

SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad SIT Digital Collections

Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection

SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2005

“To Be a Doctor” The Hopes and Aspirations of the Children Attending Namu Elementary School, and the Obstacles That Block Their Paths to Obtaining Them.

Lauren Burke
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burke, Lauren, ““To Be a Doctor” The Hopes and Aspirations of the Children Attending Namu Elementary School, and the Obstacles That Block Their Paths to Obtaining Them.” (2005). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 481.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/481

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

“To be a doctor”

The hopes and aspirations of the children attending Namu Elementary school, and the obstacles that block their paths to obtaining them.

Lauren Burke
Connecticut College
SIT: Yunnan Province
ISP Final Paper
May, 27, 2005

“Our village, Namu”. The children, some hesitant, others eager, all proud, bring forth pictures they have drawn of their hometown. In the children’s minds and through the crayons provided them, flowers sprout up next to streams, and birds fly in the sky. Almost every drawing includes a home with semicircle interloping plaster tiles for the roof. Fish swim in the rivers and a few suns contain smiley faces. First impressions of visitors to the town or school , may be similar. The pavement street leading from the village to the larger city abruptly stops and turns into dirt road at the blue and yellow gate to the town. As if whoever oversaw the construction felt it no longer necessary not worth the areas money to add concrete to a place few people would go. Down a dusty road, past intermittent shops selling candy and sugar cane vendors lies a school much like any other in China. Outside lies a concrete square, rising from the middle, like a monks freshly placed stick of incense in ashes is China’s flag. To the left is a chalkboard covered in drawings in passages of guitar players and singing praises of the country done by the older students in multicolored chalk. In the back right corner are the toilets, no doubt crawling with maggots and the piles of trash lit on fire once daily to impede the growing load. Then, at three stories by far the highest building in town, lies the school building. If you entered the school and walked straight, staring at the valleys mountains and hidden fields, it would be behind you. A white and sea green formation of three floors, each consisting of four classrooms supplemented on it’s side by a strip of rooms containing the teachers office and forgotten drum sets. If it is a Monday through Friday at 7 45 am, one will undoubtedly hear the unison voices of different classes, seemingly speaking in round as they do their morning reading and one will know the school day has begun.

Namu is a village in Yunnan province, Southwest China. The village is located about a half an hour away from Mangshi, lies near the Myanmar border and boasts some of the hottest temperatures in the country. It is a village of roughly 3000 people, most of all of whom are farmers who earn between one and three thousand kuai each year, roughly 125 to 375 US dollars. About 99.9 percent of whom are of Dai ethnic minority descent, one of the 56 ethnic groups of China and one of 26 located in Yunnan. According to China's 1990 census, the total Dai population numbered 1,025,128, which places them as China's 20th largest ethnic group¹. The Dai are considered to be descendants from the same ethnic group as native Thailand's, though, according to the people themselves, their dialect and written language are very different from that spoken in Thailand. Dai people are perhaps best known for their water splashing festival which takes place in April. Dai songs and dances, like many other Chinese ethnic groups, can be seen at tourist areas and on the Chinese New Year TV special. The Dai of Namu describe themselves as a clean-loving and warm hearted ethnic group. Namu residents are kind to guests and the woman bemoan the sexual inequality that still exists, pointing out traditions such as women having to hang their skirts to dry on a lower rung than men's clothes. Dai culture can be observed and understood quite well in Namu as the area is the largest Dai village in all of Dehong.

Namu, in many ways, resembles the children's drawings. There are a multitude of plants and animals, most notably butterflies and giant spiders, and the sunsets on the distant hills are spectacular to watch. The families are, for the most part, kind and inviting, always offering tea and meals and the local specialty; watermelon. Nearly all activities are

¹ as found in Blum, "China's Many Faces", 76.

conducted in Dai and most of the women wear traditional circle wrap skirts (*tongqun*) and bamboo hats. Namu, however, has a side that does not exist in the drawings and that the children themselves talk about only when questioned. There is a girl who got married and gave birth at thirteen who's baby now can walk on her own, though the girl would still only be in eighth grade had she continued on with her studies. A mute boy with clear mental disabilities was "quite a talker" until he became sick with fever and his family could not afford to take him to the cities hospital until it was too late for his brain to recover. The small streams that run through the town collect the trash and feces of the community as many houses toilets and small bamboo fixtures that open up into the river.

Yet Namu elementary school school is overrun with bright, energetic children whose voices rise in a multitude of rounds during morning reading time and whose dreams and aspirations vary as much as any other learning institution. Their parents work hard in the fields each day in part to pay for their education and, as they themselves describe, for a better way of life. Children discuss how they would like to be Olympic Ping-Pong champions, doctors, dancers, teachers, airline pilots and army soldiers. They speak of the places in China and around the world that they would like to visit and the houses they would like to build. They talk of wanting to attend high school, even college, and many rate their studies as the most important things in their life. There are many dreams in Namu village.

Not many of the children's original dreams, however, come true. Though few can protest to carrying the same profession she dreamed of when she was seven, many have followed the same course that they expected to all their lives. In Namu, however, Children start to drop of school as early as the first few weeks of first grade, as did one nine year old

encountered, and, though the numbers are small, they continue to do so throughout elementary school. Though the Chinese government has now made a regulation that all children must attend school from first to ninth grade, not all of the students from Namu do so. Though exact figures could not be obtained the school's principal estimated that around sixty percent of students complete middle school. The prospects for high school, which is not mandatory nor automatically provided by the state for children wanting to attend, are even worse. The principal guessed that around thirty percent of the children who graduate middle school will go on to attend high school. This would mean that, in a class of forty students, twenty four will graduate from the ninth grade, and seven will attend high school. Another teacher at the school estimates even lower. She claims that every year there are perhaps one or two students in each grade that can attend a regular (*pubian*) high school while a handful of others attend vocational (*zhouzhuang*) school. It is a very rare occurrence when anyone attends college, only one former Namu elementary student could be thought of currently attending university. Thereby, despite of their hopes, most children will end up living in Namu their whole lives doing farm work. Others might go to Mangshi to wash hair, fix cars or kill pigs. This is not to say, by any means, that Namu is an unacceptable place to live or that farm work is somehow less desirable or dignified than any other profession. The fact remains, however, that very few students in Namu hope to become farmers like their parents when they grow up. Nearly one hundred percent answered that they would like to go on to Middle school and most also state they would like to go on to high school and college. Yet of the forty children who said they wanted to obtain a higher education, at most, seven of them will be able to do so. What happens to these dreams and aspirations?

What is it in the children's lives that make them change their hopes or what obstacles block their way to succeeding? What problems exist in China's education system, within China's rural countryside and specifically for Chinese minorities that are making these children "succeed"² on a disproportionately lower level than Han?

Methodology, Introduction and Purposes for Research

The methodology used in this report consists of activities involving the local population of Namu, mainly the children, and their teachers. Two and one half weeks of class observations took place, observing grades one through 6 in various classes at a rate of about 2-4 hours of observation a day. Interviews were conducted with forty two children, grades 1-6 plus a handful of middle school and high school students and ten teachers. Families were attempted to be interviewed as well but this proved difficult and thus only five were completed. I myself also taught a number of classes, grades one through six including art, gym, math, morals and science, and thereby got to see the children from a teachers perspective. Lastly, students draw me a number of pictures of their hometown, themselves, and their future hopes and had fifth grade students combine these drawings with an essay on "Who am I?". Second graders, during an art class on emotions, completed drawings of their feeling in certain situations and sixth graders presented me with depictions of their biggest hope in life. These methods, along with the casual observations that take place every day when living in the community, are where I draw my observations from.

² I define success here as attaining the dreams the children outlined for themselves.

The Namu elementary school houses children through grades one through six as well as a half day Kindergarten and nursery school. Though it changes from year to year, currently there are two classes in each the first and second grade and one class in the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. The average class size is around 35 students, though some classes have 28 while others have 42. According to the principal there are 405 students at the school, 388 of which are of Dai descent, the other 17 are Han. There are 21 teachers at the school, most of whom commute home on the days they are not assigned to stay overnight and none of whom are from Namu. Of the teaching staff 11 themselves are Dai, the rest are all Han, though most all teachers have picked up useful Dai phrases such as “quiet” or “pay attention” to use in class. The school receives monetary compensation for teachers salaries from the government. No extra money, however, is given for supplies. Every once in a while the government will give the school something extra, a TV was donated last year and when the new school building was built in 1991 the government chipped in 70 percent of the costs, the extra thirty percent was paid for by villagers, 50 kuai was expected to be given by each resident of Namu. Villagers and the children pay for their own books, school uniforms, tuition and notebooks which adds up to around 250 per semester according to the principal, though students say their tuition is higher. The school currently waives the tuition of 18 students whose families have the hardest time paying, these children are still expected, however to cover other expenses. The school day is broken into seven classes (six on Fridays), with a half hour of individual reading time in the

mornings and a three hour break in the afternoons.³ All children take courses in yuwen⁴ (language), sipin⁵, math, gym, music, and fine arts. Children in grades three through six also study Dai writing, science, and society classes and fourth fifth and six grades also study laodong⁶ classes.

The children in Namu are faced with a great number of pressures and obstacles that lower their chances of ultimately being able to succeed academically and to realize their dreams and hopes for life. Many children in Namu, however, who do not succeed academically are individually blamed for the loss. Teachers call the students “dumb” or “uninterested in their studies”, ignoring the sociological factors also at play. I refuse to believe that they are genetically less capable than their Han counterparts, but rather believe that there are a number of obstacles placed in these children’s path that make it exceedingly difficult for them to succeed. These obstacles stem from three larger or “root” factors, each one of which contains many smaller byproducts and consequences of those larger factors. These three root factors are: the Chinese education system in and of itself, the fact that these children live in a rural, poor area, and the consequences of their being of Dai descent and thereby not speaking Putonghua, the official Chinese language, also referred to as Hanyu, before they attend elementary school. Thereby, it is not just the children of Namu that are faced with these pressures and obstacles. Rather, there are problems that affect all of China’s education system, all of education systems in rural, and thereby poorer, areas,

³ see appendix one for the school’s schedule

⁴ Translated by Susan Blum as, “like American “English”- writing and literature courses”. “China’s Many Faces” pg. 87

⁵ often translated as “moral education” classes include lessons such as how to cross the street safely, saying thank you, the use of plants and holidays.

⁶ Translated as “physical labor” this class teaches children to accomplish tasks such as fixing a sink and making puppets.

and problems affecting children of minority descent, specifically those whose cultural language is different than the country's majority language. Not all of the problems and situations that are described in this paper will necessarily take place in corresponding and similar areas of China but the fact remains that not all these situations take place in Namu; rural and minority students all over China face statistics against their odds when attending high school and college. Many of the issues the children face are a combination, because they are attending school in China, they are living in a rural poor community and the vast majority of them are Dai children. It is my hope that, with a deeper understanding of these problems, not only might some be alleviated, but also the ultimately prejudiced and discriminating beliefs that the children of Namu are somehow less capable because they have not obtained the same levels of education as their Han or city counterparts, will be disproved.

