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# Bai and Bilingual: Improving Academic Achievement Through Bilingual and Multicultural Education

Priscilla Hsu  
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# Bai and Bilingual:

Improving Academic Achievement through Bilingual and Multicultural Education

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China: Language, Cultures and Ethnic Minorities, Kunming  
Fall 2011



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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine minority language policy and practice in China, particularly among the Bai minority in Yunnan Province. There are large discrepancies between what law stipulates and what occurs in practice. Based on a literature review and findings from my study, minority students in rural areas are at a comparative disadvantage with minority students in urban areas who have greater access to resources and better educational facilities. Offering bilingual and multicultural education is of greater importance to rural minority students in creating a culturally relative environment to improve academic achievement.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to measure the effectiveness of bilingual education schools in increasing equality of access to secondary and higher education for the Bai ethnic minority in Yunnan Province, China. In China, there are 56 official nationalities as designated by the National Ethnic Classification Project—the Han Chinese being the majority and considered the most civilized. It is generally understood that to be anything other than Han is to be disadvantaged or backwards. Though the Bai are considered amongst the most Sinicized (or the most Hanicized) of the minorities, they still face issues of marginalization, economically and culturally, that bar them from achieving higher educational success, particularly amongst the minority students in rural areas. Because language is so closely linked to identity, the choice of language in classroom instruction is a significant government policy.

While there may be tensions between China's economic development goals—poverty alleviation, educational expansion, development of communications and transportation infrastructure, and even expansion of health care access—and maintaining the cultural integrity of ethnic minorities in China, we can assume that the primary goal of enforcing the use of Putonghua in Bai schools is not to “make them more Chinese,” for they are already considered rather Hanicized. However, bilingual and multicultural education is still necessary in preserving Bai culture and improving the level of educational attainment for Bai in rural areas, like Shilong Village, where the average level of education is middle school. Bilingual and multicultural education is more effective than China's current forms of affirmative action, which currently includes a lenient admissions program that

grants minorities a 30 point boost on the national entrance examination so that they may attend the same higher educational institutions as their Han counterparts.

Many of China's minorities encounter difficulties adjusting to school culture because of a curriculum and/or use of a language that is not applicable to their daily lives.

Furthermore, a nomadic lifestyle is not uncommon for minority families in the border provinces, such as Yunnan Province. Because we are working specifically with the Bai ethnic group living in Jianchuan County, we do not need to take this variable into account, as the Bai are rather sedentary. However, migrant workers and their children have not been taken into account in this study.

## METHODOLOGY

The information collected was through a combination of personal interviews and textual resources.

Interviews were conducted in the form of casual conversations. Interviews with students were always conducted in groups of 2 or more, to prevent students from feeling too much discomfort from speaking with a stranger. Most interviews with teachers were conducted one-on-one, unless multiple teachers were already in the same area. Interviewees were asked the following basic questions but additional questions or conversation usually ensued based on the interviewees' answers or willingness to converse with me.

For young students—



- What language do you speak at home?  
在家，你会用什么语？
- Do you understand your teacher in class?  
你上课的时候，听得懂你老师说什么吗？
- What language do you use to speak with other people?  
你跟别的人说话会用什么语？
- How do you feel about your Putonghua?  
你觉得你的普通话怎么样？
- Which language do you prefer using?  
你比较喜欢用哪个语？
- Do you like school?  
你喜不喜欢学校？

For older students—

- What language do you speak at home?  
在家，你会用什么语？
- What language do you speak with other people?  
你跟别的人说话会用什么语？
- When you were small, how well did you understand class?  
你小的时候听得懂你的老师说话吗？
- How do you feel your education prepared you for high school or college?  
你觉得你的教育准备高中或大学怎么样？
- How do you feel about your Putonghua?  
你觉得你的普通话怎么样？

For teachers—

- What is your lesson plan?  
什么是你的教案？
- What do you do when a student doesn't understand class?  
如果你有的学生不理解你的课，你会做什么事？
- Are there any students in particular that don't do well in class?  
当孩子上课的时候有没有一些学生做的不好吗？

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Before one can understand how the methodology fits into the framework of the fieldwork, they should first learn about the Bai and how they fit in the context of China. Next, a more detailed section of the importance of language policy is provided to allow the reader an understanding of the significance of the language of classroom instruction as well as the importance of bilingual and multicultural education for rural minority students.

### **The National Ethnic Classification Project (55+1)**

*“In China, national identity is not only ‘imagined’, it is stamped on one’s passport.” –Gladney (1994)*

The first national population census was launched in 1953 under the new government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had recently come into power in 1949. Shortly thereafter between the 1950s and 1979, the National Ethnic Classification Project (NECP) was launched as a “state project of national building” in formulating the official 55 ethnic minority groups in China. Many non-Han intellectuals and elites embraced the NECP when the new constitution (1954) officially granted equal status to people from any ethnic background, a way for the CCP to unify the country and make previously discriminated-against non-Han feel like part of the nation.

