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## Learning to be Chinese : Minority Education and Ethnic Identity among Three Ethnic Groups in China

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## **Learning to be Chinese: Minority Education and Ethnic Identity among Three Ethnic Groups in China**

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In 1994 and 1995 I spent ten months in the province of Yunnan doing fieldwork, trying to find out what impact the Chinese standardized school education has on the ethnic identity and self-perception of some of the ethnic minorities<sup>1)</sup>. The Chinese education system is highly standardized in terms of curriculum, exams, length of study and even extra-curricular activities. But at the same time I found more local varieties in the actual form of education than I had expected - varieties that were, I believe, partly a result of a local dialogue or negotiation between the local population and the state institution, in this case the school<sup>2)</sup>. While it is obvious that local fieldwork is essential to understand groups of people's cultural patterns and social behavior, it is perhaps less obvious though not less essential that fieldwork studies of state institutions in their local context may illuminate important sides of the way in which these state institutions influence the local population and how the institutions, in the interaction with the society, are themselves adapting and undergoing changes. Thus, the overall aim of my talk today is to discuss, on the basis of my fieldwork experiences, some aspects of what happens in the local encounter between the state school and three different local ethnic minority populations in China.

The government of China promotes the idea of a common Chinese nation, 中华民族 (*zhonghua minzu*), covering all ethnic groups living within the borders of China as well as people of Chinese origin living in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and abroad. This idea is transmitted mainly via the school system, and the question I want to address in this paper is how the local ethnic minority people respond to this idea of the Chinese nation, and to what degree the school system manages to impose its own view of the nation and the nationalities on its minority students? Therefore, rather than viewing the Chinese state-controlled education system in Chinese minority areas from the perspective of national policy, which has so far been the most common approach, I look at it in its local context and try to show how there is a constant interaction taking place between the local population and the state institution, in this case the school system, represented by the school teachers and administrators. Here it is important to keep in mind that the teachers and many of the cadres working in the schools and within the education system are maybe not in any strict sense representatives of the state. After all, they have just

been transferred into these jobs mostly not as a result of their own wishes and with few possibilities of changing their place of work. On the other hand, in many ethnic minority areas (and certainly in those I am going to talk about today) they come in fact to represent the state for the local ethnic minorities. Firstly, because these people, due to their jobs, have to transmit the knowledge and the ideology which is sanctioned by the government - they do not, for instance, have a choice of what and how to teach. Secondly, the fact is that most of the locals regard the teachers and the school as representatives of the Chinese state and often of the Chinese government - they perceive the teachers and education cadres as state representatives and therefore, from their point view, they ARE state representatives, and their actions and attitudes are taken to be those of the government who rules the state. At the same time, since those teachers are mostly members of the ethnic majority nationality Han (汉族), many members of ethnic minorities also come to regard the state as being first of all represented by Han Chinese. The state becomes in their eyes a state dominated by and represented by the ethnic majority, the Han. All sorts of different laws on the participation of the ethnic minorities in various state organs cannot change the fact that at the local level everybody knows that the local minority cadres are in fact often not those who, in practice, decide upon important political issues, nor are they able to (or necessarily interested in) radically changing what their children learn in school and what they do not learn.

Through the comparison of how three different ethnic minorities have reacted towards the Chinese state education I will, furthermore, argue that the historic relationship in a certain local area between different ethnic or social groups also determines for the result of the negotiation between the state institution and these different groups. Obviously, the ethnic minorities are far from being a homogenous group of people and their different relations to and concepts of the state as represented by the various state institutions are to a large extent determined by local historic ethnic relationships.

All the three groups I am going to talk about live in the South Western province of Yunnan. I shall talk about the Naxi living in Lijiang County, the Tai or Tai Lue living in Sipsong Panna (西双版纳), and the Akha living in Sipsong Panna<sup>3</sup>). But first I need to say something about the content and form of Chinese state education - about the way it is carried out in minority areas as "minority education" or 民族教育, and especially about what kind of knowledge it generally transmits concerning the nationalities (民族) in China and concerning the Chinese nation, 中华民族.

