business coalition. Not only were village schoolteachers and students increasingly summoned, often under duress, to perform as the surrogate state functionaries (such as during tourism-promotion parades and

village cleanup), the physical site of the school had also become target of fierce commercial scramble. In part two, I approach tourism from the lens of the village teachers and the promotion of market orientation to further explore the complex workings of tourism in fostering particular subjectivities, and how it also produces tricky and surreptitious creativities in everyday practices (such as teachers' moonlighting).

As we've seen, tourism is not a separate sphere of experience but fully integrated into the beliefs, expectations, and everyday tactics of rural life, shaping and guiding the negotiation of socioeconomic development, self-making, and the processes of schooling. The ways people live and interpret tourism-penetrated daily existence are much more than "disenchantment" or "resistance." In light of James Scott's (1985) famous formulation of "everyday form of resistance," the maneuverings of the local agents I've observed were similarly noisy, open, and scattered. As much as teachers self-consciously turn themselves into moonlighting entrepreneurs, the rise of tourism has also lured many migrant villagers back home in order to obtain a share of the profit, running mobile vending carts, miscellaneous goods shops, fruit stands, or providing ethnic costume rental services. Similarly, students and dropouts follow their adult kin, apprentice themselves with indigenous crafts such as silversmithing and carpentry, and become itinerant ethnic artisans to eek out a living. They are asserting a vernacular politics—however negligible it may seem—to make sense of the market priorities and tourism agendas and negotiate for a better livelihood.

Tourism is significant for an analysis of compulsory education for several reasons: it is articulated as the new vision of the state for achieving the village modern, entangled with compulsory schooling for achieving the pedagogical modern; it provides explicit circumstances to produce particular kinds of rural subjects with market orientation, as another educative pivot point in local life; its discursive spatial politics operated through the state-business alliance

offers another fruitful opportunity to rethink the dilemmas of rural schooling, its permeability, intertwinements, ruptures, and limit-points. As a modernist apparatus in village China, tourism both enables and disenables, enchants and disenchants, carrying pedagogical functions to rework the physical and symbolic contour of rural schooling in a complex manner. What does this pedagogy teach students about their educational experience and life beyond schooling? This is a question I will take up in the next (last) analytical chapter, titled *The Way out (chulu): Life after the School Walls Crumble*.

Chapter Six

The Way out (*chulu*): Life after the School Walls Crumble

It was late summer 2009, the beginning of a harvest season. The village Longxing exhibited its usual rhythm of buzzes, with a palpable celebratory tone. Piles of freshly cut grain straws were neatly stacked on the banks of the fields, their reflections dancing on the rippling water of the rice paddies. Upon dusk, one could hear the pattering of bare feet on cobblestones as farmers descended from the hills and headed towards home, carrying harvested grains on shoulder poles. After sunset, people shout from their doorways—Have you eaten yet? Come to dinner! — hailing neighbors to join the carnal celebration through countless informal social feasts.

Yet days were not at all celebratory for the 9th graders, who recently finished their middle school exit exams. For many of them, the exams declared the end of schooling and delinked them from the nine-year cycle of compulsory education. Free from school yet somewhat disoriented, they toyed with ideas of what would come next. While awaiting the release of the exam scores, some were torn between finding factory work on the coast and staying home for tourism business; some contemplated going to high school or technical academy; some were to get married, settle down, and raise a family. The future remained dim like the twisty-turny creek meandering through the village, one moment visible and the next obscured, never for a moment clear.

What happen to the Miao and Dong youth when they leave school, after they drop out or finish compulsory basic education? This chapter illustrates the Miao and Dong youth's life trajectories beyond studentship, and the constraints and resilience they experience in navigating their livelihood beyond the crumbling school walls, to speak metaphorically. I trace the divergent ways the Miao and Dong adolescents pursue their livelihood as they negotiate market logics,

local aspirations, national politics in seeking a dream of economic viability that schooling fails to bring to fruition.

The school isn't the only place that defines the contour of adolescence;¹ the journey beyond formal education entails manifold processes that powerfully shape adolescents' vocational futures, attitudes towards school and work, sense of self, and the way they know, live, and will. From the school to the tourism marketplace to the factory floor, the cultural spaces students encounter are not homologous. Each of such spaces embeds certain sanctioned ways of being and "epistemological styles" (Appadurai 1990b: 207) not always in congruity. Whether it is the school bell that regulates the daily life of the child, or the music and dance on the performance square that allures touristic sensory-scape, or the market goods sent home from southern factory floors, the heterotopic expressions of these diverse spaces form heterogeneous pedagogies that link students' experience to the broader governing techniques of contemporary China.

Researches worldwide have contended that adolescence/youth stand at the forefront of social changes and occupy a liminal stage in coming to age in the vortex of cultural, economic and historical forces (Herdt & Leavitt 1998; Marshall 1979; Liu 2011; Gilmore 1990; Herzfeld 1985). Others have explored youth as a site of broader cultural debates about nationalism, pedagogical ideals, and cosmopolitan values, and as a category given intelligibility by social science disciplines of psychology, medicine, sociology, and pedagogy within multiple historical spaces (Lesko 2001; Popkewitz 2008). In seeking a good life beyond the school walls, the rural

¹ While I use the word "adolescence" in a generic sense, I do not assume its naturalness as a category of childhood. I am aware of the cultural theses that have given it intelligibility within multiple historical practices. See Popkewitz (2008) for an illustration of adolescence as the cosmopolitan fabrication of particular human kinds. The category "adolescence" embeds the double gesture of hope and fear, and is intertwined with discourse of psychology, medicine, sociology, pedagogy, and narratives of school reforms and nation building.

ethnic youth draw upon a wide array of forces from neighborhoods, markets, popular media, and broader social, economic, and cultural dimensions to (re)appropriate the adolescent social category and reconfigure their youthful subjectivity.²

As this chapter will demonstrate, after leaving school, the Miao and Dong adolescents engage in processes of self making to grapple with the rapidly changing social world. Some remain in their native village to work in hair salons and retail shops; others become truck-drivers, vegetable vendors, and hotel security guard (*bao'an*). With the burgeoning of tourism market, some work as waitresses-cum-singers in local restaurants to perform popularized (vulgarized) ethnic songs for tourists. Some become itinerant bird catchers to supply game meat to exotic-themed urban restaurants. A few go to high schools or technical academies to continue the path of formal schooling. The majority of them, however, leave home to labor on factory floors in the bustling cities on the coast. Jumping out of the crumbling walls of the school, Miao and Dong village youth find themselves increasingly oriented towards a translocal horizon of opportunities and worldliness, yet remain bounded as the pedagogic subjects of the Chinese state within the developmental dictum.

***From Vulnerable Studentship to Floating Population:
Urban Itineration, Marriage, and Aspiration***

困难困难, 困在家里就难; 出路出路, 出去走就有路。——打工的人都这样说

Confined at home, one gains little but hardship; leaving home, there will always be a way out.

—A popular saying among migrant workers

² To invoke subjectivity is not to blindly affirm human agency as a universal rationality and total emancipation of the subject; agency is historically given and always already conditioned by opportunities and obstacles of finite social, political, cultural conditions of the present. Yet, the need to problematize what is historically given doesn't necessitate the "death of subject" commonly attributed to Foucault (see Heller 1990: 24). The subject is inherently unstable because the subject is inserted in a particular present that is always already a multiplicity. To invoke subjectivity, precisely, is to recognize that the notions of the subject and self are ever alive in the perpetual theme of human drama and in the space of contingency. The notions of the subject and self are no less "real" for having particular historical conditions of existence.

树挪死，人挪活。——民间谚语

When trees move, they wither; when people move, they live better.

—A Chinese proverb

In Qiandongnan there might not always be buses running between villages; yet there are always buses within every convenient location to take villagers to Guangdong, a province of manufacturing boom that has made China the celebrated “global factory.” In both Majiang and Longxing, if one explores beyond the embellished façade of the tourism sceneries, one would often come across locked houses, sometimes with broken windows and spun with spider webs, standing in destitution as hollow, emaciated shells. These empty houses bear witness to the massive exodus of rural laborers as the floating population of China’s globalizing economy.³ An estimated 90% of the households in both Majiang and Longxing have at one point or another experienced labor migration during the past two decades, with migrants’ ages ranging from late-teens to late forties.

In post-Mao China, self-initiated labor migration is touted as a life buoy that helps plug the rural ethnic population into the running economic engine of the country. As compared with previous generations of peasants who depended on subsistence farming, the post-reform peasantry is called upon to develop market ethos (*shichang yishi*) and seek entrepreneurial self-development, in order to “*yushi jujin*” (advance with the time), to use a phrase with much political purchase. The transition from seeking survival (*qiu shengcun*) to seeking development (*qiu fazhan*), and from making a living to making the self, compels rural ethnic populace to see themselves through the very lens that locates them at the bottom rung of the social ladder.

³ According to a recent New York Times article, more than twenty-six millions or nearly one in five Chinese are currently living in places other than indicated by their household registration. Most of these cases involve labor migrants, showing an increasing sign of urbanization in China. See Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere. New Census Finds China’s Population Growth Has Slowed. *New York Times*. April 28th, 2011.

According to China’s National Bureau of Statistics, rural migrant worker population has increased from 30 million in 1989 to more than 225 million in 2008. See Council on Foreign Relations on *China’s Internal Migrants*. Retrieved on September 26th 2011 from <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-internal-migrants/p12943#p1>.

A familiar refrain I often heard during my fieldwork goes like this: “Our place is too poor and backward. We are like frogs living at the bottom of the well all our lives (*jingdi zhiwa*) and only see a small patch of the sky. Unlike us, the city people are able to travel, even abroad, and have seen a much larger world.” The phantom of an outside world beyond the prohibitive mountain terrains and the phantom of modernity-cum-consumption have heightened an acute sense of self peripherization that rural people make sense of their lives. With an aspiration of “a life outside,” millions of peasants-or-dropouts-turned-migrant-workers are drawn into the web of industrial production. They toil on factory assembly lines as the ground-level agents of China’s globalization, churning out commodities for worldwide consumption. The countryside is slowly turning into the backyard of the city as the surplus labor reserve and, with the rise of rural tourism, the provider of leisurely entertainment.

For ethnic rural youth, the rite of passage to adulthood seems to have shifted from marriage and childbearing to *dagong*, i.e. “going out” to seek one’s fortune in the wide world. Often regarded as a neologism invented in post-Mao China, *dagong* is most frequently used to describe massive rural out-migration for seeking physical, manufacturing, and domestic labor in coastal cities. *Dagong* also connotes a new labor relation in which one exchanges one’s labor for wage income, in contrast to life-long employment with the state *danwei* (work unit) system. Considered a way out—out of poverty, out of the school and the ennui of studentship, out of soil-bound livelihood— *dagong* is now a most commonly shared rite of passage for young folks in Qiandongnan.

