Governing Suzhi and Curriculum Reform in Rural Ethnic China: Viewpoints From the Miao and Dong Communities in Qiandongnan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the uptake of suzhi—roughly glossed as “quality”—in China’s recent curriculum reform called suzhi jiaoyu (Education for Quality) in the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan. It engages with three layers of analysis. First is a brief etymological overview of suzhi to map out its cultural politics in contemporary China. Agamben’s theorization of People/people is invoked to elucidate how the keyword embeds the differentiation of bodies and the fabrication of the “others” through a civilizing mission. Second, the article surveys the genealogy of suzhi ideas-practices as the historical project of making the ideal personhood. It examines how suzhi’s entanglement in Chinese historiography constitutes the moving target for the formation of educational subjects. Third, the article draws from my ethnographic research in southwest China to investigate suzhi’s enactment in compulsory schooling and current curriculum reform. It provides nuanced empirical accounts to illuminate how suzhi quality is understood, contested, and reappropriated in everyday pedagogical practices; how the bifurcated front- and backstage maneuvering in two village schools trouble the salvationary overtone of the suzhi-oriented curriculum reform. The lens of performativity is harnessed to move beyond the “loose coupling” theory and suggest undecidable interstices in the production of pedagogical subjectivity. Furthermore, this section explores how suzhi jiaoyu sits in a jarring relationship with indigenous cosmology to produce epistemic dissonance and disenchantment towards schooling. The article concludes with a call for provincializing the “universal” notion of quality and for a productive aporia in thinking about the limit-points of schooling.

The national strength and stamina of economic development more and more depend on the suzhi of the laborers.

—Deng, Xiaoping

Education is fundamental to the comprehensive formation of national strength, increasingly measured by suzhi of workers and the development of talented human
resources. This places a more urgent demand on educating and training the new generation for the 21st century.

—Resolution to Deepen Education Reform and Push Forward Suzhi Education on All Fronts

A sentiment of urgency is discernable in the exhortations quoted above. What is it about suzhi that the late leader Deng attached such great importance and graveness to it? What is it about suzhi education that the Resolution issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council (Xinhua News Agency, 1999) holds as fundamental to the competitiveness of Chinese society? Suzhi, one of the most loaded terms in contemporary China, often translated as “quality,” has permeated policy and public narratives since the 1980s and marks an increasing concern for the quality of the population. The debates on suzhi in general, and suzhi education in particular, have garnered national attention in political, public, and scholarly circles. A general consensus is that “such a thing as suzhi exists, that its level is too low in the Chinese population, that the collective suzhi of individuals produces the suzhi of the nation as a whole, and that raising the suzhi of children is a particularly important step” (Woronov, 2009, p. 568).

This article addresses the uptake of suzhi in China’s recent curriculum reform called suzhi jiaoyu (Education for Quality) in the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan. Primarily populated by agrarian folk who identify themselves, culturally and linguistically, as the Miao and the Dong, Qiandongnan Prefecture is located in one of China’s least developed regions, Guizhou, a province of ethnic mosaics,1 plagued for centuries by poverty, and yet, perplexingly, termed the “precious land.” For decades, Qiandongnan’s subpar performance in basic education (primary and junior secondary level) has been characterized as a state of emergency, with rampant student attrition and dropout. Universal basic education has become a primary target to incorporate the Miao and Dong people in Qiandongnan into China’s educational modernity. In recent years, the quantitative provision of schooling (as expressed in the policy objective of “literacy for all”) is further bolstered by the qualitative concern for raising suzhi of the rural ethnic population through promoting suzhi jiaoyu. To facilitate the nationwide campaign on educational development for rural revitalization, suzhi jiaoyu has been implemented as a compulsory strategy by the Chinese state to transform the rural minority peasants into new kind of subjects for the nation’s future.

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

To grasp the complex dynamics of the suzhi curriculum reform, an etymological and genealogical understanding of suzhi is essential, as what transpires in local schools is intertwined, historically and philosophically, with the larger domain of China’s cultural politics. The contour of the curriculum reform cannot be disarticulated from its involvement in, and indebtedness to, the project of nation-building. It also cannot be disarticulated from particular styles of reasoning about the ideal citizenry that compels the “unification” of curriculum practices across the nation in reconstructing China’s 21st-century learners, citizens, and workers.

Therefore, the article engages with three layers of analysis, through the critical encounter of genealogy and ethnography. The first section gives a brief etymological overview of suzhi and maps out its cultural politics in contemporary China. It elucidates how the corporeal politics of suzhi embed the differentiation of bodies and the fabrication of the “others” through a civilizing mission. Second, the article surveys the genealogy of suzhi as the historical project of creating the ideal personhood. It examines how in Chinese historiography suzhi constitutes a moving target, rather than a static structure, in the formation of educational subjects. Third, the article draws from my ethnographic research in two rural ethnic communities in southwest China to investigate everyday pedagogical struggles in the suzhi curriculum reform. Rich empirical accounts illuminate how the reform sustains the ideal of pedagogical emancipation in a context that resists, ignores, and contests the logic; and what kinds of practices and tactics are employed to fabricate the successful “front” of the reform despite “backstage” contradictions. The lens of performativity is harnessed to move beyond the traditional “fidelity” or “loose coupling” theory. Furthermore, I examine the odd juxtaposition of the official discourse of suzhi education with folk epistemology to challenge the universal notion of “quality,” and suggest undecidable interstices in the production of pedagogical subjectivity.

In a sense, the first two layers of analysis map out the historical assemblage of reasons behind the suzhi discourse-practices, which offers insight into the phenomenology of the curriculum reform described in the third section. In addition, phenomenology adds nuances to the system of reasons by bringing into view the rich specificities of the dissonant working of suzhi on the ground.

