Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccom20

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Jinting Wu

Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Published online: 03 Apr 2012.

To cite this article: Jinting Wu (2012): Disenchantment and participatory limits of compulsory education: lessons from Southwest China, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 42:4, 621-645

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.672254

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Disenchantment and participatory limits of compulsory education: lessons from Southwest China

Jinting Wu*

Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Despite the state’s unrelenting efforts to enforce compulsory basic education, schooling in rural ethnic China remains an elusive ideal that leads to massive dropout and prepares many only for factory sweatshops. Based on 16 months of ethnographic research, this article examines the disjunction between the official education policy known as the Two Basics Project (TBP) and the lived practices and beliefs observed in two rural ethnic communities. It investigates how students’ disenchantment and withdrawal from school challenges compulsory education as a fragile universalist attempt at social progress. 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.

Keywords: compulsory education; universal literacy; disenchantment; dropout; rural ethnic China

Introduction

In today’s China, education is virtually on everybody’s lips: urban parents vie to enrol their children in various extracurricular activities to cultivate in them fine manners and dispositions;1 metropolitan residents invest hefty in their children’s summer camps abroad to plot a head-start in their educational portfolio as world citizens;2 China celebrated its stellar performance in a recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), where it outshone all other participating countries in math, reading and science and continued to stun its Western counterparts with relentless educational progress.3 Portrayed in journalist accounts’ broad strokes, China is touted to have achieved an educational miracle: a 99% literacy rate, high mass participation at all levels of schooling and remarkable achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.4 With the discourse of ‘China Rising’, education is upheld as the gateway to the country’s continual prosperity and potency, as a signature ‘soft’ landmark of a globalizing China.

*Email: jintingw@gmail.com
Yet, such triumphalism obscures as much as 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 global competition, an educational craze is turning affluent urban China into a mad race towards elitism (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. In a society that puts premium value on knowledge-based economy where the urban scramble for education is palpable, there is, paradoxically, a noticeable ambivalence and aversion towards schooling, as well as a high attrition/dropout rate, among rural minority students. In Southwest China’s Miao and Dong villages where I conducted this research, over 30% of middle school students drop out before completing ninth grade, often with tacit parental consent, even when the state law stipulates that basic education (Grade 1–9) is free and compulsory.

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 enforce compulsory basic education? What happened to the cherished folk belief in obtaining the ultimate social status of scholar-officialdom through education? The ethos of disenchantment towards schooling is not only a central puzzle of this study, but also underpins a growing corpus of comparative education studies around the world (Aronowitz 2001; Rifkin 1995; Willis 2003). The disenchantment cannot be explained as simply an issue of inequality, nor is it sufficient to debunk the school-to-the-social-rescue ideology, because school remains a most significant institution in people’s life, though it is far from being the singular pedagogical site.

Therefore, I take an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner 1993) to examining the school as a contact zone rife with tensions in the broad cultural–economic–social horizon. The notion ‘ecology’ is particularly fruitful in the analysis of the changing conditions of rural China and how environmental forces at the micro, meso and macro levels, including personal, familial, cultural, socio-economic and policy factors, shape the processes and outcomes of schooling. What constitutes schooling is part of a complicated ecology that brings different stakeholders, resources and agendas into productive friction.

In this article, I focus on one facet of the ecology of schooling, namely the state’s compulsory education policy known as the Two Basics/Fundamentals Project (TBP). I 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. This article is part of a larger study that aims to understand the educational dilemmas facing rural Miao and Dong students in Southwest China, as their schooling is multiply entangled in state modernization agendas.
As a society with an ostensible educational success, China provides an apt analytic opportunity to investigate the hidden contestations of compulsory schooling. Instead of recycling the canonized critique of China’s rural ethnic education—such as misallocation of funds, exam orientation, poorly trained and underpaid teachers, mismatch of curriculum, decrepit infrastructure, dropout, parental non-cooperation—this inquiry points at the very compulsory, progressive ideals and teleological visions in China’s educational programming, under which such critique becomes intelligible.

Method and data
I carried out the main part of my fieldwork in 16 months between 2009 and 2010, in two village-towns called Majiang and Longxing (pseudonyms) that are resided respectively by the Miao and Dong people and located in Qiandongnan Prefecture of Guizhou Province. 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 (1994, 206) notes, pianpi, for one, denotes a physical inaccessibility, and for another, a developmental chasm of the stigmatized site 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.