Problems with China's Education System:

In order to obtain a firmer understanding of the school system the children are a part of, one must first understand China's education system as a whole. China's education system is run on a national level, that is, while there are certain different textbooks corresponding to different regions, Yunnan, for example, has its own art and sipin textbook, the central government controls the overall educational process and thus the system remains mostly the same from place to place. The system itself is based largely on tests that take place before a child is moving up into the next educational system. Thus, a test is taken in the sixth grade before one moves onto middle school, ninth grade before one

attends high school and twelfth grade before one attends college. In some districts tests are also taken before and during primary school. These tests determine where a child where continue his or her education. In Namu, most all of the children attend the local elementary school before they split off into various middle schools and then high schools. The highest testing students go onto the best schools and, in high school, those whose scores are not high enough simply are not allowed to attend⁷.

This testing system lends itself to a number of pressures that have a wide range of affects on the children of Namu. Most obviously, it means that many children will not be able to attend high school and college, regardless of how much they might want to. One nineteen year old migrant met in Kunming said that she missed placing into high school by a mere two points. The test is the only criteria that counts when going on to higher education and though extra points are added for some special students, exceptional musicians or minority students for example, if ones score is not high enough one does not go onto higher education and the formal learning stops. The heavy reliance upon the tests has led to what I shall term “blinder linear education”, that is, education who’s purpose is merely to get one to the next level, where it is not necessarily what the student will gain from the education itself that is important, but whether or not they learn enough to bring them to the next level. This type of thinking, though not occurring with every individual in the system, can be viewed in a number of the students and teachers in Namu elementary school. Children say that they wish to study well now so that they can test into a good middle school. Teachers also

⁷ Until recently this was also the case for middle school. The Chinese government, however, has enacted a plan stating that all children must continue schooling through the ninth grade, a feat that does not necessarily occur in rural areas.

explain that it is important for children to learn Hanyu because it is the language the tests are conducted in. Thereby, some students and teachers are not considering the benefits from learning for learning's sake. The “use” of education, instead, is to learn certain information that one can later answer on a test.

Tests mean specific information that will be tested and that means that teachers have to make sure they teach everything that might be on the test in the allotted time that they have. This is perhaps easier to do in China with entrance exams than say, America with SAT's, because the curriculum is more regulated and language and math textbooks are almost identical from place to place. Though there are math and science books made specifically by and for Yunnan province, the information contained within them is very similar to that taught in other provinces. The government also tightly regulates and attempts to ensure that teachers are teaching at the same pace and are finishing curriculum. Teachers are expected to write out what they have done for each lesson to be turned into the school principle who then reports it on a regional level. This means that even music and art teachers who's material would not be included on an entrance exam, know that if they do not complete a textbook, they would be criticized by higher authorities. Math and language classes are even more strict and teachers who are falling behind in a school year are pressured to keep up with the pace. One third grade math teacher asked if students understood what she was teaching, and when most answered no she explained again. She did not ask, however, after the second time, whether or not students “got it”, saying that there was not time to explain a third time.

Discrepancies still exist, however, as one can observe in two second grade

classroom and their teachers' approaches to teaching a yuwen class. When observing these classes and how the teachers dealt with new vocabulary in a lesson, one could see a great difference in teaching methods. Classroom A's teacher went over the new words included in a textbook by writing them on the board, discussing what words they made, and had students read them aloud. Classroom B's teacher, on the other hand, wrote the characters on the board, wrote the characters opposite meaning and had students explain the meanings in their own words. She had the students pantomime the words, (for example for "camera" the teacher said "everyone take a picture of Zhang laoshi" and all the students turned and clicked an imaginary camera with their hands). The teacher then had students use the words in a sentence and lastly went over how to write them. The entire lesson was spent on around learning just fifteen new words, only half of which were contained within the lesson itself. When comparing these two classrooms two things are not surprising: one, that classroom A is six lessons ahead of classroom B and two, that classroom B's students are more able to converse in Hanyu. When approached, the teacher of classroom B observed that she knew she was behind the other teacher but that "I have a plan that I should stick to, but if I fall behind I will have them miss gym or art class towards the end of the year to finish in time. I want to teach the children slowly so that they will really grasp (*zhangwo*) the information. These children don't go home and study, so you need to go slow to make sure they grasp it at school".

Teachers are encouraged to teach classes quickly in order to finish the material rather than slowly to make sure children really understand. A third grade math lesson exemplifies this phenomena. When teaching children multiplication, for example, 50 times 25, children

are not taught to add an extra zero when they begin multiplying the 2 by 50, to make the calculation 20 times 50 which is what children are actually doing. The teacher explained to me that “this method is to make it easier for them to get the right answer”. The emphasis, then, in this particular lesson, was not on students understanding exactly *why* the process of multiplication works. It then follows that a reliance placed upon the end result of education rather than the process of getting there. Because of this, students are more concerned with coming up with the “right” answer rather than their own answer. Focus on the ‘right’ answer also occurs because teachers aren’t taught to use any outside resources or ideas aside from the textbook. Rarely do teachers stray off the path the textbook has lain down, whether or not the children fully understand. This was illustrated during a second grade “Sipin” class studying uses for plants. The teacher wrote the different uses for plants found on the page in the textbook on the board and then asked students what plants could be used for. Not surprisingly, the students read the answers straight off the board itself, which was just what the teacher wanted them to do. The uses for plants included, however, “Purifying the air”, “absorbing poisonous gasses” and “preventing soil erosion”. When the teacher was asked after class if the students had ever studied soil erosion, or why exactly plants help he replied no, neither was this process gone over during the class time. The fact that the children could say “plants prevent soil erosion” without really knowing how or why, was enough. One observation of the affects of mesmerization occurred when a first grader was reading characters off a board and twice pronounced the character “Zha” , the last character in the series, for “Qiang”, which was the first character in the series. This student, most likely, was not learning how to read each character, but rather, mesmerization the phonetic

placement on the board and becoming confused. After all, mesmerizing what the teacher has said is all you need to achieve a high score on a standardized test.

Sole focus on the end result of learning is detrimental to the learning process because it diminishes children's chances of having the capabilities to solve a similar problem when they've only been taught the exact answer for a singular problem. It also limits a child's individual expression and critical thinking skills to the extent that children think they can't or literally can't come up with their own answers. In one third grade language class, students were reading a story about a young girl who lives in an area of terrible drought and goes on a search for water for her sick mother. When the teacher asked what the students themselves would do with the water, a question which really has no right or wrong answer, a few students read right out of the textbook with an answer they knew would be correct. During art class students often draw whatever the teacher drew on the board or the drawings that already existed in their textbooks. The art teacher explains that, "it's more about having students draw whatever is in the textbook, to imitate (*mofang*) it, than having them think it up for themselves." The impact this has on a child's ability to develop as a student and critical thinker is large however. One student even commented that it was the specific reason of "copying whatever the teacher draws on the board" that made art his least favorite class. Though some textbooks include free write areas for children to record his own thoughts about a lesson, as in a second grade language book for example, the picture next to the space shows a student simultaneously holding up his book and reading it while writing down the answer with his other hand. This pictures gives the impression that the thing to do is to copy your answer from the book, certainly not a child's individual, creative

answer.

Creativity and using a variety of methods are also hard to find from a teachers perspective. Mesmerization also means that there is a lack of different methods used to impart information onto students. Though children learn best in many different ways, one by doing hands on activities, another by verbally learning an answer, and others by listening, the Chinese system focuses mainly on lecture. Though teachers say this is changing, the set up of classrooms are still conditioned to have students sit and listen to a teacher explain. All of the classrooms at Namu elementary school are set up lecture style, with students in rows of desks sitting facing the teacher. Teachers attempt to get by this by having students discuss answers in groups or with their next door partner. A few teachers attempt to have children use their bodies, either acting out scenarios found in their *sipin* books or acting out various characters. These tactics, on the whole, elicit enthusiastic responses from students. Most teachers, however, still solely employ mesmerization and lecture teaching styles. This lack of diversity means that students who do not learn best audibly will have a disadvantage throughout their schooling career.

The mesmerization tactics widely applied by the Chinese schooling system also have a negative affect on weaker students and their studies. Because all one needs to do to get answers right in a textbook or during a lesson is to copy down what a teacher has already written, one has trouble knowing if a student truly understands or not. Though individual homework and lessons alleviates some of this pressure, it is still unknown to teachers during class whether or not students are following along. During one third grade math lesson, the teacher asked students to explain how they could calculate the

circumference of a rectangle, when students answered, however, they all used the same exact sentence the textbook had used to explain, and this was what the teacher herself was looking for. In another fifth grade *sipin* class, the teacher wrote answers to free response questions on the board explaining that “some students can’t do it themselves”. The teacher did not, however, really teach the answer or explain to children how to phrase it themselves, but rather, the main goal is in having them write it down. This problem is further complicated by the fact that many Chinese exercise books contains answers in the back which many students use freely to complete their homework (one fifth grader had even ripped the answer page out for easier access). Though a useful tool for some students checking up on their work, it is a greater temptation to those who cannot or do not want to think for themselves, and teachers do not expect them to.

There are, however, teachers that attempt to allow children to come up with their own answers. As one teacher states, “The Chinese education system is attempting to become more like America’s, to open up more, to let children simultaneously play and learn”. Teachers use a variety of ways to attempt to get children to answer in their own words, one first grade teacher, before reading a new lesson, asked children to describe in their own words the picture in front of the lesson. To get around the problems caused by mere parroting a textbooks answer, a teacher asked her students to close their textbooks before answering a question. Other teachers try to encourage students to by saying “who can give me an answer different from what we’ve heard”. The students response, however, sometimes tends to be lacking. When asked to draw a picture of her own house a fifth grader copied that of a house from a textbook explaining that “I can’t draw well and the

pictures in the book looked better". Lack of creativity is not only crucial to a child's problem solving and critical thinking capabilities, but also to a child's sense of personal capabilities. When asked to draw pictures of their houses or of what they want to be when they grow up, even when asked question pertaining to their school, the answer of "but I don't know how, teacher hasn't taught us that yet" often came up. This type of thinking leads to the idea that children believe that they are incapable of doing something they have not yet been taught to do by a teacher. These few children, thereby, perhaps feel that unless they have learned something within the classroom, they do not find themselves capable of knowing or doing it. Perhaps, then, they won't even bother with learning it at all.

Being the "best" is placed over individuality and thereby even those students who do come up with their individual answers might fear that they are weaker than those already provided them.

The Chinese testing system is, in the end, a competition of the students. Though one must achieve a certain score, one is still undoubtedly competing against one's peers when doing so. This process starts as early as the first grade when awards are handed out to the three best "good student in three areas; studies are good, thinking is good, and physical work is good"⁸ each year. The awards are given out publicly and, thereby, everyone knows who receives them and, perhaps more importantly, who doesn't. Students regularly look at each others test scores and are always quick to point out the best and worst students in the class. Teachers, in a way, play into this type of competitive thinking. When asking children to read from their language textbook allowed, three different

⁸ In Chinese, san hao xue sheng, xuexi hao, si xiang hao, laodong hao.

teachers of various grade levels, after the first was done reading, said to the class, "Now who can do even better?". Though some competition in the classroom is not necessarily a bad thing, it can lead to those children who's test scores are always low and those who never receive certificates or stars to give up altogether. This sense of helplessness is perhaps one of the most dangerous things a student can do to himself.