**SUZHI: ETYMOLOGY AND CULTURAL POLITICS**

Despite its lack of semantic specificity in the Chinese language, suzhi (素质) is roughly translated into English as “quality” and linked with other related
notions such as pinzhi (品质) and zhiliang (质量). The common word zhi in three related words—suzhi (素质), pinzhi (品质), and zhiliang (质量)—is rendered as “essence” or “substance,” whereas su on the other hand, connotes “pure,” “basic,” and “original.” Put together, suzhi connotes the essential characteristics/substance of individuals, groups, and populations. The English translation “quality” does not quite capture the capacious nuances of the word. While the word quality conveys a neutral, benign essence of what it describes, suzhi has taken up a “sacred” and “salvationist” overtone to demarcate human bodies in the hierarchical order of Chinese society (Kipnis, 2006).

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

Like the word religion, suzhi is rooted in the intuitive portion of the language that constitutes what Pratt (2008) calls the “planetary consciousness” to naturalize the everyday use of the word. Despite its apparent naturalness, suzhi demarcates the boundaries between those possessing it and those who do not, in China’s differentiating social strata (Anagnost, 2004, p. 190). For instance, peasants-turned-migrant workers are deemed to be of low suzhi because of their lack of education, sheer numbers, and potential threat to the social order, in contrast to the urban elites who consume educational training, nutritional supplements, sports, and clothes in pursuit of suzhi’s plenitude. To illustrate why suzhi works so effectively as rhetoric and as a means of practicing demarcation, the etymological exposition of the term is worth commenting on, as it embeds a conceptual split and a complex movement between two ends or poles, a reading partially inspired by Agamben’s (2000) thought-provoking treatment of the term people. People, an apparently benign and all-encompassing term, embeds a double meaning: the naked life (people) and the political existence (People). For instance, the same term—the Italian popolo, the French peuple, the Spanish pueblo, the English people, and so forth—indicates both an undivided body of citizenry (people) as well as the subject that is inferior, ordinary, unfortunate, the “other” of the dominant and the aristocratic (People). The nuance of distinction is easily discernable from the title A People’s History of the United States, precisely in its manifest compassion and empathy toward the oppressed masses. Agamben (2000) elaborates on
the integration of the bare life (aka zoe) into a body politics (i.e., bios) in the oscillation between the two poles (people and People):

On the one hand, the People as a whole as an integral body politic and, on the other hand, the people as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; on the one hand, an inclusive concept that pretends to be without remainder while, on the other hand, an exclusive concept known to afford no hope; at one pole, the total state of the sovereign and integrated citizens and at the other pole, the banishment—either court of miracles or camp—of the wretched, the oppressed, and the vanquished. (p. 31, italics and capitalization original)

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

For instance, Qiandongnan is decidedly considered to be a remote, primitive, underdeveloped periphery of China, and its residents associated with such labels as rural, ethnic, exotic, and uncivilized. Depicted as standing in suzhi’s shadow, the poverty, illiteracy, and traditionalism of the region can no longer be tolerated in light of the modern biopolitical project that seeks to incorporate Qiandongnan into the suzhi metanarrative of the Chinese state through developmental strategies such as compulsory education, ethnic cultural tourism, and road construction. The state’s plan to eliminate the lowly, dejected, have-nots, as part of its modernist zeal, will, first, relegate them to the opposite pole of continuous exclusion and, second, subjugate them to a master plan of suzhi realization. Hence the ambivalence of the civilizing mission: by turning in full compassion toward the people, it paradoxically targets its negation and erasure.

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

Second, within the regime of suzhi cultivation, the body becomes an excessive focus for social and familial intervention. Individual parents invest intensely in child nurture to plan a head start for the child’s educational competitiveness. Collectively, the national eugenic rhetoric of “superior birth and superior childrearing” (yousheng youyu 优秀优育) is enacted through stringent one-family-one-child family planning policies. Individual and national strategies to develop latent potential in the population have turned the body into a political field of nation-building and a pedagogical field of self-realization.

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

**HISTORY OF THE PRESENT: A GENEALOGY OF SUZHI AS IDEAL PERSONHOOD**

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

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

Another suzhi-like approach could be detected in China’s adoption, during the early years of the Communist reign, of the Soviet model of the ideal citizen as both ideologically correct and technically savvy (youthong youzhuang 又红又专). In the political irrationality of the Cultural Revolution, millions of youth were “sent down” to the countryside (xiafang 下乡) to engage in physical labor and to be “re-educated,” by “eating bitterness” and living a life of material scarcity and adversity. Learning was bifurcated into knowledge of the “red” (hong 红) and knowledge of the “expert” (zhuan 专) with the former indicating one’s political and moral allegiance to the party ideology and the latter designating technical and professional skills. In the name of furthering the communist cause and preventing bourgeois infiltration, manual labor and the knowledge of the “red” were emphasized, in contrast to the intellectual labor and knowledge of the “expert,” as a critical makeup of a desirable citizen.

Since the 1980s, the ideal citizen has shed much of its ideological tenor. The term suzhi circulates widely in debates among scholars, educators, and policy makers (Anagnost, 2004; Sigley, 2009; Sun, 2009; Wilcox, 2009; Woronov, 2008; Yan, 2003). It is not only reflected in state educational programming (such as Education for Quality), but also in the social cultural ethos of the entire Chinese society. This ethos is seen in the mushrooming of publications on suzhi-oriented childrearing, with topics ranging from nutrition, cognitive and physical development, to character formation and moral training. Fostering the suzhi of the children is further compounded with an anxiety about the global positioning of the Chinese society in response to the increasingly knowledge-based economic competition. The ideal personhood is talked about using a series of descriptors including creativity, lifelong learning, problem solving, scientific spirit, and well-roundedness. These cultural parameters affixed to suzhi solidify the linkages between China’s 21st-century learners/citizens/workers and the nation’s continual prosperity.

In sum, the “ideal type” of the child-citizen has shifted from the poetic characters of the Confucian junzi to the Soviet model of “both red and
professional," from the Maoist sent-down youth’s capacity to tolerate hardship to the five-part embodiment of comprehensive talents (i.e., virtue, wisdom, athleticism, aesthetics, and labor 德智体美劳), and to what appears today as innovation, problem solving, and sophisticated consumer taste. The cultivation of suzhi remains a moving target in Chinese historiography and an empty marker continually filled with differential meanings and significations. In what follows, I will turn to the most recent iteration of suzhi in China’s progressive education reform called suzhi jiaoyu—the focal point of this article—to examine how it is understood and contested in everyday pedagogical practices in rural ethnic Qiandongnan.