Anthropologists have taken up the concept “rite of passage” as conditions of liminality (Turner 1967) and “a stage of reflection” during which people reflexively navigate through their life-course transition. Scholars have also directly or indirectly applied the lens of life-course transitions in their examination of contemporary societies (Herzfeld 1985; Hopper 2003; Modell

1989). The Miao and Dong adolescents participate in this rite of passage as they migrate cohort by cohort away from their native villages. Like youth around the world, they desire for material niceties and financial viability and embrace a foray into the “flashy world” (*huahua shijie*) that is simultaneously adventurous and self-fulfilling. On the one hand, this foray seems ridden with insurmountable hardship, uncertainty and bewilderment. On the other hand, the newly gained freedom and novelty of life presents a spontaneous adaptability and risk taking among the rural youth. The city is now the great classroom and the symbol of qualities (*suzhi*) that trains the rural bodies with entrepreneurialism and market ethos.⁴ Labor migration has become the de facto existential qualifier that affirms the rural youth as the “unfinished” learning subjects of the nation.

Guoyang: Where am I and where is it that I am to be?

I met Guoyang in his native Longxing during the Chinese New Year in 2009. Since he dropped out at 9th grade, he had been working in Guangdong as a migrant worker for more than ten years. When I asked why he left for *dagong*, Guoyang shrugged with helplessness and told me that there was no way out at home.

At home, there is little money and few opportunities besides farming. Youngsters like us are all out. Only old people and young children and those who have really difficult family situations, say, an only child with a sick parent, stay around.

Young people like Guoyang are keenly aware that despite the continual tie to the land, the countryside has become dissipated (*xiaotiao*) and dismembered (*lengqing*) that offers few opportunities. A sense that “there is nothing to do” pervaded village life in people’s critique of local dearth of job opportunities. For many, farming is increasingly a losing effort, and the

⁴ Ironically, the city’s new status as the pedagogical/cosmopolitan center is a reversal of the Maoist urge of the urban youth to go to the countryside and learn from the peasants.

agrarian lifeway that has sustained generations is no longer a sufficient means of survival in the harsh market competitions.⁵ With the subtle deprecation of everything rural, the village is no longer a place where people would want to remain. A life of the migrant laborer, of the city vagabond, albeit precarious and chancy, is held as the realistic opportunity.

At the same time, the countryside is not rejected altogether. After lightening a cigarette, a characteristic habit of many returned young migrants in the village, Guoyang continued, in a distancing meditation of his ethnic self and native place.

It is very interesting, you see. We locals want to leave the village to find work in the cities, but the city folks like to come here for experience (*tiyan*) and sightseeing (*guanguang*). For them it is a cool thing to do and shows that they have the money to travel. Every time I see tourists taking pictures of our wooden houses, I can't help wondering if you ask them to settle down, would they still like our place. Life is harsh and inconvenient here. We are used to it because we were born here.

The condition of possibility of Guoyang's account is the simultaneous indispensability and instability of the rural-urban borderline. Regional asymmetry in wealth and living standards, needless to say, figures prominently in village youth's self perception and imagination of an outside. Yet, the perceived rural-urban divide forms sensibilities that both affirms and troubles the divide. On the one hand, the rural is shunned for its "harsh and inconvenient" conditions; on the other, it is embraced as an object of the cosmopolitan gaze, as in Guoyang's words, it is a cool thing to be able to travel there for experience and sightseeing. While the coast becomes the "societal college" (*shehui daxue*) for rural youth to transform into market-oriented personhood, the village provides the modern-day escape for urban tourists who desire a bucolic

⁵ The situation was worsened by China's membership in the World Trade Organization since 2001, which has allowed cheaper agricultural products to be imported and domestic agricultural production to diminish by five to ten percent at the turn of the 21st century. See Yang & Li 2006.

sensory experience as a welcomed change from the city life. Through movements across both sides of the divide, the boundaries have to be repetitively enacted, thus destabilized.

“Do you like the city then?” I added. On such a seemingly straightforward question, Guoyang became ambivalent:

Do I like the city? It is hard to say. I like watching the high-risers, you know, really nice-looking buildings, something I had never seen before. Where I grew up, we only had wooden houses. The city has really nice stuff, you know, but what we have is only the factory. After a while, I started to miss the countryside. I had to spend most of my days inside the factory and I forgot which season it was. You know, when you can't go outside, it's just...not fun. Back home we always know the seasons because of all the festivals, the colors of the fields and the mountains and stuff. And in the city the air is polluted and people are not so friendly to each other.

For migrant youth like Guoyang who has “jumped the scale,” so to speak—albeit temporarily—the rural-urban divide is further blurred with a crossover desire to straddle the not-yet-modern and the urban cosmopolitan. On the one hand, the perception of the “flashy world” depicts a playful, opportunist urban space filled with commodities and wealth. This image is particularly luring for mountain youth who suffer from a “captive” mode of schooling and a monotonous lethargy associated with agrarian life. While city dwellers grow weary of the urban glitter and yearn for simpler ways of living, mountain youth pine for a life outside the schoolyard and home community, and an opportunity to experience the world (*jianshimian*). On the other hand, for young migrants like Guoyang, their choices for experiencing the world are mostly confined to labor migration and which factory or construction site to go to and how long to stay. They have physically jumped the rural scale yet find themselves cooped-up in the stifling monotony of the factory workshops. They express nostalgia for the rustic home, its pristine air,

and human sociality, where every season is marked by distinctive flavors and hues, cued in by the changing colors of planted vegetations and wild flora. Many chose to eventually return to the countryside, as they were unable to establish their own niche in China's expanding economy despite years of urban sojourn.

Guoyang was one of the many returned rural migrants I encountered who failed to "make it" in the cities. When asked about his job, Guoyang recounted his menacing work experience in Guangdong.

I worked at many temporary jobs and in different factories while there. At the beginning, I was hired to tear down old houses on construction sites. The job was tiring and dangerous. I could only manage to work one day and rest for several days. They paid me 50 kuai on the days I worked. So I ended up making some 400 kuai per month, barely enough to cover my living expense.

At another job, I was hired to hang up huge commercial signs on high-risers. One time, we had to climb on top of a 30-floor high-riser. We did have some kind of ropes tied around our bodies but when I looked down, I was so scared. I was so afraid we might fall that I forgot to put a screw to a part of a character on the sign, and alas, it smashed to the ground into pieces. We were blamed for our fault and fined 1000 kuai for the accident, almost a month's salary. If I got injured, it would cost me a fortune to go to the city hospital. Our life really isn't easy.

After that, one of my *laoxiang* (fellows from the same region) introduced me to a factory making plastic containers. It was easier job but paid very little. Then I switched to this one making metal locks because the pay is slightly better. I don't know how long I'm

going to stay. To be honest, I feel I'm just wasting my life and I'm just *hao* (sticking around) day in and day out. Sometimes I really wanted to quit but I can't.

Underlying Guoyang's narrative is both a silent longing for a better life and the disenchantment of *dagong* as creating ever-new marginalities, which is summarized in a single Chinese character *hao*. *Hao* (耗) means to expend, exhaust, and use up one's energy by sticking around until the persistent presence wears away obstacles and until the depletion of one's youth, labor, and hope. *Hao* is spoken about as a politics of presence, and symbolizes migrant youth's ambivalent spatial status (neither rural nor urban) and liminal existence in the city.

Such politics of presence, captured by the metaphor of *hao*, makes it even more complex to understand ethnic rural youth's *chulu* (出路), the "way out," and their coming to terms with the unfulfilling discipline of the school and a self-making logic of the market. The painful process of *hao* year in and year out constitutes a technique/ritual through which the migrants persistently produce a presence in the city at the expense of self depletion. Yet their "sticking around" and "withering away" indicates a silenced subaltern existence, nonetheless exerting its obstinate presence.

"Did you ever regret going out to *dagong* then?" I prodded when he seemed to be lost in his own pensiveness. Instead of a direct answer, he said:

I wished I didn't drop out and had worked harder and did better in school. But the subjects were too difficult and I was no material for academics. I was a *chasheng* [underachiever] and often fell asleep in class. And all those tests, I dreaded them. Plus our family was poor and they needed me to make money. When I dropped out, I was happy to be away from school but now I know my future is stuck. I can't do anything to

change it but I hope my younger sister can have better luck. She is in 8th grade and I'll support her as long as she is able to do well in school.

Despite his voluntary opting out, to this day Guoyang hoped his story would not be repeated by his sibling and saw education as a way out of life's dilemma. But the constant typing by the teachers as *chasheng*, and the repetitive frustration at testing dampened his interests in school. Schooling seems to provide few rewards. Youth from rural ethnic backgrounds who are functionally literate cannot land a gainful employment with the scant schooling they received. Neither can they survive from farming as their previous generations did. Given this context, *dagong* seems one of the few viable options. Yet no sooner have they delinked themselves from compulsory schooling than they find themselves chained to the factory assembly line and an itinerant life of uncertainty and frustration. Their graduation from vulnerable studentship to floating population reveals the empty promise of the state compulsory education and its professed gospel of economic and social mobility.

Rather than a pilgrimage to the telos of modernity, the *dagong* route leads to bankrupt dreams and a self-positioning as "nothingness" that consumes the youth, inflicts agony, and breeds disillusion. Guoyang shared with me his blog posts on QQ (an immensely popular online chatting and networking program), where he expressed his disorientation and melancholia and mused about the instability of future.

It is a drizzling March in Guangzhou; I wander about on the city streets, feeling extremely confused, lonely, and empty inside. The street is crowded with bustling faces, none of which is familiar to me. For years, I have lived like a vagabond in this city: what have I gained and what have I lost, who can tell me? My friends and brothers in faraway places, how have you been doing? Remember we promised to explore the world together; yet now, I had nothing better to do and was stuck in the factory. It was

strenuous physical work (*liqihuo*), and I just kept pluggin' away. Life is a failure. But, maybe, it is not... and I'm still... thinking of those days when we dreamed about future. In the long *dagong* days, I've had my share of delight, estrangement and distress. Life is so much against my wish; I lost my love and am loosing my youth. Right or wrong, sadness or joy, all seems like a mirage; I don't know where I am and what it is that I am to be. I am just *hun* (混 aimless loitering).

