

Research Note

The Problem of Sluggish Enrollment in Ethnic Schools: The Case of One Dong Village in Shaoyang, Hunan

CHIH-YU SHIH

This paper tries to move beyond the tradition-modernity dichotomy rooted in current ethnic education policy via a case study of one ethnic Dong village in China. The main argument is that education policy in general brings about results that cannot be fully presented in the human capital or statist approach. These approaches reduce the level of analysis to the individual in theory as well as in practice and may damage the popular trust in the government's enrollment campaign. Inappropriate incentives can cause misallocation of already scarce resources. Finally, ethnic education that is ignorant of local responses may be detrimental to both modernization and civic education. Ethnicity, or some form of imagined ethnicity, is not necessarily incompatible with the institution of schooling. To the state, the low enrollment problem in Dong areas is the result of poverty and backward culture. The meaning of schooling should be open to interpretation by local ethnic communities, who should be given ample room to put their ideas into practice.

KEYWORDS: ethnic education; Dong; China; Hunan; human capital; ethnic studies

Chih-yu Shih (石之瑜) is Professor at the Graduate Institute of Political Science, National Taiwan University. He is author of *State and Society in China's Political Economy* (1995), *Collective Democracy* (1999), and *Reform, Identity, and Chinese Foreign Policy* (2000).

When the modern state establishment initiates contacts with peripheral communities and expects to have lasting influences, enrolling children in school is an excellent avenue of approach. The reason why the drive to enhance school enrollment in China has been relatively unsuccessful is rooted in the state's flawed concept of education. While education officials may want to help the local authorities to improve school enrollment, their assumption that local ethnic culture is irrelevant to (or even has a negative impact on) parental attitudes toward enrollment may hinder their performance in cajoling parents to accept a career path for their children that is unfamiliar to them. If the government mistakes this as being a problem of one where the families lack economic incentives, any subsequent policy would likewise alienate the local ethnic culture and thus likely keep children from further schooling.

In many parts of China, one major problem in the field of education is low enrollment. Education officials at the county or higher level typically promote schooling in ethnic communities by linking education to a salaried job. Minority students are disadvantaged in the job market and are not particularly competitive in the entrance examinations to higher educational institutions. As a result, parents who learn to calculate the immediate benefits of education will naturally place a lower priority on schooling. This logic leads to a drop in the enrollment record.

School enrollment has consistently been low in some of the ethnic communities. Enrollment has further dropped since the government withdrew from the job market and now no longer places graduates in jobs. The Dong (侗族) area in southwestern Hunan (湖南) is an example of low school enrollment. There exist serious policy disputes between ethnic and educational sectors at both the county and provincial levels. On the one hand, ethnic officials are enthusiastically involved in designing ethnic-related education programs. Yet education officials see these changes as redundant because, in their view, education in ethnic regions is ethnic by definition and hence there is no need for special design. This mentality thus leads to a failure to tailor local programs.

Beyond the Current Approaches

Enrollment is one of the key issues in ethnic education in China that has received increasing attention in recent years. Enrollment promotion requires the government to develop an approach to understanding parental decision not to enroll their children in school. Economists of modern times often adopt a human capital approach in their analysis of investment in education. Political scientists, by contrast, are interested in the state's capacity to penetrate society or mobilize citizen loyalty through education. Facing a recently lethargic enrollment record in some of the ethnic areas, indeed the human capital approach sheds light on the cost-benefit rationality of the local people in not responding to education opportunities.¹ The statist analysis, in turn, is useful in pointing out the lack of effective incentives that the state can provide in its enrollment drive.²

Both human capital and statist explanations are flawed, however. While the two approaches respectively adopt a micro- and macro-level perspective, both seem to accept the same teleology that presupposes a linear historical movement of all societies toward modernity defined in terms of political economic rationality. Any study with such a predisposition would inevitably imbue the ethnic people in question, who are not comfortable with individualist calculation of mundane benefits, with a backward, feudal image of a people awaiting transformation along the track of modernization or enlightenment.³

Many thinkers have demonstrated that tradition only becomes traditional (or backward) after the conception of modernity enters into a meaningful discourse.⁴ One critical step in promoting modernization is the

¹For example, see Ma Lihua, *Minzu jiaoyu xinlixue* (Psychology of ethnic education) (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 9.

²For example, see Li Shurui, *Cunluo zhong de guojia—Wenhua bianqian zhong de xiangcun xuexiao* (The state in villages—The village schools under cultural changes) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999), 1-14.

³Note the title of the following text on ethnic education: *Xiang pinkun he yumei xuanzhan* (Declaring war on poverty and stupidity) (Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998).

⁴The Chinese literature in this regard has been booming since the mid-1990s. See, for example, Liu Xiaofeng, *Xiandaixing shehui lilun xulun: Xiandaixing yu xiandai Zhongguo* (In-

establishment of schools, without which the substitute of modernity for tradition would not appear so natural today. The school defines and reproduces the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. This dichotomy is what has constructed the tradition. In short, discursively, modernity arrives before tradition.