**SUZHI EDUCATION AND CURRICULUM REFORM**

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

What, then, is suzhi jiaoyu? It indicates a twofold meaning: fostering the quality of the child-citizen through improving the quality of the curriculum-pedagogy. Both notions of “quality” are slippery to define. When used to describe a person, “quality” nebulously encompasses one’s physical conditions, civic mindedness, social-moral attributes (such as diligence, creativity, entrepreneurialism, patriotism), and so forth. Similarly, when describing the curriculum-pedagogy, “quality” is a broad term lumping together an array of reform measures including homework reduction, removal of test score-based ranking and tracking, elimination of supplementary after-school lessons (buxiban 补习班), improvement of extracurricular activities, and implementation of child-centered pedagogy.

Based on the belief that overemphasis on high-stakes testing hinders creativity and innovation, Chinese lawmakers, at the end of the last century, passed two initiatives to push for educational reform: “the 21st-Century Action Plan for Invigorating Education” (the Ministry of Education [MoE], December 1998) and “the Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education” (the Central Committee and State Council, June 1999) (Li & Li, 2010, p. 211). In 2002, the MoE further launched the
“Program on the Reform of the Basic Education Curriculum,” aka the “New Curriculum Plan” (xin kegai 新课改), to revamp the present yingshi jiaoyu (exam-oriented model) with a more child-friendly one (suzhi jiaoyu).

The vision of the MoE (2001) was that by 2010 China’s curriculum reform at the basic level (Grades 1–9) would achieve positive results in two areas: changing from teacher-centered to student-entered pedagogy, and shifting from subject-defined curriculum to one integrative of different types of knowledge (Carney, 2008). Student-centered pedagogy is upheld as the core measure to combat rote memorization and spoon-feeding and cultivate individual “quality.” Nothing entirely novel, the 2002 xin kegai is consistent with China’s ongoing attempt to combat the century-old exam-oriented education system and the increasing demand for student creativity. A more ambitious aim of suzhi jiaoyu to prepare China for a global knowledge economy oriented toward technological advancement, industrial competitiveness, and lifelong learning is reflected in former premier Zhu’s (2002) “Go Global” imperative.

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

Second, the suzhi curriculum reform is linked to an overarching policy called the Two Fundamentals/Basics Project (TBP) with the twin goals to universalize 9-year compulsory education and eradicate illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults. While universal basic literacy has long been achieved in China’s affluent urban sector which is now enveloped in a suzhi scramble toward social prestige, Qiandongnan is stigmatized as a latecomer lagging far behind on national educational indexes, with its inferior basic education plagued by long-standing issues of dilapidated facilities, under-qualified teachers, and rampant dropout. As part of the state’s unrelenting efforts to make basic education compulsory, suzhi jiaoyu is bundled with TBP to bring stubborn regions like Qiandongnan on board China’s fast-moving train toward educational modernization.

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

**Suzhi in Paradoxes: Narratives in Qiandongnan**

I will now turn to a close-up picture of the dissonant workings of the suzhi curriculum reform in Qiandongnan. This section seeks to illustrate how the everyday practices of the teachers and students fabricate a “successful” front of reform despite hidden contradictions on the backstage; how the corporeality sanctioned by the reform sits in a jarring relationship with the folk conception of ideal personhood to trouble the progressive undertone of the suzhi regime. This, I hope, will cast a fresh light on the school-centered suzhi discourse-practices, as what Foucault (1997) calls the “familiar [yet] poorly known horizon” (p. 144) in contemporary China.

**Methods and Ethnographic Context**

I carried out the main part of the research in 16 months between 2009 and 2010, dividing my time equally between two village-towns called Majiang and Longxing (pseudonyms) that are inhabited respectively by the Miao and Dong ethnic people and located in Qiandongnan Prefecture of Guizhou Province. 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 proportion of village labor out-migrants, commensurate popularity as tourist destinations, similar development strategies, and most importantly, homologous educational policies. These offer 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 staff, conversations with students, parents, and villagers, and conducting occasional home visits and teaching duties. Although I am not a member of either ethnic group, I was welcomed warmly as someone interested enough in the Miao and Dong people to willingly “endure hardship” (chiku) of living in remote mountain villages for a prolonged time. The labels of “teacher,” “researcher,” and “sister,” “auntie,” and so forth, affixed to me indicate my multifaceted identities in the villages. The length of time I spent there afforded me the luxury of full participation in communal events and provided me with a more nuanced picture of local social dynamics and patterns of meaning.
making. Research methods included participant observation, interviews (unstructured and semistructured), oral history, group discussions, document analyses, and discourse inquiry.

Due to its inhospitable topography, unpacified non-Han ethnic residents, mystifying indigenous lifeways, harsh mountain climate and living conditions, Qiandongnan is commonly typified by what Tsing (1993) famously calls the “out-of-the-way” place, which is characterized by subsistence farming, spirit worship, relative isolation, and occupies a bottom rung on modernity’s ladder. Qiandongnan’s Miao and Dong people 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, p. 206) notes, pianpi denotes the physical inaccessibility of rustic, faraway places, and the developmental chasm of a stigmatized site of lack, malaise, and dispossession from the metropolitan hubs. As the proverb depicts, Guizhou is a place “without three acre of flat lands, three days of fine weather, and three cents to rub together.” The language of poverty and remoteness provides a lens through which places like Guizhou and Qiandongnan are talked about and acted upon.

The etymological vulgarization of pianpi, however, does not fully capture the complex historical trajectory of Qiandongnan and its people. From the barbarian frontiers to the bastions of military strongholds, from resource-rich areas to ethnic cultural Disneylands, from the mystery-shrouded domiciles of shamanistic masses to capitalist reserves of itinerant laborers, Qiandongnan has historically been linked to the central administration in various ways, yet never quite in sync with the standards of the state (Hostetler, 2001; Oakes, 1998; Schein, 2000). In recent decades, a series of rural development strategies have brought connectivity, mobility, and consumer motif into every facet of life; and the image of spatially bounded, economically stagnant, and culturally homogeneous place is no longer (if it ever was) an accurate depiction of the region. Satellite dishes spout on rooftops; mobile phones have become household items; people, goods, and information circulate along the zigzag country roads, interweaving the dense networks of kinship in Qiandongnan with the modalities of a trans-local China.