In media portraits, both the Miao and the Dong are ancient nationalities who are industrious, hospitable and patriotic, whose distinctive cultural ‘authenticity’ (yuanshengtai) is packaged for tourism consumption. Both peoples depend upon subsistence agriculture of wet-rice cultivation, animal husbandry and artisanal occupations such as carpentry and stone masonry. In recent decades, subsistence farming has been supplemented by factory work, logging and tourism.

Two pilot studies conducted in 2006 and 2007 led to the careful selection of Majiang and Longxing as my field sites for a number of reasons, including their comparable size, compatible folk customs, equivalent pattern of labour migration, commensurate popularity as tourist destinations, similar development strategies and, most importantly, homologous educational policies. This offers valuable comparative advantage to verify findings in similar settings.

Each village has a primary school and a middle school. The main part of my participant observation occurred at the middle schools, where I served 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. Considerable amounts of effort were spent on learning the Miao and Dong languages, through which I established rapport and trust with the locals and gained conversational fluency.
I situate the study in places – classrooms, school compounds, village markets, performance stages, rice fields, drum towers, roofed-bridges, restaurant dining rooms, factory floors – that are not self-evident locations for a typical ‘school ethnography’. I was able to fully participate in community events such as meals, 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, local politics and patterns of meaning making. Besides participant observation, the analysis also draws on interviews (unstructured and semi-structured), oral history, policy and media documents, and archives.

**Ethnographic context**

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 acres of flat land, three days of fine weather, or three cents to rub together’. Depicted as the ‘Kingdom of Mountains’, Guizhou is known for its inhospitable topography, unpacified non-Han residents, mystifying indigenous lifeways and harsh mountain climate and living conditions. In 2001, per capita annual income for farmers in Guizhou was RMB1412 (USD200), 62.3% of the national average. Middle school and high school enrolment rates in the province, 65.4% and 57.6% respectively, were also among the lowest in China (Zou 2009, 25). The image presented in the popular wisdom and social science reports is a constant nuisance to local Guizhounese who, for decades, have put a high premium on modernization, in sync with the more recent national scheme of the Grand Development of the West.

If Guizhou is considered a peripheral member of the prospering China, Qiandongnan is more decidedly constructed as a remote, primitive and exotic agrarian enclave, the classic ‘out-of-the-way’ place (Tsing 1993). The poignant anxiety to catch up has shaped multiple pro-growth strategies, including compulsory education, tourism promotion, road construction, as well as the granting of preferential rural policies. Such strategies are centred on particular problematization of the rural and the ethnic through prevalent social categories (such as poverty, illiteracy, traditionalism) produced in a technorational language of social science and inserted into the governing horizon of the Chinese state.

Firstly, tourism is upheld as pivotal to the making of a forward-moving, forward-looking Qiandongnan. Due to the recent tourism boom, both Majiang and Longxing have become the most visited places in Qiandongnan and the socio-economic hubs for the surrounding region. Under the auspices of the National Tourism Administration and the Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau, funds have been allocated to recast Majiang and Longxing through a
new face-lift. With media packaging, both villages have attracted considerable public attention as the hit stories of tourism success. Tourism has expanded the horizon of the good life, especially for the young who pursue pleasure, novelty and material satisfaction through the new burgeoning market.

Secondly, during my fieldwork, an inter-provincial highway and a cross-regional railroad were under construction, passing through Longxing and surrounding villages, 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’ – depicting the importance of road connectivity in wealth generation. State-sponsored road projects have brought influx of tourists, whetted the locals’ appetite for a cash economy, and sped up a new wave of rural-to-urban labour migration. It is estimated that almost 90% of the households in both of my field sites have at one point or another experienced labour migration in the past two decades, seeking jobs in urban construction sites, restaurants, factories and domestic chambers. Many of the young migrants are recent middle school graduates or dropouts.

Thirdly, education is heralded as the ticket out of poverty. High level of illiteracy and low retention rate (with secondary school enrolment in Guizhou among the lowest in China; see Zou [2009, 25]) are seen as ruptures of China’s educational modernity. Travelling in Qiandongnan, one often see bulletin boards displaying propaganda messages such as ‘Today’s education is tomorrow’s economy’; ‘Today’s dropout is tomorrow’s poverty’. Slogans written in such didactic vein are hypervisible across the countryside, constituting a particular way of seeing, and preaching portable remedies by the party-state.

