

Introduction

As a formal institution of socialization, education is necessarily also co-responsible for and engaged in sociocultural socialization, i.e., in socialization for ethnic membership and for ethnic consciousness. The elementary school's social studies curriculum, with its emphasis on national history, civics and geography, not to mention its rituals (salutes to the flag, patriotic assembly programs and commemorations of national holidays and great leaders), is essentially an explicit and implicit course in mainstream ethnic socialization or resocialization. Mainstream education is also an arena for the discussion and explication of values and moral issues, of national virtues and dilemmas, of national accomplishments and shortcomings, of supra-national dedication, aspiration and concern.

—Joshua A. Fishman

Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective

Since the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), many Chinese leaders and intellectuals have regarded institutionalized education as a means of integrating, controlling, and civilizing the various peoples who inhabit the border or peripheral regions of what was the empire, then the Republic, and now is the People's Republic of China (PRC). Especially since the reform period in the 1980s, the Chinese government has paid increasing attention to development of education among the peoples now officially classified as non-Han, the so-called minority ethnic groups (*shaoshu minzu*). In spite of government attempts to spread school education after 1949, many minority areas are still characterized by low levels of school enrollment and educational attainment. Strengthened school education among the non-Han peoples living in the vast border regions of China is now put forward as the precondition for successful

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modernization of their economy. No less significant is the belief that mass education is the most efficient and extensive medium for promoting, and ultimately ensuring, integration of ethnic minorities into the Chinese state. Via the state-controlled educational system, the government seeks to transmit the message of national commitment, love of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and cultural homogeneity. Therefore, patriotic education (*aiguozhuyi jiaoyu*) is especially high on the state's agenda for non-Han peoples living in the border areas. It preaches the common history of all ethnic groups within China since the legendary Yellow Emperor, and the common political, economic, and cultural interests of all people in the PRC. Thus, it promotes the idea of one "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*), as a common denominator for all fifty-six officially recognized *minzu* ("nationalities").¹

Chinese state education attempts to achieve a high degree of cultural and political homogenization for several reasons: to make communication possible among different parts of the country, to ensure the integration of peripheral areas into the Chinese state, to promote patriotism and loyalty to the CCP, and, in a broader sense, to "improve the quality" of or to "civilize" the presumably more "backward" parts of the population. These include most of the minority *minzu*, whose languages, cultural practices, and economic life are often described in Chinese media and publications as obstructing the development and modernization of the areas they inhabit. *Lessons in Being Chinese* explores how Chinese education attempts to mainstream ethnic minorities with regard to language, religion, interpretation of history, and, consequently, ethnic identification. Through the educational system powerful interpretations of what it means and implies to belong to a minority *minzu* in China are transmitted as facts beyond dispute. The national school system's representations of ethnic entities and ethnicities in China are not open to discussion or alternative interpretation in the classroom. Minority students therefore must relate to, consider, or in other ways take into account these powerful representations of themselves. My main focus is on these repre-

1. Throughout the text I use the term *minzu* rather than the standard PRC translation "nationalities" in reference to China's fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups, including the Han and the fifty-five minorities. However, the term *minzu* in China is often used to imply only the minority *minzu* (*shaoshu minzu*). In such cases I translate *minzu* as "minority" (e.g., "minority education" [*minzu jiaoyu*] and "minority school" [*minzu xuexiao*]).

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sentations and on the *responses* that state education produces in terms of ethnic identification: the degree to which education succeeds in forming national sentiment and eliminating or reducing ethnicity, and *why* different people respond the way they do. I have asked, and attempt to answer, three main questions: What do minority students in China learn about themselves as members of an ethnic group during their education? Why does standardized education, aimed at achieving a high degree of cultural homogenization, produce profoundly different reactions in terms of ethnic identity among different ethnic groups? And what role does education then actually play in directing and forming ethnic and national identities? I argue that the Chinese government's and most educators' belief in the school as an institution capable of controlling the transformation of minorities' cultural values and eliminating ethnic identities is exaggerated. For most ethnic minorities in China, school education is entirely based upon Chinese language and history. It leaves no room for the transmission of cultural values that might contradict the state's interpretation of nationalism, atheism, and the common interests of multi-ethnic China. However, by denying the significance of the minorities' own languages, histories, religions, and cultural values, education sometimes strengthens focus on ethnic identity.