The central theme of these passages is his coming to grips with where the "I" is in the wide world, an existential self-searching (of "where I am and what it is that I am to be") in his encounter with nuts and bolts of the factory and the whirlpool of the city, in a style of lamentation and abandonment. The messages signify a powerful struggle for self-expression, a profound sense of alienation, yet also an ambivalence towards the seductive and abusive city, suspended in the undecidability of "maybe" and the ellipsis of "I'm still..." Despite the sobbing description of loneliness and wounds, he is still, may I suggest, "in love" with the city; yet the "love" becomes stifling because of its immediacy yet unreachability, and the self doubts it begets on the tattered soul. Forever in love yet out of love, the place of his longing has to be repetitively negotiated and re-imagined.

In his blog, he used the word "*hun*" to describe his aimless loitering and haphazard lifestyle of idling. The Chinese character *hun* is commonly used to refer to hooligans who idle around trying to make trouble and who are rejected as social malaise. This ghettoized image of *hun* is later invoked by migrant laborers to describe their liminal status as "people out of place," who are categorized as "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) without legitimate urban status and who reside in the cities on temporary IDs. Their living quarters are target of constant surveillance by the local Public Security Bureau that is on the hunt for crimes, gambling, and drug abuse (see Liu 2011).

As “surplus population⁶,” rural ethnic youth loitered (*hun*) in urban peripheries, and their bodies are both indispensable as commodified labor and disposable as signs of incivility. Despite their labor is forever implanted into the built environment of the city, they remain perennial strangers whose rural *habitus* is shunned and purged as social malaise creating overcrowding, poor hygiene, and security threats.⁷ As reflected in Guoyang’s poignant account, years of *hun* as transient laborers tattered the dream, wounded the body, and haunted the soul.

The twin concept of “*hun*” (loitering) and “*hao*” (sticking around), however, indicates a politics of presence that comes to define migrant youth’s liminal subjectivity. On the one hand, the production of categories that type them, first as at-risk, vulnerable adolescents who have “fallen through the crack of schools,” then as chaotic, contaminated, and crime-prone urban transients, is central to a governmentality that patrols the boundaries of vulnerability and normalcy, worthiness and abjection through regulating discourse (see Foucault 1972). On the other hand, even as “people out of place,” the vast numbers of transient laborers are nonetheless integrated into the urban landscape where their presence is an ineradicable part and tenacious resilience through “*hun*” and “*hao*.”

During the time when my conversation with Guoyang took place, he was home anxiously awaiting words from his employer in Guangzhou; in a normal year, he would have left for work right after the Chinese Lunar New Year. This year (early 2009), however, the worldwide economic crisis hit the export industries in southern China, and many factories stopped hiring workers. As he was getting fidgety, his parents, however, were trying to persuade him to stay

⁶ Presently, there is an estimate 150 million surplus laborers in rural China with an increase of 6 million new laborers every year. See Zhang & Zhao 2006: 277.

⁷ The purging takes place in periodic sweep-cleaning efforts to preserve the city of its orderly and sanitized image. It is particularly acute during national and international sports fairs. For instance, during the Beijing Olympics in 2008, in order to present a civilized and well-maintained veneer of the national capitol, the Chinese government issued a number of rulings to strictly control traffic volumes and bar the appearance of street vendors most of whom were migrants from the countryside. In China’s one-party and centralized political playfield, things can be accomplished quickly by state ordinances.

and find a bride. At twenty-eight, he was considered old and past the best marriageable age. Years of “*hun*” and “*hao*” in the city had resulted in a weathered look and a tattered heart. He was torn. Somehow he concurred with his parents that he was approaching thirty and it was time to start a family. Yet he was agonized that he had not made it through *dagong* and now that he came back empty-handed, life felt like a total waste and failure. “I can’t come back yet because I am still too poor. Nobody wants to marry me like this,” he sighed. To make matters more complicated, Guoyang was in love with a girl whom he met in the factory in Guangdong. They broke up and parted their destinies, however, as he never went back after the Chinese New Year because his employer no longer needed his work.

In his usual melancholia, he bemoaned the difficulty in finding a suitable woman in his native village, given his age and humble, unglorified origin. Marriage in agrarian ethnic communities remains a critical *rite de passage* to achieve maturity and adulthood. In the local scheme of things, due to the family-centered agricultural pattern and strong emphasis on kinship ties, early marriage is eagerly anticipated. The combined impact of out-migration and the growing thirst for wealth, however, has significantly altered the terms and means through which rural ethnic youth attain marriage and achieve adulthood. Male returnees find themselves at odds with both the agrarian cultural expectation of early marriage and social pressure of conspicuous consumption that has increasingly become the criterion for judging the personal worthiness. Like many returned migrants, especially unmarried males, Guoyang was deeply troubled by the matrimonial custom that he had failed to live up to.

He never went back to Guangdong and later found a job as the hotel security guard (*baoran*). When off duties, he helped take care of his cousin’s internet café. He seemed rather

bored, loitering around a lot and trying his luck at gambling⁸ for quick cash. Internet and alcohol gave him a modicum of solace and provided an emotional outlet, as alcohol annulled the pain, and pop culture on cyber space blurred the reality. Unable to secure economic prosperity in the sink-or-swim market logic, yet still hoping to alter the narrative of backwardness and poverty, the returnees like Guoyang are both realistically minded and hollowed inside.

Despite years of “*hun*” and “*hao*” in the city, they are nevertheless unskilled labor in many aspects and still thoroughly embedded in a peasantry they inherit from previous generations. Yet, schooling and labor migration have worked successfully in keeping many Miao and Dong youth off the land. Many are inexperienced to live a soil-bound life, lacking both the skills and motivations. They often have picked up perfect fluency in the city dialects (such as Cantonese) and recast their ways of living with a newly acquired appreciation of Han foodways as well as new tastes of fashion, hygiene, and consumption styles. They are the indigenous moderners who are immersed in lifeways associated with urban living, although they do not reject village life altogether. Their lives are interwoven with a desire for material niceties, a bitter-sweetness associated with urban migrancy, a troubled sentiment of courtship and adulthood, and a disengagement with agrarian livelihood.

Linfeng: The Society is My School

Linfeng, a twenty-two-year-old Miao, was a *dagongmei* (female migrant worker) whom I met in Majiang during the Miao New Year. When Linfeng was introduced to me by her little sister, whom I befriended while volunteering at the middle school, she struck me as energetic and sociable. With a blond hair dye, a shiny bright-red jacket, and a pair of low-cut blue jeans, she also set herself apart with her “eccentric” attires and adornments. Two large different-sized circular earrings were dangling amidst the disorderly permed hair, a trendy style (*xin chao*)

⁸ Gambling, through the characteristic tile game mahjong, was widely observed in both villages. A high percentage of villages— young and old, men and women alike, even some adolescents—found mahjong their major recreational pastime. This echoes the pervasive sense of “there is nothing to do” in the village and the simultaneous expansion of consumer indulgence.

popular among young females these days. She told me she rarely dressed up or combed her hair in the characteristic Miao style, even when she came back home. It was cumbersome and not in fashion, she said. Now working in a city in Zhejiang Province, she decided to live “as they do.” As a malleable young woman eager to fit in, she appeared indistinguishable from the Han urban residents.

The second oldest of four daughters born to a widowed father, Linfeng started to shoulder family responsibilities at an early age. For six years since she graduated from middle school, she had been working in a factory specialized in making drinking glasses with her two sisters and the brother-in-law. Each year, they had two weeks off to visit home, which presently comprised of just her father and her 9th-grade little sister. While in school, Linfeng was academically aspiring and “made it” at the high school entrance exam. Her family, however, couldn’t afford her further education, especially after her mother passed away. Yingfeng spoke with considerable regrets:

I wish I were able to go to high school because I was a good student. But it hurt my heart to see our father laboring in the fields all by himself to support us. There was no way he could do it by growing rice and vegetables. He is getting old. I wanted badly to make money for the family. So I decided to go to *dagong*.

The father used to make a living as a silversmith, but stopped his guild after the decease of his wife. Now that his three daughters were working away from home and the youngest one was attending school in Majiang, he was home alone tending the rice field. Their native village Guibei is reputed as the village of silversmiths (*yinjiang cun*) for its fine craftsmanship in silver ornament making. Several decades ago when silver products⁹ were still in great demands in the

⁹ The Miao are known for their fondness of silver adornments and jewelry as they believe the silver metal carries a magic power and can fend off evil spirits to protect its possessors from illnesses and misfortunes.

Miao communities, many Guibei villagers were able to live comfortably by silversmithing at home. Since the 1990s when massive labor out-migration became a dominant theme in Qiandongnan, Guibei has been severely dismembered while the demands waned for silver making. Just an hour away from Majiang, Guibei is now an empty and deserted place tucked in the depth of Mt. Leigong. To some, it serves as a contrastive reminder of how far Majiang has come in its present-day buoyancy. Guibei is linked by kinship to Majiang through generations of intermarriage but has little going in terms of tourism. Connected to Majiang by an unpaved dirt road, Guibei remains much less visible and visited. Life there manifests an exaggerated harshness (see figure#16).



Figure#16: Village Guibei at dawn.

On hearing I was a volunteer teacher at her little sister's school, Linfeng immediately warmed up to me. She confided in me her worries of her younger sister Nee, who struggled with her academics. Nee boarded at the dorm during weekdays and hiked two and a half hours to visit home every weekend (see figure#17). Despite her misgivings, Linfeng was hopeful that her little sister might carry out her unfulfilled dream of "making it" through successful schooling, a dream no longer viable for herself. "I really want her to continue education now we can afford it with all three of us girls working in the factory," she spoke longingly, "and we want her to have a different life."



Figure#17: Nee cooking on an electric plate during her weekend visit home.

As for herself, in time, Linfeng had come to appreciate the lessons learned from a migrant life and from the vicissitude of the market and the society.

I wish I were able to go to high school. But I've realized that society *is* my school. I'm working hard to save up money. I don't spend much on clothes and beauty products like other girls in my factory do. And I don't complain as much, either. Sometimes they can get really bitter and grumpy about the job and the boss and stuff. For me, I think it is all about mentality, you know. I want to be a happy person no matter what I do and where I am. I am happy that I can at least work hard to help my family, especially my younger sister and my father.

She remained optimistic and convinced that life was worth living despite constant challenges and hardships. She rejoiced at the modicum of success she'd gained as the breadwinner of the family; she was also delighted that she'd acquired a different mentality and come to see life in a new light.