The pragmatic logic of ‘education for development’ is promoted via the project of wenhua fazhan (cultural development) with a double register. The first task of the project is to capitalize on ethnic culture and heritage for tourism promotion, 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’. Having been schooled, a person is labelled as one with culture; conversely, unschooled, a person is viewed as one without culture. Here, the mode of wenhua fazhan draws on two subtle appropriation of culture, one as exploitable resources to enact tourism ‘authenticity’, the other used to mark the moral-epistemological supremacy of state schooling.

To understand the disenchantment in 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. As much as the school is the educational apparatus of the state (Althusser 1971), social policies symbolize the larger apparatus of power that tempers the effects and meanings of schooling. I will now turn to the discursive practices through which school-
ing is mobilized as a most important 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 propaganda message)

Just as the educational craze speaks to the well-to-do urban parents’ sense of social insecurity,10 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.

Education becomes a ‘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. Even in the remotest villages of Qiandongnan, the school stands as a visible marker of the state’s moral and pedagogical supremacy, such that some argue the school is the state in the village (Li 1999). This can be seen in the weekly national flag-raising ceremony as the salutation to the paramount symbol of the state; the young pioneer initiation when first grade pupils pledge dedication to communism; the learning of national history via a curriculum replete with state-sponsored memories and dictums; and mural exhibition of party slogans that sanction what is thinkable and permissible in the pedagogical space. As Coe (2005, 4) 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.’

**Brief history of China’s compulsory education policies**

Education policies in China are thoroughly wedded to a functionalist premise that links education to economic efficiency, better jobs, greater wealth and social good. The school-to-the-social-rescue model is presented as the ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1980) in which prosperity and schooling are woven into interdependency. If, as Durkheim (1963) contends (see also Yeatman 2001), law indicates social consensus in how the subject is morally and judicially constituted, enforcing compulsory education indexes the interpellation of the child-citizen as a universal rights-bearing subject in service to the nation.
Two themes are constant in China’s educational policies: 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 basic education to all school-age children regardless of gender, ethnicity, region, religion and socioeconomic status.

In 1994, the ‘Outline of Educational Reform and Development’ set 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, 两基)’. Three stages of TBP were specified: the first (1994–1996) involved coastal municipalities that accounted for 40–45% of the population; the second stage (1997–1998) covered the medium-range developed regions, about 20–25% of the population; the third and the last stage (1999–2000) targeted the least prosperous parts of the country, roughly 15% of the population concentrated in western inland regions. Affluent coastal provinces located around the two burgeoning economic zones (the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta) took universal junior secondary education (pujiiu 普九) by flying colours 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 issued, a joint initiative by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance was put to effect, entitled the ‘National Project on Compulsory Education in Poor Areas (NPCEPA)’. As the title indicates, it highlights education as an aid programme for poverty reduction. With the first priority given to universal primary education and then universal junior secondary education, NPCEPA was carried out in two phases (1995–2000 and 2001–2005). Some of its measures include providing basic school facilities, training teachers and principals, distributing free textbooks and improving ICT. It also established a regional assistance programme channelling resources from coastal municipalities to inland provinces, and mobilized international donor communities (Zhang and Zhao 2006, 266). Consistent with China’s efforts to build productive labour forces, NPCEPA targets the rural ethnic regions and aims for productivity enhancement and poverty reduction.

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 laboratory equipment, 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 (Dong 2008, 55).

By the beginning of the 2000s, however, TBP did not meet its stated goals and timeline in many 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 and Zhao 2006). In 2006, the ‘Two Exemptions and One Subsidy Policy (liang mian yi bu 两免一补)’ 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.

With the combination of measures, by 2010, when I concluded my fieldwork, after an intense round of national inspection, 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.

**Ambivalence as situated agency**

On a hot and humid summer morning, barely 7 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 now.’

Meanwhile, her parents were unloading vegetables from a second-hand truck they recently purchased. The highway construction had brought workers and project managers to dine and shop at Longxing, which offered cash opportunities for villagers. When I asked the father what he wanted for
Leefang now she was out of school, he sighed with a vacant look. ‘We can’t afford to keep her in school. 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.’