To understand the resistance to or the disinterest in education in a local community from the modernity point of view would thus likely miss the point. Before ethnic people accept the idea of receiving education, discursively impossible is for them to resist modernity from a position within tradition. That position is meaningful to only those imbedded in the language of modernity. Accordingly, the lukewarm response of locals to the enrollment drive of authorities may not be resistance at all, or, at best, may only be qualified resistance, which is not understood as resistance locally.

There are at least four theoretical propositions implicit in the discussion above. The first is that there is no such thing as a universal meaning of the term "ethnic education." Second, people do not calculate their education opportunity decisions only from an individual, micro base. Third, education policy of today is essentially insensitive toward incentives that are not oriented toward individual material benefits. Finally, responses to education enrollment campaigns are not subject to deductive modeling or categorization—one must rather learn about each additional practice through the case study approach.

All four are incompatible with the presumptions of both the human capital and statist approaches. In fact, authorities representing the state seem to think exactly the opposite, believing that the function of education is to facilitate emancipation from backward ethnic consciousness that obstructs citizenship in general and marketization in particular. For the state, that ethnicity carries different meanings in different localities is not im-

roduction to social theory on modernity: Modernity and modern China) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996); Rey Chow, *Fumu yu Zhongguo xiandaixing: Dongxifang zhijian yuedu ji* (Women and Chinese modernity: The politics of reading between West and East) (Taipei: Maitian, 1995) (see also the English edition from Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1991); Wang Tawei, *Xiangxiang Zhongguo de fangfa: Lishi, xiaoshuo, xushi* (Methods of thinking China: History, literature, narrative) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1998).

portant. What is of value is that all local communities, ethnic or not, end up in the same direction—a unified, modern China.

This is why authorities do not conceive of ethnic education as a policy to preserve ethnic conventions. Rather, such policy is an instrument to convert ethnicity, believed to be insignificantly authentic, into universalist citizenship. There is rarely any doubt that local ethnic communities may need a different kind of education to prepare their future generations for directions that are outside of the discursive boundary of modernity. For policymakers, the primary concern is economic growth. They want children in ethnic areas to learn how to act rationally as autonomous individuals so that they can join the market and the state without familial bondage. Policymakers also expect these participants to remain in their hometowns as they contribute to local development, not to immigrate to coastal cities.

The following discussion will try to move beyond the tradition-modernity dichotomy rooted in current ethnic education policy. Accordingly, this author contends that education policy brings about results that cannot be fully presented in the human capital or statist analyses. To individualize a unit of education in theory as well as in practice may damage popular trust in the enrollment campaign. Inappropriate incentives can cause misallocation of already scarce resources. Finally, ethnic education that is ignorant of local responses may be detrimental to the goal of modernization and civic education.

This paper begins by turning the question on its head by trying to understand how ethnic communities may understand education in ways different from the authorities. This research pretends that the ethnic boundary arbitrarily drawn by the state in 1956 is applicable. The intention is to consciously avoid looking at ethnic education from an outside position, but instead utilize the perspective of the ethnic communities looking out. There is no assumption, furthermore, that any appearance of the values of modernity being accepted by the locals is spurious. The goal is to find the meanings not included in the modernity discourse.

The case study used for this analysis is the Dong people living in Changanying (長安營), which is a village under the jurisdiction of Changanying Township of Chengbu County (城步縣), Shaoyang City (邵陽市),

Hunan. My primary purpose is to uncover different meanings attached to the term "education" by people in different positions and to reflect critically upon the education policy of the provincial authorities. The first step, however, is to briefly introduce a few other cases concerning ethnic education. They include research on the Yi (彝族) people in Meigu County (美姑縣) of Liangshan Prefecture (涼山地區), Sichuan (四川); the Xian (鮮族 Korean) people in Shenyang (瀋陽), Liaoning (遼寧); and the She (畲族) people in Suichang County (遂昌縣) of Lishui (麗水), Zhejiang (浙江).

A note on methodology is needed here. The method is doubtlessly multi-sited,⁵ an approach becoming increasingly popular as shown in the works by Anagnost, Gladney, or Schein.⁶ The author spent over five years visiting sites in different villages many times and for different durations. During each visit to China, this author requested to meet with as many schoolteachers, village cadres, enterprise owners, and peasant households as possible. The multi-sited design was a deliberate attempt to deconstruct the author as an outsider and avoid presenting the issue as "them (ethnic) vs. state" or "me vs. them." For instance, by cutting across spaces and sharing with interviewees insights from other sites, possible has been to resolve problems brought up by the interviewee insights from other sites in order to resolve problems brought up by the interviewees at the time. At other times, the author cut across roles and acted like a superior by disclosing ulterior practices behind face-to-face talks to the accompanying cadres after the interview. Multi-sited research prevents the adoption of just one counter-discourse when facing the universal assimilation policy of the state.