Linfeng's choice to adorn herself with outlandish non-Miao attires invited constant local contestations. When she came back to Majiang with dyed hair and flashy clothing, the staff at

the ticket booth took her as a tourist and refused to let her in without an entrance fee.¹⁰

Frustrated, she had to argue at length to prove her Miao ethnicity and local status before she was admitted through the gate. She was denied entry because of her costumery preference that seemed to have crossed the assumed ethnic markers. The returned migrants' self presentation ruptures the essentialist discourse of what it means to be Miao and non-Miao, and perturbs the perceived notion of ethnic authenticity and the divide of us-them, here-there. As Paul Gilroy contends in *Black Atlantic* (1993), identities are always already (re)made and unfinished with hybridity, mutability, and instability. Linfeng's strategic refashioning of herself by adopting a distinctive veneer neither Miao nor simply Han renders the body a hybridized zone that is at once visible, performable, and consumable.

Linfeng's body image was further contested during her homecoming to her native village.

Nobody in my village recognized me because of my hair dye and clothes. My dad was a little upset, but he didn't say much. Even my older sister didn't like my appearance; she said she would pay me to have my hair dyed black. I don't care. I did it with a purpose. I'm twenty-two and people think it's time for me to find a mother-in-law (*pojia*). But I don't want it to happen this way, and I don't want people to come to my house and ask for a marriage. I want my freedom. I want to support my siblings and achieve something. In this village, you know, you can't wear your discontent on your face, otherwise you'll lose friendship. So I have to appear eccentric (*linglei*). I think my appearance and standoffish (*shibu guanji*) manner has driven away many of the guys here.

¹⁰ Since Majiang embarked on touristification, ticket houses were installed at gates to sell park entries. Tourists are charged sixty kuai for a one-time entry. The only exception is the locals who reside in the greater Majiang area, including Majiang proper and a few adjacent village-hamlets, who are therefore granted admission free of charge. Yet the process of finding out who is "local" and who is not often involves conflicts, especially when the visitors are the relatives or friends of the locals.

There was a triumphant look on her face. Linfeng's nonconformist appearance was not simply a mischievous act of self-pluming, but a tactic deployed to negotiate the politics of age and marriage that is woven into the predicament of rural ethnic *dagongmei*. Even though marrying well (*jia de hao*) has been a much sought-after destiny for many young females, Linfeng refused to live a domesticated life of village womanhood. As she was painfully aware, many women were spatially bounded to the native hamlet,¹¹ and socially confined to motherhood and childrearing. As she said, she didn't want to marry so soon and was determined to locate the meanings of her life elsewhere, even if it meant living a marginalized life as a migrant worker. She was also perfectly aware that her attitude towards marriage might raise local eyebrows. In order to minimize neighborly discontent, she contrived a peculiar presentation of herself and displayed alternative canons of dress and material ostentation. In doing so, she asserted a creativity to negotiate her designated cultural self with deliberate costumery masquerade.

In her pursuit of new tastes and trends, she did not simply show off the markers of acquired modern identity or an aura of urbanism; she also projected herself in an imagined elsewhere with a different attitude towards domesticity and marital expectation. Others also describe how Chinese *dagongmei* take chance to experiment with new ways of life once they leave their rural villages and decry early marriage as confining women into "chattel and slaves" (Hyde 2007: 175; see also Pun 2005). In expressing the constraints of domesticated village womanhood, she saw early marriage as impeding to her freedom, mobility, and pursuit of happiness.

I don't want to marry yet, not in the village. I like my village. I miss it when I am away in the factory; but then there is nothing to do at home and I get bored whenever I return. As young people, we ought to go to cities and work hard for our future.

¹¹ In Linfeng's words, the farthest place many village women had set foot on was the adjacent village a few kilometers away, where they paid occasional visits on market days.

Instead of simply championing the rising individualistic ethos or rejecting rural life and kinship ties *tout court*, she embraces a different kind of rite of passage towards adulthood. Through the society-cum-school, she learned to value hard work, delay of instant gratification, and shared familial resources/support as the legitimate passage to a developmental uplift that would otherwise be out of reach.

While the state considers rural-to-urban migration as necessary to mitigate the gap of a socioeconomically polarized China (*eryuanhua de zhongguo* 二元化的中国), the rural migrants see it as an opportunity to jump the scale and seek a spatial membership otherwise beyond reach. For rural female migrants, it is also an opportunity to negotiate politics of matrimonial customs and politics of gender and age. Urbanity is imagined as a space for competition and success (打拼和成功) and for plugging the void of an earthbound life. Even though the city constantly reminds her of her “lack,” Linfeng is determined to stick around. “My coworkers at the factory find it unbearable to stay year after year, but I just smile. I want to be a joyful person no matter what happens in life.” Her persistence echoes migrant laborers’ collective tactic of “*hao*” (Yan 2008:246-48), through which one slowly exhausts one’s time and energy in a hope to wear away an obstacle and obtain a change or a transformation.

Her metamorphosis from a not-yet-adult middle school student into a fashionable, independent, self-willing migrant worker, who traverses village and city life, farmlands and factory floors, speaks of her calculated maneuvering of real life dilemmas. Her assertive body image casts a cheerful tone over the uncertainty of the future as she forges an alternative participation at the juncture of market logic and local gender and matrimonial politics. The keyword of development, both as the national aim and personal dream, underlines the microphysics and scattered liminality of the migrants’ daily existence.

Ethnic Entrepreneurs: Becoming Craftsmen and Entertainers

If labor out-migration emerges out of the recognition of wealth differentials and is the means through which villagers cross spatial partitions, the rise of tourism has lured many migrants back home or saved many others from leaving home for pursuing a better life. Tourism marks their home community with a distinct place-identity and ennobles it as the symbolized landscape. Tourism also marshals a web of linkages and forces around the logics of cultural production and commercialization (Oakes 1998: 189). For many out-of-school youth in Majiang and Longxing, their entry into the workplace is increasingly through the appropriation and market transaction of their ethnic assets.

Some apprentice themselves with indigenous crafts, such as silversmithing and carpentry, follow their adult kinsmen to urban centers, and make a living as itinerant craftsmen. They are hired to build ethnic replicas in city theme parks, such as in Beijing, Guilin, and Guangzhou. Some are recruited by ethnically-themed restaurants to perform popularized songs and dances to urban banqueters. Others choose to come back from previous migrancy and start tourism business at home. They make a living by vending sticky rice balls (*baba*), fruits, and noodles, or in more adventurous ways, running miscellaneous goods shops, local specialty (*techan*) stores, or family inns. The wave of home coming, however, did not settle smoothly. Despite years of work in the manufacturing industry, many rural youth remain unskilled labor. Hard as they try to obtain a negligible share of the tourism profits at home, their livelihood is still on a day-to-day basis and future is uncertain. Besides, cost of living, including food, daily expenditure, and land prices, has hiked considerably due to tourism.

Xiaolu, a twenty-four-year-old Miao, was an ethnic cultural vendor whose livelihood depended on the rising market value of ethnic artifacts and the new trend of cultural consumption. In the logic of cultural tourism, ethnic crafts are increasingly commodified with a

price tag. Before coming to Majiang, she had lived in Shanghai and Beijing as an “illegal” peddler on non-regulated city sessions selling ethnic antiques such as embroideries, jewelries, silver ornaments, Miao fineries and costumes. She described to me her peripatetic life with a lingering sense of fear.

We staked out some space on the pavements or metro platforms, where there were many pedestrians, and put our products on display. We had to stay watchful and alert at all time. If the patrolling police came near, we would wrap up our stuff in a few seconds and ran. If we were caught, they would confiscate everything, and our “blood and sweat money” (*xuehanqian*, i.e. income of arduous efforts) would be all gone.

Without a physical store or formal registration with the city bureau of commerce (*gongshang ju*), both of which requires monetary resources and bureaucratic network (*guanxi*) beyond her means, Xiaolu had to rely on a guerrilla style of vending. Her life on the city pavements was one of constant purging, marked by her “illegal” status and perceived as a thorn to the orderly urban spatial image. The unpredictability of income, coupled with constant threat of displacement, had spurred Xiaolu to return to her native Majiang.

After the grand staging of the 2008 Tourism Conference made Majiang a rising star, Xiaolu reckoned there might be some opportunity at home and rent a storefront to run an antique shop on the main street. As the oldest of three children in a poverty-stricken family, Xiaolu dropped out after primary school and joined her parents in the family antique business. They frequently travel to remote mountain villages in Guizhou, Guangxi, and Jiangxi to collect ethnic articles from hard-to-reach hamlets. Initially, their patronage comprised of affluent cultural connoisseurs from the Great Britain, France, the United States, and Japan. The patrons’ private wealth and fascination with indigenous artifacts helped open a pathway for local collectors to make cashes, as well as for cultural objects to travel across ethnic and national

boundaries. Occasionally Xiaolu's family business also catered for local ethnological museums that were in search for display items.

In order to communicate with her foreign customers, she taught herself English and picked up some essential conversation facilities. When she learned that I studied in the U.S., she showed great interests in my overseas experience and lamented that she herself wasn't able to pursue a path of schooling. In her spare time, we spent many hours sharing English learning tips and practicing English together. She also traveled with me to the villages whose path her family had trodden over the years in collecting crafts. It had not been an easy life as the working conditions were precarious and the income unpredictable, in addition to the frequent conflicts that arose during negotiations of contracts and payment.

"There are fewer and fewer valuable items to collect these days because most good antiques were bought and shifted overseas," Xiaolu lamented. Even the local market is monopolized by profit-driven corporations, whose factories imitate and mass-produce ethnic crafts on assembly lines.¹² In Majiang, Xiaolu's competitors were vendors who received their machine-made products from these factories. Compared to their shiny jewelries displayed in the window cases, Xiaolu's rusted ornaments and embroideries looked listless, often overlooked by tourists who were attracted by ostentatious sensory stimulation.

Lianchun was another example who worked closely with ethnic cultural artifacts. A young Dong lad in his mid twenties, Lianchun was a celebrity in Longxing known for his fine craftsmanship in musical instruments and his virtuosity in singing. With his artistic talents, Lianchun became a *geshi* (歌师), which literally translates as "song teacher" and is a rare honor

¹² Ironically, many assembly-line workers were rural, ethnic youth who were paid to mass-produce trinkets in mimicry of their own ethnic assets.

that few could enjoy. In the Dong community, *geshi* exhibits great repertoire and exceptional virtuosity in singing, and is communally recognized for his/her accomplishment in cultural transmission. Contrary to his passion in music, he found schooling a constant nuisance and ennui. At the age of twelve, he took great joy in following his elder male kin to nearby villages for *xinggezuoyue* (行歌坐月), a courtship ritual during which singing was performed to communicate with and pursue one's lover. At the age of fifteen, he apprenticed himself in the craft of instrument making, including *lusheng* (reed pipe), *dongdi* (Dong flute), *pipa*, *erhu*, and *niutuiqin* (three types of string instruments), and exhibited great talents in song composition.