Traveling in the mountain regions of Qiandongnan, one is often greeted by propaganda messages emblazoned on roadside bulletin boards announcing “Today’s education is tomorrow’s economy”; “Today’s dropout is tomorrow’s poverty”; “It is better to marry a peasant than a person who has no culture”—“culture” here indicates a person’s educational attainment in a problematic way.10 Slogans written in such a didactic vein about national goals are hypervisible in the countryside, preaching ready-made remedies for issues of poverty, education, and the making of new rural subjects for China’s continual growth. Such a ritualized display of party-sponsored exhortation presents a school-to-the-social-rescue model in
which prosperity and schooling are tightly woven, and in which the *suzhi* of the rural ethnic child becomes the symbolic marker of regional—and national—development.

**Discipline or Punish: The War on Child-Centeredness**

Yet in cultivating the *suzhi* citizen-subjects, the *suzhi* curriculum reform produces incongruity between the policy scripts and the subterranean processes that transpire in everyday classroom practices in Qiandongnan. Within the policy domain of compulsory schooling and *suzhi jiaoyu*, a contested “front” emerges around the notion of child-centeredness.

While *suzhi jiaoyu* is juxtaposed with *yingshi jiaoyu* (test-oriented education), teacher-centered pedagogy and corporal punishment are criticized as begetting conformity and repressing individual creativity, thus being fundamentally at odds with the ethos of quality education. According to the new curriculum guidelines, the tutelary relationship needs to shift from one of submissive obedience to teacher authority to one eulogizing student agency. In deliberating new learning strategies, teachers are to create an affective ambience of collaboration and approach teaching with empathy. A more egalitarian pedagogy is upheld where learning shifts from a relationship to others (obedience to authority) to a relationship primarily with oneself (rights and responsibility to determine one’s own conduct).

One could easily locate a heightened emphasis on individual learners within a secular-modern paradigm that celebrates the Deweyan notions of experiential learning, progressive pedagogy, and democracy. Arguably, the endorsement of such transnational pedagogical ideals reflects China’s desire for membership and legitimacy in the global community. The focus on inclusion, emancipation, and protection of children is also embedded in the discourse of children’s rights promoted through transnational entities such as Save the Children and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, and is taken up by national policy initiatives, such as the Law for the Protection of Junior Citizens (*wei chengnianren baohu fa* 《未成年人保护法》).

Yet, the issue is less about China’s adherence to a newfangled doctrine, or of its membership in a global community, than its becoming part of a collective “we,” a present with particular precepts, mottos, and systems of reasons. What is important is the shifting systems of thinking that have enabled the “talk” of individual empowerment, rights, and lifelong learning as the regime of truth in contemporary China. The student-centered reform rhetoric rests upon the philosophical-political-economic precepts of freedom, equality, and choice in the conceptualization of the ideal child. Presented as universal, it marks how we think about the educated person and the means by which to educate, in relation to quality/*suzhi*.

Despite the increasing nationwide support for child-centered pedagogy, the majority of the teachers in Majiang and Longxing with whom I spoke...
were ironic and bitter about it, dismissing it as a stigma that demarcated them from city teachers and as out of joint with their immediate reality. To illustrate this point, the vice headmaster of Longxing Middle School described his encounter, during a summer training session, with a private school headmaster from Zhejiang, one of the most affluent coastal provinces.

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

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

Indeed, while urban private schools can charge astronomical tuitions from willing parents, village schools in Qiandongnan are often plagued by lack of resources, aging and untrained teachers, underperforming students, and worse of all, massive dropout. Teachers often talk about suzhi jiaoyu as a developmental stage marked by advanced teaching facilities and superior academic performance, feasible in urban centers but incongruous with the resource-deprived, exam-heavy rural reality. Yet it would be oversimplistic to take their words at face value and argue that suzhi jiaoyu is indeed something out of joint with the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan. In my observation in Majiang and Longxing, the child-centered curriculum policy penetrated everyday teaching practices and often was interpreted begrudgingly as loss of teacher authority. Discipline, a technique deeply instilled in local teachers’ professional life, was forfeited by the reform’s lofty-sounding rhetoric of decentralization and egalitarianism.

To many teachers, the call for student-centric pedagogy as “quality education” had infinitely complicated their daily practices, if not made their
life downright miserable, especially when bundled with TBP, the compulsory education law. Mr. Long, a senior teacher who had taught Chinese for 25 years in Majiang Middle School, lamented that he did not know how to teach anymore.

To be honest, *suzhi jiaoyu* and TBP have made a huge mess of our life. With TBP, we cannot let one single student quit school or make them repeat grades, regardless of their performance. And with *suzhi jiaoyu*, we are supposed to put students at the center and not use discipline. Now you walk in a classroom and see students talking and fighting with each other as if the teachers were nonexistent. Students can be very uncooperative because they know the teachers are powerless now. Before, we say a student performs poorly because he or she doesn’t study hard; now they say a student performs poorly because the teacher is lousy. Whatever happens, we are to blame now. And the students know that very well. They know we must beg them to stay in school now, according to the law. If we try to discipline them, they threaten to drop out. After a while, teaching becomes a chore that we trudge through every day.

The profound disenchantment and disempowerment felt by the teacher is palpable. Even though Mr. Long seemed to suggest a stark contrast between when classroom discipline was legitimate and when *suzhi* pedagogy was enacted, as if the two were fundamentally incommensurate, the discrepancy assumed between *suzhi* and discipline is spurious. The disciplinary authority prohibited is now superimposed by a more subtle form of discipline, written in *suzhi jiaoyu*’s student-centered policy scripts. While the more blatant form of corporal punishment is pathologized, the very act of this negation enables a new disciplinary front that hinges upon the school’s humanistic-liberal mission to “rescue” and “emancipate” the child, a discipline invisible yet no less pervasive.