Methodologically speaking, the author's intention is not just to "resist" universalism of the assimilation policy, but also to "open." Resisting requires the researcher to position him/herself in the interviewee's shoes

⁵For pros and cons, see George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁶Ann S. Anagnost, *National Past-times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991); Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

and develop one counter-discourse. Opening, in turn, promotes creativity through recognizing coincidence, inconsistency, and surprise, as well as the limitation of man's capacity in controlling.

A Few Cases in Comparison

The literature on school enrollment in ethnic areas is limited. This paucity is itself an indicator of the problem. There is the view among those who do work on enrollment that, although the ethnic community is in a passive position and must be mobilized into the state system, members of the community are able to allocate resources from positions within the state system to benefit their own community.⁷ On the other hand, the ability to participate in the education system is not equally distributed among ethnic villagers. This ability is related to the distance between home and the school, class status (whether or not having been autocratic in the past), and gender. Accordingly, people's ability and motivation in taking advantage of policy privilege is uneven. In general, according to the same research, those in relatively disadvantaged positions tend to be passive given they do not see the benefits of schooling while others in comparatively advantaged social positions understand that education facilitates upward social mobility. However, research findings also show that upward social mobility is available to the relatively disadvantaged as long as they participate in school education.⁸

The research agenda of these studies does not touch upon the contents of education policy. The assumption is that parents determine their responses primarily in accordance with their own familial traits in terms of structural factors such as class status and gender. This section will explore the influence of education policy, or policy discourses, on the responses of

⁷See the discussion in Stevan Harrell and Ma Erzi, "Folk Theories of Success: Where Han Aren't Always the Best," in *China's National Minority Education, Culture, Schooling, and Development*, ed. Gerard A. Postiglione (New York: Falmer, 1999), 236.

⁸*Ibid.*, 232-33; Yi Mouyuan, *Yizu shi yao* (Keynotes on Yi history) (Beijing: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), 653-63.

the local community to the enrollment drive.

One interesting case of ethnic education is a Xian (鮮族) school in Shenyang City. All Shenyang's Xian schools, from preschool through senior high, teach in the Korean language. Mandarin Chinese is no more than a language course. The high school and college entrance examinations are held in Korean as well. Many Xian youngsters in Shenyang do not speak Korean because most live in the city. Preschools teach in the mother tongue. Xian freshmen have no problem adapting to the Mandarin system in college, though.

Compared with most other ethnic areas—for example, the Dai (傣族) people in Xishuangbanna (西雙版納), Yunnan (雲南)—the purpose of stressing ethnic language at the beginning of schooling is to prepare children to enter the Mandarin system at a higher grade, typically the second or third grade. After the transition, students are expected to jettison the mother tongue as a useless "crutch."⁹ The function of the Korean education in Shenyang is obviously the total opposite, yet is an exception in China. This uniqueness has to do with the close connections the Xian people have historically enjoyed with their neighbors in North Korea. During the current era of opening-up to the outside world, the Xian people in China encounter no difficulty in communicating with people in both Koreas.

Ethnic language education of this sort helps to preserve Korean consciousness among the Xian people. The government nonetheless actively involves itself in all the editing, printing, and distributing of textbooks. These activities all depend on government financial support due to lack of economies of scale. Printing public-owned Korean-language newspapers is, moreover, also a government policy. With the aid of such extensive government investment, the Xian people are currently the most educated people in China, enjoying the most number of college professors.

The Xian experience is worth noting in the sense that the maintenance

⁹As a fully rehabilitated patient is no longer in need of a crutch, a minority student at ease with Mandarin should not speak in the native tongue in school. Commissioner Dao (刁) of the Xishuangbanna Education Commission enlightened me on this particular point in 1997. Later I understood that this crutch (拐棍) approach became widely adopted elsewhere in China.

of Korean consciousness is no longer incompatible with the people's Chinese identity. The state is locally considered a protector of Korean ethnicity. Despite continued reports of local ethnic conflicts between the Xian and other ethnic peoples, ethnicity and state citizenship are in harmony. Being able to win the trust of the Xian people and promote official policy through the Korean-language newspapers and policy documents, the state is actually in a strengthened position to mobilize citizen loyalty.

A second case is She (畲族) education in Suichang County. According to the local people, the She colloquial is the most significant element in defining She ethnicity. This association becomes increasingly important as people have gradually lost their conventional religious practices. Moreover, She teachers strictly prohibit speaking of the She colloquial in all the schools visited by the author. Parents apparently support the policy out of a desire to ensure that their children will not be disadvantaged in the Mandarin-dominated market when they begin their career. A negative feeling associated with one's own ethnicity has emerged.

A turning point in ethnic consciousness emerged when the central television broadcast a program introducing local She culture through a synthesized She mountain song—"Wind from the She Mountains." Suichang communities were elated watching the program. Since the broadcast, teaching She mountain songs has become an essential part of the curriculum. Nobody failed to mention the teaching of mountain songs in all four schools interviewed. Since mountain songs are sung in the She colloquial, the use of this ethnic tongue was officially recognized overnight. The local normal school now requires the learning of the She colloquial and its students go to elementary schools to teach mountain songs on a regular basis.