Despite being a young *geshi*, without academic credentials and the widened economic path it enables, Lianchun struggled mightily to raise a family while keeping his passions alive. Due to family poverty and boredom with school, Lianchun dropped out before finishing 9th grade. Since then, his livelihood had depended on sporadic employments, such as laying bricks for house renovators. Once he was offered a singing job at a restaurant in Shijiazhuang (a city in northern China) with the pay package of 2000 kuai per month (roughly 300 dollars), plus free meals and accommodation. However, with a five-year-old daughter and ailing parents, and with his wife already working in Guangdong, he simply could not afford to travel thousands of miles away from home to take the job. In addition, the thought of singing popularized ethnic songs dampened his enthusiasm. Instead, he stuck around, picked up carpentry, and laid bricks to make a living. He befriended a youth hostel owner in Longxing, who offered the hallway space for him to display his instruments. Once in a while, Lianchun would add a little income through selling instruments to interested tourists who stayed in this hostel.

Sometimes, he would be hired by song and dance troupes to perform for government sponsored events. In early 2010, he was enlisted to dance for the opening ceremony of the One

Conference Two Festivals (*yihuilijie*) celebration.¹³ Hundreds of villagers and school children from different villages were recruited for this grand production. They were trained ad hoc by choreographers to perform dances to showcase ethnic customs and lifeways (see figure#18).



Figure#18: Grand opening ceremony staged by ethnically attired village performers.

Lianchun's team performed a dance piece called "The Seasons" that depicted the year-round agricultural activities of the ethnic farmers.

We practiced every day for about a month on the outdoor stage. The weather was freezing. After a while my body was numb. Our trainer was a choreographer from Kaili (the prefectural capital of Qiandongnan). He made us repeat the jumping and leaping so many times until he was satisfied. We were all amateurs so we were drilled very hard. I fell down often on the cement floor and had bruises all over.

Despite the minor injuries, Lianchun was glad he got to make some extra money that year and was hopeful of what the event might bring.

¹³ "One Conference Two Festivals" refer to the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Liping Conference held by CPC Political Bureau during the Long March and the 23rd anniversary of President Hu Jintao's speech at the Academic Seminar of the Liping Conference, as well as the celebration of the 4th Kaili Ethnic Cultural Festival and the 3rd Liping Drum Tower Cultural Festival in 2009. Such grand production of festive commemoration is typical of China's statecraft and its visibility-driven political climate.

For people like us, we do not have much culture (*mei wenhua*). We'll have to make do with what is available. I hope the ceremony will bring some attention to our region and create more jobs for people like me. People say my future is bright (前途无量 *qiantu wuliang*); but I say my future is gloomy (*qiantu wuliang* 前途无亮). If I could choose again, I would not give up school to concentrate on my musical interests. Now it is too late and I suffer from having low level of culture (*wenhua shuiping taidi*).

In retrospect, he invoked the problematic notion of “culture” to indicate his scanty level of schooling. In the Chinese lexicon, having received education is called “*you wenhua*” (having culture) thus “*gao suzhi*” (having higher quality); and not being schooled is called “*meiwenhua*” (having no culture) therefore “*suzhi di*” (with lower quality). Lower “quality” is associated with lack of “culture” and viewed as a result of insufficient schooling. The quality-culture debate is predicated upon the normalization of human values on a hierarchy to mark the superior and the inferior, the have’s and the have-not’s.¹⁴

“Culture” and “tradition” are two words often used interchangeably and appended to a wide range of problem framing in rural ethnic China. There are two types of narratives related to them. The first type of discourse is primarily conservationist, advocating for the preservation of ethnic customs for multiethnic co-presence and harmony. Arguably a distinct brand of Chinese multiculturalism, it calls for the revival of a fast vanishing ethnic minority “culture”/ “tradition,” which is essentialized in concrete skills/artifacts (such as embroidery, silver making, architecture, costumes, songs and dances) and touted as intangible cultural heritages.¹⁵ If the first type of discourse rests upon a conspicuously humane and emancipatory overtone and occurs mostly in politically correct discussions, the second type of discourse forms subtle

¹⁴ Since the early 1980s, the state discourse has attributed China’s preliminary stage of modernization to the “low quality” of the population, primarily in ethnic rural areas. See chapter three for detailed discussions of the quality debates.

¹⁵ The One Conference Two Festival is such state-orchestrated cultural revivalist showcase.

currents found only in informal, private speech acts. There, “culture”/ “tradition” is invoked in dualistic comparison with the “modern” and talked about as obstacles to progress and incommensurable with the developmental ethos and the scientific rationality.

Lianchun’s life symbolizes the ironies and contradictions of the contested ideas of “culture” and “tradition.” On the one hand, virtuous in ethnic arts and craftsmanship, he was touted as the embodiment of an “endangered” musical tradition; on the other hand, he was interpreted as a lack (even by himself), not only of “culture,” but also of “quality”/suzhi, locked in an inferior cultural realm and developmental dilemmas. Indeed, while compulsory schooling renders academic performance a sole criterion of one’s culturedness and homogenizes the meaning of success, Lianchun’s cultural virtuosity in ethnic arts and crafts was overshadowed by his inability to apprentice himself with state sanctioned cultural worthiness.

Persuading the Birds: Youth and Urban Consumption

Quanniao, literally “persuading the birds,” is a euphemistic way to describe bird hunting, which, in recent decades, has become a contributing factor to student dropout in rural Qiandongnan. For many male youth, *quanniao* is an exhilarating pastime, an escape from the austere constraints of school life, and a quick pathway to cash income. While game meats are sold to restaurants—mostly in Guangdong Province where rare animal delicacies are widely sought after—students forge an alternative mode of participation in a food economy. Not persuaded that schooling would help them secure a foothold in society, they partake in the production of an urban food lore to eke out a living.

Bird hunting is a highly unpredictable and risky venture. The catch depends largely on season, climate, location, and technique, and involves a great deal of luck. Despite the precariousness, it is highly attractive among young males because of its low cost and high profit margins. October and November are considered the prime season for bird hunting.

Consequently, it is also the busiest season for the schools to catch dropouts and absentees, many of who had slipped through the school gate to follow their male kinsmen to go “persuade the bird.”

One weekend in October 2009, I went on a home-visit trip with the teachers of Longxing Middle School. Among other things on the agenda, one was to visit a family whose eighth-grader son was recently absent from school. As it turned out, the student did not go to *dagong* in Guangdong as the teachers had expected; instead, he went to catch birds with his father, two uncles and a few other male villagers at the Dongting Lake. His mother was the only one at home at that moment and didn't seem particularly concerned about him missing school. She promised to send him back once he returned home. Dongting Lake region is a flood-basin of the Yangtze River with great biodiversity, where birds are abundant throughout the year. Like the majority of bird catchers in his village, he followed his adult kin to the region for this sink-or-swim means of fortune making. Later the student did show up again in class and I caught an opportunity to talk to him about his experience.

This time we were lucky, we caught twenty thousand birds in four weeks. There are so many birds there, all seasons and all yearlong. We sold them to restaurants in Guangdong. My uncles had connections with a middleman who took our birds to the restaurants. We charged him three kuai for each bird. Then we divided up the money, and each person made more than ten thousand kuai. Well, since I was following around, I got a few thousand for my share too.

He seemed animated while reminiscing about his first adventure. “Is it difficult to catch birds?” I prodded.

Not really. Most of the time, it is just luck. A few years ago, my father told me, they had to use cassette players and sticky pads. Now everybody has switched to MP3 players and amplifiers with remote controls. We also have large nets. We layered the nets on the

ground and tied them around trees to make a trap. After we cast the net, we hid in the forest and just waited. We played a bird chirping song. If the birds didn't come, then we switched to another song with the remote control. It's great, I mean, all we need is a MP3 player, an amplifier with a remote control, and some nets. The best part is the stuff actually doesn't cost much compared to what we made.

While in the old days people played cassette-tapes of bird chirpings and used sticky pads for the catch, nowadays they resort to cheapened technology, such as remote-controlled MP3 players, to monitor and operate at a distance. They spend long hours waiting in the damp forest for the optimal moments. In a good season, they could catch tens of thousands of birds and sell them at three or four kuai each to restaurants in Guangdong. The income, after being divided among team members, could amount to twenty to thirty thousand kuai (3300-5000 USD) per person, enough for one to be financially secured for the rest of the year.

Despite the financial viability, *quanniao* is a highly risky undertaking, since wild game hunting is outlawed. The student continued:

The money is really good, but the deal is if we are caught, we'll be put in jail. Not long ago, a guy from our village was caught. Later the family paid a lot of money to bail him out. So we have to be very careful and as they say, "shoot a bullet and change to another location" (*da yi qiang huan yi ge difang*). *Meibanfa* (there's not much we can do), we are poor and have to survive. I know I suck at school and won't get a job. So we have to do different things to make a living.

In order to avoid being caught, bird-catchers resort to a guerrilla strategy and constantly rotate among sites. If caught by the forest patrolling police, all efforts would evaporate and the wrongdoers would have to pay large sums of ransom to get out of detention. Yet this does not stop them from going as the temptation is too huge to pass. In their own words, in order to survive (*wei le shengji*), they are willing to try anything that could bring income. Rural youth are

keenly aware that school is not a realistic path to future livelihood and they are on their own to find alternative income options, even if it means outlawry.

Unlawful wild game hunting is spurred by a particular food economy increasingly in vogue in urban China. In the Province of Guangdong, the Special Economic Zone designated by Deng Xiaoping during his monumental trip to the south in 1992, people are known for their extra-ordinary dietary preferences. As they seek palatry satisfaction and nutrition, restaurants are in wide demand that serve rare animals such as chrysalides, turtles, foxes, monkeys, snakes, and birds. Although protected by law, rare game meat continues down the throats of wealthy business gurus and officials who are tired of dishes offered in ordinary food joints. Exotic animals are considered significant when entertaining important guests. One's position in the hierarchical food chain signifies his/her financial and political prowess. The rareness of wild game meat is also linked to the traditional Chinese medical theory of *bu*—boosting the exhausted body with restorative tonic—a nutritional therapy popular among health-conscious urban elites.

While corporate heads and potent state dignitaries seek longevity through consumption of alternative foods, the abundance at dinner tables ironically coexists with a lack and emaciation. Indeed, urban banqueting, a ubiquitous form of social excess, come at the expense of the society's functional depletion, in this case, the pedagogical dilemmas of the rural ethnic youth and the emaciation of their schools. In a time when heightened consumption becomes the privileged way of meaning/value making, schooling is increasingly marginalized when rural youth seek survival in the ebbs and flows of market economy. Ironically, the peak season for bird hunting is also the peak season for school absenteeism.