As I shall return to, there are certainly differences in the ways that education is organized and carried out in the different minority areas in China. In some areas the teaching of minority languages is part of the curriculum or is offered as a

voluntary course for minority students, and some areas have their own local textbooks in addition to the national standardized books. Even so, generally speaking the content of Chinese education rarely deviates from the national standard. Teachers know which books to use and what to teach. Therefore, when regarding education from the perspective of national and ethnic identity, students belonging to ethnic minority groups, as well as Han Chinese students, are presented with a definite set of interpretations and perceptions of what it implies to belong to a so called “national minority (少数民族)” in China.

Concerning the presentation of ethnic minorities in the Chinese state school, students first of all learn that almost all of the “national minorities” were more “backward” in terms of economy and culture than the “majority Han” at the time of Liberation in 1949. They learn that the Communist Party then helped them to develop so that all nationalities of China became united in the multi-ethnic socialist society. They became part of the Chinese family of brother nationalities with the Han nationality (汉族) as the oldest brother. The reason why this unity was made possible, they learn, was not merely because of the Communists. There was a more profound and comprehensive reason, namely that all nationalities in fact have a common history, they are all descendants of the mythical first emperor of China, the Yellow Emperor, and thus they all belong to, and have a shared identity as, the “Chinese nationality (中华民族)”. Students also learn that within the framework of the Chinese state and constitution, all nationalities in the “New China” have equal rights to develop their languages, maintain their cultural traditions, and believe in their own religions. However, since the education so often ignores, and thereby indirectly denies, the usefulness and even the existence of the minorities’ own languages, histories, religions, form of education, customs, marriage practices, values, ethics and so forth, the impact on the students’ self-perceptions is often very powerful in the sense that it fosters in many students an image of themselves as members of a “backward minority”. Sporadic attempts at introducing brief volumes about “local minority culture” outside the common curriculum in local schools are insufficient to change this tendency<sup>4)</sup>.

From a cultural perspective, Chinese state education attempts to achieve homogenization in China in order to make common communication possible all over the country, in order to ensure the integration of the minority areas into the Chinese state, in order to promote patriotism and loyalty to the Party, and, in a broader sense, in order to “improve the quality”, or to civilize, the presumably more “backward” parts of the population. These are mostly understood to be the national minorities whose languages, cultural practices and economic life are often perceived as obstructing the development and modernization of the areas they inhabit. The belief in the civilizing and homogenizing effects of education in China is still very strong, as it was among many officials, educators and teachers

promoting Confucian education among the so-called “barbarians” especially during the times of the Qing Dynasty. The Chinese government and many cadres engaged in education continue to trust that by emphasizing a common Chinese language, history and culture, while largely ignoring ethnic and cultural differences, standardized education is capable of replacing local ethnic identities with national sentiments of unity. The question remains as to what degree the present day modern education actually manages to homogenize the population? The fieldwork research I carried out in Yunnan suggests that one of the results of an education directed at achieving cultural homogenization may well, at least in the long run, be the opposite, namely fragmentation and increased focus on ethnic identity.

Let us now return to the Naxi in Lijiang, and the Tai and the Akha in Sipsong Panna, and their different way of responding to the national project of establishing a standardized Chinese education system, and the images of the nationalities and the nation which are transmitted through this. I shall briefly talk about two of the groups, the Naxi and the Tai, and then return in more detail to the Akha.

Among the Tai in Sipsong Panna the first Chinese schools were established during the time of the Republic after 1911. But it was only after 1950 when the Communists took final control over the area and dismissed the previous Tai king and his government, that Chinese school education became more widespread among the Tai. Still today, the local government and all the Han Chinese cadres and teachers who have been sent to the area have not been able to spread and popularize Chinese school education efficiently (see Hansen 1998). One important reason for this is that most Tai fail to see any significant economic or social advantages in spending money on school education. Another reason is that the content and form of state education is in direct opposition to the Tai’s widespread tradition of educating boys in the local Theravada Buddhist monasteries and to Tai values in general. Since the Chinese school largely ignores Tai language, religion, script and values it is both unattractive, and difficult to succeed in, for the Tai.