While the ban on the She colloquial continues in class, the language nonetheless survives in schools in a different format. This has dramatically changed local She consciousness as "model" or "vanguard" schools have mandated all conventional uniforms for teachers as well as children. In certain villages all villagers keep one set. Upon the request of the She people, the local government has added new athletic items allegedly containing She traits to provincial games.

On the other hand, patriotism is taught simultaneously in schools.

Among one of the few in the whole country, one local elementary school sent to Hong Kong a student representative to attend the ceremony of the island's return to China in 1997. Compared with the Korean case, the co-existence of She ethnicity with Chinese patriotism is clearly more a coincidental result than a policy intent.

The third case is Meigu County in Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture. In contrast with the former two, Meigu represents a case of clear failure in enrolling children to school. Undeniable is that the low level of development in the locality explains part of the reason why enrollment has fallen to as low as 56 percent and that the local ethnic junior high school is about to close down in 2001, barely ten years after its inception. Since teachers seem to be as devoted as anywhere else, the blame easily falls on the so-called backwardness of the local ethnic Yi culture, which many interviewees of mine considered to still be bound by a recently overthrown slave system.

In order to put more pressure on the local authorities, educators impose economic sanctions on village cadres whose villages perform poorly in enrolling children. Under the pressure, cadres mobilize parents harder and harder in order to protect their own interests. The rhetoric always attacks the Yi's past slave legacy and the government paints an attractive economic future for the educated. The identified problem is always related to the Yi's ethnicity, and never connected to the current policy. Parents, as well, are using one type of economic logic, too. Teachers find, however, that parents do not see the economic utility of education and instead want their children to begin joining productive work as early as possible.

The view of the parents is that, unlike under the command economy, education can no longer guarantee a job in the cities. Their children would not be competitive on the job market against the Han children anyway, nor could they possibly beat Han examinees in high school entrance examinations. Moreover, entering school also means a poor self-image: attending school does not make the children feel proud of being from a Yi family. Without an emotionally positive inclination toward education or convincing economic prospects, enrollment has fallen way short of government expectations.

In those ethnic areas encountering enrollment difficulties, that

schooling is useless is indeed a popular perception. In the Manchurian Dazhi (大柘) Township of Beining (北寧), Liaoning, for example, parents told this author that children make more money by learning fruit planting. In Menghai County (勐海) of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, according to my interviewees, some Dai parents did not see a need for education. Because agriculture requires little hard work thanks to a reliable conducive climate, parents can afford to send children to temples for Buddhist bible learning rather than to school. In Wadi (窪底) Township of Mao County (茂縣), Ahba Prefecture (阿壩地區), Sichuan, many Qiang (羌族) parents whom this author interviewed wanted their children to take advantage of local tourism job opportunities as early as possible.

In all these cases of failure, in contrast with Xian and She, one common theme is that ethnicity is considered irrelevant to education. In the case of Dai, the officials specifically stated that Dai ethnicity was no good for modern times.

The author's experiences in Shaoyang suggest the possibility that the reported rate of enrollment in most other places, including Han villages, may be inflated. No village directors can afford to be entirely honest about enrollment difficulties without facing administrative as well as financial penalties. Local officials under pressure easily resort to economic sanctions and take ethnic education a step further away from being just a plain matter of ethnicity.

Background on Changanying's Dong People

Changanying Township is under the jurisdiction of Chengbu County which is an autonomous administrative district for ethnic Miao (苗族) people. There are a number of other ethnic groups dispersed in the area such as Hui (回族), Dong, and Man (滿族). The county ethnic affairs commission, which has over ten full-time employees, is one of the most active divisions of Shaoyang's municipal ethnic affairs commission. When the Hunan provincial government attended the ethnic clothing festival in Kunming (昆明) in 1999, for example, Chengbu was one of the major participants of the provincial delegation. The primary tasks for the Chengbu

ethnic affairs commission include education, sanitation, and economic development.

In order to provide the provincial government with a good impression, local county authorities do not always tell the truth in their reports to superiors. For example, the official record shows that the rate of elementary school enrollment for the county is as high as 98 percent. However, responsible cadres at lower echelons revealed that the actual enrollment could be lower than 80 percent. This is especially true in economically backward regions. From the point of view of local cadres, the worst misinformation is not about school enrollment, but rather concerns the economic situation of the county and some of its townships. The official county financial report in 1999 deliberately covered up the lethargic performance of the previous year; so glowing was the report that, as of 2000, the county was no longer qualified to receive extra funds allocated by the central as well as provincial governments to the county or townships below the poverty line. This meant a loss of a few million *yuan* in special allowances for infrastructure.