The central and provincial governments in China have suggested and implemented various methods to increase school attendance and accomplish basic compulsory education among the minority *minzu*, such as establishment of special (mostly boarding) minority schools, experiments with bilingual education, introduction of locally edited teaching materials, and easier access for non-Han students to higher education. Very often, though, government proposals and even regulations concerning special minority education are carried out only half-heartedly, either because they are rejected by local cadres or because the government fails to provide sufficient economic support. Frequently, financial difficulties dictate the educational practice in a local area, and many special programs come to serve primarily as superficial demonstrations of good-will, such as bilingual education's affirmation of minorities' principal rights to develop their own languages. Especially in areas where most educators are Han and the level of integration is low, many cadres controlling the minority education fear that extensive experiments inevitably will result in increased ethnic diversity and identities. The general attitude among these cadres and among many Han teachers and Party and government lead-

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ers is that the Chinese school has a positive civilizing effect on what is so often regarded as the culturally and economically “backward” (*luobou*) minorities.

The outcome of an education that succeeds in significantly raising the educational level of a minority group might well result in an increasing focus on ethnic identity, formulation of local political demands, and introduction of alternative forms of education. Even in the Chinese school system, where most non-Han students have to disassociate themselves from their cultural heritage in order to be successful, the influence of education on ethnic identity is to a certain extent unpredictable and depends on external factors such as the level of the group’s political and cultural integration into the Chinese state, the degree to which it perceives Chinese school education to be advantageous, local educational history, religion, cross-border ethnic contacts, and economic development. Obviously, education is only one of many factors that influence ethnic identity, and it is impossible to isolate it. However, by looking into the aspects of education that are most directly related to ethnic identification and categorization, this book discusses the impact of education on the changing forms, contents, and expressions of ethnic identity among ethnic minorities in China.

When promoting the education of minority *minzu* with the combined purposes of modernizing the economy and ensuring integration and “ethnic amalgamation” (*ronghe*), the Chinese government faces the paradox that successful minority education sometimes leads to increased ethnic demands. On the other hand, failed attempts to spread education could cause an ethnic group to support local alternative education with the consequence of further alienation from the Han majority and the Chinese state. In either case, the mission of achieving cultural homogenization and “ethnic melting” through education is not accomplished. There is, however, a significant difference between the form and content of ethnicity that develops from (though not necessarily originates in) education and that which is strengthened among people who are excluded from education. The spokesmen for a revival of ethnic identity who have themselves participated in state education are better able to express and make themselves heard within the context of the state. Their ethnic identity might have been strengthened through a basically assimilative education, but, unlike those who have been excluded from state education, they have been provided with the means to strategically formulate their ethnic demands within the politically acceptable framework.

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Lessons in Being Chinese is based mainly upon data collected during fieldwork in two autonomous areas in Yunnan Province and among two ethnic minorities: the Tai (Dai) in Sipsong Panna (Xishuangbanna) Tai (Dai) Autonomous Prefecture and the Naxi in Lijiang Naxi Nationality Autonomous County. These two groups have different histories and experiences of Chinese education and equally distinct reactions to and perceptions of this education. Also included in the discussion are the Akha (officially classified as part of the Hani *minzu*) and Jinuo of Sipsong Panna, who were previously under the rule of the Tai king and government. In education and response to education, these two groups have much in common because of their historical relationship to the Tai in the Sipsong Panna area. The Akha and Jinuo provide an example of a third way of responding to Chinese minority education.

The Chinese government and its civilizing envoys have not been able to spread and popularize Chinese education efficiently among the Tai in Sipsong Panna. One important reason is that most Tai fail to see any significant economic or social advantage in spending money on school education. Another reason is that the content and form of state education is in direct opposition to the traditional Tai Buddhist education of monks and to Tai values in general. The Tai in Sipsong Panna historically made up a nation separate from the Chinese empire (Hsieh 1995), and it was only in the 1920s that the area effectively became an integrated part of China. The Chinese system of education was introduced in 1911, and Chinese schools became widespread in the area only after 1949. In many respects Chinese education in Sipsong Panna resembles the education established by colonial powers for indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. The few Tai who pass through the school system need to alienate themselves from their cultural heritage (their religion, language, and history, in particular) in order to be successful. In this respect education has an assimilative effect, but only on the few. For most Tai, Chinese education has little direct bearing on their ethnic identity and cultural practices simply because they do not participate in it. This also means that they are deprived of the possibility of gaining influence in a political system that is based entirely upon Chinese language and on cultural values different from their own. If the government wanted to reverse this tendency, it would have to make education directly relevant to and clearly advantageous for the Tai, in which case most local educators would feel that they were supporting the already-strong Tai ethnicity rather than promoting ethnic amalgamation and

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unity. Neither the government nor local educators are prepared to run this risk. As a result, an increasing number of Tai seek instead to extend their own traditional temple education and their cultural and economic contacts with other Tai in Thailand. These contacts support them in their religious belief and prove to them that their language and script are useful in a modernizing society, even though they are apparently worthless in the present-day Chinese state.