In some respects Chinese education among the Tai resembles the education of indigenous peoples established by colonial powers in other parts of the world. The few Tai who do manage to pass through the school system need to alienate themselves from their cultural heritage, their religion, language and history as a kingdom, in order to be successful. In this way education has an assimilative effect, but only on the few. For the majority of the Tai, Chinese school education has little direct bearing on their ethnic identity and cultural practices simply because they do not participate in it. One could argue that by keeping the majority of the Tai outside the schools, the homogenizing education in fact indirectly fosters a strong ethnic identity among them, because many of them seek alternatives in their traditional Buddhist education, they turn towards their monks and support all their

efforts to further develop the traditional education, and some of them let their sons participate in Buddhist training in Thailand. In this way, their strengthened ethnic identity is not formulated within the framework of the state and therefore poses a potential political threat. In their increasing contacts with Buddhists in Thailand especially, they are supported in their religious beliefs and they find proof that their language and script may be useful in a modernizing society, even though it is apparently worthless in the present-day Chinese state. While the state education system promotes the idea that modernization and economic prosperity are inextricably bound up with the learning of Chinese, the experiences of contacts between Tai and Thai Buddhists contradict this.

The Naxi in Lijiang have responded strikingly differently to the standardized Chinese state education. With the exception of the poorest Naxi villages, school education among the Naxi has been successful in the sense that most Naxi nowadays complete six years of primary school and many continue into secondary and even tertiary education. The Naxi are proud to have a proportion of college and university graduates as high as the Han and higher than most national minorities in China. Already since the 18th century when Chinese Confucian education gradually spread among the Naxi, Chinese school education became a springboard to status, though more rarely to power, and hardly ever to wealth. Today, state-controlled school education in Lijiang is accepted by the Naxi as their own, it is not perceived as a foreign institution imposed on them to civilize or change them. Unexpectedly and unintentionally the success of state education among the Naxi have supported their recent attempts to develop a stronger common Naxi identity and to formulate ethnic, cultural, political and economic demands within the context of the Chinese state. Paradoxically, a school education that denies the value of Naxi traditions, religion, language and history, and aimed at facilitating the disappearance of ethnic entities, has provided the Naxi with a voice and a means to express themselves as an ethnic minority in the People's Republic of China and in an international context due to vast interest among foreign tourists and researchers in the Naxi and their area. Today the intellectual Naxi are the most active spokesmen for the renewed interest in the traditional Naxi ritual script and its inventors, the so-called dongba ritual specialists (see also Chao 1996). In this process there are also several examples of how the Chinese-educated Naxi intellectuals have a strong influence on the actual content of school education although this is not directly reflected in a change in the official curriculum, and how they have initiated new local schools which are not a direct alternative to the state schools, but which offer, for instance, teaching in Naxi traditional (religious) script (Hansen 1999).

Though different in many ways, the Naxi and the Tai have in common that within their own local areas they have historically been the dominant or even