On the one hand, the ability to consume game meat at the scarcity end of the food chain embodies a celebrated urban *suzhi* and a quality lifestyle of carnal nurturance. On the other

hand, the condition of possibility of such an embodiment is not only one's financial prowess but also a different kind of corporeality at once indispensable, expendable, and invisible. It is the corporeality of the rural ethnic youth often considered deficient in *suzhi* that contributes to the abundance of the urban food lore. The symbolic metaphors of excess and deficiency are manifested at the tips of chopsticks, such that some sinologist argues "the chronic 'Chinese' problem is one of deficiency and excess at the same time" (Farquhar 2002: 122).

The rural students' bird hunting adventures and subsequent supplies to urban appetites need not be read as a consumptive exploitation between the eater and the provider, although it is certainly amenable to this kind of interpretation. Through the doubleness of deficiency and abundance, the seemingly apolitical act of food consumption turns into an intense political field. It is political precisely because of the pedagogical function it carries where the school fails. The urban food lore and the market value of the labor of rural youth carries pedagogical valance that "teaches" students about their differential social positioning ('We do different things from the city people'), the valuation of their labor, the future's unpredictability, and their own predicament in the broader ecology of the society. The concrete satiety at the dinner table is enabled by the abstract deficiencies lived by the rural students whose corporeality is commodified into urban appetite and slipped through the educational gospel of school-to-social-mobility.

Like their adult kinsmen who collect and sell wild medicinal mushrooms to pharmaceutical companies—which then process, package, and advertise them to wealthy urbanites at considerably higher prices—the young bird catchers are at the bottom of the food chain. Connecting the ecological system of the mountain valleys/forests to magnificent city restaurants, itinerant bird-catchers are an essential yet invisible part of urban consumption. Yet they consciously calculate their own inadequacy in exchange for tangible cash income and a meager livelihood. Students' appropriation of circumstances necessary to survival—however

chancy the appropriation is—indicates the instability of the boundary between deficiency and excess, and greater porosity of educational subjects and the broader society.

Continuing the Path of Schooling

Despite that their path to schooling is strewn with obstacles, and their educational aspirations are often overshadowed by other more tangible livelihood options, not all rural families opt out of schooling altogether. Many parents adopt an educational strategy in line with the rising prominence of academic credentialism and the reform-era discourse of self-development. Especially for parents who have temporarily “jumped the rural scale” and “experienced the world” through *dagong*, their own urban vagrancy brings astute awareness that low attainment of schooling binds one either to the earth or factory floors, while schooling sets a man apart from farmers, blue-collar artisans, and assembly-line workers. They send back remittances and spend their *xuehanqian* (money earned with blood and sweat) on learning aids and afterschool tutoring for their children.

Mei was such a student whose life straddles a distant factory compound and the immediacy of rural life and schooling. Both her parents were migrant workers in Guangdong. They left for *dagong* since Mei was in 5th grade, leaving behind a tumbledown house and a few patches of rice fields. The maternal grandparents served as the surrogate guardians of Mei and her younger brother and helped farm their parents’ rice paddies while they were away.¹⁶ The parents visited home once a year for two weeks during the Chinese Spring Festival. Years went by; Mei had grown into a shy 9th grader, a bit quiet and melancholic.

Despite the familial poverty and prolonged parental absence, Mei managed to do well in school and to the amazement of her teachers, showed remarkable talents in English, a difficult

¹⁶ This arrangement was closely tied to a salient social phenomenon called *liushou ertong*, i.e. migrant parents leaving children behind in rural areas.

subject for most rural students. During the school year, Mei looked after her younger brother and helped with farming chores. In the summer, Mei sometimes went to visit her parents in Guangdong and help them with cooking and washing. This summer, however, Mei stayed home awaiting the results of the high school entrance exams. As it turned out, she'd scored enough for the county-seat key-point high school. When I asked her whether she was excited, Mei replied with a fleeing "I don't know," her voice tinkering with guilt.

If my parents send me to high school, they would use up the money they've been saving from *dagong* for renovating the house. They work so hard to save so little. If I go to high school, I'll spend most of their saving and I am afraid I won't live up to their sacrifice. What if I fail in high school? What if I can't find a job afterwards?

Mei was painfully aware that if she continued school, her parents' dream of renovating their crumbling home would be perpetually postponed. She even toyed with the idea of going to find work in the coast, which was adamantly opposed by her parents. Later that summer, during a trip to visit student dropouts, I met Mei's parents in a small manufacturing town called Nanhai at the outskirts of Guangzhou, the capitol of Guangdong Province. The visit turned out to be rather challenging as I had great difficulty finding the place. Guilty of spending their meager salaries on transportation, park entries, and restaurants, migrant workers like Mei's parents simply did not explore the city beyond the factory boundaries, even after years of working there. The name of the factory, which was an obscure family business, and a nearby grocery store, was all the information he had, as these were the primary locations he identified his migrant life with. He apologized profusely for being unable to provide further directions, not even the name of the road.

Finally, with the help of several traffic policemen (*jiaojing*), after some fifty-five-minute ride on an outbound bus and two excursions on motorcycles, I arrived at the factory gate. The

factory was a two-storey, grey-brick building that resembled a military barrack. A man of extremely bony built greeted me in front of the gate, his pants loosely hanging, and his chest heaving with small lumps of muscles noticeable from the oil-stained T-shirt. It was Mei's father.

As he led me towards the workshop (see figure#19), sounds of metal clinking became audible. The dimly lit floor was littered with oil-darkened containers and sacks. Mei's mother sat on a plastic stool, hands in greasy, heavy gloves, measuring and cutting off the metal chain to a required length. Right by her were a few buckets, each containing unbroken chains five to six kilometers long. She told me she worked eleven hours a day to finish ten buckets; long hours of sitting on hard surface and years of repetitive movements made her body ache with stiffness.

She now made nine hundred kuai per month, while her husband made slightly more at one thousand per month. Most factories in Nanhai specialized in small hardware products such as chains and locks, and offered very low wages. Despite the meager salaries, they were still making more than they could at home. "Every hundred we make here in the factory helps. This way we still barely make ends meet. If both stayed home, we wouldn't have had enough money to get by." The father switched in and out of Mandarin and Dong when speaking to me, frustrated at his own inability to converse fluently in the official language.



Figure #19: A corner of the metal chain workshop where Mei's parents worked.

Mei's mother took me to the second floor above the workshop, a narrow pathway lined up with tiny rooms on both sides that served as the living area for workers. Mei's parents had a kitchen and a bedroom of their own, and considered themselves lucky despite the suffocatingly small space. The kitchen was a five-square-meter room without water tap. A few bowls and spice bottles were loosely scattered on the floor. The only cooking utility was an electric hotplate. Right next door was the bedroom, barely wide enough for a bed and a chair where they put an old television set. Mei's mother fished out a few family photos from a black plastic bag to show me. In her eagerness, she beamed with delight at the sight of her family and the prospect of a new house some day, hoping to eventually return home with a better economic standing and more secure livelihood.

"We are going to renovate our house when we save up enough money," she said. The comfort of an abode is traditionally held indispensable for a good life. As the Chinese proverb *anju leye* (安居乐业) vividly depicts, only when one is properly sheltered can one enjoy one's productive/professional life. The strong kinship ties have also motivated them to come back. In the agrarian social life, a man's place in the wider scheme of things is largely defined by the concern for family and kinship. As many scholars have pointed out (Harrell 1985; Hsu 1948; Nee 1985; Huang 1998), the need to maintain ancestral linkage between the past and future generations has obliged the peasants to work hard, defer immediate gratification, and maximize collective potentials. They return to settle down, to erect the center beam of a new house, to cover the roof of their parents', to bury the dead and celebrate births, and to convert hard-earned wealth into educating children whom they'd left behind. It is arguably this reciprocal call—responsibility to the family and kinship on the one hand, and the need and desire for

“making it” on the other—that has kept the village *dagongmei* and *dagongzai*¹⁷ constantly on the move along the translocal highway and zigzag country roads, producing both movement and stickiness.

But now our daughter is going to high school, we’ll use that money for her education, even if we’ll have to wait for a few more years for the house. We are only ordinary people (*lao baixing*). Our life is bitter (*ku*) because we do not have much *wenhua* (literally “culture,” which indicates one’s level of schooling in a problematic way) or *benshi* (competence).

Attributing life’s hardship to their own incompetence, they feel compelled to provide a different life for the children so that they would not have to “eat bitterness” (*chiku*) as much as they do. Eating bitterness, a revolutionary-era genre of speech, is now dressed up with new meanings. During the Cultural Revolution, young urban intellectuals and students were sent to the countryside to eat bitterness by enduring harsh lives and manual labor. In the Maoist belief, one could purify one’s mind by living a deliberate life of dearth and hardship, a line of thought inherited from the Marxist binarism of material base (the physical body) and spiritual superstructure (the ideological mind). Eating bitterness became a way of “embodying and materializing their revolutionary enthusiasm and of producing and providing themselves as subjects of the revolution” (Yan, 2008:202).

Rather than being the catalyst of ideological transformation, “eating bitterness” is now connected to a different kind of subject making. The endurance of physical affliction is now understood as indispensable conditions for corporeal transformation and acquiring of *suzhi*. “Bitterness” and “excess” are the twin notions that the rural ethnic peasant-migrants come to

¹⁷ *Dagongmei* and *dagongzai* are two gender specific colloquial terms to indicate female (*mei*) and male (*zai*) migrants who work on low-skill menial labor for a salarized livelihood.

embody in today's China. Termed as "excessive labor", rural migrant workers are compelled to endure bitterness in order to be rid of the "excess" label, and see their vulnerability in light of a meritocratic myth that types them as "others."

Mei's parents' self-negation as deficient subjects (*meiwenhua* and *meibenshi*) translates into their endurance of hardship and willing support for the children's education. With the money they saved for house renovation, Mei did manage to enroll in the county-seat high school. Yet when I met her again during the October National Holiday in 2009, she appeared disheartened. Compared with the county students, she was only fish in a small pond and wasn't "good" enough. She was outperformed by her classmates and was tracked in a "low" class. The competition and pressure soon became unbearable. "I want to give it a try now. But if I fail the college entrance exam, I am going to Guangdong to join my parents." She muttered these words while thumbing through the pictures I had taken of her parents in their factory.