Helplessness is often defined as giving up. The feeling occurs when one no longer believes that there is anything she can do to remedy her situation and instead of fighting chooses to go along with the negative affects. There are definitely children in the Namu elementary school who are displaying signs of this type of attitude. There are fifth grade students who cannot even read the word "I" and second graders who describe themselves as "unable to understand what the teacher says, so just sleep during class". There are many different factors for this type of behavior. One of which has to do with a child's lack of creativity in the classroom, since work often consists of copying a teacher's writing off the board, one need not to be able to read or write to fill in the blanks in one's exercise book. Teacher's still, however, know and can point out those students who consistently get zero's on a test and who's Han hua is well below substandard. Why then, are they not dealt with more often? Why don't teachers work with the students on an individual level, to bring up their studies? What happened to these children when they were being taught the fundamentals of reading and writing? Why wasn't anyone paying closer attention?

One of the answers to this question is that there simply isn't enough time or available teachers. It would be quite a feat for even the most energetic teacher to keep a close eye on over forty students and accomplish challenging and teaching the capable ones while

helping those struggling with the added pressures of having to follow a curriculum in a forty minute class period. Bells ring at the end of each class, allowing teachers slim to no slack time to be able to add in last minute questions. Children are taught to yell out answers in unison, drowning out those who are incorrect or not answering at all. During free reading times, or when going over a lesson and allowed to read by themselves, students project as loudly as they can, taught that the clearer the better. Many students have trouble keeping their places and concentrating on their own reading with thirty five different voices jumbled in the background. A number of students attempt to cover their ears and drown out the noise. The way the building is set up provides difficulties too. If music class is going on next door the keyboard and singing can drown out one's own teacher and provide a distraction. One second grader, in the middle of class, answered a question posed by the teacher in the next classroom over.

The large classrooms also make it hard for teachers to convey their information to students. Even homework cannot receive the kind of attention a child would need to improve his mistakes. With forty notebooks to grade teachers barely have the time to grade them all, let alone write in explanations of where students turned wrong. Lecture style teaching means that students are mostly listening or repeating during class time and when asked to read aloud or answer questions most teachers ask for raised hands, held aloft by usually the same students, and chose them time and time again. When no hands answer a request teachers will select which student to read. When I asked a teacher how she chose she answered, "I'll chose students who I know can answer the information first, than those who might not. If I called on the one's who aren't good students first than too much time

would be taken up.” Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough time to call on the students who weren’t as knowledgeable in the class time. Thus, weaker students are allowed to get away with not knowing information and being unable to answer it. Teachers too, display helplessness with the situation saying, literally, “there’s nothing you can do” (*meiyoubanfa*). But who could blame them, with a class of forty students to control and bright, eager students to teach, one simply does not have the time or hands to pay extra attention to a few students who are silently unproductive. Especially when there are actual disturbances to a classroom occurring.

A particularly important and sensitive topic was noticed while observing and teaching the fifth grade class at the elementary school. The class consists of over forty students and is roughly half boys and half girls. While interviewing some of the students in the class, particularly the girls, they commented on how they disliked art and music because, as one girl put it, “the boys are too bad during these classes. They make a lot of noise and disturb those of us listening to the teacher”. Clearly, any good teacher wants to attempt to make the problem children understand, to engage them and to have them finish their work. A different problem raises itself, however, when these children are actually disrupting the work of the children who are attempting to pay attention and to work. With time such a huge issue as it is and the future of these children’s education’s to be most likely decided within the next year, it is completely unfair for the few troublemakers to control what can and cannot be accomplished during class time. At first one is frustrated when the teachers allow a student to sleep at his or her desk or draw pictures instead of listening to the lecture, but soon it becomes clear that when one is trying to teach over forty students, unproductive silence,

though damaging to the singular student as it is, is much more preferable to disruptive behavior. Though some teachers say, when assigning seating, they attempt to place worse students with better ones, hoping the good will have an affect on the bad, the reverse can happen as well. As one fifth grade teacher said “I often have to place two poorer students together because if I place them with smarter students, they will disrupt them”. Thus, often, students who are causing trouble are not only damaging their own educational possibilities, but also those of their peers.

It’s not only loud behavior that can be disruptive, but also actual physical disruptions as well. During the three week period in Namu I myself broke up two fights and observed a number of students who had been hit by their peers. One day a second grade boy ran home sobbing in the middle of a lesson because a friend had smacked him over the head. During class time children poke or lean their hands back to swat at each other and use brooms intended to sweep for war games. Some of these actions are playful fights between friends but often children end up crying in-between classes, disrupting not only their studies, but their emotional state as well. The usual punishment at Namu, if there is any at all, as teachers often turn a blind eye, is reprimanding the students verbally. One teacher raps students on the head with her knuckles or lightly swats at them with her hand, is it surprising that her class has one of the worst hitting problems in the school? What should teachers do? With so many students to control and so little time to do it it is hard to think of possible solutions. Especially when there are not really any positive rewards to be able to extend children for good behavior or privileges, such as recess, to take away from those who exhibit bad ones. Worse, most often the teachers themselves have resigned to the

fact of fights and no longer seem to care.

A further byproduct of the testing system down the road is the fact that many of those who end up becoming teachers did not necessarily chose this profession for themselves. Many teachers interviewed stated that they were unable to test into regular High schools and were placed in vocational teacher schools (*shifan zhouzhuang*) instead for three years. Oftentimes, after this schooling, teachers are immediately assigned a school to teach, some starting when they are seventeen or eighteen years old. Though the Chinese system is slowly changing and the choice of ones career is becoming more open, the fact remains that many current teachers did not chose the job themselves. Some interviewed laughed and shrugged their shoulders about the problem saying “what can you do?” (*meiyoubanfa*). When asked what she liked to teach one teacher replied, “It’s not that I like to teach, or don’t like to teach, there’s just nothing you can do about it, I have to resign myself to my fate.” One teacher went to the extreme when asked which course she liked to teach the best, she replied “I don’t like to teach anything. I don’t like teaching at all”.

One does not necessarily have to enjoy ones profession to be able to complete daily tasks competently. A teacher, however, who is, or at least should be, pushing and inspiring children to learn, would be better suited to the job if he or she received some enjoyment out of the class herself. Teachers who take the time to go around and check on each student, who are invested in their students education, who are willing to stay after class and work with individual students are bound to have a better affect on their pupil’s education. One second grade teacher explained that there were many children in her class who didn’t understand any of the information given to them. The previous year she had

been away on maternity leave and there were a number of teachers who came in to take her place, the teachers, however “Didn’t have the interest in helping the students who weren’t understanding. They just taught what they had to and left”. How can students be expected to be enthusiastic about their lessons if teachers are far from thrilled to be teaching them? And, can you make teachers be excited about a profession that they themselves did not chose? Perhaps this is another negative byproduct of China’s tests and education system.

The tests take place for a number of reasons. Historically speaking, the system is not that far a cry from the provincial exams that took place throughout China’s dynastic period. Secondly, though China has, in the past thirty years, evoked a one child policy allowing families in the cities to only give birth to one child and rural areas two, the number of children vastly surpass the number of teachers and thereby spots available in schools. Since not everyone can attend, the tests are meant to be a fair way to see which students are capable of attending. But are they really? Though points are added to tests of minority students and in some cases, those from rural areas, to make up for the lack of resources and educational experiences those children have, can it really account for all the hardships in their way?

The effects of Rural life and poverty:

Rural students in China face disadvantages disproportionate to those experienced by their peers in the city. One of these obstacles, perhaps the most obvious, has to do with the lack of economic resources available to those in the countryside and the level of

poverty in which many of them are living. According to the Third World Network, the World Bank, “defining absolute poverty as per capita income (in purchasing power parity, PPP, terms) of \$1 a day in Asia”⁹. This sum would equal around 2,920 kuai per year, a sum that many families in Namu do not produce each year. Some of the children identified as those who’s families situation is the hardest (*kunnan*), live on an average of 400 kuai per family member each year. With school tuition, book fees, uniforms and notebook fees, along with material expenses such as pens, pencils and book bags, the total can run around 400 kuai a year or, roughly a fourth of a four person households yearly income. The amount of money goes up when students reach middle school and high school, sometimes reaching two or three thousand kuai a year including room and board, almost all of what most families make in Namu. Though government assistance does come for those who study well and Namu Elementary itself forgoes the tuition of nearly twenty students a year, though they are still expected to pay for their own notebooks and materials, the economic pressures are still incredibly heavy and often little to no help is provided to families whose students aren’t in the top of their class. One knows that poverty is a problem for education but why exactly?

First there are the obvious answers. The resources are incredibly lacking. The sipin textbooks, for example, come with VCD’s for the children to watch and the books make frequent mention of them. The school, however, has one TV with no VCD player which was provided by the government. Littler things, however, readily available paper to make windmills to teach students lessons on the wind, clay to do an art project, pens and markers, are also unavailable. The school receives little funding from the government aside from

⁹ <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/twe287c.htm>

enough to compensate for the teachers salaries (1400-1600 kuai a month). Most other expenses come from the students miscellaneous expenses (*zafei*). Since students in the countryside have less money to give their school, Namu Elementary has less money to spend on the materials and, thereby, many that are supposed to be included within the curriculum are simply not provided. When asked what else they would like in a classroom teachers most often talked of computers but also of exercise, composition, and textbooks.

The lack of finances also has an influence on students on an individual level. Because there aren't worksheets or many exercise books available, teachers cannot keep up on students progress as easily as if they had them. Worksheets and even blank paper is not available to the students making the range and scope of exercises given to them is limited. If teachers want to include something that is not in the textbook they must make a copy of the materials for each student by hand, making innovative worksheets and activities that teachers might find particularly useful are extremely rare if not nonexistent. When I would make these type of worksheets for my classes teachers would often comment "Ah, you really know how to teach class, we can't come up with any of that stuff." Thereby, not only do teachers not have the materials at their disposal, perhaps they were never taught how to employ it if they did. Even simple things such as pencil sharpeners can keep a student behind. One first grade student spent most of a lesson under his desk trying to first look for his pencil sharpener when his writing utensil broke and then spent another chunk of time whittling it down with a small knife. Classrooms are not stocked with extra paper or pencils so if one forgets to bring something one just does not participate. Though holding children responsible does not have entirely negative consequences, leaving a first grader no other

option and placing the blame entirely upon himself might be overload for someone of only seven years of age.