If, in the past, students were subject to physical/verbal punishment for misconduct, now both the students and the teachers are subsumed in a capillary realm of discipline that Foucault suggests is integral to the governmentality of the modern soul. The discourse of individual rights bespeaks an absent presence of a discipline that governs the inner subjectivities of both student and teacher. Such discipline is part of the perpetually mutating order of things as readable signs inserted in systems of signification (Grosz, 1995), producing a fragile, fuzzy, and fluid pedagogical space that legitimizes particular ways of teaching and learning as *suzhi*.

The agenda of “centering the learner” clearly presents a departure from the Confucian pedagogy that emphasizes teacher seniority, rote learning, and proper ritualistic conducts of students. How the teacher–student relationship is conceived and what constitutes the proper way of doing pedagogical work has also markedly shifted under the *suzhi* curriculum reform. Historically, the teacher has been likened to the burning candle and the gardener of seedlings who enlightens and nurtures others to his/her own diminution. Teacher authority has been construed in affective terms as an extension of parental care—intensely emotional yet intrinsically unequal,
benevolent yet capable of disciplining, and requiring children’s respect. The more archaic appellation for teacher is xiansheng (先生), literally one who is superior in age and wisdom and whose virtues and conducts are to be emulated by students. The true student is not only the seeker of knowledge but of morality, rituals, and propriety, who shows the utmost reverence and obedience to the teacher.

Under the aegis of suzhi curriculum reform, however, the teachers’ disciplinary authority is swept under the discourse of learner-centeredness and constantly threatened by student disrespect and hostility. Just like the idea of “learning is doing,” the idea of “teaching is facilitating” is now the new order of things that defines teachers and teaching. The discourse about “facilitation,” “student empowerment,” and “participatory teaching” is mobilized, at least rhetorically, to define teacher competence and teaching quality. Clearly, the proper way of teaching has nothing intrinsically “proper” or “natural.” As McWilliam (2004) points out, the idea of a proper teacher is the product of the historically contingent “regime of truth” that shapes what is acceptable and normal and operates on the body and soul of both the teacher and the student.

Suzhi Jiaoyu On- and Off-Stage

Child-centeredness is one of the many contested fronts to be meticulously maintained in the suzhi curriculum reform. The “proper” image of the teachers as affective facilitators of learning, rather than rigid disciplinarians and impassive deliverers of knowledge, is another front to be carefully monitored. Test scores still work as the sole criteria of the legitimacy of the school, thus another normative front that must be kept. Based on my observation of everyday classroom practices in Majiang and Longxing, I argue that what was exhibited on the overt fronts of suzhi education was twisted at the backstage, through students’ and teachers’ appropriation of the policy lexicon in ways that both mimicked and ruptured the reform scripts. I argue that it was through repositioning themselves in relation to the master code of suzhi and suzhi jiaoyu on the front and backstage that the pedagogical actors in Majiang and Longxing came to negotiate their marginal social status as partial, incomplete reform subjects. The variously defined suzhi and suzhi curriculum-pedagogy were repeatedly constituted through acts that were symbolically performing the policy script on the front stage and displacing them in acts of mimicry and mockery on the backstage.17

Whereas the student-centric language reinscribes what ought to be the “proper” way of teaching and constructs discipline/punishment in a negative light, on the whole, village teachers managed to “talk the talk” without adhering to the rhetoric in their instructional practices. They both held physical discipline as imperative—to beat the devil out of the students for
their own good, so to speak—and regarded it as “the weapon of the weak”\textsuperscript{18} that they had to avail themselves of to keep their own safety and sanity. Mr. Zhang, a ninth-grade Chinese teacher at Longxing Middle School, once confided in me while we were proctoring a mock exam together.

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

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

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

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

This was dramatized by a haircut episode I witnessed in Longxing Middle School. I was asked by a ninth-grade English teacher to substitute for his evening session\textsuperscript{19} and help the class correct answers on an exam.
paper. In the middle of my instruction, a few male teachers arrived at the door, each with a pair of scissors in hand. Admonishing the students to keep their hair trimmed neatly, they started walking down each aisle, cutting off hair that they viewed as inappropriately colored or excessively long. I later found out that this was part of the routine housekeeping that would occur periodically during the school year, especially before the national school inspection. “Students should know their job better by now; they are here to study and not to wear funky hair and clothing,” I was told. Besides hairstyle, other practices such as makeup, body piercing, jewelry, and clothes were also subject to strict regulations. Students were not allowed to wear jewelry or nail polish or makeup of any kind. No flip-flops or high heels. Skirts were discouraged. Long hair, which was popular among young Miao and Dong females, must not be let loose to its full length, as it was considered too provocative for licentious minds.

The haircut episode was a dramatization of backstage maneuvering that ruptured the child-centered, humanistic front of the suzhi curriculum reform. Yet it was not simply a negation of the reform, because it maintained another front that required the suzhi student to be appropriately attired with particular aesthetic and hygienic virtues. The teachers might appear to be the authoritarian executors of the “event”; yet the very “problem” of teachers dictating the appearance of the students and orchestrating orderliness must be “problematized.” The deployment of specific techniques (scissors) to get rid of the “excesses” is part and parcel of what is called “the regime of appearance” that regulates “how people and things should look that combines aesthetic, scientific, political, and moral discourses” (Dussel, 2004, p. 86; Perrot, 1994; Roche, 1994). “Proper” hairstyle, just like other good habits and cleanliness, is repeatedly espoused as part of the ritualized cultivation of the suzhi body as well as the “soul” (Popkewitz, 1998; Rose, 1990). Such a “surgical incision” (Grosz, 1995) of haircutting is a powerful intervention of the school in the fashioning of the self—the extracting and removing that take place on the body—and enacts a double strategy of both eliminating the “excessive, diseased, or unaesthetic from the body” (Dussel, 2004, p. 89) and inscribing into the soul what it ought to be yet lacks. To reiterate, the child-centered, humanistic front was ruptured on the backstage by the teacher-centered, coercive “surgical incision” which, ironically, maintained another front that sanctioned the suzhi child-citizen as properly attired and comported. This indicates that the suzhi reform often speaks in a tongue that is forked, producing messy undercurrents and contradictions.