Coda

An analysis of livelihood strategies beyond studentship reflects how rural ethnic youth grapple with the rapidly changing ecology of the social world to chart divergent life paths with different aims, aspirations and the imaginative resources. It also provides a fruitful view of how the ecology powerfully shapes students' vocational futures, attitudes towards life and work, and self identities. Jumping out of the crumbling walls of the school, Miao and Dong youth find themselves increasingly oriented towards a translocal horizon of opportunities, yet bounded as the pedagogic subjects of the state's developmental dictum. The various life courses reflect the ways youth interpret the "educational" and "development" mantra, and their practical adaptations in the face of changing rural ecology. Despite that such adaptations oftentimes remain bounded in the national modernization agenda, they nonetheless rupture the normative frame of the "modern" and suggest the limit-points of schooling.

This final chapter illustrates the divergent life paths of the rural minority youth after they finish or drop out of secondary school. Some students became ethnic performers or souvenir vendors in a burgeoning tourism market. Some became itinerant bird catchers to supply game meat to exotic-themed urban restaurants. A few went to high schools or technical academies to continue formal schooling. The majority of them became migrant workers laboring on factory floors in the bustling coastal cities. Jumping out of the crumbling school walls, rural ethnic youth found themselves chained to the market ethos and the “ebbs and flows” of the society-cum-school, living a life no less precarious and tenuous than the regimented, boot-camp-like schooling. Pedagogical effect does not end with schooling; rather, it is manifested in forms of livelihood strategies that reflect the complex ecology of rural education.

As Foucault reminds us, each society has its regime of truth (1980: 131) that at once determines the conduct of individuals and permits them to “effect a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom” (1990:18). The youth I observed in both villages are as such subject to a matrix of discourse; yet, they also bear witness to the conditions of their lives and appropriate these conditions in their pursuit of wellbeing and a state of happiness.¹⁸ Their experience demonstrates a liminality—what Homi Bhabha (1990) calls the play between the pedagogical and the performative—that constitutes youth subjectivity. This subjectivity exists where the pedagogical and the performative facets of power inhere. While the nation regenerates itself through pedagogical narratives and

¹⁸ The notion of “happiness,” as some have argued, is linked to particular cultural reasoning about self-realization, personal destinies, and individual fulfillment. It is also related to broader historical shifts in ethical, philosophical, and religious thoughts (McMahon 2006). The concept of happiness, when applied to school subjects, also ascribes psychological principles to order modes of living towards the continual process of rational planning in search for better life, such as expressed in life-long learning (Popkewitz 2008). Although happiness is not a primary concept of inquiry in this study, I invoke it here as a lens to rethink youth subjectivity. As the ubiquitous human pursuit of the good life, however divergently the “good” is defined, to attain a state of happiness is about the various ways people make use of resources (albeit limited) to carve a livelihood under conditions that may or may not be conducive.

compulsory technologies, such narratives and technologies must work in and through the youth who are both discursively subjugated to the unity of the pedagogical discourse and ruptures its sanguine tonality at its most unpromising moments.

Conclusion

Based on sixteen months of ethnographic, oral historical, and archival research conducted in a Miao and a Dong village-town in Qiandongnan Prefecture, Guizhou Province in Southwest China, this dissertation is a modest attempt at illuminating some of the thorny issues and controversies considered endemic to Chinese rural minority schools. Focusing on the confluent and disjunctive movements in and around the school, the study has been primarily concerned with the disenchantment and participatory limits of compulsory education in rural ethnic Qiandongnan. As a high-profile official at the Guizhou provincial ministry of education once sarcastically said, he acted like a firefighter dashing around to attend to constant emergencies in rural ethnic education. What is on fire? What is the state of emergency concealed by the national discourse of “harmony” and the global discourse of “China Rising”? To understand the state of emergency in education is to understand the “social poetics” (Herzfeld 1997) of contemporary Chinese society and its project of modernizing “the rural” and “the ethnic” through a variety of social, economic, and educational policies.

Against the dominant narrative that paints Chinese education in the successful limelight, and against the popular account that attributes such success to a homogenous cultural belief in the profitability of schooling, this study nuances, if not altogether questions, the rosy depiction and commonsense appeal to education as agent of social progress. The study shows that the soaring educational desire in Chinese society has not gripped the population uniformly, nor do all people perceive the educational opportunities in identical ways. Schools are not merely standardized institutions where everyone participates, agrees upon, and gets along within. Schools are complicated webs of relations involving differentially conceived ideas and agendas about learning, mobility, what constitutes “quality” personhood, and what it means to live a good life. The efforts to enact education policies in rural settings brought into play an array of

mediating factors and subjectivities that often produce messy, continuous dissent and challenge the neat policy template and the nationalized belonging.

“Ethnic issues” (*minzu wenti*) and “rural issues” (*nongcun wenti*) have become focal points of debates in Chinese education, through which images and representations about the “Other” are invoked to diagnose economic and social problems as well as justifying state interventions. Rural schooling is at the center of China’s modernist quest to transform the rural ethnic minorities from being the national burden to becoming the national assets.¹ In order to bring about the transformation, the state has implemented a number of education campaigns as well as development programs. Both educational and developmental programs are part of China’s larger agenda to revitalize the countryside and to modernize its “holdout” population, namely the rural minorities.

Three dimensions of the state’s educational campaigns, namely access, quality, and accountability (addressed in chapters two, three, and four), represent a linear narrative that sketches the boundaries around the official discourse of educational development in Qiandongnan. Firstly, the compulsory education policy (namely the Two Basics Project, or TBP) concerns the quantitative provision of basic education that mandate all school age children complete nine years of schooling. Besides the quantitative provision of education that promotes education for all, there is also a qualitative concern to improve the quality of curriculum and teaching, therefore improving the so-called *suzhi*/quality of the population. Thirdly, a comprehensive education audit system has been put into place. Throughout the years, educational officials at the county, prefecture, provincial, and national levels conduct school

¹ Education is a trope of the national imaginary of development and a part of a broader ecology within which students and villagers in Qiandongnan are cast as *children*—ever too immature, too provincial, lacking *suzhi* and market consciousness, and wanting to be “schooled.”

inspections to ensure accountability of the local schools in meeting the standards of these policies.

My research challenges the linearity of the educational campaigns sketched around access, quality, and accountability. Firstly, despite the sanguine narrative of TBP and the slogan's simplistic equation of "today's education" with "tomorrow's economy," success of education has been rather elusive for many rural students in Qiandongnan. Yes, education is still understood as a way out of poverty and the stigmatized label of lack (in *suzhi* and mobility, for instance). Yet to many Qiandongnan residents, schooling is neither the only nor the central reward in life. With the declining value of credentials and the ever greater obstacles to "making it" in the exam-focused, urban-oriented education, motivation to succeed in school continues to wane. In people's practical reasoning, they are better off by embracing work (usually menial and low-skill) as a more realistic path to livelihood and social mobility. Pessimism and ambivalence towards schooling has been growing, spurred by economic constraints and few opportunities for gainful employment, and culminated in massive dropouts among secondary school students. The liberatory perspective of TBP often meets with incommensurable ways of knowing and reasoning, as well as epistemologies often overlooked by the state-sanctioned criteria of learning. Students' disenchantment and withdrawal perturbs the "naturalness" of schooling and suggests its limit-points as ineffectual attempts at social emancipation.

Secondly, while rampant student attrition has become the prime obstacle of TBP to incorporating the Miao and the Dong people into China's educational modernity, Qiandongnan's subpar performance in basic education is also translated into a qualitative concern for raising *suzhi* of the rural ethnic population through promoting *suzhi/quality* education. *Suzhi/quality* curriculum reform becomes yet another compulsory technique of the Chinese state to educate

ideal citizenry for rural revitalization. However, the very notion of quality, distilled in the idiosyncratic Chinese notion *suzhi*, is a moving target intertwined with China's cultural politics.

The linearity of quality education is troubled historically by the ways *suzhi* is deployed to differentiate human bodies on a hierarchy of worthiness. The linearity is also troubled by everyday pedagogical maneuvers that fabricate the successful "front" of the reform and "backstage" contradictions. While the *suzhi* reform mandates student-centeredness and egalitarian pedagogical relationship, this sanctioned front is sustained by ranking, favoritism, and teacher authoritarianism on the backstage in order to maintain another normative front of testing. The bifurcated performance on the front and backstage produces classroom hostility, cosmetic compliance, and sense of alienation among teachers and students. This indicates that the *suzhi* reform often speaks in a tongue that is forked, producing messy undercurrents and fuzzy terrain of mimicry and mockery. The dissonant working of *suzhi* on the ground further informs the disenchantment of compulsory schooling and sheds light on the dilemmas and fragmentations daily lived by rural teachers and students.

Thirdly, to regularly monitor the performance of rural schools, especially with dropout prevention as the prime target, a comprehensive audit system is established. Village teachers and students receive a proliferation of audits throughout the years, straining to meet the constant scrutiny of performance inspection. Educational audit is yet another compulsory technique of the Chinese state. While the ideal of universal basic education requires the village schools to think like the state by rendering themselves accountable for the ideal, counterstrategies in meeting the audit demands constantly transgress the ideological roof. Fabrication² of enrollment statistics, appearance management, cosmetic compliance of dropout

² While "fabrication" here refers to physical manipulation of statistics, enrollment figures, and school performance, it is also a powerful concept to analyze the making and classification of human kinds (such as class, gender, disability) through academic discourses, institutional practices, and social narratives. See Hacking 2006.

prevention all indicate a performance both in the physical and symbolic sense to trouble the linearity of the audit technique. The cookie-cutter mode of educational planning and assessment compels village schools to spend already strained resources falsifying outcomes and cultivating *guanxi* (protégé network) with audit-conducting bureaucrats. The overt compliance and the covert manipulation of inspection demands form odd ethnographic juxtapositions to illuminate the profound disenchantment of education in rural ethnic Qiandongnan.

Besides the state's education campaigns, village schools are also entangled in social changes and state developmental campaigns, such as the promotion of rural ethnic tourism, the changing state governance and officialdom, and the large scale of labor migration that turns the countryside into a surplus labor reserve for China's manufacturing miracle. School is not just a vague pedagogical steward but a set of turf battles involving audit fever, spatial warfare, and market regime through which the "rural" and "ethnic" become embedded in nationalist projects. The two schools in Majiang and Longxing detailed in this work are witnesses and partakers of such battles staked to build a stronger nation through educational and developmental programming.