ruling ethnic group. The Naxi constitute the vast majority in the area of Lijiang, and when representatives of the Qing empire took over direct control in Lijiang (in 1723) they kept cooperating with the ruling Naxi Mu family. Today Lijiang is a Naxi Autonomous County, the majority of the local government members are Naxi and only very few belong to the other local ethnic groups such as Lisu, Miao, Nuosu, etc. The Tai also made up the overwhelming ethnic majority in Sipsong Panna until the Communist government started to send Han Chinese in large numbers to the area. It was the Tai king, the Tai princes and a Tai government which practically ruled the area of Sipsong Panna until 1950 while the other ethnic groups inhabited the less fertile areas higher up in the mountains where most of them still live today<sup>5)</sup>. In contrary to the Naxi and Tai, the Akha belong to one of the groups who have long been a locally subordinated ethnic group equally to, for instance, the Jinuo and Lahu in Sipsong Panna or the Nuosu and Lisu in Lijiang. Obviously all of these groups do not respond equally to Chinese education, but I shall nevertheless argue that their common experience of historical subordination explains some important similarities and differences from the Naxi and the Tai in the way they have responded to the Chinese education system. More than 150,000 people in Sipsong Panna are officially classified as Hani (哈尼族), and most of them are Akha (others call themselves Phusa, Akha, etc.)<sup>6)</sup>. The Akha, together with the other ethnic groups living in the mountains of Sipsong Panna, were previously called by the common name *kha* by the Tai - a derogatory term meaning "slave". Although the Akha (and the other groups from the mountains) traded with the Tai, they rarely interacted socially, they lived in separate villages, and intermarriage was and still is rare. However, today students of Akha, Tai and other ethnic origin come into close contact with each other in the Chinese secondary boarding schools, especially. Here they study, live, eat and sleep together. They become friends but are, at the same time, not insensitive to the power of the historically inherited ethnic relationships as reflected in, for instance, the taboo against inter-marriage. As one eighteen year old Tai student told me: "If I fell in love with an Akha and wanted to marry him, my parents and grandparents would definitely object to it, but then... I never would fall in love with an Akha".

Among the Akha the first Chinese state schools were started in 1956, mainly with Han Chinese teachers who were sent from all over China to Sipsong Panna as part of the Communists' nation- and state- building project<sup>7)</sup>. Had it been difficult to establish a Chinese school system among the Tai, it was at least a similar challenge to do so among the Akha, though for different reasons. The teachers who were sent to start the new schools did not speak the local language and the Akha especially were rather suspicious of the newcomers who came to settle in their villages and tried to convince villagers to build straw houses for school buildings. They were very poor and saw no use in letting their children attend school rather

than help working. Hunting become another issue of dispute. Apart from sending large numbers of cadres and teachers to Sipsong Panna, the Communists also sent farmers from the inland of China to start rubber plantations in the subtropical and very fertile region. In order to plant rubber trees the new farmers needed to cut down vast parts of the jungle, and since the Akha and the other ethnic groups in the mountains depended on the jungle for their hunting, this often resulted in clashes between locals and in-coming Han Chinese farmers. And this did not work in favor of the other Han Chinese who tried to establish the state schools.

Gradually, though, Chinese primary schools become common in many Akha villages. Today most Akha children attend primary school for the first four years, but then they mostly need to pass an examination to continue into the fifth grade and need to go a higher primary school in a nearby village. That means they often have to either walk about an hour to and from school every day from when they are around eleven years old, or they have to stay at a boarding primary school, cook their own food and carry it to the school every weekend. It is also difficult for them to follow an education based entirely on Chinese language and as a result they often do not continue.

Only in those few Akha villages where teachers are local and therefore speak the local language, do teachers speak explain in local language to the children. It is however a great problem getting teachers who are able to do this. First of all there are not enough Akha with a teacher's education and secondly, most teachers who are sent to the poor villages try to get a transfer to a better area as quickly as possible. In this connection it is interesting to notice that Akha students I interviewed in the Teachers Training School emphasized that the Akha villages might be less developed and less attractive than Tai villages, but "at least the Blang villages were even more backward." In this way, it seemed that everybody was able to find somebody who they found worse off than themselves and who they could consider to be more backward-though I am not sure who the Blang would place at the bottom end of the local ethnic hierarchy. As one Akha student said, to the great amusement and agreement of other students present: "I do not want to be sent to the poorest places, for instance to a Blang or Lahu village. Just imagine, they know even less about science and knowledge than we Akha do."

