

## Empire at the margins:<sup>1</sup> Compulsory mobility, hierarchical imaginary, and education in China's ethnic borderland

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This paper presents an ethnographic interpretation of education as a social technology of state sovereign power and governing in the borderlands of contemporary China. Illustrated with snapshots from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a Pumi (Premi) ethnic village located along China's south-western territorial margins, it is argued that the hierarchical structure of the education system, coupled with the arduous and yet *compulsory mobility* entailed in educational participation, powerfully shapes the social and political imaginaries of peripheral citizens. Education serves simultaneously as a *distance-demolishing technology* and a *hierarchy-establishing technology* that counters the 'frictions of terrain' that traditionally presented a problem to the state for governing such geographically inaccessible borderlands.

**Keywords:** China; education; minority; state; power; imaginary

### Introduction

Historian and philosopher Michel Foucault in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1977: 181–4) offers some brilliant analyses of schooling/education. He sheds light on the French military school regime and what he calls the 'techniques of power' employed in the school to discipline pupils, including processes such as normalization, individualization, and ranking. Through examining such processes, he shows that it is not ideas or ideologies taught in the school that accomplish the state's aims of subject formation and discipline; instead, he argues, it is concrete techniques, mechanisms, and instruments that achieve this.

In this ethnographically based paper, I adopt Foucault's analytical perspective of focusing on the (social) technologies of power and discipline, and apply it to the domain of education in China's ethnic minority borderlands. The paper is theoretically concerned with the vital roles that education and schooling play in relation to state power and sovereign governance. I ask in what ways peripheral 'out-of-the-way' (to borrow an expression from Tsing, 1993) places inhabited by marginal peoples remain a part of an integral sovereign nation state. My central argument is that the hierarchical structure of the educational system, coupled with the arduous yet compulsory mobility entailed in educational participation, shapes the social and political imaginaries of citizens living in the periphery whose connections with the central state are otherwise tenuous. In comparison with such formal and structural aspects of the education system, which powerfully shape the imaginaries, desires, and 'practical consciousness' (Giddens, 1984) of the borderland citizens (especially school children), the content of education in the school is secondary and relatively insignificant.

In this sense, I concur with educational anthropologist Veronique Benei (2008: 21) on the point that '[s]chool is not just a space for learning and official education but one of the most omnipotent manifestations of the state in people's lives and/or surroundings that powerfully inserts itself into the imaginaries of social actors'. Using snapshots from an ethnographic fieldwork

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conducted in July 2011 at a Pumi ethnic village located along China's south-western territorial margins, this paper is an account of how the school inserts the state into people's imaginaries.

The paper is organized as follows: firstly, I offer a brief theoretical discussion of the relationship between education, schooling, and the nation state in order to further contextualize the shift from the content of education to the structural and formal aspects of education as the focus of analysis. I then briefly present background information regarding ethnic minorities and education in China. This is followed by a description of the research site, fieldwork, and the specific research questions. The main ethnographic sections follow, leading to the concluding discussion.

### **Education and the nation state**

The relationship between education and state formation is a perennial scholarly concern that can be traced back as far as Plato's famous writings in the *Republic*. In the modern, secular nation state founded on the Enlightenment principles of scientific progress and democratic sovereignty, whether in reality or just in name, the importance of state-sponsored universal educational institutions, in the form of schools and schooling cannot be overstated. Virtually everywhere, universal education is 'a central feature of modern state formation' (Kaplan, 2006: 9), seen as 'both a prerequisite for the stability of the state and a powerful means of national integration' (Benei, 2008: 4). This is so because if nations are necessarily 'imagined communities' as Benedict Anderson (2006) famously asserts, then schooling is a crucial method of enabling such imaginations. Ernest Gellner (2006) went as far as assigning education a definitional value in relation to the modern nation state by suggesting that modern societies are characterized by a single education system (i.e. the *national* education system) below the level of which no sub-communities are able to, or are supposed to, reproduce themselves. Comparatively examining the historical developments of European and American educational systems in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Andy Green (1990: 80) argues that the school simply 'became the secular church' in so far as the integrative function (for example, inculcating a national language) it performs in relation to nation-state formation is concerned.