There are also many social factors in Namu that stem from poverty and affect a child's life in general and ability to succeed in particular. A child's family plays a crucial role in their lives and thereby, in the education process. Around one fourth of the children interviewed said that either their parents were the most important things in their lives or their biggest dreams for the future was to support and pay back their parents love. Though there are many parents who work tirelessly to be able to pay for a child's education and are there every night to remind them to complete their characters, there also seems to exist the other extreme as well. One soon stops becoming surprised when with each social deviant surfaces a story that well explains just perhaps why that is. The nine year old first grade drop out who steals from the school's family is very poor while his father spends most of the money he earns gambling, playing cards or Mahjongg. The second grader with an affinity to hit people and is almost entirely illiterate and who sleeps during class has reasons behind his behavior. His father got drunk three years ago and was killed when his motorcycle slammed into the truck it was behind. and his mother often is out working late compensating for the loss and does not have as much time to take care of him and his little sister. A first grade boy who's classmates say he often has trouble concentrating in class (*nan zai*) and who one day burst into tears and was sent home to rest by his teacher's mother is an opium addict. One girl explains how when she grows up she wants to live somewhere other than Namu because there are too many drugs here while another describes his heart as "sad" because his father hits him. Many students when questioned

answer that their parents support their studies and would like them to go to middle school or beyond. Both stellar students and those who describe themselves as substandard (*cha*), however, have doubts about whether or not their parents would let them attend a higher level of education. One girl who was interviewed replied that even if high school was free, her parents might not let her attend because it might not have use and they want her to work on the farm. Teachers also lament that many parents don't care about what the students do. When asked about the discipline system one teacher said that sometimes, with exceptionally poor behavior, they would visit a family to talk to the parents. "This usually doesn't have use", the teacher said, "some parents will yell (*ma*) at them and the student will listen, but often the parents won't do anything at all." If parents can't be relied upon when the students misbehave and teachers have to get involved, one seriously doubts that they will be there to encourage and support the student in their studies. One teacher noted this lack of support by stating "I wish that we could link up and connect more with students families. To have them (the families) realize that education should take place on both sides. That we (teachers) need their support and understanding."

There are, however, a good amount of families who, precisely for the reason that their own lives are hard and difficult, are willing to make large sacrifices for their children. One mother interviewed said that she sends her child to school, "so that he can continue on. So he doesn't have to live like it is here, going right to work when the sun comes up and only resting when it goes down". Many children interviewed are aware of their parents hard work and that they knew that paying money for their schooling was hard "because my parents work so hard in the fields every day to be able to pay for it." Because of this sacrifice, many

children are driven to succeed. One fifth grader, in an essay entitled “Who Am I?” wrote, “My family grows *yancai*, I think that they do so much farm work and the work is so hard on them, so I’ve decided to study very hard, only this way can I achieve my aspirations. When I have free time I help my parents do housework, help them wash dishes and feed the pigs. I feel that this little bit is what I can do, in this way I can alleviate their exhaustion”. A fourth grader expressed that she wanted to work hard because “My studies (currently) are a little poor, but my parents work so hard for me, that I don’t want to throw it away”.

Poverty and financial issues most likely can account for some parents unwillingness to put so much emphasis on schooling and others pressure put upon students to do well and succeed. As aforementioned, China already had a blinder linear thinking system employed in its education system and parents see the line of school to lead, ultimately, to jobs and money. One twenty-two year old who graduated from elementary school said that her parents told her they would only pay for further education if she decided to become a doctor. “I didn’t want to be a doctor though” she says, “I was afraid of hurting people by giving them shots.” The woman’s parents, thereby, no longer would pay for her education and she began farm work at the age of twelve. Unfortunately, both employment and steady salaries are hard to come by for rural students. Rural parents often don’t know or don’t have the abilities to help them go out and find work and the government no longer secures jobs for college graduates, nor does the practice of “fengong” or, division of labor, take place. There is, thereby, no guarantee for families that after paying a tenth of one’s income a year during six years of elementary school to, at least, an additional thousand kuai for each of the three years of middle school and three years of high school, that their children

will not have to come back to the countryside and work on the families fields regardless. Families interviewed say that they sent their children to school so that they could have a better life and make more money than themselves, but many families get discouraged by the odds and decide its not longer worth the enormous expense. As one teacher explains, "If a student goes from first to 12th grade and parents work tirelessly and hard for it (their schooling), and the students don't get a job, parents feel brokenhearted and lose hope". Thereby, convincing families to spend their hard earned money is difficult.

The fact is complicated because school in China isn't necessarily thought of having the benefits of expanding ones mind and improving oneself. Students themselves seem to realize the importance of this, as they saw they like going to school for reasons such as "gaining more knowledge", "making myself smarter" and "improving myself and my situation". Parents, however, are often the harder critics, a teacher explains that she believes they think, "I didn't go to school or graduate from high school and I can still grow crops, I can still build a house and make many, so this (a formal education) has no use".

Feeling as if one's education is important and specifically useful in one's life is a crucial connection to make both for students and those supporting them. Who doesn't remember being resentful of a calculus class feeling that one would not use the information later in life and, thereby, what was the use of studying it today? Often the brightest students whose Putonghua was spoken the best were apply to apply the use of it to their everyday lives. One fifth grade boy explained the importance of studying Hanyu with a recent event. "For example, the other day someone who was Han came to buy watermelons and they didn't know how to speak Dai and the person selling watermelons couldn't speak Hanyu. I

translated for them because I could speak both.” Another boy, a first grader, connected studying Hanyu with what he wants to do later in life, become a doctor. He explained that studying Hanyu is important “Because when Han people come for a shot if you don’t speak Hanyu you won’t know what they are saying.”

Finding the connection between one’s studies and everyday life is complicated, however, when one lives in China’s rural countryside. Though textbooks are often split up by geographical area, China’s population is not necessarily similar just because people live within the same region. China’s gap between rich and poor is one of the larger in the world. China’s cities are, for the most part, prosperous while countryside areas lying a mere 20 minutes away still have yet to receive telephones. Though 70 percent of China’s population is living in rural areas, Chinese textbooks, disproportionately display city children’s lives, if countryside children are ever shown at all. This is especially evident in the classes sipin and society classes taught at the school. The classes range on subjects from environmental awareness to personal dangers and health care to getting along with friends. The pictures and situations, however, often are taken from those that only city children would have the opportunity to encounter. Lessons show children at computers and talk about how one should treat animals at the zoo. In a lesson on throwing away trash, children are taught about various recycling receptacles though Namu has not a single public wastebasket on the streets. Even in lessons which would seem perfect to include children and situations from the countryside, such as planting seeds, instead show city children in apartments with a pot of dirt. One of the few lessons that does extensively use the countryside as its main setting topic’s is “I love my hometown” and uses the terms “visit” and “remember” instead

of truly acknowledging that that is where most of China's population lives. When asked how teachers deal with these problems one second grade teacher replied, "many of the lessons don't have much of a connection with their lives but there's nothing we can do, you still have to teach them."

The problems were similar in a fifth grade in labor or *laodong* class. The textbook is entirely unsuitable for these children. The lessons range from work activities that rural children learn in their early years such as "washing sweaters" and "mopping the floor" to making puppets and paper lanterns for which they have not a single one of the materials. On one day of observance the class was learning about "caring for and treasuring our libraries". When the teacher asked if students had even ever seen a library the answer was a unified "no". "Well", the teacher went on, "if you go to high school than your school might have one". The lesson went on to talk of how to check out books and the classification system. These children might not ever encounter a library in their lives, though it is useful to know about them the lesson would have been better suited to teaching the children exactly what a library is and what it's used for, perhaps even how to start one in your town. It was not surprising that more students than usual fell asleep during this class and that energy in the classroom was at a definite low.

Children need to see how important education is to their lives and finding a connection between their daily work and work in school makes information easier to grasp and to remember in the future. At an educational conference on minority students in Baisha, outside of Lijiang, Professor Guo from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences also made a statement on this issue. "Most of the textbooks for rural students use examples from city

life which rural students don't understand as quickly and are also slower to latch onto the information. Also, many elementary students in rural areas do not go onto higher education and they need education that will help them improve and that directly links with their future lives." Though many children say they would like a different life than that of raising crops in Namu, the fact is that many will return here later on in their lives and do this type of work and a curriculum more focused on this would be ideal. Though students should learn about the outside world and other ways of life, the foundation from which information is learned should be rooted in children's own reality. For what can the child who says that his dream is to stay in Namu, that he likes his life as it is here, do when he's only taught about city children and how to speak Putonghua?

The Challenge of Being Dai:

One of the most distinguishing factors of the Namu elementary school is that its population is over 95 percent Dai. This means that the overwhelming majority of the children spend the school day communicating in a language that is not their first, that they do not speak before attending half day kindergarten at the age of five and that they do not speak with their parents at home. As Susan Blum, author of "China's Many Faces" quotes, "The (Chinese) official language, Mandarin (or *Putonghua* or *guoyu*) is the native tongue of only 70 percent of the people of China. That leaves 360 million who speak some other dialect at home"¹⁰. Namu life, like many other minority areas, is conducted almost exclusively in the people's native language of Dai. Vegetables are bought, gossip

¹⁰ Blum, "China's Many Faces: Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Pluralism", 83

exchanged and games are conducted all in Dai. Dai, however, is not the language which the government wishes the children to continue to study.

China has the largest population in the world and the number is growing larger every day. A challenge for any government to control and unify, the Chinese have the added problem of the coexistence of 56 ethnic groups, 55 of which speak distinct languages or dialects. Because of this diversity, the Chinese government has to strategize how to unify the enormous population under the title of “Chinese”. One of the largest steps of accomplishing unification is unifying the language of the country. As Susan Blum explains this process, ““The (Chinese government’s) goal is to make them (ethnic minorities) all Zhongguoren, people of China, who can speak a common language of identity, if not a literally common language¹¹ . Although Dai is taught in the schools, it is certainly not the main language relied upon, and the government might eventually hope to weed it out completely. As Blum states, “Official treatment of linguistic diversity in China has fluctuated, but the predominant goal is that everyone learn Putonghua. It is assumed that in time the other varieties will fade away through disuse¹² “.

There is, of course, good reason for everyone in China to learn Hanyu. Aside from the political want to unify the country, daily life in virtually all Chinese cities and most other places is conducted in Hanyu. Ninety-five percent of the population themselves are Han and Hanyu is the only language many of them speak. Doing anything outside of Namu, or any other Dai speaking place, thereby, would be impossible for the children unless they have a grasp of the country’s language. Most every child interviewed acknowledged this

¹¹ Blum, “Against Authenticity: Self, Identity, and Nation-Building” pg. 8

¹² Blum, “Fieldwork in Kunming: Cognitive and Linguistic Anthropological Approaches” pg. 27

fact, stating that if they travel to Mangshi, the nearby city, they have to use Hanyu to get around. As one student put it “If you can’t speak or read Hanyu, then you won’t even know how to go the bathroom or use a telephone”.