The Akha have their own language but no script (like the Lahu, Blang and Jinuo in Sipsong Panna), and after the Communists' famous classification project of the 1950s<sup>8)</sup> they were described as being on a rather low level of social evolution - some of the Akha in Sipsong Panna were supposed to belong to "primitive societies (原始社会)", while others were described as having developed private land ownership<sup>9)</sup>. Most of them were supposed to be influenced by a sort of primitive communism where basically everyone shared everything, they practiced slash-and-burn agriculture and they had a form of so-called primitive

nature religion. On the basis of the theories of social evolution, so vividly adopted by the Communists, they were presented as so-called “living fossils” practicing a way of living and representing a mode of production which researchers argued that most other groups in China had left behind hundreds of years ago. And this is still the message which is being transmitted though the schoolbooks.<sup>10)</sup> Once when I asked a nineteen year old Akha student what she remembered having learned about Sipsong Panna in school she said the following:

I only remember having learned one thing. Before the Liberation the whole of Sipsong Panna was just wild forest. It was very backward because there were only minority nationalities living here. When the first tractors came everybody thought they were very strange. They thought they were animals and tried to hit them. People were all very poor here, but that apparently all changed after the Liberation.

Obviously, this student did not remember everything she had learned about the different minority nationalities, but during their education, what the Akha do learn about their own ethnic group, their own history and religion is indeed sketchy, based on the notion of backwardness, and serving to prove that they belong to some of the most backward groups in China—that they are even more backward than the Tai living in the same area.

Thus, In the case of Sipsong Panna, already existing local ethnic hierarchies are in a certain respect cemented through the content of the Chinese state education. In the broader context of the People’s Republic other groups are of course added to the hierarchy and the Han are to be found on the top of social evolution, but at a local level the form and content of education confirm for instance the Tai and the non-Tai’s perceptions and historical experiences of who are rulers and who are subjects, who are more developed and who are more backward. However, the interesting point here is that the very same education may in fact, at the same time, help to change these local ethnic hierarchies. In order to explain how this takes place, I will first elaborate a bit more on how the Tai and the Akha look upon each other, how Han teachers and cadres who are engaged in education perceive the Tai and the Akha’s different abilities to study, and how they refer to their achievements in education.

One of the things which Akha students often mentioned to me as typical for the relationship between Tai and the other local groups was the different perceptions of the value of each other’s languages. Most Akha who have not been to school, and especially those above thirty years of age, can speak or at least understand Tai. However, when I asked students if the Tai also understood Akha language they would always start laughing or they would look at me with curiosity: “Of course the Tai do not speak Akha”, I was told. Many students said that in fact many more Han Chinese than Tai learn Akha. Not those Han employed in the rubber

plations or working as cadres, but the Han who are living in Akha villages and often married to Akha women. I often heard Akha students say that whereas Akha are interested in learning other languages, the Tai especially do not share this interest.

Apart from language, one of the issues which most often resulted in vivid discussions between Tai and Akha students was religion. The reason for this, I believe, was that their education emphasized how religion and especially so-called “superstition” may obstruct modernization. Therefore, it was very important for all students to disassociate themselves from religious practices in their villages. Since they were aware that superstition is regarded as even worse than religion, as more backward, as more obstructive toward modernization, it was always important for them to fight back when members of other ethnic groups attacked their religious customs. One of the more interesting discussions I overheard in this connection was among a group of Tai and Akha female students. I was interviewing the Akha girls and slowly, as often happened, other students came to watch or to listen. But during the talk the listening Tai students, and even my Tai assistant who helped by translating when students had problems with Chinese, become so provoked by some of the things which the Akha said, that a discussion developed and my role changed from the interviewer to the listener and observer.