In the critical literature on education and the nation state based on these theoretical foundations (for example, Benei, 2005, 2008; Kaplan, 2006; Kipnis, 2011; Nie, 2008; Thøgersen, 1990; Woronov, 2004, 2007, 2008; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Hansen, 1999; Barr and Skrbis, 2008), there is a pronounced tendency to focus on the *content* of education – what is taught and what is not taught – as indoctrination and ideologized socialization. Even in the context of more developed democratic nation states where education has become less and less characterized by ideological inculcation and more and more by *skill formation* oriented towards enhancing the economic competitiveness of the nation state in a global knowledge economy (Green, 1997; Koh, 2010), the analytical focus on the *substance* of education nevertheless remains. Skills have simply replaced ideologies as the substantive focus of critical educational analysis. In this paper, the aim is to move away from such a commonplace focus on the content of education, and instead to dwell upon the *structural* and *formal* aspects of education in relation to state formation and state power.

### **Ethnic minority and education in China**

In the standard narrative, China is a unified nation state comprising a Han majority and 55 minority ethnic groups. These officially designated minorities make up less than 9 per cent of China's total population,<sup>2</sup> yet traditionally they inhabit areas that collectively amount to two-thirds of the

country's territory. Sinologist and historian Prasenjit Duara notes that since the Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1911, the state has:

[c]onsistently emphasized assimilationist institutions, narratives of voluntary assimilation, and the cultural investment of peripheral spaces as part of the national imaginary. The Republic collapsed in the face of a revolutionary uprising, but its institutional and cultural efforts at nationalizing the peripheries served as the foundation of PRC's consolidation of these regions in its version of the multinational state. (Duara, 2003: 252–3)

Perhaps as a result of such an assimilationist policy direction, relationships between Han (and the Han-led state) and certain major ethnic groups have been fraught with tensions, although this is by and large not the case with the ethnic groups in China's south-western borderlands, such as Yunnan Province. The Chinese state recognizes the disadvantages experienced by ethnic minorities in a Han-dominated nation, and has instituted legislation and policies that provide favourable treatments for these minorities. These preferential policies cover areas such as family planning, education, employment/promotion, and formal political representation (Sautman, 1998). For instance, China's contentious one-child policy did not apply to all ethnic minority families; their children are also entitled to bonus points or reserved quotas in access to public higher education.

Hence, China's ethnic minority policies can be characterized as dualistic, in having an assimilationist general thrust as well as a dimension of affirmative action. In the final analysis, however, it should be noted that many of these affirmative actions and policies ultimately aim to serve the purpose of helping the ethnic minorities assimilate into mainstream cultural and social life, defined largely by the Han people and their dominant culture. The language policy is a case in point. Hansen (1999) and Safran (1998) make essentially the same point that 'bilingual education in the PRC is not an end in itself, but has been regarded primarily as a transitional measure aimed at facilitating mastery of the dominant languag[e]' (Safran, 1998: 4). Taking the example of bilingualism in Inner Mongolia, Naran Bilik (1998: 49) argues that although there existed perfunctory institutions of bilingual education in several major ethnic regions in China, the 'minority languages ... have lost their practical status in social function'. Importantly, these remarks pertained to the languages of the larger minority groups which have written scripts or, in some cases, deep literary traditions of their own. The issue of formal bilingual education rarely arises in the case of smaller minority languages, which either lack written scripts or had scripts that were never widely used. This leads to the fieldwork site for the present research: a remote borderland village called *Yushi* (pseudonymized) that is home to a 'minor minority' (*shaoxiao minzu*) ethnic group.<sup>3</sup>

### Research site, fieldwork, and research questions

Located not far from the Sino-Burmese border (see Figure 1), *Yushi*'s full official administrative appellation is:

Yushi Natural Village,  
Qinghua Administrative Village,  
Township of Hexi,  
Lanping *Bai* and *Pumi* People's Autonomous County,  
Nujiang *Lisu* People's Autonomous Prefecture,  
Yunnan Province,  
People's Republic of China.



**Figure 1:** Location of Yushi Village



**Figure 2:** Yunnan Province

China’s south-western border province of Yunnan (Figure 2) enjoys the reputation for being a ‘museum of human species’, as it is home to the largest numbers of indigenous ethnic groups in China,<sup>4</sup> and encompasses huge ethno-cultural and ecological diversities. According to the latest national census available, one-third of Yunnan’s population, or over 15 million people, are categorized as minorities; among them, six large minority groups have populations over one million (Puri *et al.*, 2011).

Yushi, however, is a village of no more than 400 people, inhabited almost exclusively by the Pumi (also known as Premi) people, a so-called ‘minor minority’ group whose total population was estimated to be around just 30,000 (Yang, 1999).<sup>5</sup> As the village rests deeply in a mountain valley some 2,900 metres above sea level, road infrastructures leading from the outside world to the village were very poor; inside the village, the connections between villagers’ wooden

houses and crop fields were mostly dirt paths covered in mud and animal faeces. Understandably, the village remains severely underdeveloped economically. The main economic activities in Yushi were animal (goat and cow) herding and plant cultivation, which brought in an annual per capita income of less than RMB 1,000 as of 2010 (Zhu, 2010), roughly equivalent to US\$ 150.