Leefang’s father expressed his disillusionment:

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 social connections (guanxi) to help our kids get jobs. If I keep my daughter in school, she is not going to make it after all. She will still end up working in factories. So why waste the time and the money? We’d rather she started making money now. Besides, schooling makes her lazy and incapable of farm work.

Every day before dawn, Leefang and her parents would set out in the rattling truck towards a neighbouring village to get their wholesale produce, which they would then retail at the Longxing market. Leefang told me if she had her way she would like to have finished ninth grade and gone to a vocational school:

During seventh grade, I could still understand the subjects. Then in eighth grade, they became so difficult. I was placed in the lower track, and sitting through the classes was a torture. We were chasheng (underachievers) and our teachers only cared for students in the higher track.

With teachers focusing on high achievers for maximal test results, learners like Leefang were cast into a category of deficiency. Leefang’s dilemma echoes numerous cases I encountered in Qiandon-gnan. The operative principle is no longer that cash-strapped families strive to provide for their children’s education so that they could have a gainful employment 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).

Leefang’s story\(^\text{12}\) suggests rural ethnic population’s disenchantment with and ‘opting-out’ from state compulsory education, and their embrace of work as a more realistic path to social mobility. In people’s own words, it is highly risky to empty one’s bank account in the vein hope of securing a good life through academic success. Instead of seeing education as the panacea to poverty as the party slogans claimed, they know very well they have little practical chance of continuing beyond the junior middle placement (the Two Basics Project’s catchment grades). They know that to follow the state scheme of schooling, the cost is high and the benefit is unpredictable.

Although dropout has not been a severe concern in primary schools, it is a simmering issue among junior secondary students. Middle schools in
Majiang and Longxing experienced a dropout rate as high as 30%, which complicates the Ministry of Education’s estimates of 11% in rural areas (Moxley 2010). In Longxing Middle School, for instance, the enrolment roster of 2009 recorded a total of 890 students, yet only around 300 were actually attending school. Despite the economistic diagnosis of TBP that attributes dropout primarily to household financial stringency, when I spoke to my interlocutors, a matrix of 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 to marriage, work and family responsibilities.

Firstly, even though villages in Qiandongnan have been granted Two Exemptions and One Subsidy, 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 school (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 experts blame the entrenched system of spoon-feeding, rote learning, and testing as the leading causes of attrition. Despite the government campaign to revitalize the countryside, rural schools continue to deliver an urban-centred, 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.

Thirdly, exam scores do not singularly determine one’s educational trajectory. Guanxi (having proper social connections) serves as an important asset in the Chinese society to help one negotiate with gatekeepers (Kipnis 1997; Yang 1994). Lacking the essential social lubricant guanxi, rural ethnic children are put at a greater disadvantage when navigating education and employment markets.

Fourthly, schooling’s waning relevance to employment is increasingly a national and transnational phenomenon. As Stambach (2010, 186) remarks, ‘American jobs went overseas, educated persons in Africa remained unemployed, and the market for schooled expertise had little or nothing to do with skill, nor even with certification’. In China, similarly, 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 and privatization of higher education, which has drastically increased the number of tertiary graduates far in excess of the employment capacities of the society.

Additionally, with the centralized work assignment system now 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’ that guaranteed lifelong employment with state 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. Now regarded as inefficient, rigid and wasteful of talents, direct job assignment is replaced by the market logic of supply–demand and the self-enterprising ethos (Bray 2005, 179).

Today, many Miao and Dong youth finish school inexperienced for a soil-bound life; nor do they have credentials for salaried jobs in urban centres. Compulsory basic schooling prepares them, mostly, for factory assembly lines where their youthful bodies and dreams are intertwined with China’s 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, what is required is more than simply blaming the victims.

Some ethnic scholars in Qiandongnan offer a telling analogy: ‘For rural ethnic people, to follow the state’s 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 other 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).