The Akha make up the third-largest ethnic group (after the Tai and the Han) in Sipsong Panna. They were historically regarded as inferior by the Tai, and today the two groups rarely intermarry or have close social relations. The same applies to the Jinuo, who, like the Akha, live higher up in the mountains. These groups do not have their own script, and Chinese education has developed slowly in their villages. However, whereas many Tai tend to reject Chinese education because it forces them to assimilate to mainstream cultural practices and reject their own language, religion, and history without offering economic or social advantages, these much poorer minorities from the mountains may find in Chinese education a way to escape hard labor in the villages, to occupy more important and influential positions in society, and thereby also to reject their historical subordination to the Tai. This partly explains why the Akha and Jinuo students appear, at least for the time being, to more easily accept that they learn only Chinese in school and not their own language, and to accept the school's representation of them as members of a backward group. Participation in Chinese education is thus in some respects a way of combating traditionally low status in the local ethnic hierarchy.

The situation for the Naxi is strikingly different. Except in the poorest villages, education among the Naxi in Lijiang has been successful in that most Naxi nowadays complete primary school (*xiaoxue*), and many continue on to junior secondary school (*chuzhong*). The number of students in senior secondary school (*gaozhong*) and college is as high as the average of the Han and higher than that of most other minorities. Many high cadres and influential researchers and teachers today are Naxi, even at the provincial level. Han and Naxi researchers alike agree that the early establishment of Confucian education and the long history of Han influence in Lijiang has facilitated this development. Unlike Sipsong Panna, Lijiang has for a very long time been an integrated, though peripheral, part of the Chinese empire and in recent

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history has not constituted a separate nation. The content of education in Lijiang today—with its focus on Han history and language, nationalism, and Communist political training—does not deviate from the standard of the rest of China, and Naxi parents' complaints about their high educational expenses and the lack of technical or agricultural training for their children are similar to those in many rural Han areas. Generally, the state-controlled education in Lijiang is perceived by the Naxi as “their own,” not as a foreign institution imposed to civilize or change them. Success in Chinese education—whether Confucian, Nationalist, or Communist—in fact constitutes an important part of many Naxis' ethnic self-perception today. In the last five years especially, the Naxi have shown a remarkable talent for expressing their own increased concern for preserving and reviving ethnic characteristics while utilizing a common Naxi identity to extend their own local political influence in areas such as education. This tendency is perhaps best illustrated by the well-trained Naxi Party cadres who are now not only calling for extended research on Naxi history and culture, but are themselves playing a central role in reviving previously vilified religious rituals. This was certainly not the Chinese state's intent in spreading education among non-Han peoples. The main point here is that successful education of the Naxi has unintentionally and unexpectedly supported their ability to develop a stronger common Naxi identity and to formulate their ethnic demands within the context of the state. Paradoxically, an education denying the value of Naxi traditions, religion, language, and history, and aimed at facilitating the disappearance of ethnic entities, has provided the Naxi with a voice and a means to express themselves as an ethnic minority in the People's Republic of China without threatening the political system.

RESEARCH

If there is no such thing as a perfect translation or interpretation, there are still better, worse and idiotic ones.

—Mark Hobart

“Summer's Days and Salad Days”

The focus on local practices and perceptions of education and on the relationship between state education and processes of ethnic identity has to a

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large extent determined my primary research methods: interviews, participation in local events, sitting in on classes, and preparatory documentary work. Fieldwork was carried out between 1994 and 1996 in Sipsong Panna, Lijiang, and Kunming. During the main part of the fieldwork, between July 1994 and September 1995, I conducted 173 formal interviews, sat in on twenty-two classes in two middle schools (*zhongxue*), talked informally to many other people, and participated in local events such as weddings, festivals, family celebrations, competitions in schools, and other school activities.

Formal interviews constituted a significant part of the fieldwork, and analysis of them has been crucial to the interpretations presented here. The interviews were formal in the sense that the interviewees were specifically told that they were participating in an interview and the purpose of the interview. Usually only the interviewee, my assistant *peitong* (an officially approved and obligatory assistant provided by my host organization), and I were present. When interviewees spoke Chinese, interviews were conducted in Chinese. Otherwise they were conducted in Tai or Naxi through the assistants' interpretation. Sometimes villagers would gather to listen, or students who shared the dormitory of an interviewee would be present. Sometimes I interviewed two or three students or teachers together. Occasionally the interview developed into an interesting discussion between students, sometimes of different ethnic groups, or between villagers. Whereas some interviewees were deliberately selected (headmasters, representatives of education commissions, researchers who had written about education or ethnicity among Naxi and Tai, etc.), most were randomly chosen according to the focus of the research: I wanted to interview schoolteachers, present and former students, parents of students, people who had never participated in education, and people (for instance monks) who were part of a learning institution outside the state-controlled schools. I also wanted to interview people from different age groups, preferably equally balanced between male and female, and from villages as well as from county capitals. In spite of my intention to avoid gender bias, I ended up interviewing more female than male students, parents, and peasants. Male students were often rather timid talking to me, and even more so with my local female assistants of approximately their age. The interviews with female students more often developed into discussions or gossiping among several students or into dialogues. However, almost all interviewed government and Party cadres and heads of schools were male, since very few women occu-

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ped these powerful positions. I also interviewed a number of old people to get an impression of life in the schools before the Communist period began in 1949. The historical chapters in this volume are to a large extent informed by the presentations of these interviewees, many of whom had experienced education in recent years as well as in earlier periods.