What happened was that one Akha girl said that one of the big differences between the Tai, the Akha and the Han was that the Tai were especially eager to perform “superstitious activities (迷信活动)”. She said that since the Tai believe in Buddhism they have a lot of superstitious activities. This made my assistant jump to her feet and say that since the Tai believe in Buddhism their religious activities are precisely *religious* activities *not* superstitious ones, and that in fact it was the Akha themselves who practiced superstition. Another Tai girl then asked the Akha in the room to tell about their own superstitions and one Akha girl started to tell, clearly embarrassed, about the female shaman in her village, the so-called *nipha*. She told about how the *nipha* tried to cure sick people and how she could see in her dreams which girls from the village should become her future students. The Tai students corrected her during her story, when she would, for instance say things like “the *nipha* knows about medical herbs” and the Tai would correct her and say, “she only knows a little though”. This went on for some time until one Tai loudly exclaimed “this is really superstition” and the discussion was taken over by the Tai who continued to exchange horrified memories of how they had seen a *nipha* perform her rituals on TV. The Akha clearly felt rather bad about this, and each of them tried to say that their father or uncle or someone else in the family did not believe in the *nipha* anymore. And the discussion more or less ended when one Akha concluded that “women are much more superstitious than men. Men are more open... I do not know why”.

The whole situation, which took place in a cramped dormitory, was just one spot in a larger picture which shows a historical local ethnic hierarchy that continues to dominate the Tai and the other ethnic groups' thoughts and perceptions of self and other. I often found it surprising how eager the Tai students and intellectuals were to defend their own position against the minorities from the mountains – how they needed to emphasize themselves as a dominant group with a script, with a religion, with a recorded history and with a previous king. One very obvious explanation is of course that the Tai themselves feel under pressure from the mainstream Chinese propagation of atheism, modernism and development which to a large degree forces them to disassociate themselves from learned values and beliefs. But another reason may be that Chinese state education is gradually changing many Akha's perceptions of themselves as an ethnic group, their perceptions of the Tai, and that they have started to see participation in Chinese state education as a possible way out of historical subordination to the Tai.

Whereas the Tai tend to reject Chinese education indirectly because it forces them to assimilate to mainstream cultural practices and reject their own language, religion and history without actually paying off in the form of economic advantages, the much poorer and previously subordinated minorities from the mountains may find in Chinese education a possibility to escape the hard labor in the villages and to occupy more important and influential positions in the Chinese society and thereby also reject their historical subordination to the Tai. This may explain why the Akha apparently, and at least for the time being, find it much more easy to accept that they only learn Chinese in school and not their own language, and even accept the representations of themselves as a members of a backward group in the broader Chinese context. Unlike the Tai, they often express gratitude to the government for having established Chinese schools in their villages allowing them to learn to read and write. If Akha students do not perform well in school they tend to blame themselves and the backwards conditions in their villages, whereas the Tai are more likely to blame the school system for not teaching in their own language and for making it impossible for boys to attend the monastery and the school at the same time.

In fact the Akha have a quite low proportion of students in school as compared to the Tai, mainly because many Akha villages are extremely poor, without electricity and sometimes even without enough food. Often, less than 10 percent of Akha children in a village primary school manage to continue into the fifth grade. Still, teachers in schools all over Sipsong Panna and most cadres engaged in education, put forward that the Akha (and, by the way, the Jinuo) perform better than the Tai in school – or rather, that they come from less, but achieve more.<sup>11)</sup> I would like just to quote one headmaster of a national middle school whose view on the difference between Tai and Akha students is very representative and

commonly heard among other Han and Tai teachers:

Tai students are very clever, but they are not so industrious and good at studying as the minorities from higher up in mountains. The Tai have a better economy, they have an easier life, they do not need to work so hard. I have faced this problem for 20 years now. The Akha for instance have a very hard life and they are not so intelligent. Therefore they are very eager to study hard, to learn, to escape such a hard life. Generally the Tai are more lazy. They think that their own language and script is really good. They think they do not need to learn Han Chinese. The Akha, they realize the need and advantages of learning Chinese.