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 the learned and knowledgeable would not be taken advantage of. 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 of 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). These names were given by clan elders who had been educated with classic Confucianism in public schools called yixue during the Qing dynasty (Rawski 1979, 57–8). 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 and medical personnel are envied for occupying privileged positions. My own presence as a US-affiliated researcher only amplified the enthusiasm towards schooling, which, for many, could bring people to far-away places, even the fantasy world of North America. Indeed, despite the disenchantment, schooling does open up alternative space for cultural imagining and 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 a 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 after-school tutoring and invest to help their children gain an advantage over their peers. They complain that tourism and commercial encroachment have increasingly marginalized schooling and strangled the cultivation of local talents. 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. 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 the folk 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 ‘indigenous’ cultural logic. In fact, the term ‘indigenous’ is highly contested and associated with official and popular imageries that paint the ethnic people with backward primitivity. The term ‘indigenous’ also invokes a plea for cultural exoticness that nativizes the ‘other’ as befitting a separate frame of reference and consigns them to the waiting room of modernity (Gaonkar 2001). To that end, I use indigenous and folk interchangeably, focusing on the particular, the unassimilatable and the incommensurable.

Abstraction, regimentation and compartmentalization
In the Miao and Dong epistemologies, how one learns about the lands, animals and plants involves a complicated whole of lifeway, rather than through abstract taxonomies. To know is to become competent in worldly existence; knowing is a continual process of becoming; learning, being and becoming are tightly interwoven into organic coherence. Before learning 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 revered experts. Learning took place around cooking stoves, on dinner tables and in the fields, and had little to do with sitting down for gruelling tests. In such a pedagogical mode, learning is intuitive; literacy is extra-linguistic; learning and aesthetic enjoyment become inseparable.

To the 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 worshiping) 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. The guanxi to be carefully maintained is with numerous deities that populate the landscape as wellspring of life energy. The world is seen as relations and connectivity, without strict compartmentalization between the human and nonhuman. This suggests that 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. The logocentric, codified form of school knowledge privileges abstract words that circulate from textbooks to exams. In Qiandongnan’s highland village-hamlets, many children experience maladjustments after moving to township schools, due to regimentation of day schedules and the prolonged confinement in the classroom; some dropped out for an inability to cope with schooling’s temporal algorithm. Heidegger (1999) 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. Similarly, learning through the route of being and unsayability has been largely purged from the technologized, professionalized, managerialized compulsory education scheme.

Ordering adolescence as serialization of life

While the agrarian life is organized around perennial labour 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). Since the turn of the twentieth 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 humankind to be administered, ordered and tamed through comparative standards of social sciences and rules of schooling (Popkewitz 2010).

The fear for mass illiteracy seems to legitimize schooling’s prolongation of adolescence as en-route-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, adolescence occupies a different realm of meanings and is associated with one’s fertility-ready status and household responsibilities. At home, children are more appropriately depicted as miniature adults who undertake ‘full-time’ labour by the age of seven or eight and engage in intra- and inter-familial duties. They acquire basic skills of labour by observing and emulating kinsmen. While treated at school as oversized children whose growth needs to be monitored by incessant testing and tracking, at home students are given adult roles such as attending to household chores, looking after younger siblings and helping out on the rice terraces. The relationship between children and adults and between age and work has not been as distinguishable as marked by the modern-day mass schooling.
In the school’s lexicon, adolescence is a period characterized by emotional immaturity, latent sexuality and behavioural puerility that need to be closely monitored. For instance, students’ body images are subject to strict regulations. Long hair, popular among young females in the Dong and Miao communities, must not be let loose to its full length, as it is seen as too provocative for licentious minds. Dating is strictly forbidden, as adolescents are considered too young to know what love is about.

To the Miao and 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. Upper division secondary students 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 be perpetually suspended in the state of adolescence. For them, schooling extends adolescence too far, puts children into prolonged immaturity, thus inadvertently making them unmarriageable.

In the Miao and Dong communities, marriage has historically functioned as a *rite de passage* indexing the reach of maturity. Early (adolescent) marriages are still practised and to some extent, preferred. Contrary to the individualistic ethos of schooling that espouses one’s self-improvement, marriage is considered an effective strategy to enlarge one’s kinship network and insure against life’s adversarial circumstances. Many dropouts quickly take up the role of parenthood and 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 indigenous 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 indigenous 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.

**Bodies of ‘quality’**

Since neither the Miao nor the Dong have a written form of their language, ancestral history were transmitted primarily through songs and embroideries. Therefore, expertise in such skills constituted desirable personhood and helped a person gain communal respect. Musical virtuosity, in particular, has historically been a very important part of daily life, as songs are repositories of histories, traditions and everyday wisdom. Agricultural information,
legendary tales, melancholic chants, practical advices are all woven into intricate lyrics and melodies. The Dong proverb ‘Foods nurture the body; songs nurture the heart’ well depicts the epistemic order. Ability to sing is a revered character, or a desired ‘literacy’/‘quality’ if one uses the modern educational parlance, which not only helps one gain communal respect but the admiration of the other sex in courtships.