The CCP used the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin’s four criteria as a model for their NECP. At the time, the only politically correct definition of ethnic groups was to draw on

Stalin's definition of the Russian term *нация* (nation), the Chinese equivalent of which is *minzu*. *Minzu* is a 20<sup>th</sup> century adaptation of the cognate Japanese term *minzoku* and was popularized after the NECP as an official term to refer to the officially designated ethnic groups. It is often translated as "ethnic nation," "ethno-nation," or "nationality"<sup>1</sup>.

Fieldwork teams sent out to conduct the NECP in the 1950s used Stalin's four criteria: a community that shares a common territory, a common language, a common economic life and a common psychological make. Stalin's four "objective" criteria were subjected to "practical adaptations" and were prioritized for different peoples based on the most salient practices—a prime example of which are the Hui nationality, whose commonality is not their language but their religious practice of Islam.

The process of the NECP was both subjective and objective, based on "scientific" historical, ethnolinguistic and ethnographic research that relied mostly on descent-based data, linguistic analysis, religious practices, archives and focus-group meetings. An initial 38 *shaoshu minzu* or ethnic minorities were identified—the most undisputable of the more than 400 self-proposed groups—a number which eventually grew to a final 56.

***Who Are the Bai?*** The Bai people (*Baizu*) were among the first thirty-eight groups recognized as a separate *minzu* group and are an ethnic minority in China. The Bai are the second largest *shaoshu minzu* in Yunnan Province, China, with a population numbering

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<sup>1</sup> Gladney, D. C. (2004). *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, minorities, and other subaltern subjects*. University of Chicago Press.

1,858,063 in 2000<sup>2</sup>, approximately 80% of which in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (DBAP). The Bai make up about 34% of the total population<sup>3</sup> of DBAP, which was founded on November 22, 1956 as an attempt by China to please its ethnic minorities by granting large groups autonomy. The Bai people are well recognized as a distinct *minzu* group in China for four reasons: 1- the NECP; 2- *The Five Golden Flower*, one of only two feature movies about *minzu* in the early 1960s and late 1970s; 3- a Gongfu movie based on a bestseller novel, *Heavenly Dragons*, by a high-profile Taiwanese writer; 4- tourism promotions in Dali.

Being Bai does not necessarily affect one's identification with being Chinese in the sense of political loyalty, national belongingness or cultural affiliation. Bai (2010) reported that in her fieldwork interviews, no *shaoshu minzu* "would deny their identification with Chinese citizenship<sup>4</sup>." None of the participants in this study denied their Chinese citizenship either. However, one's ethnic identity comes from what one was in a primordial sense. Someone may not look particularly Jewish, may not read or speak Hebrew, may not go to temple and may not keep kosher, but they may still have a strong sense of cultural identity based on a different historical experience<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, several scholars support the idea that ethnicity is also a product of subjective identification.

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<sup>2</sup> China's Ethnic Statistical Yearbook 2004 (Beijing: Ethnic Minority Publishing House), pg. 487 as cited in Bai, Z. (2010). *Making a difference: Bai identity construction in Dali*. Beijing: Social Science Academic Press.

<sup>3</sup> Bai, Z. (2010). *Making a difference: Bai identity construction in Dali*. Beijing: Social Science Academic Press.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Notar, B. (1999). *Situating Research in China from Wild Histories: Popular Culture, Place and the Past in Southwest China*. Ph. D. Dissertation, Anthropology Dept., University of Michigan, 26-83.

The Bai have survived and sustained themselves as a *minzu* not only because they were labeled as such by the NECP but also because of personal subjective identification stemming mostly from linguistic and cultural differences. Though some historical Chinese representations of the Bai recoded that food and loose women seemed to constitute the major differences between predecessors of the Bai and the Han, there are ongoing debates regarding language and culture differences between the Bai and the Han.

***Language Differences.*** Researchers like Hsu (1963) report that they are unable to find any phenotype or fashion differences that separate the Bai from the Han as a distinct ethnic group. However, interviews by Bai (2010) with Bai elders do cite “a language difference to distinguish between the Bai and the Han<sup>6</sup>.”

Debates over the Bai spoken language include its classification and whether it should be classified as a Bai, Sinitic or Tibeto-Burman language. Some scholars say that the spoken language is closely related to the Yi language of the Tibeto-Burmese family under the Sino-Tibetan language family, while others cite that the similarities between Mandarin and Bai plant names proves its Han origin.

There are, in fact, many lexical items in the Bai language borrowed from other languages. Like Cantonese and Vietnamese, Bai say *gai* for “chicken.” Like southeastern Tibetan, Bai say *sbamao*, for “witch.” Many words have been borrowed from Mandarin, especially words having to do with technology, like television set and airplane. Some plant names, especially crops, are similar to Mandarin, however there are still quite a few

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 3.

differences. “Rhododendron” – which grow profusely in Yunnan – in Mandarin are *dujuan hua*, but in Bai are *mabiyi*. “Cooked rice” in Mandarin is *fan*, whereas in Bai it is *harsi*<sup>7</sup>.