So, the minorities in a local area who are looked down upon and who have traditionally had a low position in a local ethnic hierarchy, may find a strategic use in the state education to reject this historically inherited low position. The Akha had previously been dominated by the Tai. Their ability to perform well within the Chinese school system, or simply the fact that they are praised by the Han Chinese cadres and teachers (who for them represent the state) for *trying* to perform well, provides them with new possibilities of gaining status and maybe influence. In some aspects they even manage to be accepted as slowly becoming “more developed” than the Tai. Many Han Chinese teachers tried to explain to me that by rejecting Chinese state education “the Tai risk to become even more backward in the future than the minorities from the mountains”.

Unlike the Tai boys, the Akha have no alternatives to the Chinese education, they do not have many educated members, and therefore they may, to a certain degree, regard assimilation as a strategy. Even when in fact they do not have a large proportion of students and less intellectuals with influential positions than the Tai, the students are profoundly influenced by Han teachers’ presentations of them as hard working, diligent and more open towards the prospects of cultural change than are the Tai. In this way the presentations and the dominant perceptions of them by Han Chinese in powerful positions became more important than the more objective facts of, for instance, low student attendance rate. This appraisal of the Akha is only possible because they accept, in the first place, the presentation of themselves as backward in schools and welcome the state’s attempt to educate and, perhaps to civilize, them in the Chinese, school system. This illustrates how state education may have a direct influence on local ethnic relations and it suggests that local historic ethnic hierarchies may also have a direct impact on a group of people’s reception of and responses to the image of the Chinese nation and the different ethnic groups within China as transmitted in the standardized, state-sponsored education. By accepting the school’s construction of their own ethnic group as backward and by accepting to discard their cultural habits and the importance of learned values, students of Akha origin, for instance, may in fact manage to challenge the Akha’s peripheral and subordinate position within the local hierarchy.

## Concluding Remarks

So far I have argued that whereas we may talk of a Chinese state school that seeks to transmit a uniform image of the Chinese nation and the nationalities through the content of the education as well as through what is omitted from it, there is not one single “minority” response to this education. Rather, the Chinese government and its local representatives are faced with a myriad of different responses and reactions, of which I have only discussed a few here, and which again have different and unpredictable consequences for the ways in which the ethnic minorities in China relate to the Han, to each other, and to the Chinese hegemonic state and its government. The Chinese government’s and many Chinese educators’ belief in the school as an institution capable of controlling the transformation of minorities’ cultural values and diminishing the importance of ethnic identities is exaggerated, though my research suggests that education *does* play an important role in determining the direction and form of ethnic identity. Thus the Naxi, for instance, are able to utilize their long-term participation in and adoption of Chinese education to forcefully establish themselves as a national minority in China without running counter to the government’s intention of promoting the ideology of the “unity of the nationalities” and the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu*). Others, such as many Tai, tend to reject Chinese education because it collides with religious traditions and compels students to alienate themselves from their own history as a Tai nation and from learned cultural values. Others again, such as some of the Akha, may find strategic advantages in adapting to the Chinese school system and downplaying ethnic identities in order to counter their low social positions in a locally defined historic ethnic hierarchy,

In this process the local schools themselves are sometimes influenced, changed and adapted to local demands, through the people who represent the school system, work in it, and are interesting in making it function. State institutions in Communist countries such as China are often depicted as institutions which are only changed by the will of the government - and the Chinese school system is indeed not among the most flexible ones. However, the central government has provided the local “autonomous” governments in minority areas with certain rights and possibilities of adapting the state school to local needs; and often there is a sort of exchange or negotiation taking place in the relationship between the local population and the local representatives of the school system. Sometimes this results in adjustments (though never radical change) of the school system, the form and content of education, or the admission procedures. Often this tendency is strengthened when members of the local government themselves belong to one of the local ethnic minorities and are positive towards a development of an education that includes more teaching of a minority language (often their own), local history,