The fact remains, however, that this language difference adds a tremendous pressure and extra hurdle for the children of Namu to conquer if they are to continue their studies. This problem has been identified by the Vice Principal of Namu Elementary as a “language obstruction” or “*yuyanzhangai*” difficulty. Children in Namu attend two years of nursery and kindergarten before they begin first grade. The first few days of class center around getting the children acquainted to the school, showing them which bathroom to use and what certain bell rings mean. This is mainly done using children’s native Dai language. After this first week or so, however, the children leap right into the curriculum and books used by other Chinese students around the country. Though they are still in their first few weeks of speaking and hearing Hanyu they are expected to complete the same materials as those who have been speaking it since their first words. Though teachers of Dai descent estimate that they use between 10 and 30 percent Dai when teaching class, the textbooks still exclusively use Hanyu and there is little to no transition phase for new students.

Children in the school system, however, are never taught Mandarin per say. Even though students are using an entirely new language, they are expected to complete the same material, mostly in Hanyu, as any other school in the area. This has enormous consequences on a child’s educational process. It often means that if a child does not learn a certain word on the given lesson day they will not learn it again. Though there are 11 Dai teachers in the school, 11 can only speak Hanyu which means that, if a Han teacher is

instructing class and you do not understand the words being used, there is nothing that can be done except to listen harder. Students not only have to combat learning the information explained to them, such as multiplication tables and the difference between a fruit's seeds and outer skin, but with the new language and words as well. This is especially challenging with the Chinese written system, which is based on characters, not phonetics, this means that there is no way of "sounding out" a word by its appearance, one has to be taught it. When learning how to write new characters or studying new vocabulary in a lesson, Dai students not only are learning to write the word but also what it means. Thereby when learning the character for drink "he", Dai students must also learn what "he" means because they would have never used that word used at home with their families when many Han students would have learned it before. This problem also surfaces when students are reading a lesson in a textbook. Often, students read in unison and one can tell if no one in the class knows it because the students stop. Teachers often will give the students the pinyin for the word, or tell them how to pronounce it, but rarely do teachers then explain what the word means. This lack of explanation can lead to further miscommunications and lack of transfer of knowledge and the effects vary from student to student. Students interviewed stated understanding everything the teachers say during class, to only ten or twenty minutes of it. This lack of understanding can have large consequences on a child's emotional state in the classroom.

During art class two different second grade classes were learning how to draw emotions. They were taught "happy" (*gaoxing*) "excited" (*xingfen*) sad (*nan guo*) angry (*sheng qi*) confused (*gao meng le*) and bored or disinterested (*wuqu*). The class was then

asked how they felt in certain situations and to draw the emotion in a corresponding box.

The boxes were numbered one through six, each had a circle provided for the students to draw the emotion within. Box five represented how students felt when speaking and using Hanyu or Putonghua. Out of the fifty-three children responding, fourteen drew a happy face, eleven an excited face, nine a sad face, four an angry face, four a bored face and twelve a confused face. This makes a total of 24 positive emotion faces (happy and excited) and 29 negative emotion faces (sad, angry, bored or confused). In addition, two children themselves are Han and have been using Han their whole lives and drew happy faces. Thereby there were 22 Dai students with positive faces and 29 with negative. This means that more than half of Dai second grade students feel uncomfortable and experience negative emotions when speaking the language that dictates their entire school day and academic lives creating a possibly uncomfortable environment in which they learn.

This uncomfortableness is illustrated in the way children ask questions during class and view their own opinions. During observations, and according to teachers themselves students would rarely raise their hand and ask a teacher questions or to repeat themselves. When asked during interviews what they would do if they didn't understand some students explained that they would ask the classmate in front of them during a break or ask the teacher after class. It seems that students have a hesitation of speaking up about their listening difficulties, when asked why one student replied "I don't want to disturb the students who are listening to the class and understand". Teachers give examples that they think students themselves aren't sure how to phrase their questions in mandarin and fear that, if they spoke incorrectly, they would be laughed at by their classmates or scolded by

their teachers. If, thereby, the language barrier makes it so that children cannot even ask questions in a language that is comfortable to them, a very dangerous problem exists that threatens the students educational livelihood. The mesmerization methods of the Chinese system discussed above also play out on these threats. Because children are encouraged to answer questions such as “what are different uses for trees and plants” by repeating sentences from a textbook, if they do not know a certain word used by the book’s answer they are unlikely to answer the question themselves. This means that, instead of being given the chance to use one’s own words to explain what is going on in a certain picture and explain around unknown vocabulary words, students simply parrot back words that they may not know the meaning of or not even speak up at all. Not speaking up means that one might not learn the information appropriately, or even at all, and could result in lower test scores and a lower academic ability.

With so many students feeling uncomfortable with Hanyu and it being virtually the only language used in the classroom, how could it not have an effect on studies? Every class visited had at least one or two students who can barely speak Putonghua and who say they don’t understand most of what the teaching is talking about. As early as first grade students don’t speak during lessons, can’t read aloud with their peers and are unable to complete assignments given to them by teachers. There was a fifth grader who was unable to write the word for “I” and many of his classmates who could not read sentences such as “My favorite foods to eat are_____” from the board. Teachers sometimes just cannot help these students. A second grade teacher explained that “You can’t pay attention to their (the students who do not understand) not speaking during class, you just have to hope that they

don't affect the other students. Sometimes I try to give them one or two new words to study after class since they can't learn a whole new lesson full of vocabulary words".

Should a student who is basically illiterate be in the fifth grade? Teachers insist that they do know things, that knowledge is being transmitted to them. One said that "Even though they can't speak it (Hanyu) they will still understand what the teacher is saying, if they sit in a class that uses Hanyu from first to sixth grade, the Hanyu will be passed on to them from their teachers". The vice principal of the school echoed this by saying "There are students who put their heads down on their desks and do not do any work, the information will seep into their heads though. Even though they cannot read or write, they still have lots of knowledge about the outside world and can speak about and understand a lot of information". It's hard to be sure whether or not this is entirely true as, there are definitely students who do not do any of the work, who did not understand anything I said to them and who I never heard speaking Hanyu. This gap could have existed, however, because I am a foreigner and speak with an accent or something of the kind. The question remains, however, of why students who do not and cannot do the work expected of them, who are completely illiterate in the language expected to take them through their lives, are allowed to move through the education system.

Namu used to be able to hold students back a grade until a reform was passed in the late nineties. The reform is called "Yiwu Jiaoyu" or mandatory education, and insists on children attending school from the first to ninth grade, though, as seen above, this does not always take place. The reform also made holding students back a grade (*liu ji*) impossible. As the vice principal explained the mindset behind this, "It's like a child walking down a road.

When they first come to the road and won't move, you move them along to the next section. If they still won't move by themselves, you move them along to the next. If you took them back to the beginning, they would be even less able to walk on their own. They would see everyone else moving on in front of them and would feel upset. If you take them back to the beginning, they will just turn around and run home. So you move them along to the next step." Though there are positive aspects of not holding a child back, such as the self esteem issue professed above, there are also many negative ones as well. One could look at the same analogy using a stream, with children being swept along by the current whether or not they are willing or ready to swim. This type of education process, merely moving a child along because they have reached a certain age, hoping that they will learn something just by floating along, almost by some sort of osmosis process, is not the best for children. By doing this, educators are taking education out of the children's hands and making them passive players in the process. It means that teachers stop caring if work is being done, resigning themselves to saying "there's nothing you can do" (*meiyoubanfa*) and turning a somewhat blind eye. By just moving them along one is admitting that there is nothing you can do, that the student isn't even worth a serious attempt to make them learn the information.

While learning, especially in their earliest years, children need to feel that they have a support system behind them. One sixth grade class was asked to draw pictures of what their biggest dreams and aspirations are in life. The children drew pictures of attending middle school or college, becoming teachers and actors. Most notable, perhaps, was out of the 24 students, eleven wrote that they hoped to become dancers or singers. When

arriving in Namu and learning about Dai people one will quickly be told that Dai “aren’t as interested in studying, they prefer singing and dancing”. One has to wonder whether these children truly discovered their love for entertaining, or if they were encouraged throughout their lives to do so because Dai are stereotypically thought to be good at it. Perhaps students aren’t made to feel that they could achieve more in an academic realm. Though children should be somewhat responsible for their own education processes, educators need to make their pupils feel that they are valuable, intelligent and capable. Though, as stated above, this is difficult to accomplish when there is a class of forty students, one still has the capability to try. Many teachers observed at Namu, however, whether they intend it or not, apply tactics that one fears might have a negative impact upon the child’s learning and status. Teachers freely expressed their thoughts about their students, mainly the worse ones, within earshot of the children themselves. Teachers explain to observers and state that the children are lazy (*lan*), bad at their studies (*cha*) and even, and quite frequently, stupid (*ben*). Below illustrates an example of an occurrence such as this:

During our free study time I go over and help a boy sitting in the front row with his multiplication. He is smaller than many of the other students and doesn’t have the same look of attentiveness that is usually reserved for those others who sit in the front row. I turned to this boy wearing blue and looking dazed and asked him if he understood. Earlier I had helped him up at the blackboard, in front of his on looking peers. I had asked the students to come back from rest period early if they would like to continue studying math, I was shocked when nearly all of them came. Though I think this may have had more to do with the fact that I was foreign, or perhaps when a teacher asks if you like to do something you feel you have to, nevertheless there was a large crowd of onlookers as he shakily answered the arithmetic I had set up on the board. Later, when going over similar problems with him in his textbook, I was surprised to find that the student had trouble with simple arithmetic, such as three times two. With patience and ample time for him to think through the problem, he was able to figure them out. This boy eventually started to understand and just as I felt some

progress was being made the bell signaling the end of the first of afternoon classes rang and his classmates anxiously waited for me to motion that it was all right for them to leave. After doing so the classroom broke into its regular complete chaos, as if it was the last day of school, students jumped on desks and ran outside. The regular teacher came over to me and attempted to sympathize with me for my labors of working with the boy.

“This student is too stupid” she said, voice in dismay though almost laughing, “we can’t do anything, he doesn’t even understand the simplest things. Every test he takes he scores zero. Ah, too stupid” she sighed shaking her head.

“But look at his homework,” I replied, extracting his simple notebook from his bag and holding it up. Most of the arithmetic had been completed correctly, it was only when double digit numbers like 13 or 25 were multiplied against figures of ten that he got confused, certainly achieving higher than nothing.

“He copies from his neighbor!” Cried a girl who sat front row center.

“Yes, that’s what he does” the teacher agreed shaking her head while looking at his deskmate’s homework, who had scored one hundred. She called to the boy, “come over here. Did you copy his homework to get the answer”

He shook his head.

“What’s three times six then?”

“Eighteen” the boy replied.

“That’s right” I said, feeling protective of this nine year old boy and his ego and future studies.

The teacher didn’t respond, not looking upset or changed by his response. Perhaps a bit confused but mainly indifferent. She led me out of the classroom and down to the students art class where they watched a Tom and Jerry cartoon, translated into Chinese.