Changanying Township is located in the southwest of Chengbu, a little over two hundred kilometers from the city. Another two hundred kilometers southwestward is the famous tourist city of Guilin, Guangxi (廣西桂林). In a sense, this is an interprovincial region. The major income of the township is derived from wood, Chinese medicine, and hopefully in the future, tourism. All three major ethnic groups are present in the township, numbered by the size of population in the order of Dong, Miao, and Man. The Man (Manchurian) army originally from Changan (長安 which is Xi'an 西安 today) during the early dynasties explains the origin of the township name. The township is composed of two previously separate townships—Changanying and Yanzhai (岩寨). Changanying Village, where the author conducted field research, straddles both units. Forty percent of the villagers are Dong. The two major festivals for Dong are December 27 as New Year's and July 2 as Ancestors' Day.¹⁰

The township middle school, whose principal is a Han Chinese with

¹⁰Both dates are in the lunar calendar.

a normal-school degree from Shaoyang, was founded in 1987 and the principal began his career in 1998. There are six classes in the school—two of each grade. The enrollment is about 280 students. There are no Han students. Dong and Miao are the majority while Man is the minority. Only 10 percent go on to high school after middle school. Three among the total of fifteen teachers are female and five are Han. Dong males compose the majority of the faculty.

The challenge for the middle school at the time of the interview was limited teaching space. One of the class buildings has stayed half-completed for three years because the budget had not come through. The search for teachers is a lesser problem. All Dong teachers are originally from the township, having left to acquire higher education yet being sent back after finishing normal school. None of the Han teachers is a local, however. The rule is that Han teachers, once assigned, should not apply for a shift until the third year. In reality, however, those with good connections leave after only one year. Equally worth noting is the unfortunate reality that all teachers instruct in courses not of their specialty.

This author also spent time with the Yanzhai central elementary school in Dazhai (大寨) Village. There are twenty-one teachers, mostly Dong and Miao, and roughly 350 students who are divided into eight classes. Eighty percent of the students are ethnic and the twenty-one teachers share eleven dormitory rooms. Moreover, 160 students live in the school; some sleep in a room above the kitchen. The school struggles to make money by raising swine. Villagers help the school by engaging in one construction item a year: a racing field in 1996, indoor plumbing in 1997, a wall in 1998, a gate in 1999, and a paved road in 2000.

Locally Perceived Education Problems

Like many parents in Meigu, Dazhi, Menghai, and Wadi, education as a useless investment is a popular theory among parents in Changanying Township. Parental attitudes toward schooling have turned a little more positive in recent years as the forces of modernization have begun to reach the mountains via TV screens as well as tourist contacts. On the other hand,

the state's withdrawal from the job market by not placing school graduates has negatively impacted the children's willingness to attend middle school. The policy change is especially detrimental to the enrollment of the occupational school at the middle school level. As more villagers return from the coastal areas with wealth, children want to leave home for good after elementary school.

The principal of Changanying Middle School specifically pointed out that his major problem concerning teaching is that students lack motivation. One teacher acknowledged that he and his colleagues have few, if any, strategies to cope with the slow learning pace of the students. He could only reiterate the value of education in order to keep at least some minimum interest in learning at school. He himself felt that such a cliché never really provides effective incentives. For reasons unknown at the time of the research, the enrollment for the year 2000 was much better with only less than forty students not reporting to school, compared with more than one hundred in all the previous years.

Cadres working at the municipal and county ethnic affairs commissions explain why enrollment is generally low at Changanying. According to one county official, schooling does not promise a job nowadays. This is particularly annoying from the points of view of both parents and students. Secondly, the extreme poverty in the mountains disallows parents from raising even the minimum amount of tuition. At Changanying Middle School, for example, the tuition for one student for one semester of the 1999-2000 school year is 360 *yuan*. At Yanzhai Elementary School, it took 40 *yuan* to cover the room and board of a youngster (or 50 *yuan* for a junior high student). Without commercial activities, families in the mountains are typically short of monetary resources to meet such financial demands.

The Dazhai Village director is unusually concerned with his daughter's education. He himself is an intellectual who once worked in the township government. Her tuition in a neighboring province amounts to as high as 6,000 *yuan* a year. The daughter called the night before our interview, asking for a monthly payment of 110 *yuan* to pay for an after-school math class. The director said he was prepared to sell some of his valuables, including a cow, to collect enough money to support her.

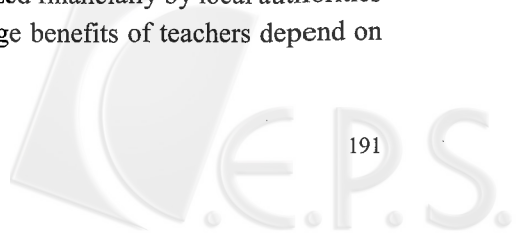
Thirdly, investment in high school does not guarantee entrance to

college. Without a college degree, the chances of finding a good job in the city are not promising. Jobs available to high school graduates may offer students less money than working in the field. In the unlikely case that students pass the college entrance examination, meeting the college tuition would be even more of a headache than high school tuition. Finally, parents always worry that possessing a college degree will not guarantee that their children will find a good job after graduation. The uncertainty prevents the parents from seriously considering long-term investment in education. On the whole, the analysis offered by the county official is close to a human capital approach.