My research journey into the village serves as a vivid illustration of its isolation due to geographical inaccessibility.<sup>6</sup> From Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan Province, it was an eight-hour coach journey to the Lanping County seat, which was the furthest point public transport could go. Then, four further hours of bumpy riding in specially arranged four-by-four sports utility vehicles on circuitous mountain roads took one to the Qinghua Administrative Village. But the final journey into Yushi village itself had to be undertaken on foot: a route through mountains that usually takes about two hours in fine weather took my colleagues and I more than five exhausting hours in wet conditions because we had to opt for a longer but safer route.

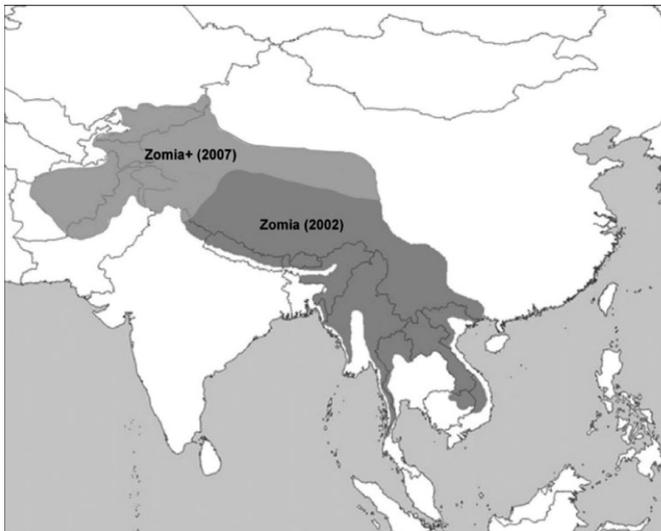
The geographical inaccessibility of a vast region including the south-west borderlands of China was highlighted by James Scott in his work *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), in which he argues that the history of this sprawling region called 'Zomia' (Figure 3) was a history of the 'barbarian' peoples actively refusing to be incorporated into the state government structures of the surrounding lowland kingdoms and civilizations, notably among them the Han Chinese empire. According to Scott, the 'frictions of terrain' that characterize this region, including high altitudes, heavily forested mountain ranges, lack of infrastructure, and difficulties of building the same, afforded the 'hill peoples' a retreat space, and allowed them to evade state appropriation that often latched onto lowland paddy cultivation because the latter tied down populations and rendered people's social and economic activities *legible* to the state.

Although Scott's Zomia thesis is a matter of active debate within the academy, there is little doubt that my research site, Yushi, and its inhabitants – securely ensconced in the deep mountains of Zomia – presented and still present a problem of governing for the Chinese state that has long claimed sovereignty over them. While in history there certainly had been particular methods through which these apparently ungovernable places and peoples somehow remained part of the Chinese empire, such historical questions are beyond the scope of this paper. My questions here are for the present: in what ways does a remote and marginal village become part of the sovereign nation state that is the PRC? How does sovereign integrity and connectedness manifest at mundane levels in a peripheral space like Yushi? And how do peripheral dwellers such as Yushi villagers become citizens of a nation state whose centre is in many ways so far removed? Some clues for answering these questions may be gleaned from an ethnographic examination of the domain of formal education.

The ethnographic fieldwork underpinning this paper was conducted over a brief but intensive period of three weeks in July 2011, during which an experienced Chinese anthropologist specializing in the Pumi people in Yunnan led a group of eight postgraduate researchers, including myself, to examine the various aspects of Yushi village life. I focused on the topic of education, and had read up about the Pumi people and the ethnic minorities in south-western China more generally before embarking on this fieldwork. As the anthropologist leading this trip had a friendly, long-term collaborative relationship with Yushi village as well as with the township and county administrations which have jurisdictions over it, we were made to feel welcome in the village. The trust that had developed between Yushi villagers and the leading anthropologist over a long period of time evidently benefited us too, opening many doors. For this reason, although the research team consisted of all Han people, we did not feel that this ethnic identity created any significant barrier to our communication and interactions with the villagers. All villagers we met, except several elderly and middle-aged women, spoke fluent Mandarin; younger villagers and children spoke Mandarin particularly well thanks to schooling. Hence, although the village is no doubt geographically marginal, it certainly is not closed-up.