One has to take into context that this particular problem might be a result of a difference in culture. Teachers often even called themselves dumb and it is an easy trap to fall into in order to explain away ones imperfections and missteps. Cultural relativity, however, should not take place over possible improvements on a child’s education and sense of self. For what happens when a teacher calls a student dumb and there’s none there to deny the comment? What happens when one’s parents too cannot help one with his homework and praise him for what he’s done and only understand the harsh red x’s marking his missteps and failures? Is it a surprise that so many children give up hope in the

school system and, more importantly, in themselves? For why should a student bother to continue to push him or herself when there are no standards to hold himself up to. No one to push him when he does not do his work, no parents who support him when he brings home good test scores, and a guaranteed pass into the next step of the process. As one teacher states, for some students, “if they don’t understand, it could be because they are just dumb, it’s a problem with their intelligence”. Placing all the blame on a child’s brain is a clear oversimplification of what is actually going on as it completely ignores the sociological factors in play. One cannot know, for example, how many questions that student could answer if Dai were being used in the classroom or how she would rank with her peers were the language obstacle not present. Instead of trying to discover how she can best learn, of finding her intelligence, she is resigned to being “dumb” or “without interest”. All of this can happen at the age of eight, closing all doors for a possible academic future.

This is not to say that Dai is not used in the classroom at all. Many Dai teachers say that they will translate and explain things in Dai if they feel students do not understand what is being taught. In one fourth grade society class, most concepts were explained again in Dai and children are sometimes even allowed to answer questions in Dai. This does not ensure that all students will understand, but it ensures that even those without a grasp of Hanyu will be involved within the lesson, if only for a matter of minutes. Using Dai can also ensure that students are really understanding what is going on. In one first grade language class, the teacher explained sentences in the reader in Dai and then asked for explanations in Dai as well as asking for translations from Hanyu to Dai. This actually allows students to use their own words to explain and understand the text, while making them feel more

comfortable. When asked whether they liked their Dai or Han teachers better, many students preferred Dai to Han stating that, “They (Dai teachers) are like us, we can understand what they are saying. Hanyu however, is still the predominant language used in all classes, even in some teachers Dai classes.

Though students must take Dai writing classes, these occur only once a week and are sometimes even conducted in Hanyu, making Hanyu the language even that controls the study of Dai. These classes, however, only occur in grades three through six because, “students need to spend their first two years focusing on Hanyu”. And even though Dai is included on the middle school examinations for Namu school students, the score doesn’t have any weight on where you will attend middle school like the sipin, science, language and math sections do. This discrepancy means that even if a student achieves a near perfect score in Dai and does not do as well on other sections, she will attend a “lower” middle school than her peers who could test poorly in Dai and all right on math and language. Students who are of Han nationality, though most of them have one Han parent and one Dai parent, are exempt from taking Dai classes. While the other students are learning how to write Dai the Han students sit at their desks and complete whatever work they wish for their other classes. Not only does this type of class assignment based on one’s ethnic backgrounds give the children who already have the advantage of a background in Hanyu extra time to complete their work, but also makes it seem as if Dai is not as important to study as Hanyu, that only those who were born into the ethnicity should bother learning the language. The fact that it is only compulsory for Dai students makes it so that it is unnecessary for Han to learn and thereby, places Hanyu, the compulsory language

for all attended the school, ahead of Dai in an academic and social sense.

Placing languages in a type of rank system, where one is better than the other and carries a more academic connotation, has affects on a child's studies that might not be as visible in the classroom. Interestingly enough, teachers and students alike say that they do not feel that the fact that major tests take place in Hanyu necessarily affect a child's studies, as one teacher said "They're only taught the knowledge in Hanyu so even if the question was translated into Dai they wouldn't know it". There are effects, however, on a child's psyche that lower his sense of self and individual intelligence because he has been using and learning a language other than the "academic" language used in school all his life. A student attending school and learning only Hanyu, thereby, might discount or not even think of intelligence gained through the Dai language, and, in the end, discount his own personal intelligence or even feel that he has none because he does not know Hanyu.

When interviewing some students there is a definite correlation between what they consider knowledge and information and "smarts" and the study of Hanyu. Many students say that they like their Yuwen, or language course the best because that's where "you learn the most knowledge." One girl, when asked why studying Hanyu was important stated it was because "you learn the knowledge of the Han people (*Hanyu*). There are also some Dai children, who have negative perceptions of their own ethnic identity and what it means to them. Many of these feelings have to do with how Dai children feel Dai measure up to Han students in the classroom. "When teachers ask questions," answered one girl to the question of the differences between Han and Dai students, "they (Han) can answer faster and better". Another boy responded that "Han students are bolder with teachers, they can

talk back and ask more questions. Dai can't do this". Most all students associate the study of Hanyu with gaining more knowledge in general and becoming smarter and thus, Han people as being smarter than Dai. As one third grade girl stated when asked what Dai people were like, "We're very stupid people, because Dai can't speak Hanyu".

The association between one's own individual intelligence and the language they speak is very strong in Namu. If one connotes being smart with the ability to speak a certain language, than ethnic groups that do not use that language are automatically less smart than those that do, regardless of how much knowledge might be contained with their indigenous language. This association has implications on a child's individual sense of self and also of his or her sense of ethnic identity. Though there are a handful of children who say they are "very proud" to be Dai or like the ethnic group because "that's what my parents are, so I've always felt good about it", one needs to pay special attention to those who have negative views on Dai people. One fourth grade boy, who's father is Dai and mother is Han but who associates himself as being Dai, when asked how he felt about being Dai responded that, "I have the feeling that I don't want to be Dai. Dai people can't do anything all they say is "modigatai"¹³ . Another sixth grade girl spoke, "I don't really have any feeling about being Dai. I guess I think Dai are retarded, (*Hanba*), can't do anything at all, not like the people in Mangshi. Dai can't speak Hanyu."

If a child already has the opinion that, because she is Dai, than she is less smart than others in the country, she is already fighting an obstacle before she even attends school. One has to wonder where many of these opinions come from. In reality, Hanyu is only a

¹³ Dai for "Where are you going"? The standard form of greeting among residents of Namu

language, and any type of knowledge information such as math or science could also be learned in Dai. Students, however, are exclusively using Hanyu in the classroom to learn specific information, and most of their parents are unable to help them with their homework and do not understand it because they do not know Hanyu. Thus children see the inability to complete problem sets and think through answers directly connected with the inability to understand Hanyu. Children see that their parents, because they speak Dai and not Hanyu, cannot understand the information and then believe that it is because their parents are Dai and not Han. No one has taught them that you can learn math and science and morals just as easily in Dai as in Hanyu. Since Hanyu is the dominant and controlling language used at school, that is where knowledge is believed to come from.

Teachers, as well, often emphasize the difference between Han and Dai in and outside of the classroom. Some of these emphasis seem harmless enough. One teacher, during a *sipin* class on plants, when asking about the different kinds of flowers Namu grew and hearing the students answer with a flower that puzzled him he spoke, "We don't have that flower in Han people, we don't use that, you Dai have that". Some teachers use the difference as a way to attempt to have students open up, "It's ok if you speak incorrectly because we're Dai so we don't know Hanyu". All teachers, when questioned, stated that there were differences between Dai and Han students, including parents ability to help and students own interest. Providing this wedge, however, between students and teachers and between different students, gives the Dai students a disadvantage from birth. If a teacher already thinks differently of one's self, thinks and expects less of one, and feels he already know one's capabilities as a student simply based on one's ethnic background, it is hard to

escape these prejudices and become a stellar student. Thus, many teachers lower their expectations for Dai students. Low expectations on a school aged child can have a negative affect on their schooling for life, for if they are not pushed to achieve higher, if they feel they can use being Dai as an excuse for poor studies, as many teachers let them get away with, it takes a very self motivated individual to rise above that and truly achieve to her highest abilities.

Conclusion

So what is it then, that can be done in order to help these children achieve their dreams, realize their possibilities in life, and give them the self confidence they need to ultimately rise in the world? Regardless of whether they want to become singers or doctors, farmers or soldiers, every child should make the decision based upon his or her own passion and wants, not because it is where they were placed into, or felt it was their only option. No second grader should feel he is not smart enough to attend high school, no third grade girl should have to give up her dreams for of becoming an airplane pilot for the generalization that “Dai are better at dancing?”, or because her family cannot afford school.

There are, clearly, some obvious answers to many of the obstacles children face. One of these solutions is an economic one. The fact of the matter is is that the Chinese government is not providing schools with enough money. Textbooks issued by the state utilize vcd’s and show children molding clay when the schools cannot provide nor afford any of these materials. One possible solution is to change textbooks so that they can be used year after year. Currently, students are expected to buy their own books and, thereby, are

allowed to write in them. Many students, however, do not necessarily take advantage of this and use textbooks to doodle in during class. If textbooks were recycled from year to year and students relied more heavily upon their own exercise books to do problem sets, and were taught how to take notes in the higher levels, money would not only be saved by both the government and individual families, but also children would have to be in charge of their own education to a higher extent, by physically having to write down the information instead of copying and filling in blanks from the board. were the state to provide a larger amount of funds towards education, were they to provide classrooms with materials needed and to reduce the cost of school for students, pressures would be alleviated enormously and parents would not have to fear that their money was being wasted on a child's education.

Many factors, however, are social ones that will be much harder to change considered the deep roots in which they lie. Parents unwillingness to support education, prejudiced beliefs about Dai people and teachers own begrudged attitude towards teaching do not have quick fix solutions. Some of these obstacles, however, will hopefully change with time. As rural people are increasingly reaching higher levels of education, and today's students become tomorrow's parents, not only will education most likely be valued more, but also parents will be able to help their students complete homework and assignments. Also, as China becomes more open in terms of allowing children chose their own careers, teachers will not be forced to teach because that is the only profession they "tested" into. More and more educators are teaching because it is what they themselves wish to do with their lives and, thereby, they will assumedly gain more pleasure from

teaching itself and the benefits of transmitting knowledge to children. Perhaps as China's system changes from socialist to capitalist, teachers influence on students will be better rather than worse. Currently, teachers do not get hired or fired based upon their teaching skills and teachers whose students do better on test systems and can read and write with greater ease receive no more benefits from those teachers whose students are illiterate. As one teacher lamented, "The worst teacher in the school gets paid the best because he's been here the longest and had a higher position. He doesn't care about teaching, however, and his students always test poorly". Perhaps if teaching comes more into demand as a profession, and China's education system does open up more to offer creativity in the classroom, teachers themselves will be held accountable for the progress of their students and their teaching methods and thus better teachers and styles will come about. Perhaps if there were also, in turn, more positive rewards for students, an actual recess or creative free time, there would be more incentives for students to do homework and not be disruptive in class.