As for the students, their bodies were at times standardized and flattened, as in the haircutting incident, at times differentiated and demarcated, as in the cases of ranking and tracking, and often caught up in both processes. Even though tracking has been banned by the quality education reform, it was still rampant inside these schools. In both Majiang and Longxing middle schools, after every monthly exam (yuekao), students were
ranked by their scores and the first 100 names would be announced on the school’s bulletin board. The term *chasheng* (literally, poor performer) was coined and used to label students on a hierarchy of competence (good versus poor). Inside the classrooms, higher and lower achieving students were physically separated into different seating areas. Given that teachers were evaluated on test scores for salary raises and promotion, favoritism was a common practice. During my many conversations with students, I asked why they seemed so uninterested in learning. A group of eighth-graders in Majiang Middle School once told me in disgruntlement:

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

Ranking and favoritism was another instance of backstage maneuvering that both affirmed the normative front of testing and ruptured the egalitarian, progressive overtone of *suzhi jiaoyu*. Students who fell below the achievement bar were ostracized and their motivation dampened. Yet, despite the draconian school ambience, students managed to engage in their own playful backstage mockery of the testing regime through youthful expression in clothing, cosmetics, cigarettes, alcohol, and pop music. Girls still colored their nails, put on variously shaped earrings, and dated in secrecy. They would skip classes to go shopping on market days and return to spend the evening at the Internet café chatting online, downloading music, and engaging with virtual realities.

Self-conscious of their own “status group” that distinguished them from other “normal” students, much in the same light as the “ear ‘oles” depicted by Willis (1977), students in the lower track unanimously referred to themselves as *chasheng*, and more dramatically, some even sewed or painted the words on their clothes to demonstrate the very label that stigmatized them. Such a self-identification with the official label expressed students’ cognizance of, and precocious receptivity to, social and academic hierarchy, and could be understood as students’ embrace of the school’s categorization through repetitively citing and embodying it. Their very repetitive citation of a given discourse that “constructs” and “subjugates” them, that is, their very act of self-deployment of the *chasheng* label that signifies them as the “poor” students, is seen as what Judith Butler calls “subversive repetition” (1990, p. 147) and “subversive citation” (1995, p. 135). It is subversive because such repetitive citation puts the students at the junctures of language that opens up spaces for resignification and disrupts the categorical codes used to keep them in place.
With a kind of “civil disobedience” and “conformist rebellion,” students exercised a form of care of the self in what Foucault (1983/1984) calls the “aesthetics of existence” (p. 348) through which the self is constituted in, and by, deliberate and “historically analyzable practices” (p. 369). The deliberate marking of the body as chasheng with cheerfulness and pride was a playful move in which students found sociality and group identity through both resistance and accommodation to the codes that typed them. Such an account that students give of themselves by wearing their labeled identity on their sleeves, so to speak, furnishes a linguistic occasion for students’ self-transformation. The transformation is, paradoxically, by virtue of the very language in which they have been labeled. In the process, students not only “disclose” and “publicize” themselves as chasheng, but act on schemes of intelligibility while, at the same time, subjecting them to rupture and contest. Such is also a tactical crisscross—albeit partial—of the institutional enclosure of individual students into finished categories and a perpetual attempt at unsettling and reconstituting authoritarian narratives. Through public display of the “self” in the form of bodily marking, children exhibit a precocious receptivity to official discourse and a creative negotiation of their school identity. As poststructural feminist scholarship suggests (Mahmood, 2005, p. 22), norms are not only solidified and/or subverted, but also inhabited, consumed, and performed in myriad ways.

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

The famous Chinese adage xinpingszi zhuang jiujiu (new bottle with old wine) is often evoked to describe “quality reform” as retaining the old essence while superficially changing the language. For many, the latest reform drama is yet another doomed battle against the prevailing exam machine, no more than filling the new bottle with old wine. In many village schools of Qiandongnan, teachers continue to teach to the tests; and testing remains the most important way of evaluating teachers and winnowing out students. The “quality” campaign is still to a large extent assessed by quantitative criteria, to quote the teachers’ joking punch line, “education for suzhi is still education for scores,” with suzhi rhyming with “score” (shuzi 数字) in Mandarin Chinese.
Provincializing Suzhi/Quality

Finally, I will turn to the juxtaposition between the official suzhi discourse and folk interpretations of learning to understand why suzhi jiaoyu has met with disenchantment in rural ethnic Qiandongnan. It is not my intention to homogenize the Miao and the Dong into one unitary “indigenous” cultural identity, standing as a counterpoint to the state’s civilizing agenda. In the limited scope of this article, I do not have the space to tease apart the rich specificities in the Miao and Dong learning experiences; I focus instead on the commonalities observed in both villages. My purpose is to show that alongside, beneath, and intersecting the suzhi mantra lies an immense wealth of beliefs, values, and ways of knowing not always commensurable with the state-sanctioned criteria of learning. Such epistemic dissonance provides important insights to why the new perspective of suzhi jiaoyu often meets with resistance and disenchantment.