Yet, such ‘qualities’ are no longer emphasized in the modern classroom curricula that are text-based and exam-oriented, urban- and outward-bound, aiming towards the suzhi\textsuperscript{25}/quality citizenry: patriotic and productive, technologically savvy and problem-solving. Singing, embroideries and virtuosity in indigenous instruments were categorically rejected during the modernization campaigns (1950s to 1970s) for their putative irrationality and superstition. Today they 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. What people know, what it means to gain proper skills, and how they relate to the act of knowing are battles waged on an uneven field in which certain conceptions of knowing are favoured over others. 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.

**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’,\textsuperscript{26} compulsory basic education and universal literacy are packaged together in the scheme of TBP. Universal literacy enables the imagining of the nation and 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 stigmatized as illiterate and wenmang (literally translated as ‘character blind’, i.e. unable to read Mandarin characters). Whereas both the Dong and Miao languages exhibit great linguistic nuances, only facility in the dominant official language (Mandarin Chinese) counts as legitimate criteria of social competency. Upheld as the language of independence and sophistication, Mandarin is juxtaposed with the Miao and the Dong that are considered as parochial tongues keeping people in the backwaters of the mountain valley.

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 onwards for all subjects; having lessons in Mandarin contributes to their alienation from school. 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.

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, what is proficient and what is deficient.

**Conclusion: rethinking participatory limits of compulsory education**

As anthropological studies of education across the world have effectively persuaded, public schooling is repositioned amidst contradictions and contestations. Yes, it still sits within the modernist myth that education leads to social mobility, better jobs, greater national success; yes, the scramble for credentials and social reproduction of elitism (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bowles and Gintis 1977) is still widely observed today; yes, schooling in many cases remains the state-driven catalyst for a particular kind of change. Yet, what is also true is that the school is increasingly displaced from the anchor of the education-to-the-social-rescue model, as a discontinuous space within which the child experiences disparate identities and criteria of being. Such experience may bear little resemblance to the modernist state agenda, if not outright contradicting the rationality.

In this article, I hoped to illustrate that 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. Specifically, the article examines the educational disenchantment and massive
dropout in two rural minority schools, in the context of the Two Basics Project. Despite the culturally specific values 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.

Instead of asking what factors lead to the policy failure of TBP—a style of inquiry focusing on problems rather than the conditions of possibility for problematization (Foucault 1990)—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. French philosopher Deleuze (1992, 163) reminds us the universals do not explain anything; instead universals need to be explained. Baker (2010) also argues that provincializing commonsensical concepts, such as literacy, destabilizes pedagogical assumptions and binaries such as literate/illiterate, science/superstition, modern/tradition. The concept of literacy solidifies the nation-state as a priori sovereign of knowing and forecloses the possibility of alterities and ‘a necessary speechlessness that has nothing to do with voice and yet still has plenty to say’ (ibid., 224).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Social Science Research Council and the Morgridge Foundation for their generous funding, which had made the ethnographic research possible.

Notes

1. 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 and compete to enrol their children in private lessons of fine tastes and lifestyle training (French 2006).

2. According to a China Daily article, there are more than 60,000 children who enrol in US summer immersion programmes in 2011, which has become the latest strategy for Chinese parents with overseas ambition (Cheng 2011).


4. 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&crid). According to a report by the UN Statistics Division, China’s adult (15+) literacy rate and youth (15–24) literacy rate were 94% and 99% respectively in year 2009, compared to 59% and 82% respectively in Nepal, 56% and 75% respectively in Bangladesh in the same year (see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/literacy.htm).

5. This folk belief (xue er you ze shi 学而优则仕) is generally associated with the Han nationality. However, as I will explain later on, the value accorded to
learning is also deep-seated in the Miao and Dong cultural beliefs, even before the state definition of ‘learning’ and propagation of formal schooling came into place.