There are also practical changes that China can make within its education system, particularly in terms of gearing education towards children's lives. Since China is and will continue to use its current testing education system for a time to come, it is necessary for there to be some form of unity between textbooks and what children are learning. There are, however, small changes that can be made within the textbooks that can have a large impact on a child's ability and interest in learning the material. Take math books for example, if word problems included more instances of farmers figuring out field circumference or how much money they can make off of a watermelon sale, the calculation methods remain the same as

if examples from city life are used, yet countryside children will be able to identify with the situations. While teaching a third grade class on multiplication, taking a step outside of the problem sets given in the textbook, for example, children were asked who's families raised pigs. Eager hands shot up into the air, voices shouted over each other to reply and talk about their own family. Children who hadn't been seen raising hands before were giving figures of how many pigs their family raised each year. The class then enthusiastically added together the number of pigs in the entire class and then used multiplication to estimate how many pigs the entire school raised. Because it was attached to their own lives and directly related to themselves, the children were able to take more interest in the problem. Though it is important for children to learn about the outside world and life in other areas, there should be solid roots in their own lives. Clearly it is important for children in rural areas to learn about city life, what is currently done with the textbooks, however, is that city life is being presented as the reality that the children live in, and that reality is used as a base from which to teach material. Children from rural areas, however, might not even understand what a computer is and how it works, yet their textbooks are teaching them about the internet. There can be and are ways to gear information more towards their lives and if new textbooks cannot be made that are specifically geared toward rural students than perhaps the books could at least show an equal representation of city and country life. For example, when looking at a moral education or *pinde* textbook for first graders from 2002, a lesson teaching how to safely cross the street shows four pictures of street intersections.¹⁴ These photographs, however, are all of city scenes, certainly a picture of a rural road or cattle

¹⁴ Pindeyu Shenghuo, yi nian ji, 2002 pg. 26

crossing could also be included.

One could also recommend that Dai be used more frequently in the classroom. This could be done not only to make children feel more comfortable about asking questions or learning new material, but also so that a connection can be made between intelligence acquisition and the children's native language. This way, children will hopefully elevate their feelings of personal abilities and also the abilities of their ethnic group as a whole. Perhaps in the future Dai children will stop being thought to be "stupid" or disinterested in their studies. Perhaps if a child does not do well in school, he or she will not take all the blame but other causes will be examined and improvements made. Perhaps, slowly, more and more children from Namu will be able to attain their dreams, realize their hopes and be proud of who they are and what they can accomplish. Perhaps no longer will students be deemed incapable, stupid or lazy when they do not understand. Perhaps one day students in Namu will be recognized for who they are: children with dreams that they are capable of achieving, if only they received the support and help they needed. That is certainly my dream of the future.

Appendix

1. Namu's daily class schedule

Individual reading (zidu) - 7 30- 7 50
ten minute break
Class one 8 00- 8 40
ten minute break
Class two 8 50- 9 30
morning exercises, flag raising (Monday) Flag lowering (Friday)
Class three 9 50- 10 30
eye exercises
Class four 10 45- 11 25
Afternoon break
Class five 2 30- 3 10
ten minute break
Class six 3 20- 4 00
ten minute break
Class seven (Monday-Thursday only) 4 10- 4 50

2. Route Itinerary

On April 27th I took a bus from Lijiang to Xiaguan that left at 12 30 and cost 35 kuai. I arrived in Xiaguan around 4 30 and then took a 6pm express bus to Mangshi that arrived around 1 am and cost 88 kuai. The next morning I took a public bus (1 kuai) from Mangshi to Fengping and a breadbus (15 kuai) from Fengping to the Namu elementary school. Coming back on the 21st of May, I took a type of rickshaw from Namu to Fengping (1 kuai), and a public bus from Fengping to Mangshi (1 Kuai). I took a 5 30pm non-express 158 kuai overnight bus from Mangshi to Kunming that I was told would take 14 hours but ended up taking 18 and a half. I arrived back in Kunming on the 22 of May.

3. ISP research, rewards frustrations etc.

Perhaps the primary hardship that I ran into was the fact that I was conducting my research in an area that does not use Putonghua for all of their daily interactions. Thereby I had to have people assist me when completing interviews. These people ranged from teachers at the school who were also fluent in Dai, to students who helped me by translating for their classmates. Though I was able to conduct a large number of interviews with a variety of people, I fear that, through the double translation (Dai to mandarin and then my own mandarin to English) leaves gaps and possible misunderstandings. I do still feel, however, that most of the information is accurate and very worthwhile to examine. A second problem also occurred with the translators themselves. Oftentimes when I would ask a question the interviewee would spend a long time thinking of an answer before giving one. This could last as long as five minutes and often translators would jump in with their own opinions or try to explain to me what the interviewee was thinking. This, of course, is not what I wanted to discover at all for it's not the translators ideas I was interested in, at that point at least, but the interviewee themselves. Along those same lines, I fear that when I was brought out by Mo laoshi (without whom I would have gotten nothing accomplished) that she was preselecting the families to have me interview by those she thought would be able to answer my questions best. She told me herself, while looking over my questions, that many of my questions were too hard, that Dai think much more simply about things and wouldn't have the ideas to answer my questions. Before going to some houses she would speak of the persons great Putonghua skills or the deeper level of their thoughts (*sixiang*). Though I asked to be taken to a variety of houses, I still fear that we focused more on a

select group of parents.

Most of my research and most of my interviews were conducted with Namu children who themselves attend or attended the elementary school at which I spent my time. The children, though lively and bright when we were playing games in the school yard or swimming in the river, had a tendency to clam up when I began to interview them. What I perhaps found most interesting, particularly with the male interviewees, was that the loudest and naughtiest (*tao pi*) of the children were the most hesitant in interviews. Granted, many of the children spoke very well on their ideas and opinions but the combination of a foreign teacher plus the added strain of speaking in Putonghua left me with a few one word answer interviews. Originally I interviewed the children in groups of two, as I felt this would lessen the strain. That, however, proved to be a wrong choice as often the person who answered second would nearly verbatim repeat what the first student had said (not surprising since the Chinese education system does not value creativity in individual answers so long as one provides what is "right"). Also, when I interviewed children out by others there would inevitable be a large group surrounding us, laughing at answers and attempting to answer the questions for themselves. Soon my interviews were conducted one on one in an enclosed area which seemed to work much better.

One also has to take into account the bias' children's answers might have simply due to the fact that I, a foreign teacher, was interviewing them. Thus they may have felt it was to their advantage (perhaps even their duty) to answer affirmatively to questions such as "Do you like to go to school" and "Do you enjoy doing homework at night?". One child I interviewed in the range of another teacher and she answered affirmatively that she liked school and when she saw the teacher walk away she answered negatively when I asked again. I soon decided to interview children without any other teachers present.

Lastly, what I think I had the most difficulty with, was not getting to involved with the culture as it was and changing things. I realized I could never be an anthropologist who does not attempt to change a society at all as I broke up fights and questioned teachers as to why they called their students stupid. Sometimes I felt the need to get involved with what was going on, I couldn't passively stand back.

As for insights to anyone else entreating research in China, or any other foreign destination, I offer this journal entry below as an account of a frustrating day and the rewards that came at the end of it:

I was looking for a place to run. A path to sprint on, to let my body release all the feelings of frustration, injustice and sense of helplessness I would sometimes encounter in Namu. Though I had experienced more moving and touching moments in the past few weeks here than I encounter in most seasons in the rest of life; It was the beginning of my last week at the school and everything was starting to wear on me. I had completely lost any taste for noodles and rice which severely limited what food I could eat and interviews were beginning to wear on me. Between the chinese language and teacher's accents and contradictions I would walk away from each one frustrated and angry, wanting to scream. The lack of real English communication for the past three weeks had also been a struggle, it is always nice to have a person to vent to or at least try one's best to express one's feelings too but after a week of trying to be polite and culturally sensitive, of teaching and observing classes during the day and interviewing, playing with children and figuring out a forty page paper at night was wearing down on me. At lunch I was told about class changes that disturbed my plans for the afternoon and I knew I would explode if I did not get away. So I returned to my room, pulled on a t-shirt and pants that could best be rolled into shorts, packed a water bottle, my journal, novel and skirt and set off to the fields behind the school.

Since it was the early afternoon which normally means lunch and a short nap I was hoping to find the fields relatively empty so that I might run unobserved. I briefly entertained the idea of jogging through the streets though rejected it a second later when I realized it would mean being followed by the eyes of the entire town and children's laughter. I love the people of Namu but solitude was what I needed this afternoon. I crossed through the narrow mud and grass footpaths that crisscross the fields of rice, grass

and other unidentifiable crops by someone who only visited farms as a source of fun on school field trips. To my right and left little streams irrigating the water to the flooded rice patties contained rotting watermelon rinds. Occasionally thatched roof shacks could be found with makeshift bamboo beds and a few blankets to rest upon when the sun grew intolerable for work. A man riding an old electric machine, churning through the mud as if one was making chocolate, passed by me, two women wearing rubber boots and wide brimmed bamboo hats were pulling shoots out of the water, a man led two dark gray gigantic water buffalo's through the dirt. As I walked around a corner I was upset to find bicycles and a motorcycle lying near the clearing of a river next to a wide path suitable for running, I decided to head to the stream across two fields, hoping a similar, less populated path would run adjacent to it. When I arrived, however, the slope I had hoped would lead to a clearing led to a cabbage patch with yellow flowers. I stopped, listening to the water, wondering if a swim in its shallow depths would relieve me of my tension.

Then I heard a voice.

"Zhang laoshi, where are you going?!"

Ordinarily I love to hear these words. When I first arrived in Namu most of the children giggled at me and ran away and even in my third week I only received a return "good morning" by braver students. The frequency of the children's ability to talk to me made me feel more accepted by them and meant I was making a deeper connection. This afternoon, however, I didn't feel like being watched as an object of interest.

I soon realized, however, that the voice I heard and the boy who had been following me from a distance was *zuo ai guo shi*, the nine year old boy who had dropped out of school in first grade. Incidentally, when I first came to Namu in March to introduce myself, he was the first student I met and interacted with when he completely beat me in hopscotch. He was a curious energetic boy, who most of the teachers told me to stay away from, during the week long break he was told not to enter the school area because "he stole things from the teachers" and other students would often tell me how bad or "huai" he was. I instantly liked this boy however. He was smart and bright and wasn't afraid to talk to me. He would play with any child, younger or older and seemed to have the kind of insatiable curiosity that can lead to either incredibly remarkable or incredibly dangerous discoveries. I had heard that his family was very poor, not an incredibly unordinary situation in Namu but his was made worse by the fact that his father gambled most of the family's money away in Mahjongg. I didn't mind having *ai guo shi* with me, I knew he didn't just want to watch me.

Soon a farmer came by and spoke with *ai guo shi* in the local Dai dialect unintelligible to me aside from "beautiful", "where are you going" "thank you" "I've eaten" and the numbers one through ten. I was told by *ai guo shi* that he didn't want us walking through his fields, I do not blame him at all since I was completely clumsy and inexperienced in how to do so and often fell sideways into crop fields below, and he suggested we cross the stream to go to the fields on the other side of the way. After removing our flip flops and doing so I found the fields on the other side contained a crop most likely already harvested, since the fields contained little but dirt and thatched shacks, and thereby there was only one person to be seen across the way. We walked up a path wide enough for a cart and certainly wide enough for two people to run upon. When we reached the end I asked *Ai guo shi* if he'd like to run, he said yes.