The county official's report was first submitted to the county government to no avail. He later resubmitted his findings to the provincial and central authorities; the newspapers even printed it. This led to enormous pressure from the very unhappy county education commission, for the report was tantamount to an accusation that the officially reported enrollment rate was spurious and that local policy was misdirected.

In fact, the superior municipal ethnic affairs commission shares a similar perspective and is critical of the education commission at the same level. Those officials responsible for ethnic policy believe that the education commission pays too much attention to the execution of a curriculum unrelated to local characteristics and puts too much emphasis on the enrollment rate. Indeed, principals as well as education officials often refer their policy goals to the following three dimensions: enrollment rate, recruiting of qualified teachers, and building of school infrastructure.

The irony is that the education commission itself lacks power in the government budgeting process. Chengbu ethnic affairs commissioners complain that most education commissioners have little interest in ethnic background knowledge or, if they themselves are ethnic, are disinterested in reflecting upon their own background. Such cliches as local teachers being "the greatest teachers in the world" help very little. Education officials' praise of teachers who spare their own salary in order to cover the tuition of the poorest students sounds hypocritical because any teachers not making such a sacrifice would be penalized financially by local authorities for losing students. The status and fringe benefits of teachers depend on the enrollment outcome.



This explains why parents of young teachers care very much about the school situation. Most parents are worried when knowing their child is assigned to a position at Changanying. Fortunately, generous donation from a Taiwanese businessman helped set up a class building for the township middle school, a project that was completed in 1999.¹¹ This dramatically improved the outlook of the school setting. Not knowing that this new development was an isolated event, parents of the new teachers of 2000 were happily relieved upon seeing the new building when they escorted their child to his or her new assignment.

In the above process, parents, teachers, education commissioners, and principals collude in creating an education discourse centered on school facilities and nothing else. For the principals, the primary mission is to raise more money for school infrastructure. For the education commission, how to move and allocate scarce resources and squeeze local contribution is the primary task. For teachers, as long as they do not go back to the wooden bed to sleep, the bamboo chair to sit, or the mountain cave to teach, they can tolerate the next three years.

Teaching quality is beyond discussion at the education commission, as the commission has no role to play in writing school texts. Teaching content, for instance, is the work of the Ministry of Education with the support of supplementary texts prepared by the provincial authorities. Similarly, the authorities have a very limited supply of teachers, and most are only interested in openings in the cities. These officials do not want to hear opinions on things that they have no power to handle or jeopardize their chances of promotion by challenging the job done by their superior.

The human capital approach thus leads to a vicious cycle. People learn to think in terms of investment but unfortunately have no control over material resources. Some ethnic affairs commission cadres raise issues of ethnicity in the process of education. Although they are unfamiliar with the popular views on education in the ethnic mountains, the issue of ethnicity, which concerns them, may precisely be what is lacking in the making of the

¹¹As government funding for maintaining the existing classrooms was never realized, the rooms were no longer safe for continued use. A Taiwanese businessman who visited the neighborhood decided to help. The actual amount of cost was not related to me.

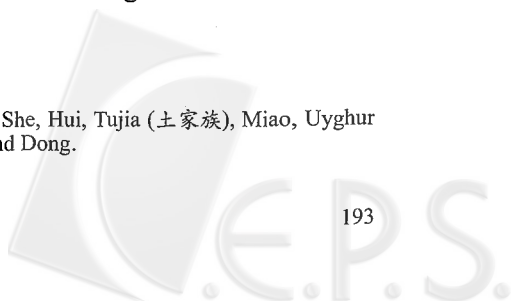
current education policy.

Education without Ethnic Characteristics

While a non-issue in Changanying Township's education system, ethnicity is nonetheless a symbol of the community. In fact, the county government sees Changanying as a model of how ethnic culture can be preserved. For Hunan, this is a symbolically important issue because there are thirty-nine ethnic groups in the province, more than in the other internationally well-researched minority province of Yunnan. However, the government treats education from a completely different angle—education is the instrument of state-building. Education is presumably designed to emancipate citizens from backward conventions or values and to instead make them active, individual participants of productive as well as political systems. Ethnicity is a matter of emotion instead of rationality and therefore should not be on the government agenda. For the government, ethnicity means balanced representation of minority people in public positions. Other meanings are in the social and cultural realms.

Consequently, when the Ministry of Education decided that all school children should join a quality education designed specifically by each school, Changanying should have utilized the program to promote local conventions. The purpose of the "quality" education program is to create room for developing aptitudes outside of the longstanding examination-oriented teaching style. Han schools typically interpret quality education to be extracurricular programs in art, music, athletics, etc. Surprising is that most ethnic schools this author has visited have done the same. Ethnic dancing is perhaps the only item on the agenda of quality education existing universally.¹² Not surprisingly, ethnic dancing is not the major item and sometimes even refers only to ethnic dancing in general, not specifically to the local ethnic group's conventional dancing.