During the fieldwork, the research team stayed with two friendly village families. Because the researchers focused on different topics, except for the first few days of introduction and familiarization, most of the time we split into small groups or individuals to carry out our own research activities of visiting families for informal interviews, very much in the form of chatting. On the other hand, the team met up every evening after dinner to share among each other the research findings of the day. This way, while each researcher focused intensively on a small topic in depth, by the end of the research stint we were able to obtain a fairly comprehensive picture of village life. In my own inquiries on education, I visited 19 village families with school-age (5–18) children; I chatted to the parents as well as the children about their educational experiences, although inevitably I can only afford to present what I think are the most interesting stories in the following ethnographic accounts. While the adult villagers did not seem overly enthusiastic about my visits, I did not sense any reluctance or reticence on their part to meet or talk. Their school-age children were usually far more interested in the ‘sisters/brothers’ coming from the ‘city’, and were eager to answer questions. Again, I did not feel any attempt on their part to evade conversations or give misleading information. Because of the geographically hierarchical structure of the schooling system, during my stay in Yushi village I also made two day trips to the Hexi Township, where I visited two schools (one primary, the other junior secondary; both in summer vacation) under the guidance of a student informant and met and chatted with two teachers, one in each of these two schools. As we stopped over at the Lanping County seat on our initial journey into Yushi, I also visited the county educational bureau which had oversight of the area including Yushi; there I interviewed, more formally, two officials on policy-related issues.

Although the research fieldwork was relatively brief, my interactions with a range of key informants in various institutional settings across several geographical and administrative scales allowed me to meaningfully explore the social and political significances of education/schooling in China’s ethnic minority margins. Taking an interpretivist approach that is typical with anthropological and ethnographic research, this paper seeks to offer some heuristic clues and useful propositions for thinking about the research questions that I raised earlier; what it does not claim for itself is analytical exhaustion or closure.



**Figure 3:** ‘Zomia’

Source: Michaud (2010: 188)

## State and education at the margins: Ethnographic snapshots

### **Education: A regime of compulsory mobility**

The abstract central state and the citizen subjects' daily lives are connected through various forms of material as well as symbolic interactions and transactions. Such interactions and transactions are often reciprocal though seldom symmetrical. In remote and underdeveloped areas, these interactions and transactions are often reduced to a bare minimum. In the centre-to-periphery direction, the state reaches its peripheral citizens through the provision of the most basic social services. Conversely, in the periphery-to-centre direction, the very utilization by borderland citizens of these services may be regarded as acts of reciprocity that amount to the passive recognition of the state's legitimacy to govern.

In remote and inaccessible places such as Yushi, formal education in the shape of schooling is the most prominent – often the *only* – example of such reciprocal transactions between the state and its subjects. Chinese scholar Li (1999) thus goes as far as to claim that the school is the state in the village. However, while it is certainly true that the village school enacts the state through pedagogic rituals such as national flag raising, national anthem singing, and the explicit teaching of national ideologies with officially approved textbooks, these activities within the confines of the walls of the school do not constitute the most potent way in which schooling functions as a technology of power/governing. Instead, I argue, when we place the village school back into the much larger hierarchical network of educational institutions of which it is merely the furthest node and the lowest rung, we realize that it is the *compulsory mobility* inherently demanded by educational progression that acts as a far more meaningful and compelling way to structure the political consciousness and subconsciousness of the dwellers of the periphery.

James Scott (2009) calls modern communication technologies such as mobile telephone and satellite television, which connect remote citizens to an imagined *community* and *polity* that they are otherwise not in a position to experience or comprehend, '*distance-demolishing technologies*' that the state uses to counter frictions of terrain. Borrowing Scott's expression, and with snapshots of my ethnographic fieldwork, I argue below that education, through its promise to provide social mobility, serves as a primary and powerful *distance-demolishing technology* and *hierarchy-establishing technology*, creating in the minds of peripheral citizens a sub/consciousness of their own position within an imagined community/polity to which they become firmly attached.

### **The compulsoriness of education**

The compulsoriness of education can be understood as having a twofold meaning. Firstly, in China it is enshrined in national legislation that all children must complete nine years of basic education (six in the primary school and three in the junior secondary school). Secondly, as a condition particularly relevant to mountainous border regions such as where Yushi is located, participation in education demands compulsory and strenuous *physical mobility* on the part of the students (and sometimes also the parents) because schools are almost always located hours or days of arduous journeys away. In this section, I briefly address the first compulsoriness before moving on to compulsory mobility in the next two sections.