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

Without written scripts in their languages, songs are repositories of ethnic histories and folklore capturing the richness of everyday wisdom and the profoundly spiritual. Agricultural information, legendary tales, melancholic chants, and practical advice are all woven into intricate lyrics and melodies. For instance, the Dong Grand Choir, known as Kgal Laox in Dong and dongzu dage (侗族大歌) in Chinese, has traditionally served as an important medium to teach the Dong people about history, philosophy, social responsibilities, laws, and aesthetics. The Dong proverb “Foods nurture the body; songs nurture the heart” (fan yang shen, ge yang xin 饭养身歌养心) well depicts the existential values of singing. In the Dong language, to sing songs is literally “doing” songs (dor kgal), which indicates singing as an intricate part of daily activities that people naturally “do.” I learned that in the past, almost all Dong children belonged to clan-based, same-sex singing groups from the age of 10 and spent many evenings together learning a repertoire of songs from a song expert. Participation in a singing group is generally viewed as a criterion for group membership,
indicating mutual respect and communal bond. This is evidenced by the opening line of a song: “If you don’t sing, friends will say you are proud; Sit down and sing, and friends will say you are good and honest” (Ingram, 2007, p. 94). The significance of songs goes beyond the context of singing. The Dong regard singing as an important form of socialization and entertainment, as one of the normal activities that one “does” on a daily basis, as a welcomed change from the farming routines. Through learning to sing, social structure and patterns of daily life (such as teacher–student interaction, allocation of different musical responsibilities, clan-based identities, gift-giving) are also reinforced.27

Indigenous rituals such as singing and courtship used to serve a very important function in socialization. After a day of strenuous physical labor, young and old alike gathered around an intimate charcoal fire in the village drum towers all night long to converse and express their tender feelings through songs.28 They sang songs mimicking water gurgling, cicadas chirping, and roosters crowing to soothe fatigue and hardship as well as to initiate a courtship. Courtship, a ritualistic passage to adulthood, they believed, performed a more valuable pedagogical function than schooling. As the saying goes, “One year of courtship outweighs three years of schooling” (du sannian shu buru nao yinian guniang 读三年书不如闹一年姑娘). Through singing, young people expressed their respect and tender feelings for members of the opposite sex, indicating an intention to consider them as marriage partners.

In both the Miao and the Dong language, learning and knowing takes on very different ontological and epistemological registers. While the logos-centric, codified form of school knowledge privileges abstraction and taxonomy, it sits in jarring relation with embodied vernacular knowledge that is transmitted in a more performative, embodied mode and has little to do with sitting young people down for grueling lessons and tests. In the Dong communities, for instance, the communally revered song experts are hardly characterizable as being knowledgeable in the modern pedagogic sense. Most have never attended school, often cannot read or understand Mandarin Chinese. Labeled as wenman29 (literally translated as “character blind,” i.e., unable to recognize Mandarin characters), yet they have learned hundreds of song lyrics and melodies by heart. In the past, village elders told me, a song expert would be invited from another clan to live and teach for an extended period of time to prepare for a festival performance. Despite material scarcity, villagers willingly contributed grains and meat as in-kind compensation to the song expert. To this day, a song expert would be referred to as a source of cultural authority, even if he/she was considered illiterate in the modern educational sense. Such musical expertise is “non-sentential,” to borrow Maurice Bloch’s (1990) phrase, which cannot be expressed via compartmentalized categories, nor transferrable through formal instruction or abstract pedagogies. It is only through watching, listening, and doing, a process that does not project a means–end
dichotomy or outward (urban)-bound teleology or preconceived didactic goals, can one gain a modicum of competence and *suzhi* in musical virtuosity. In such a pedagogical mode, learning is intuitive; literacy is extra-linguistic. Acquiring knowledge/skills and aesthetic enjoyment becomes inseparable.

Today, such “qualities” as singing, embroideries, and virtuosity in indigenous instruments are marginalized in the modern classroom curricula that are text-based and exam-oriented, urban- and outward-bound, and that aim toward what is stipulated as the *suzhi* citizenry: patriotic and productive, technologically savvy and problem solving. 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 in the Miao and Dong communities I observed, learning through the route of being and custom has been largely purged from the technologized, professionalized, managerialized, compulsory education scheme. At stake here is the enfolding of a liminal epistemic space that speaks in alternative grammar into a fixed official category of *suzhi*.

Each school subject comes from a complicated web of relations that often get obscured in the “common sense” of what school is about and ought to do (Gustafson, 2009, p. 203). The rich ethnic ways of life I observed in Majiang and Longxing suggest intuitive forms of epistemology and different systems of valuation of human qualities that exist side by side with the mainstream notion of *suzhi* and learning. Rather than pitting them against each other, I argue that villagers live through such juxtaposition with ambiguity. On the one hand, ethnic ways of life are never static. Over the past decades, the Miao and Dong lifeways have undergone significant changes. With urban-bound labor migration, mandatory state schooling, and the rise in tourism and television viewing, fewer and fewer young people still claim proficiency in ethnic singing and dancing. Indeed, there is an acute sense of self-marginalization and an intense desire for acquiring Chinese literacy and the mainstream form of *suzhi* to function in the larger society. On the other hand, even if viewed as backward and obstructing social progress and *suzhi* acquisition, folk lifestyles and epistemology continue to serve as a significant force in the Miao and Dong people’s social identification.

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

This article uses a three-layer approach to unpacking China’s *suzhi* curriculum reform in the rural ethnic context of Qiandongnan. The first two layers map out the etymological and philosophical foundations of the reform through probing the ways the keyword *suzhi* is deployed in China’s cultural politics. I argue that *suzhi* functions as a moving target in the formation of ideal citizen-subjects and embeds an ontological divide that codes and differentiates human values with a civilizing agenda. Based on the conceptual discussion, the third section draws from my ethnographic research in a Miao and a Dong village in Qiandongnan to investigate the dissonant working of *suzhi* curriculum reform on the ground. I examine the bifurcated (front and backstage) classroom practices and the odd juxta position of the universalist ideal of *suzhi* education with folk epistemology. As Tsing (2005) argues, “universal dreams and schemes [can only be] charged and enacted in sticky materiality of practical encounters” (p. 1). The *suzhi* curriculum reform is such a universal scheme that enacts messy contradictions, ambiguities, and incommensurability.

The effort to propagate *suzhi* as a national educational strategy points to an already-signified space, stratifying what counts as quality and what doesn’t. As Baker (2010) has elegantly argued, provincializing commonsense concepts points to productive interstices to reengage with grand narratives in educational research. We need to investigate the conditions of possibility that renders *suzhi*/quality the universal telos to see how it paradoxically embeds discontinuities and disparate systems of reasoning that encumber students’ participation. This means, counterintuitively, to think about education and quality not just in terms of rights and law, but with a productive aporia that bears witness to schooling’s limit points and to pause at times of impasse rather than hastening toward a general, permanent solution. It also means setting aside, momentarily, existing predications about schooling as the location for the presencing and production of norms of human quality/ability, to allow for the fertility of differences to enter and enable crossing of non-crossable borders in social thinking and programming.