¹²They include Zou (鄒族), Xibo (錫伯族), Man, She, Hui, Tujia (土家族), Miao, Uyghur (維吾爾族), Dai, Bai (白族), Xian, Qiang, Yi, and Dong.



Changanying is no exception. The quality education program started only in September 2000. This was at least a couple of years behind most other mountain areas and five years behind cities. The irrelevance of ethnicity in the school environment partially explains the inability of teachers to find suitable programs for mountain children. Judging from the praises that the township is a model of ethnic culture, the lukewarm responses from schools were paradoxical. The ethnic traits appearing in the village life make the school's lack of ethnicity incomprehensible.

For example, the Dazhai Village director and party secretary regularly dress in Dong clothing—even if they are not receiving guests, attending meetings, or engaging in social activities. Of course, the so-called Dong-styled clothing is as much an invention as a custom, for the featuring of a few yellow lines on the traditional plain blue clothes is a new design.

Ancestor worship is another important activity in the village. Many households have five big Chinese characters—Heaven, Earth, State, Parent, and Teacher (天地君親師)—painted on the wall facing the gate. All the distiches this author saw in the village praise the virtues of ancestors. The two major surname groups in the village—Yang (楊) and Meng (孟)—each keep a long list of their lineage.

Young people working in the coastal areas also gather together to celebrate traditional festivals. These young workers send their money back home to the mountains, constituting the hometown's largest source of income in recent years. All those households that now have a color television set are those with children working in the coastal areas. People still remember the turning point as the year 1991, when the village as a whole suddenly acquired twelve color television sets. Workers leave home through their local connections and Dong villagers set up their own channels for recruiting and placement. Almost all return on a regular basis. Males returning with a spouse often opt to stay in Changanying. They may leave again for a short-term coastal job but will soon come back home.

There is no doubt that Dong consciousness is strong among villagers, who are sensitive toward the Dong image in the eyes of visitors. The village director recalled the following story. A Taiwanese television station was once in the village to shoot Dong festivals. The cameramen refused the tea offered by the local people and questioned the sanitary conditions

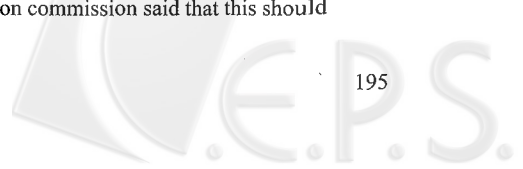
of the village. Consequently, villagers who once agreed to cooperate with the visitors refused to offer any help. Similar feelings take place when villagers warily watch how Han outsiders come in to steal fish resources. They are particularly angry at how these thieves use poison, electricity, and bombs. Changanying Village now has their own patrols to defend their river resources.

Given that the sense of community and Dong consciousness are indeed strong, and that the local sentiment toward the lack of respect by outsiders for this community identity is also noticeable, how can a school system that mentions no ethnic traits attract parents? That education can become something irrelevant, if not foreign, can be the result of inattention given to ethnicity in the school. In other words, Dong ethnicity is not the reason for poor enrollment. On the contrary, the reason lies with schools' alienation of Dong consciousness. Consequently, schooling could be meaningful only if it could bring wealth, an association unfortunately not clear to all locals.

One county education commissioner suggests that reforms could include the addition of ethnically related teaching materials to the current texts. This could be useful, however, only if the materials were also considered "ethnic" from the local point of view, not just from the provincial education commission's point of view. Another method would be to establish ethnic schools so that the ethnic affairs commission will have a role to play in both deciding the contents of the curriculum and intervening in the job placement of graduates. This would incur the suspicion of the education commission from a purely bureaucratic politics point of view.

A school principal put forward this idea of what an ethnic school should be:

It should always be that an ethnic community has an ethnic school. Students of an ethnic school should wear ethnic clothing. This has to do with the basic image, which would allow people to tell you are a Dong student on first sight. The school should incorporate local ethnic culture as well as ethnic traits into its textbooks. Thirdly, school buildings should have ethnic characteristics. In addition, all teachers should understand the ethnic language, even if they cannot speak it. I once tried to order a set of ethnic clothing for students, but the education commission vetoed me. Its reason was that I should not increase the financial burden of the student families. My second idea was to teach Dong mountain songs in the school. The education commission said that this should



first acquire the approval of the provincial authorities. However, if students do not speak the Dong language well, how can they sing Dong songs? In the village, although people still sing mountain songs all right, only those over thirty are good at it. School children generally can't. Those few children who can sing at best sing in a distorted tone. From the ethnic education point of view, my ideas are good, but the education authorities are indecisive. Likely is that the ethnic culture will perish if we do not do something about it. We have only a very few left today, who can still sing Dong songs. Children would all learn how to sing Dong songs if we could get together all those over fifty and sixty years old to teach them. It is a pity that the current curriculum is too rigid. Once they are incompatible with the policy of the superior, my ideas become no more than utopia. Today, it is a rule that Mandarin is the only language in the class. The county education commission checks on every teacher's Mandarin capacity.