According to Jinting Wu (2012a: 626), in China, '[e]ducation becomes a "solution" of underdevelopment, especially of the peripheral regions', because it is believed that by improving the *suzhi* or 'quality' (Wu, 2012b; Woronov, 2008; Fong, 2007) of its population through education, not only would the country's economic competitiveness increase, the many social problems believed to stem from people's lack of education would also be eradicated. Thus, as China refocused its energies on economic development since the 1980s, a number of laws and policies

have been instituted in order to raise the educational levels of the nation as a whole. The Law on Compulsory Education was passed in 1986, laying the legal foundations for the state's subsequent efforts in this area; in 1994, the Outline of Educational Reform and Development set the target of universalizing nine-year compulsory education by 2000. When there was a failure to meet this target in the country's many poor areas, including most borderland ethnic regions, the 'Two Exemptions and One Subsidy' (*liangmian yibu*) policy was launched in 2006, aiming gradually to abolish tuition and miscellaneous fees and provide small sums of living subsidies to students from families experiencing financial hardship.

Along my bumpy and circuitous coach journey to Lanping County, I frequently noticed painted walls of buildings/houses or gigantic billboards carrying slogans such as: 'It is a grave offence not to send your eligible children to school!' No doubt the very presence of these slogans attests to the continuing existence of the problems to which they refer. As Wu's (2012a) recent research in another of China's minority provinces, Guizhou, shows, non-participation in compulsory education and drop-out before completion are still far from eliminated in the underdeveloped areas. Indeed, at the Hexi Township Bureau of Education an official stressed in an interview that universalizing nine-year compulsory education was a serious, urgent, and ongoing 'political task' (*zhengzhi renwu*).

Koen Wellens is among the very few scholars who have written about the Pumi people, and he observed in a Yunnan Pumi village that many school-age children were not attending school regularly for reasons such as poverty, traditional gender ideologies, and 'logistical impediments such as distance' (Wellens, 2010: 89). While this account is helpful, the fact that Wellens's fieldwork was conducted around 2000 means that updates are needed, especially in view of the introduction of the 'Two Exemptions and One Subsidy' policy in 2006. In my field interactions with ordinary Yushi villagers, I was able to confirm that nine-year compulsory education had indeed been made virtually cost free to any eligible children, thanks to the implementation of the aforementioned policy, because virtually all families in the village were poor enough to qualify for the benefits. Villagers with children studying in primary or junior secondary schools reported that their yearly out-of-pocket expenses for education were no more than the several tens of yuan spent on basic stationery. Before the policy was put in place, however, costs were significant. A villager now in her 20s recalled how she used to pay about 200 yuan per year when she was in junior secondary school for tuition and book fees, in addition to the weekly living cost of 15 yuan per week during term time; these figures roughly tally with observations made by Wellens (2010: 87–91). It is worth mentioning though that if children were to pursue education beyond the junior secondary level, charges still apply and will have to be borne by the families themselves. Senior secondary school tuition fees are typically between 1,000 to 2,000 yuan per year for public schools, and double that amount for private ones, not inclusive of living expenses. The nearest senior secondary school is located in the county seat of Lanping.

### **'Balanced Education' and its discontents**

Since the 'Two Exemptions and One Subsidy' policy of 2006, the most recent major national policy initiative that has had tangible impacts on villages as remote as Yushi is perhaps that of the 'Balanced Education' or *junheng jiaoyu*. Concerned with the huge and entrenched rural–urban disparities in terms of educational resources and quality, when China's State Council issued the National Outline for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–20) (*guojia zhongchangqi jiaoyu gaige he fazhang guihua gangyao*) in 2010,<sup>7</sup> one highlighted theme of the Outline was the 'balanced development of compulsory education' across the country. Although in official rhetoric balanced development had always been a goal in the state's policies

on education, the renewed emphasis on this goal at this juncture reflected the Chinese state's profound anxieties over the levels of social inequality that had developed in the country since the start of the new millennium (see Sun, 2003).

In the rural areas, the 'Balanced Education' agenda had largely translated into policy actions encapsulated in another catchphrase, namely 'Educational Resource Integration' (*jiaoyu ziyuan zhenghe*), which operationally meant closing down poorly funded, poorly staffed small schools at the lowest administrative levels in order to concentrate financial and human resources at larger boarding or semi-boarding schools on higher administrative levels. The rationale behind such integration is that of the economy of scale, expressed in the belief that the quality and efficiency of education will improve when students, teachers, and other resources become concentrated. Again, although the slogans were new, Hansen (1999) noted that ever since the 1980s policymakers had consistently preferred concentrated boarding schools in mountainous and border regions, believing this to be the solution to low attendance and high drop-out rates. Thus, what the 2010 pronouncements of 'Balanced Education' and 'Educational Resource Integration' did was to provide a renewed and powerful impetus towards the implementation of the policy down to the remotest margins of the country.