The purpose of the interviews with representatives of government departments was to get information about local government policy and attitudes toward the education of minorities. When interviewing school headmasters I tried to get basic information about schools (ethnicity of students and teachers, differences among *minzu* in terms of enrollment and achievement, and specific measures for educating minorities) and to let them tell about their own experiences in education and their own attitudes toward minority education. In interviews with all—students, teachers, parents, peasants, old, and young—I first asked a set of “closed” questions (e.g., age, parents’ occupations, level of education, participation in specific religious activities, knowledge of spoken and written languages, ethnicity of best friends) and then a number of “open” questions that prompted the interviewee to tell about school experiences, attitude toward family, cultural practices at home, religious belief, relationships with other *minzu*, hopes for the future, and so on. Each interview lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours, and many of the interviewees were interviewed several times.

During my fieldwork I sat in on twenty-two classroom hours of politics and history, as well as some geography and Tai-language training. Teachers very rarely deviated from what was written in the textbooks, which I could read for myself. However, it was very informative to observe which topics and contents the teacher emphasized and which sentences she asked the class to learn by heart and read out loud. Even after I stopped sitting in on classes, I continued to participate in special events at the schools, such as speech competitions with the subject of patriotism and various celebrations for which students wore minority costumes to dance and perform. All of these activities were important parts of the school as an institution concerned with establishing the nation as a common denominator and point of identification for all citizens of the People’s Republic of China.

The task of processing interviews is of course always deeply influenced by the researcher’s own experiences, analytic abilities, involvement in the project, and attitude toward the subject. My goal in interpreting what I was told

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during the interviews, what I saw and heard during my time in the field, and what I read in the textbooks was to draw a picture of how state education directs or influences ethnic identity. Obviously, the interviewees decided which story to tell in each situation and which things to omit. My role as an officially approved researcher with an assistant sometimes made people feel relaxed in the interview situation because they felt sure that what I was doing and asking was officially approved. But it also sometimes prevented people from telling me in detail about politically sensitive aspects of religious and ethnic identity. I consciously chose interviewing, rather than relying on participant observation alone, because I was particularly interested in the ways people would choose to tell about their educational experiences (or sometimes lack of same), the things they had learned about themselves in school, and their memories of the content of education related to the constructions of the Han, minority *minzu*, and the Chinese nation and the relations among them. My own attempt to understand more about, and account for, the relationship between the powerful Chinese discourse of *minzu* and local processes of ethnic identity is based on my interpretation of these stories. As Mark Hobart writes, “Sharing language, in the sense of using the same words (or ‘tokens’), does not entail people extracting the same meanings from them—if indeed they extract meaning at all—any more than they represent things in the same way” (Hobart 1987: 36). This insight does not rule out the possibility of providing interpretations based on thorough data. It merely opens them up to conflicting views and alternative translations—an acknowledgment of the fact that no descriptions are exclusively true since one can hope only to tell how *a* world is, not how *the* world is (Goodman 1972: 31).

TRANSCRIPTIONS OF FOREIGN TERMS

Most Chinese terms are transcribed in the standard pinyin form, and their corresponding characters are listed in the Glossary. Some names of places, people, and ethnic groups are transcribed in their most widely accepted Anglicized form (e.g., Tibet, Manchu, Mongol, Sun Yat-sen). Other ethnic groups are transcribed in ways that best reflect their self-appellation (e.g., “Premi” instead of the pinyin form “Pumi”). The most commonly used romanized transcription for the Tai people is “Tai” which is pronounced in the same way as the Chinese pinyin transcription “Dai.” As with all Tai terms, I pre-

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fer the transcriptions that are modified on the basis of Standard Thai transcription (and are commonly used in publications such as the *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*), and therefore the area in which the Tai discussed in this book live is called “Sipsong Panna” rather than the Chinese form “Xishuangbanna.” Other Tai terms are transcribed in accordance with those commonly used by scholars with a profound knowledge of Tai languages. Concerning Naxi terms, I use the Chinese term *dongba* for the name of the Naxi ritual specialists rather than the Naxi romanized transcription *dobbaq*. The reason for this is that Naxi intellectuals, as well as Chinese and foreign researchers, tend to prefer this form, especially in the phrase “*dongba* culture” (*dongba wenhua*).