Indeed, once the school can serve as a place of cultural renaissance, local tourism could benefit greatly. One municipal ethnic affairs commissioner uses Bai (白族) people in the city of Dali (大理) as an example of how to use ethnic characteristics to boost tourism.¹³ As to the Dong people, he is critical of the current practice of "pulling a few old ladies from home to sing a few songs." He thinks that this is meaningless. He suggests that students should join the tourist activities in order to earn money for the village and to learn the Dong language at the same time. Ethnic affairs commissioners from both the county and municipal authorities all dislike the education policy aimed at meeting the goals set up by a central government too remote to know what goes on in the mountains. One education commissioner rebuts that since Chengbu County is already an ethnic autonomous district, every thing going on in the county is by definition ethnic, and to create ethnic schools or promote ethnic education would be redundant. In other words, all Changanying Township schooling is ethnic; legally, it cannot be otherwise.

For the same reason, provincial education authorities do not support the idea of establishing an ethnic middle school in Changanying Township, not to mention that there are already two ethnic schools in Chengbu County. The county education commission further argues that a third in the

¹³He is not specific here. In general, he means that tourism in the ethnic areas should be like in Dali where historical sites as well as stories are fully utilized to stimulate tourists' imagination and spending.

mountains would undermine the current system of enrollment and only allow those who are not suitable for further education a false chance. One county ethnic affairs commissioner holds exactly the opposite view:

I promoted the idea of establishing a third ethnic middle school in the hope of preserving Dong ethnic characteristics. The education commissioner denounced me as a devil's advocate. The ethnic affairs commission, on the contrary, praised me for having a good idea and believed that this was exactly what should be done. The education commissioner said that we are in an autonomous district, all education here is ethnic, and there is no need to overlap. The head of the ethnic affairs commission suspected that the education commissioner [who is a Miao] was a phony ethnic minority. Ethnic education should mean special education with ethnic content, not general education of ethnic people. I remembered that I even had the design of the ethnic clothing for the third ethnic middle school ready. The education commission insisted that the provincial authorities must be consulted first. I was fortunate that the county's people's congress supported me. I could have lost my job otherwise. Another idea of the ethnic affairs commission was to build roads for the sake of developing tourism. Tourism would depend on the attraction of ethnic culture so we wanted to have a great campaign on ethnic culture. The education commission had a totally different view. The county government sided with the ethnic affairs commission, [but this does not help].

The Multiple Meanings of Ethnic Education

The county education commission is taking a collectivist rather than individual view on the issue. This is different from the education commission's preoccupation with the investment in human capital for the purpose of preparing general citizenship. If local ethnic leaders in the township as well as in the village continue to worry about the decline of Dong identity, the education campaign shying away from Dong ethnicity will not succeed in mobilizing parents to accept the necessity of receiving education. The thinking of the ethnic affairs commissioners is notable in that some ethnic programs in school may change the image parents have about schooling. At least children may feel more confident coming out of a curriculum that presupposes the authenticity of Dong ethnicity rather than a curriculum that assumes the irrelevance of ethnicity. Educators try only economic logic in recruiting students. The argument backfires due to the inability of the government to guarantee either advanced education or job opportunities after elementary school. As a result, the education commission resorts to finan-

cial and administrative sanctions on weak performance and does further damage to the meaning of schooling.

The current approach to schooling from the human capital perspective is thus problematic. The foundation of schooling in the ethnic areas is the deep-rooted and widespread discourse that ethnic communities are backward due to the lack of education. Consequently, schooling—which means modernization—cannot become a place to preserve the so-called backward culture. The criterion for judging backwardness is invariably economic; ethnicity is therefore increasingly irrelevant in the discussion. When ethnic affairs commissioners refer to ethnicity, it is almost the synonym of being exotic—a self-imposed exotic image designed to attract tourism. Implicit in their argument is also an economic rationale.

One lesson from the experiences of schooling in ethnic Xian, She, Yi, and Dai areas is that the education commissions nationwide at various levels have so far failed to appreciate the mutually reinforcing effect of ethnic consciousness and school enrollment. Ethnicity, or some form of imagined ethnicity, is not necessarily counterproductive to school enrollment. To the state, the problems of schooling in Dong areas are the result of poverty and backward culture. This research suggests a different perspective, namely the meaning of schooling should be open to interpretation by local ethnic communities who should be given ample room to practice their versions of education. Possible is that tourism and exotic images prevail in the end, or ethnicity proves to be irrelevant in the long haul of history. This does not have to be the case, though, depending on how local leadership is involved in bringing ethnicity into the school curriculum.