According to officials at the County Bureau of Education, in Lanping County (which administratively encompasses Yushi), the total number of schools nearly halved, from the pre-2007 level of 456 to 231 in 2011. This figure was to go down further still. For Yushi, this meant closing down a small village school that had catered to village children for the first three years of their primary education (known as a *chuxiao*) until 2010. Now all children had to start boarding in the 'full' primary school (*wanxiao*) in Qinghua Administrative Village from just 5 or 6 years of age. Many parents in the village had qualms over this, and were worried about children's welfare and safety when they are away. The father of a 7-year-old boy complained:

I can't understand this policy. When kids are just 6, 7 years old, how can they look after themselves? We [parents] cannot stop worrying (*bufangxin*). My son still can't speak much Mandarin, so he can't even let the teachers know when he's hungry or feeling ill.

At the time of fieldwork, plans were imminent to further downgrade the Qinghua *wanxiao* to a *chuxiao* so that students would have to spend the first three years there, and the remaining three years in Hexi Township, where a large boarding school with impressive-looking facilities was under construction. Another villager with an 8-year-old son pointed out that if this plan went ahead and his son had to go to the township for upper primary school from the next year, he would certainly have to spend an entire day every fortnight just to accompany his son to and from the school for fear of his safety during the journey, because part of the footpath is adjacent to a fast-running river. He appeared annoyed, pointing out that a whole day spent on the way could be a significant loss of productive time during busy agricultural seasons.

### **Educational desire and imaginaries of hierarchy**

It is interesting to see how such pragmatic concerns of parents contrasted with the experiences and perceptions of the students themselves, and I argue that it is in the latter's experiences and perceptions that we glimpse the working of education as a technology of power over people's desires and imaginaries.

Many of the students to whom I talked during fieldwork approved of going out of the village and attending big schools, suggesting that boarding with other schoolmates was fun and good for their studies. A 13-year-old boy I met in the village, Ah Kang (pseudonym), who had just finished the first year of his junior secondary school and was spending summer holidays back home, told

me that he definitely preferred big classes in 'integrated' schools to small classes, because 'there is more competition'. He said that he enjoyed boarding secondary school life in Hexi Township, and confidently revealed that he was doing well academically in his class.

When he led me to his home, I noticed how his numerous school award certificates prominently adorned the front door of the house, as if these seals of approval issued by the certifying authority (that is, the school) were some modern talisman capable of adding honour and righteousness to the house and warding off evils. The 'evil' – if we could speak of such here – to be warded off is perhaps none other than the profound sense of stigma attached to the dwellers of China's ethnic borderlands for being uneducated and therefore 'backward' and 'uncivilized' (Hansen, 1999; Wu, 2012a, 2012b). When I approached Ah Kang's mother, who happened to be doing laundry nearby, to ask her to take a photograph of me and Ah Kang, she could not understand the Mandarin I spoke; Ah Kang intervened and casually explained to me: 'Oh, she doesn't understand, she is *wenmang* (illiterate).' For a moment I was in deep shock because I had not expected a son to apply such an explicitly derogatory term as *wenmang* (see Peterson, 1994) to his mother.

In my further conversations with Ah Kang, I asked him whether he had joined the Chinese Communist Pioneer Group (*shaoxiandui*). This is a school-based political organization founded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and supervised by the Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL); it is practically compulsory for all primary school students across the country to join it, serving to educate them in the values of socialism and loyalty towards the CCP (see Woronov, 2007). As he had done so, I probed him about the meanings of being a 'Pioneer'. On hearing this Ah Kang seemed confused, as if having encountered a question that he had never contemplated before. After thinking for a while, he replied that to be a Pioneer was simply to 'help other classmates' and to be 'obedient' (*tinghua*) to teachers; he seemed to have no idea of the hierarchical relationship of encompassment between the Pioneer Group and the CYL and ultimately the CCP. While it is in fact common across China that children who are members of the Pioneer Group do not comprehend the political meanings and significances of their membership, Woronov (2007) argues for a performative approach to understanding Pioneer Group membership as opposed to a cognitivist approach; accordingly, she demonstrates that in urban Chinese schools, the Pioneer Groups induct children into 'performing the nation' and developing patriotic, nationalist, and other desirable sentiments and subjectivities. From my conversations with Ah Kang, however, I noticed few such influences. Instead, his imagination of the nation state and his sense of belonging to it seem to be powerfully structured and articulated by another hierarchy that he knew intimately well: the hierarchy of educational participation.