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NOTES

1. Guizhou boasts the presence of 49 of the 56 ethnic groups in China, with ethnic residents accounting for 37% of the total population, according to the 2004 census. See *Guizhou* (2006).

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

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

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

6. See Zinn (1980). It is a widely claimed nonfiction by historian and political scientist Howard Zinn who presents American history through the eyes and voices of the working people—women, Blacks, Native Americans, war resisters, impoverished laborers, and so forth—rather than from political and economic elites.

7. The distinction of zoe and bio is also discussed elsewhere. See Agamben (1998).

8. “What Heaven (tian 天) commands (ming 命) is called natural tendencies (xing 性); drawing out these natural tendencies is called the proper way (dao 道); improving upon this way is called education (jiao 教).” See Wu (2011, p. 4).

9. In the early 1990s, a joint summer camp attended by Chinese and Japanese teenagers led to a mortifying tale of Chinese children’s low suzhi in comparison to their Japanese counterparts. The Chinese teenagers were inferior in terms of physical strength, mental endurance, and the ability to tolerate hardship and delay gratification. This brought the Chinese educational system the humiliation of seeming to only produce bookish learning rather than worldly citizens of adaptability and creativity. This episode spurred a national sensation and rounds of heated debates on the future of Chinese education and its citizenry. See Sun (n.d.).

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

11. China’s traditional emphasis on examinations as a pathway to officialdom could be dated back to its Imperial Exam System (ke ju kaoshi zhidu) that was first introduced during the Sui dynasty and lasted for over 1,300 years until the end of the Qing dynasty. The Imperial Exam System was established initially as a mechanism to select imperial governors among civilians through a special exam
called Ba Gu Wen based on classic Confucianism. Rising from the ordinary folk to the royal palace had been the dream of ancient scholars who pursued a life of text memorization as the only way toward officialdom. This was in line with Confucius’ exhortation to apply oneself to be a state officer after becoming learned (xue er you ze shi). See Li & Li (2010).

12. In 2003, the strategic import of the “three rural issues” (sannong wenti)—namely agriculture (nong ye), peasants (nong min), and rural communities (nong cun)—was highlighted in the central government’s 11th Five-Year Plan. In March 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao identified the historical task of the Chinese Communist Party as “building a new socialist countryside,” highlighting rural revitalization and poverty alleviation as crucial to the Party’s legitimacy.

13. The measures include increasing government funding in basic education, improving teacher training, financial support to impoverished households, consolidating underperforming teaching facilities, and above all, implementing student-centered pedagogy.

14. 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, and so forth.

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

16. The notion of “culture” is further linked with suzhi to mark the superior and the inferior: having received education is called you wenhua (having culture) and gao suzhi (having higher quality), whereas not being schooled is called meiwenhua (having no culture) therefore suzhi di (with lower quality).

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

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

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

20. Market days occur once every 5 or 6 days in both Majiang and Longxing when vendors from neighboring villages gather to sell vegetables, candies, fruits, clothes, small household appliances, and electronic gadgets. Market days are popular among the youth and provide consumer goods to satisfy their consumptive desires.

21. For a detailed discussion of the effects and consequences that giving an account of oneself has on oneself, see Butler’s reading of Foucault’s later work in Butler (2005, pp. 111–136).

22. See de Certeau (1984) for an influential use of the notion “tactical” in revealing the informal means ordinary people reappropriate languages, symbols, artifacts, and so forth, in everyday situations and in doing so subvert the representations that are institutionally imposed upon them.

23. Such disenchantment is seen in rampant student attrition/dropout. Like many other rural residents, villagers in Majiang and Longxing have traditionally considered education as a way to jump out of peasantry and into officialdom, as a way to secure future lifetime employment. To them, becoming a cadre, a state employee, eating the emperor’s rice, so to speak, is the kind of “quality” life that a person with higher *suzhi* lives and that a “quality” education should bring about. When education fails to provide a link to that superiority, when they find themselves schooled yet prepared only for factory sweatshops, they lose faith in education. A great number of middle school students drop out, often with the tacit consent of their parents, to work at low-skilled and low-paying factory jobs in the labor-intensive manufacturing industry, seeking a self-making dream that the school fails to bring to fruition. See Wu (2012).

24. In fact, the term *indigenous* is highly contested. It is associated with official and popular imageries that paint the Miao and the Dong with backward primitivity and as antithesis of the modern. The term *indigenous* also invokes a plea for cultural quiddity that nativizes the “other” as befitting a separate frame of reference and consigns them to the waiting room of modernity (Gaonkar, 2001). To that end, I use *indigenous* and *folk* interchangeably, focusing on the particular, the unassimilatable, and the incommensurable.

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

26. Since the 1986 debut of the Dong polyphonic choir singing (Kgal Laox) at the Golden Autumn Arts Festival in France, the Dong and their musical talents have captivated Western audience. Recognized as a form of National Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2006 and included on UNESCO’s Representative List of the ICH of Humanity in 2009, Kgal Laox is reputed as the “crystal creeks of oriental symphony” and has appeared in various forms of national and international media in recent years. Since 2000, Kgal Laox has received increased publicity in government-sponsored tourism promotion as a symbol of the pan-Dong identity. See Ingram (2011).
27. In recent decades, with the increase of labor out-migration, tourist influx, and compulsory schooling, children are no longer expected to learn to sing, yet singing is still considered an important part of daily life.

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

29. 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 languages of parochialism keeping people in the backwaters of the mountain valley. Mandarin is the medium of instruction from kindergarten on for all subjects. Students, many of whom hear Mandarin for the first time in school, find it difficult to think and converse in the official language; having lessons in Mandarin contributes to their alienation from school knowledge. 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. School knowledge is resisted partially because of its irrelevance and great experiential remove from the means of livelihood.

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

REFERENCES