We sprinted down the path, around its small curves and turns, with the incredibly hot sun beating down on us and soon I could tell he was panting for breath just as I. When we reached an impromptu garbage heap by a small hut I turned around and cried "go back!" and we ran the next way. I had removed my flip flops and felt the dull rock edges cramming between the muscles of my feet as *Ai guo shi* and I subconsciously switched off who ran on the grassy middle plane and who ran beside. When we reached the end we stretched and then ran again.

"Where do you want to go Zhang laoshi?" He asks after we both catch our breaths and take big gulps out of the water bottle. I say I'd like to return to the big stream to swim in the cool water. He nods and we start walking down a larger, more beaten down path

sidelined by the ever present watermelon rinds and more men with their beasts and machines. Soon we turn off and onto one of the rolling lumps that lie between the fields to allow those to crisscross her way to her own work. The paths resemble snakes half bathing in the rice paddies, scales drying in the sun. The cracked dirt like enlarged elephants skin under a microscope and just as rough as my feet soon discover when slippery mud patches where the irrigation canals have broken through make it impossible to hold onto both my footing and white flip-flops. I pay careful attention to each step, thankful for my small frame yet aware of how clumsy and awkward I am on these paths that most here can walk on as easily as a paved one.

“Zhang laoshi,” calls ai guo shi, “look behind you. The birds are flying!”

I turn around to see a flock of small white cranes taking off and flying above the crops in an unidentifiable yet organized mass. The move in perfect unison, as if each was resting upon a larger invisible bird and each individual’s wings are moved with each breath of their leader. They swoop and curve by bean plants, distant rivers and a singular red tree.

“The birds are beautiful”, says Ai guo shi, smiling, not to tell me, just to state the fact for himself.

Yes they are, I agree. And so are you, I think.

We continue to walk with Ai guo shi leading the way, occasionally we stop to look at the surrounding fields, Ai guo shi points of plants and crops he likes to eat and tells me the Dai names for various sights and sounds. I throw in a couple of english words which he cautiously pronounces and we both laugh at each of us learning each others native language by use of our chinese commen part. After crossing a river and wandering by houses and a group of older boys he spots a small bird lying beneath a patch of bamboo trees who sprout up in unison and then fly in different directions like a child’s ponytail piled on the top of her head. “Small bird!” he cries before swooping down and catching the tiny thing between its hands. He urges me to jump and reach for its companions who have flown to safety in higher branches but I say it’s too high up, besides, if we take the birds away from it’s home than how will it find it’s way back?

“This is it’s home” Ai guo explains to me motioning to the patchwork assortment of trees that rise above us, “All of this is”. The matter is closed and he continues on, swinging the bird in the grasp of his hand.

After meeting up with a larger group of boys, swimming in the river, racing down it’s banks and splashing fights we emerge and I go off to change out of the long skirt I double wrap underneath my arms to swim in like the other women and girls of Namu. After singing Chinese pop songs to each other it’s time for me and the older boys to go back to school. Zuo guo ai shi heads back to his house.

“Goodbye Zhanglao shi” he turns around to say.

“Goodbye,! Would you like to go running again tomorrow, we ran two times today, we’ll run three tomorrow”

“Yes” he replies and heads into the opening surrounded by three structured walls that comprise of his house.

Soon the other boys are asking me if they can run tomorrow too and I have to reply yes, though I wish that it could only be Zuo ai guo shi and myself again, yet aware of how difficult it would be to recapture the serene afternoon regardless. As we walk back to school down the dust road I turn to see Zuo ai guo shi attempting to hide from his attempts at peeking his head out to watch us go.

I really do love this child and think of how he’s dropped out of school, the negative impressions that the teachers and other students have of him and how much he has touched me. I can’t help but think how much better his spoken Chinese is than so many first and second graders at the school and wonder again of why he left. While we wound our way by fields and grass I decided to ask him again.

“The teachers hit me” he says “so I left”

“Why do they hit you”

“Because I sleep in class”

"But don't you want to go to school, you are so smart, don't you want to study more?"

"I would, if the teachers didn't hit me."

"You would?"

"Really. I would"

"Will you go next year?"

"I will"

"Really"

"Really"

I have no idea if Ai gou shi really will attend school next year. I talked to some teachers about it and they said that he was tricking me, that he was too hard to teach and that there wasn't anything they could do about it. A part of me wanted to grab Zuo Ai guo shi and take him back to America with me, where he would have to go to school, where no one could turn him away and he'd have parents that wouldn't pretend to be asleep when teachers came to talk about his situation. I wanted him to have the chances I had, to be able to dream the dreams I dream. Then I remember his hopes for the future, of living in the next village over, of raising animals and making money from his crops. And I remember the birds, and how beautiful they were floating above rice fields and bamboo trees, gliding into rivers to catch fish and the way my bare feet felt, sore yet strong upon the dry cakes of mud. And I know that this is where he belongs. I only wish I could know how I could help.

4. Other possible ISP topics of study:

There exist so many opportunities for further study that one could write a paper based on this alone. I feel that one could truly go deeper into each aspect that I studied in my paper, focusing for a longer period of time on the effect of textbooks or Mandarin on a child's psyche. It would also be fascinating to do a long-term study on a group of children to see how perceptions change throughout their school years. I also would have liked to work with students who had just finished taking their tests and to hear about impressions about them, particularly middle school or high school exams. Parents and family opinions could definitely use more study as well as the children's perceptions of being Dai themselves. Lastly, it would be interesting to look closer at the effect a specific teacher can have upon his or her students and what teachers seem to impart knowledge more clearly onto his or her students. I would also find it fascinating to compare and look at other Chinese minorities and their experiences with elementary schools and to see if there are particular problems that apply only to certain specific groups, or if many of the obstacles exist for all minority children.

Bibliography and works cited.

Print Resources:

Blum, Susan D. "Against Authenticity: Self, Identity, and Nation-Building", pp. 3-15 in *Portraits of "Primitives"*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2001.

Blum, Susan D. "China's Many Faces: Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Pluralism", pp. 69-95 in *China Beyond the Headlines*, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2000.

Blum, Susan D. "Fieldwork in Kunming: Cognitive and Linguistic Anthropological Approaches", pp. 17-48, in *Portraits of "Primitives"*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2001.

Gladney, Dru C. "Ethnic Identity in China: The New Politics of Difference", pp. 171-192. In *China Briefing 1994*. ed. by William A. Joseph, The Asia Society. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.

Web Resources:

Chinagate. com, "Education for Ethnic Minorities in China :An introduction to China's education for ethnic minorities" , <http://us.tom.com/english/478.html>

The People's Daily, "Big Income Gaps Found in China, Much Concerned by State", July 2000, http://english.people.com.cn/english/200007/04/eng20000704_44584.html

Third World Network. "World Bank Poverty", <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/twe287c.htm>

The People's Daily, "Big Income Gaps Found in China, Much Concerned by State", July 2000, http://english.people.com.cn/english/200007/04/eng20000704_44584.html

Personal Resources, Formal Interviews conducted:

Namu students.

(Many students last names are atypical of other Chinese names due to their being phonetically translated from Dai into Hanyu, the children all had and knew their own Hanyu names. Also, ages vary partially because students could have either answered how old they currently are, or how old they will be this year. Lastly, many children who identified themselves as Han have one Han and one Dai parent.)

Ban Xiao Xiao, 8 years old, second grade, male, Dai
Bi Ai Lang, 9 years old, second grade, male, Dai
Bi Tuan Huang, eight years old, first grade, female, Dai
Bi Tuan Mei, 10 years old, third grade, female, Dai
Bi Yue Wang Li, 10 years old, third grade, female, Dai
Dao Bao Yu, eleven years old, fourth grade, female, Dai
Fu Qi (*unintelligible character*), eight years old, second grade, Han
Huang Bao Lian, twelve years old, fifth grade, male, Han
Jiao Ai Cheng Shi, eleven years old, second grade, male, Dai
Jin Ai Bao Xin, ten years old, third grade, male, Dai

Jin Xiang Lun, twelve years old, fifth grade, female, Dai
Jin Yue Bao Wang, ten years old, fourth grade, female, Dai
Jing Wen Qing, thirteen years old, sixth grade, male, Dai
Lang Jian Lin, eleven years old, fourth grade, male, Dai
Lang Qiu Long, eleven years old, fifth grade, male, Dai
Lang Xiao Mei, eleven years old, third grade, female, Dai
Li Fu Shan, nine years old, second grade, male, Han
Li Qiang, twelve years old, fourth grade, male, Dai
Li Suo Bai, eleven years old, fifth grade, male, Dai
Nan Xu Ming, twelve years old, fifth grade, male, Dai
Tao Mei Jie, thirteen years old, sixth grade, female, Han
Wan Xiao Mei, twelve years old, fifth grade, female, Dai
Xian Feng Ying, ten years old, second grade, female, Dai
Xian Suo Ping, thirteen years old, seventh grade, female, Dai
Xian Tuan Zuo, fourteen years old, seventh grade, female, Dai
Xian Xiang Lun, nine years old, second grade, male, Dai
Xiao Tuan Huang, ten years old, third grade, female, Dai
Xiang Ai Tan, twelve years old, fifth grade, male, Dai
Xiang Bao Guang, ten years old, third grade, male, Dai
Xiang Chen Run, twelve years old, fifth grade, female, Dai
Xiang Luang Ming, thirteen years old, sixth grade, male, Dai
Xiang Quan Long, twelve years old, fourth grade, male, Dai
Xiang Suo Tuan, eleven years old, third grade, female, Dai
Xiang Xiao Run, twelve years old, sixth grade, female, Dai
Xiang Yan Ping, eleven years old, third grade, female, Dai
Xiao Han Lu, seven years old, Kindergarten, female, Dai
Zhou Ai Guo Shi, nine years old, Dropped out in first grade, male, Dai
Zhou Xiao Mei, ten years old, second grade, female, Dai
name unknown, twelve years old, fifth grade, male, Han
name unknown, sixteen years old, tenth grade, female, Dai
name unknown, seventeen years old, tenth grade, female, Dai
name unknown, seventeen years old, eleventh grade, female, Dai

Namu Elementary School Teachers

Ms. Cheng, 23, four years teaching, currently teaches music, Dai
Ms. Feng, 42, twelve years teaching at Namu, currently teaches second grade yuwen and third grade Dai, Dai
Mr. Jin, 38, fourteen years teaching, currently teaches first grade math and fourth grade Dai, Dai
Mr. Liu, Principal
Ms. Mou, 37, fourteen years teaching, currently teaches first grade yuwen, Dai
Ms. Xi, 27, seven years teaching, currently teaches fourth grade yuwen and sipin, Dai
Ms. Yang, 25, four years teaching at Namu, currently teaches third grade yuwen and sipin, Han
Ms. Yang, 30, ten years teaching, currently teaches third grade math and fifth grade shehui, Han
Ms. Zhang, 24, five years teaching at Namu, currently teaches second grade math, Han
Ms. Zhuo, Vice-Principal

Formal interviews were also conducted with five parents whose names are unavailable.