To attend primary school, one has to go out of the small native village; for junior secondary school, one has to go to the township seat; for senior secondary school, one either goes to the county seat or prefecture seat; and finally for college education, if one makes it to that level at all, one has to go to the provincial capital Kunming or, even better, the nation's capital, Beijing, where the best education in the land is believed to be available. Ah Kang detailed to me the various cut-off points he had to achieve at each level of entrance examination before he could progress to the next educational level with the same fluency with which he taught me about the names of the plants and crops we trekked past on our way to his house. For this 13-year-old ethnic minority boy in a borderland village, a hierarchized sense of the Chinese nation-state geography and a comprehension of his own position therein are made *legible* and *tangible* through the 'grid of intelligibility' (Foucault, 1978: 93) that is the educational hierarchy.

In an interview with another village youth on vacation, who was enrolled at a private senior secondary school in the seat of a neighbouring prefecture, he related to me a view about educational development in China that his teacher had propagated among the students:

'eastern China is like Europe; midlands China is like Asia; and people in your region [namely south-western minority areas] are like Africa.' There was a sheepish smile on the youth's face that seemed to index an ambivalence about the quotation that he had just reproduced to me. A hierarchical imaginary based on the idiom of one conception of world geography of development contributed to structuring the educational perceptions of these subjects dwelling in the nation's margins.

Education as a social technology of power based on the imaginaries of hierarchy has two inner dimensions in the Chinese context. Firstly, there is a Confucian moralistic dimension where academic accomplishments are associated with honour, virtue, and intrinsic self-worth. Secondly, there is a utilitarian dimension that ties educational qualifications to materialistic and worldly success. For more than a millennium in China's history, these two dimensions were inextricably entwined through the imperial civil service examination system, and can be said to have wrought an inseparable connection in the minds of the Chinese between education and people's social and economic mobility (Ho, 1964). Scholars (Bakken, 2000; Kipnis, 2011; Thøgersen, 1990) have argued that education in contemporary China has, to a notable extent, inherited this twin-dimensionality as one of its fundamental structural principles. My fieldwork supplies two small ethnographic commentaries on how this twin-dimensionality structures the social imaginaries of the ethnic minority students in the country's margins.

When I visited the junior secondary school located in Hexi Township, I noticed that the main gates of the school were rather bizarrely flanked by posters that said 'keep silent' (*sujing*) and 'keep clear' (*huibi*), which were clearly derived from banners carrying the same expressions that were traditionally found in government courts (*yamen*) of Imperial China. Such banners naturally became taboo in the modern People's Republic as unsightly vestiges of 'feudalism' and nowadays only appear in television drama; their re-appearance at the flanks of the gate to a school in a small town in China's peripheral lands provoked much thought. Inside the school, portraits of great men and women in human history were everywhere to be seen, overlooking the shoulders of the students when they run through the corridors or climb a flight of stairs, pronouncing their solemn mottos and admonitions. On the public noticeboard, printouts of students' examination scores and rankings next to their names are openly displayed. The honour and authority attached to academic success make educational attainment an intrinsic good that establishes a moral hierarchy.

I was also struck by how explicitly financial rewards were mobilized in the school in the governing and disciplining of students. Xiao Mei (pseudonym), a 15-year-old Pumi girl from Yushi who had recently graduated, explained to me the system of financial reward and punishment that operated in the secondary school. The *subsidy* in the 'Two Exemptions and One Subsidy' policy meant that most students received between 300 and 600 yuan per head per semester from the state, depending on whether or not they belonged to a 'minor minority'. Local government channelled the money to the school, and the school then deposited it into students' purpose-made electronic cash cards that could only be used in the school canteen and convenience store. What had become a common practice in the school, however, was for teachers to punish misbehaving students by deducting money from their cards in the name of 'fines', and later to redistribute the accumulated funds to the best academic performers as rewards. According to Xiao Mei, students who were caught smoking, drinking, or fighting usually got 50 to 100 yuan deducted each time. The reasoning justifying such a practice was that since these students were apparently sufficiently well-to-do to indulge in such wasteful habits, they did not really need the subsidy. Then, at the end of the semester, academically outstanding students in a class might get bonus packages of 100 or 200 yuan, which they could take home to parents or keep in their cards as spending money. Aware of the potential for controversy, a teacher from the secondary

school stressed to me that all parents had signed written agreements with the school regarding these practices. Personally, she believed this to be a good practice to ensure that the ‘money of the state’ (*guojia de qian*) is not wasted in the hands of undeserving students.