etc. So, for instance, when some groups, such as the Tai, reject the school because of cultural repression in the school, because it collides with religious practices, or for various other reasons, then the school representatives on their part engage in a sort of negotiation. This is first a negotiation of how the school should look, but on another level it is maybe also a negotiation of what the Chinese nation is and should be, and of how the ethnic minorities fit into this constructed common identity as the Chinese nation. The school may grant a little more space to the Tai by allowing more Tai language in primary schools, making experiments with real Tai-Chinese bilingual education, and allowing monks and novices to go to school while keeping their affiliation with the monastery. Sometimes it even allows boys *not* to go to school if they prefer to be monks. However, at the same time the teachers and the education cadres in Sipsong Panna, who are mainly Han Chinese, make use of the fact that the Akha and the other non-Tai groups in Sipsong Panna are against a further strengthening of Tai culture in the education system. Because they find advantages in a school system based on Chinese which may allow upward social mobility, it is easier for the authorities to reject the Tai's claims for the further development of a school which is more Tai and less Chinese. Equally, the case study of education among the Naxi has demonstrated how schools at the local levels, while being first of all a product of central education policy, are, at the same time, changing and flexible concerning form and content due to local interactions between the school representatives and the population. These local variations in the school system only become visible for the outsider through local fieldwork, and they are significant for understanding how and why ethnic minorities are responding differently to the national project of spreading a unified Chinese education system attempting to facilitate the cultural homogenization and common identification of all people in China.

## Notes

- 1) Some of the conclusions drawn in this paper are developed in my Ph.D. thesis (Hansen 1996) and I refer to this and to Hansen 1997a and 1997b for more extended analysis of especially the responses of the Naxi and the Tai Lue to Chinese state education.
- 2) The fieldwork methods were interviews, listening to classes, reading textbooks together with students, and participating in various local events in villages, schools and families.
- 3) The Tai are classified as part of the Dai nationality (傣族), the Akha as part of the Hani nationality (哈尼族), and the Naxi of Lijiang as the Naxi nationality (纳西族).
- 4) In connection with "patriotic education (爱国主义教育)" the local governments are encouraged to produce teaching material that includes local history and the presentation of local heroes, famous persons, etc. The reason behind this is that

students are expected to learn how “to love their country” through learning how to “to love their native area”. In Lijiang and Sipsong Panna such local material has been produced. In Sipsong Panna it is only taught in the Teachers Training School and in Lijiang it has not yet been introduced in the education.

- 5) Until the 1950s the Tai made up the ethnic majority in Sipsong Panna and the Tai king, the *chao phaendin*, and government ruled the area. Since the 1950s an increasing number of Han Chinese have moved and been moved into the area as teachers, cadres, state-farm workers, etc. Today the people in Sipsong Panna are classified as the Dai Nationality (傣族) and make up 36% of the local population in Sipsong Panna (a total of 798,086 in 1994), the Han (汉族) make up 26% and the last third part of the population is made up by various smaller ethnic groups, such as the Akha, Jinuo, Blang, Lahu, etc.
- 6) There are Akha people in Burma, Laos and Thailand as well.
- 7) This was also the case among the other non-Tai groups living in Sipsong Panna, but for the sake of simplicity I only talk about the Akha in this paper.
- 8) See for instance, Fei Xiaotong 1981, Gladney 1991, McKhann 1995, Wellens 1996.
- 9) A Romanized script was created for the Hani nationality in the 1950s, but this was based on a dialect which is unintelligible for the Akha in Sipsong Panna and is therefore useless for them. Consequently, only Chinese is taught in primary schools in Akha villages.
- 10) See also Hansen 1997a for a more detailed discussion of how the message of “backwardness” is transmitted via Chinese textbooks.
- 11) In fact the Jinuo are often praised even more than the Akha for having escaped their own backwardness by accepting and participating in Chinese education. Chinese school education has been rather successful among the Jinuo who live in a small, delimited area near Jinghong, and due to the various quotas for admitting students of different nationalities into the higher education system, they boast a relatively high percentage of senior middle school and university graduates.

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