In recent decades, rural schools are increasingly entangled in tourism-centered development of Qiandongnan. As another compulsory technique of the developmentalist Chinese state, tourism exerts discursive spatial politics and renders school walls ever more porous with bureaucratic demands, commercial agendas, and state-business coalition. Not only were village schoolteachers and students increasingly sandwiched by propaganda demands to perform as the surrogate state functionaries (such as during tourism-promotion parades and village cleanup), the physical site of the school had also become target of fierce commercial scramble. The controversial touristification process has orchestrated a spatial tussle, under the unbridled power of corporate developers joining hands with government bureaucrats,

encroaching on village public facilities (such as schools and farmlands), transforming rural teacherhood, and shaping the experience and disenchantment in and around the school as its discursive effects.

The school isn't the only place that defines the contour of education; the journey beyond formal schooling entails manifold processes that form heterogeneous pedagogies and link students' experience to the broader governing techniques of contemporary China. This dissertation ends on the divergent life paths of the Miao and Dong adolescents after they finish or drop out of secondary school. I trace the ways they negotiated market logics, national politics, and local aspirations in seeking economic viability that schooling failed to bring to fruition. Some students became ethnic performers or souvenir vendors in a burgeoning tourism market. Some became itinerant bird catchers to supply game meat to exotic-themed urban restaurants. A few went to high schools or technical academies to continue formal schooling. The majority of them became migrant workers laboring on factory floors in the bustling coastal cities. The various life courses reflect the ways youth interpret the "educational" and "development" mantra, and their practical adaptations in the face of changing rural ecology. Despite that such adaptations oftentimes remain bounded in the national modernization agenda, they nonetheless rupture the normative frame of the "modern" and suggest the limit-points of schooling.

As a polemic site and sensitive barometer of social, economic, and cultural agendas, occupying an educational and developmental crossroads, village schools in Qiandongnan continue to be involved in both local and translocal struggles. It is as much a complex process of cultural production as part of an ecological landscape linking rural ethnic residents with national discourse, provincial agendas, and local aspirations to produce contending ideas about what it means to be educated, mobile, and living a good life. In a way, to understand the disenchantment and dilemmas facing rural minority communities like Majiang and Longxing is to

understand the ecology of rural China and the complicated governing dynamics that both promote and strangle village schools. The state-ordered developmental complex, along with its harnessing of education as the *modus operandi* of modernization, has mobilized these governing dynamics to come together in complex ways.

Much like the mosaic milange of the contemporary Chinese society, its educational system has been interwoven with cacophonies and fractions. While a palpable educational desire envelops urban China in a mad race towards social prestige and elitism, education remains an elusive ideal for many others who find themselves ensnared in the besieged site of the school and prepared only for factory sweatshops. Despite the state's unrelenting efforts to compulsorize basic education, despite China's centuries-old Confucian ideology that puts high premium on learning, and despite the cherished folk belief in obtaining the ultimate social status of scholar-officialdom through academic success (*xue er you ze shi*), this study illustrates the disjointed and tension-ridden nature of education.

Specifically, I adopt an ecological-discursive approach that suggests the permeability of the school as embedded in the cultural-economic-social landscape of rural China and rife with pedagogical tensions, push and pull, movement and stickiness. I borrow what Mary Louise Pratt 2008[1992]) has called "contact zone" (also see James Clifford 1997) to think about the frictions of educational agendas with economic imperatives, market incentives, and state intervention, and the co-presence of teachers, students, village residents, merchants, and bureaucrats in crafting the pedagogical, economic and social order. Such approach views the dilemmas of China's rural ethnic education as an ecological fiasco with conflicting modes of reasoning and governing.

Contemporary Chinese society is like a gigantic truck stumbling on a potholed road; its speedy advancement often comes at the expense of such ecological-social frictions. In a sense,

I'm not entirely interested in the description of things taken to be features of such frictions. The phenomenological aspect of the dilemmas cannot fully furnish the ground for its own emergence; it is, rather, facilitated and limited by discursive frame of relations and norms, compulsory techniques, and the particular historical and social contingencies. I have tried to intertwine historiographic perspective and genealogical sensibility into the ethnography in a hope to illustrate the conditions of possibility in which problems and dilemmas are discursively normalized.

An inquiry into the uneven topography of rural ethnic schooling contests the pedagogical universalism and reveals unsettling lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2003) as limit-points of schooling. While public education harnesses the secular-rational missions of social progress and nation building,³ massive dropout and widespread disenchantment provides a counter-discourse that interprets the compulsory state technology as a fragile attempt at social progress. Instead of merely assigning blames on such issues as misallocation of funds, exam-orientation, poorly trained and underpaid teachers, mismatch of curriculum, decrepit infrastructure, dropout, parental non-cooperation and discontent—canonized critique long acknowledged by the state and the general public at large—this inquiry points at the very compulsory, progressive ideals and teleological visions at work in China's educational programming under which such critique becomes intelligible. The work in these pages, I hope, demonstrates that different orientations, anxieties, and strategies can enter to rupture the singular vision and emancipatory ideal of compulsory schooling in China, one of the most fascinatingly complex social settings in the 21st century.

As the dissertation demonstrates, the ecology of rural schooling is penetrated by myriad compulsory technologies that are dispersed in today's China, insinuating themselves

³ Elsewhere, Stambach (2010) offers a telling account of how the secular-rational motive of social and economic progress encounters and contests American Christian evangelicalism in East African schools (Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda).

everywhere tacitly and obscurely, oftentimes couched in liberatory narratives of equity, modernization and social progress. Embedded within China's deep-seated gospel of reform and change, the compulsory technologies are not merely decreed by the state, but part of the discursive apparatuses that travel across global timespace as cosmopolitan signifiers and as the microphysics to order what is possible to be seen and thought about. Rural schooling is the sensitive reflector of larger social processes par excellence and the lens through which I investigate broader issues of school reforms, ethnic politics, migration, citizenship, and globalization, a scope that reaches beyond the immediate case of China.

This dissertation does not attempt at an exhaustive account of the status quo of Chinese rural ethnic education. Situated on the mercury edge between rural backwardness and ethnic exoticness, Majiang and Longxing are not "typical" communities in China's countryside. Arguments made here should not be extrapolated to apply to other rural ethnic communities, as sociocultural idiosyncrasies render each a unique case. Not only is generalization impossible across communities, even within the same village, families and individuals narrate similar yet different, sometimes contradictory, stories.

On the other hand, when my informants queried about what I had discovered in my research, I often joked that I had found very little new. Despite my tongue-in-cheek rejoinder, in a sense, the ethnographic journey was in many ways, to echo anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1987), a deepening of the familiar rather than the discovery of the "exotic." By "deepening of the familiar," I do not mean to have recycled the familiar repertoire of analytics necessarily afforded by my training in the "West." What I present in this work is in a sense not entirely unique as it is a particular iteration of a set of familiar themes increasingly prevalent on a national and even global scale. Like many other beleaguered communities around the world, the villages in this study are at once incorporated and marginalized, integrated and minoritized;

and its people are entangled in the grand scheme of modernization, traversing social imaginaries through encounters and movements. Despite the cultural specificities in these two communities, the governing techniques and pedagogical struggles are also characteristic in other parts of rural areas, if not also throughout much of the rest of China. That schooling is one of the most powerful forces at once motivating and constraining, and a contested site of discordance, disenchantment, and contradiction has also been, to a large extent, a common theme across the global timespace.

Implications and Ethical Undecidability

Finally, when it comes to the inevitable question of “so what,” “why do we care,” and policy implications, it raises difficult questions as to what ethics entails. As Foucault reminds us, there is more than one proper sense of ethics and one permissible kind of social justice, which may disburden educational research from having to remain fastened to the instrumental/pragmatic concern about “what to do on Monday” and “what to recommend to policymakers.”

My position is that it is not up to us [scholar-intellectuals] to propose. As soon as one ‘proposes’—one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination. What we have to present are instruments and tools that people might find useful. By forming groups specifically to make these analyses, to wage these struggles, by using these instruments for others: this is how, in the end, possibilities open up. But if the intellectual starts playing once again the role that he has played for a hundred and fifty years—that of prophet in relation to what ‘must be,’ to what ‘must take place’—these effects of domination will return and we shall have other ideologies, functioning in the same way (1988: 197).

As I charted a series of chapters, I may have laid down some preliminary markers for further debates and investigation, but I have tried to avoid formulaic diagnosis and prescription as such practices often rehearse the very ontological discourse being critiqued. The boundaries between chapters are contestable and provisional. The proliferation of “events” militates against the closure of neat partitioning and troubles the certitude of “data” as objective snapshots of reality or as revelational of social patterns and structures. As no event is simplistic enough to be fixated in writing, writing is always already an incomplete project.

The quotidian life-world of the ethnic countryside and the everyday tactics, creativity, and maneuverings in and out of school present an experiential and existential flux that can never be fully captured by the “authorial” text. It is not a narrative that can be told from an analytical distance with the grand dichotomies of center/margin, self/other, here/the not-yet-here, but a story that moves in fits and starts, thrives on undecidable tensions, and begins over and again without hastening towards an end. An expansive notion of the “ethnographic” and its “ambivalence” that James Clifford (2003) speaks about begets an open-ended, unsettling story. Farquhar also argues, “If the object body is to be put in motion and the living, experiencing body is to be addressed in histories that go beyond area studies or ‘out of the way’ places, the tool kit of ethnography must be expanded” (2002:5).

In writing, I struggle with the tenacity of western analytical inventory —that my own studentship in North American has undoubtedly harnessed in me—as a form through which Chinese discourse (and more particularly, Miao and Dong discourse) necessarily appear. In a similar vein, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern puts, “I am constrained by the fact that there is, of course, no ‘Melanesia case’ that is not a Western projection’ (1992:75), speaking about the weight Western imagination exerts on her work in Melanesia.

Ethnography belongs to a broader genre of social history, whose enduring, positivistic accounts of “things and words” reveal forms of historiography. Life-worlds become recognizable only through conceptual and linguistic mediation. In this monograph, I pay close attention to performative modes of words or utterances that have led to particular iteration and interpretation of an event. I have tried to situate linguistic analyses within a historical system of intelligibility. For instance, the genre of practice termed “eating bitterness” discussed in this research (as well as other keywords such as *suzhi* and harmony) is cast in the diachronic and synchronic relationship between its historical usage and its present appropriation, and the ways in which the semantics and linguistic forms continue to mutate, adjust, and evolve.

Most importantly, what questions can I ask, with or without the received notions, precepts, and intellectual analytics that my academic training affords me; how far could I go with such approaches, metaphors, theories to see what they open and enclose and at what point they fall apart, and to come to terms with the historically rich, emergent, non-reductive accounts, something that we don’t yet know what to call? What would I produce instead, if I were to draw comic strips rather than an academic manuscript? Would such temporary abeyance from a language of entities/entification and a subject-centered prism produce messy, unclear answers to research findings? These are sources of discomfort and anxieties I live with throughout the writing.

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