Xiao Mei, who, by the way, looked much smaller than her 15 years of age, told me that she usually spent just five yuan per day on food. Through such thriftiness, by the end of her three years at junior secondary school, she actually managed to save up 1,300 yuan in her card. Now that she had graduated, she could cash the entire balance and told me that she planned to use it to defray the first year’s tuition fees at senior secondary school. With the grades that she had earned through hard academic work and the money she had saved through thrift, she was now able to move a step up the educational hierarchy that she hoped would eventually lead her to a college education and a ‘good life’ outside the deep mountains.

### Concluding discussion

The significance of formal education for the governing of the modern nation state is increasingly clear. With regard to the construction of identities, education is a key institution, alongside the museum and the military (Anderson, 2006), through which the nation is made to appear in the minds of people. With regard to the shaping and regulation of the subjectivities and behaviours of citizens, schooling is the foremost disciplinary institution that the state uses to re/produce desirable national subjects (Foucault, 1977). At a more fundamental level, borrowing James Scott’s (2009) insights, education does not even need to render political subjects subjugated or productive. All it needs to accomplish is to make subjects *legible* to the state, and this legibility is achieved through the imposition of a unitary, monolingual, pyramid-shaped educational system. That the universalization of nine years of legally compulsory education in China is accorded the seriousness of a ‘political task’ was due precisely to the importance of the universal legibility of the borderland subjects to the state.

This paper argues that education is also the primary means by which the state is made legible to these marginal subjects. However, this legibility does not mean a transparency or an ability to truly understand or grasp the workings of something. Instead, the legibility of the state to its marginal subjects is an ideologically infused imaginary of hierarchies that serves to incite desires – educational, moralistic, and monetary desires – that are then harnessed to buttress the real power structures behind these imaginaries. Thus, although both are enabled through the institution of formal education, the legibility of the marginal subjects to the state and the legibility of the state to the marginal subjects are profoundly asymmetrical.

When social/cultural/political critiques of education are made, the focus of analysis is often on the content of education and the ideological imports of such content, but Foucault reminds us of an alternative analytical possibility. In one of his lectures on power, he suggests that ‘we should make an ascending analysis of power, or in other words begin with its infinitesimal mechanism[s]’ (Foucault, 2003: 30), because he does ‘not think it is ideologies that are shaped at the base’, but instead ‘it is the actual instruments’ (33). The institution of education in Chinese borderlands as described in this paper is one such mechanism and instrument – a social *technology* of power. The geographical remoteness and inaccessibility of the borderlands highlights *compulsory mobility* as one key feature of this technology, which produces a centripetal force on the marginal subjects’ imaginaries and desires. The borderland minority students who are constantly ‘on the go’ in order just to attend school are like pilgrims whose mobility is an embodied manifesto of their faith. In areas where enormous ‘frictions of terrain’ stand in the way of the reach of sovereign power, this compulsory and ritualistic mobility instituted by the educational system plays a vital role in binding the marginal subjects to the nation state.

## Notes

1. I borrow this title from the book *Empire at the Margins* (Crossley et al., 2006), which deals with the Chinese empire's historical relations with its margins. While today's China is surely no empire, my use of this title is meant to be conceptually provocative, in order to highlight certain historical continuities in the central Chinese state's relation with its marginal territories, and to suggest that these continuities form an important context in which education as a social technology of governing can and should still be examined today.
2. According to the sixth Chinese National Census conducted in 2010, see [www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/t20110428\\_402722232.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/t20110428_402722232.htm) (accessed 28 August 2013).
3. In China, ethnic minorities are further categorized into 'major minority' and 'minor minority' (*renkou jiaoshao minzu* and *shaoxiao minzu*) according to their total populations.
4. According to Yang Zhaohui (1999: 1), Yunnan has 25 minority ethnic groups with populations larger than 5,000.
5. Wellens's (2010) work on the Premi people notes that the Premi in China have been artificially divided into two 'ethnicities' (*minzu*) by the state: those living in Sichuan Province are officially recognized as Tibetans, while those living in Yunnan Province are recognized as 'Pumi'; this paper is solely concerned with the Yunnan Pumi, and this is probably the reason why the estimated total Pumi population I cite differs from Wellens's figure.
6. This brief research journey lasted three weeks in July 2011, and was part of an anthropology and ethnology summer fieldwork programme organized and sponsored by Yunnan University. The research team consisted of one expert anthropologist familiar with the region and other junior postgraduate scholars who took part in this programme.
7. For the complete text of this policy document see [www.aei.gov.au/news/newsarchive/2010/documents/china\\_education\\_reform\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.aei.gov.au/news/newsarchive/2010/documents/china_education_reform_pdf.pdf) (accessed 28 November 2013).

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Steve Cowan and Tinghe Jin of the IOE, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to Yunnan University which organized and sponsored the field trip underpinning the paper.

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