6. In its popular discourse, China proclaims itself a multi-ethnic, unified country with 56 officially identified ethnic groups, including 55 ethnic minorities and one dominant majority, namely the Han. It is worth noting that the minority status accorded to the ethnic people like the Miao and Dong is nothing intrinsically ‘natural’. It is part of an arbitrary and contested process of ethnic identification, which served as a pragmatic strategy for the state to govern the population through classification and naming. The year 1956 saw the launch of an ‘ethnic identification campaign (minzu shibie)’, where ethnologists were called upon to study, describe and classify ethnic groups according to the Morgan–Stalinist 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; also see Guldin 1994; Harrell 1996). The campaign also adopted the Marxian–Morganian evolutionary paradigm to justify the sorting of different ethnicities into a hierarchical developmental ladder, with the Han situated at the ‘civilized’ end of the spectrum.

7. 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.

8. In both villages, per the residents’ own rough calculation, nearly 90% of the households have had labour 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.

9. 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 pre-empting the threat of political instability fuelled 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 enrolment, 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).

10. The sense of insecurity is exacerbated by China’s stringent birth policy and its result that most urban children are ‘singletons’ and the ‘only hope’ of their family (Fong 2004).


12. As one anonymous reviewer rightfully pointed out, there is a gender dimension to dropout, which, although not the focus of this article, deserves some
explanation. Throughout China’s long agrarian history, manual labour 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 enrolment 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 enrolment at the primary and junior secondary level (Grades 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 (Connelly and Zheng 2003; Hannum 2002; Davis et al. 2007).

13. According to a recent survey of 17 middle schools in 14 rural counties across six 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% 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).

14. 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 manoeuvres are frequently used for the sake of meeting the inspection demands, which further complicates the meaning of official statistics.

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

16. The number of college graduates in 2009 totalled 5.31 million, a voluminous increase from 848,000 in 1998 when former president Jiang Zemin announced plans to bolster higher education (Yao 2010).

17. Under the planned economy, college graduates received job assignments in line with the national development needs and obtained lifelong employment in work units (Agelasto and 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 labour studies has documented the drastic decrease of employment in the state sector, in the 30 years since reform, from 78.3% to 21.9% of the total urban employment (Kuruvilla, Lee, and Gallagher 2011, 1).

18. 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.

19. As I explained previously (see note 12), when family resources were scarce, investment in education was usually made for male offspring.

20. 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 songwriter 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.

21. Although I do not have the space to go into in-depth discussions of tourism in this article, Qiandongnan’s tourism-centred development is another facet of the ecology of rural education that rendered school walls ever more porous with commercial agendas, bureaucratic demands, and state-business coalition.

22. As one anonymous reviewer rightfully points out, 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 valued their spiritual domain but also because they mistrusted the ways the intrusive state–business coalition manipulated their collective resources.

23. In 2001, China’s State Council launched the Rural Primary School Merger Programme to consolidate teaching resources by shutting down schools in sparsely populated communities. The Merger Programme aimed at eliminating ‘teaching points’ (jiaoxue dian 教学点) – one-room school houses in remote village-hamlets with only three or four grade levels where one or two teachers teach and supervise students in the entire school – and relocating students to larger boarding schools in centre village-towns. In the government’s rationale, township schools have better educational resources and more qualified teachers. Local families, however, are not too sanguine about the idea, as it would require their children to travel and board at school for five and six days each week. In addition, they would have to pay additional fees for meals, dorms and transportation. Despite its state support, the project has fuelled heated local debates (Pang 2006).

24. See Ou (2007) for detailed accounts of the Dong material culture, especially the aspects of marriage and family practices.

25. 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. 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. For more in-depth discussion of suzhi in
China’s recent curriculum reform, “see my article Governing ‘Suzhi’ and Curriculum Reform in Rural Ethnic China;” “Viewpoints from the Miao and Dong Communities in Qiandongnan, in press with “Curriculum Inquiry.””

26. In 2006, the policy directive of ‘Constructing New Socialist Countryside (jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcun 建设社会主义新农村)’ was launched to address the ‘three rural issues’ (sannong wenti 三农问题) – namely issues related to agriculture (nong ye 农业), peasants (nong min 农民) and rural society or communities (nong cun 农村). Both policy-makers and researchers have come to see the thorny and multi-dimensional rural issues as predicament for the country’s modernization, especially when labour migration has severely dismembered the countryside and turned it into a surplus labour reserve for China’s manufacturing industry. The state pledges to revitalize the rural region through the following measures: reinforcing compulsory basic education; promoting rural tourism; road construction; and granting preferential rural policies (Day and Hale 2007).

References