Others aspects of the language do not resemble Mandarin at all. Unlike Mandarin, there are many polysyllabic lexical items in Bai such as *miwapi* for “moon” and *mipipi* for “sun” (*yue* and *ri* in Mandarin). Bai grammar also differs significantly from Mandarin. Mandarin has no verb tenses, whereas in Bai there is a future tense, for example, *wuzen*, “will have,” “will be.” In Mandarin, classifiers or measure words precede the noun (in English we use very few classifiers but have a few which also precede nouns, such as “a gaggle of geese”), for example in Mandarin, like English, one says “two rabbits” (*liange tuzi*) whereas in Bai one says “rabbits two” (*taolao guodeng*).

Whether or not a Bai written form ever existed is still up for debate. Within China, the Bai written form (*Bai wen*) mostly refers to what is called “Chinese character-based writing” or *hanzi baidu* (Han characters read in Bai). Some Bai, including my host grandfather in Shaxi County, admit that there is no Bai script. Others insist there is a Bai written form, as illustrated in the following narrative account by Bai (2010):

*When people in Color Village were decorating the altar for their benzhu (village patron god) procession in 2004, a man in his 50s came over and started to fold a piece of red paper, skillfully making the big piece of paper into squares and cutting the paper into six strips. Not until then did I realize what he was doing: writing the couplets for the altar.*

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<sup>7</sup> Notar, B. (1999).

*He put the paper on the ground and wrote directly on it with a traditional Chinese black brush-pen. The couplet he wrote had a very well-structured rhythm in beautiful calligraphy. But I found one character “hong” in “hongyang” was not written correctly, I was struggling over whether or not to reveal the error, and how to let him realize it without his losing face among his fellow villagers. Knowing that the couplets were to be stuck on the wall at the back of the altar and that everyone could see them, I wrote in my notebook the “correct” word just before he hung them up and showed it to him, thus avoiding attention from others nearby. His reaction was, to my surprise, quite relaxed and comfortable. He told me firmly but in a friendly manner: “Oh, this is the way we Bai people write it, its [hong] pronunciation is [xuan], we have this word [xuan-yang] in Bai language [instead of hongyang].” I was left speechless, as he knew what he was doing.*

Scholars argue that Bai writing was once used formally in religious practice and Bai opera manuscripts in history, all of which were lost during the Cultural Revolution. Others argue that the Bai written tradition is nothing more than a corruption of Chinese characters—that the Bai predecessors created their own way of writing by adding or dropping parts of Chinese words. Yuanfu<sup>8</sup> (1981) argues:

*In spite of the similarities between Bai and Han written forms, no matter how many Bai words have been borrowed from the Han language, as long as there are some written characters to express Bai spoken language, there is nothing improper in calling it Bai written language.*

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<sup>8</sup> Making a difference

Whatever the true case, the Chinese government has undertaken codification projects, including the standardization or designing of scripts, to preserve minority languages based on the spoken word. While a number of minority languages have seen their original script retained, a few have been revised. An official Bai written form has been revised using a Latin-alphabetic form.

***Culture Differences.*** The Bai have kept the most essential of their ethnic culture, such as their indigenous religion and their mother tongue, but have absorbed a great deal of Han culture as well. They are known to be the most Sinicized and have the most developed agriculture among all the ethnic groups living in Yunnan province<sup>9</sup>.

Bai speakers may have absorbed many Chinese cultural practices, but they still retain a distinct sense of cultural identity in terms of language, food, women's roles and a sense of emplaced history. However, Bai do not often articulate or emphasize their cultural differences from Han Chinese, because they live within a context of long-term majority prejudice against ethnic minorities. Bai speakers in Dali, especially Bai intellectuals, are aware of outside representations of themselves and have had to negotiate their identities in relation to these representations. In this context, emphasizing a difference from the Han majority highlights one as being "less civilized"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Gan, X. (2000). *Dali and the Bai People in The Yunnan Ethnic Groups and Their Cultures*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House, 40-62.

<sup>10</sup> Notar, B. (1999).



Though differences between Bai and Han culture may be downplayed or for the most part denied, Hsu<sup>11</sup> (1963) observed differences in West Town of Dali that contradicted the generalized pattern of the Chinese family. Although he states that the “desire of male descendants is intense,” he notes that matrilineal marriage, residence with the wife’s family or tribe, is a common practice. Hsu further observed that the sexual division of labor not very rigid, for example hired labor could be either male or female. Moreover women, in their capacity as traders, spent much time outside the home and even away from the village. Yet, his own acknowledgement of the greater authority of women, their important economic role and their greater freedom of movement (only elite West Town women over 30 had bound feet, village women did not), did not cause Hsu to reformulate his description of the people of Dali as typical Chinese.

When asked: “What is the difference between Bai and Han Chinese?” many Bai may respond with “There isn’t much difference” for a variety of reasons. First, most villagers do not interact with Han Chinese on any regular basis (an exception to this are villagers who work in the quickly growing tourism industry). Village officials are Bai. Most elementary school teachers are Bai. While differences between the cultures of one’s own village and the culture of the next village over are tangible, the differences between one’s practices as a Bai and the practices of the Han are more abstract.

Second, it is important to note that the question, “What is the difference between Bai and Han Chinese?” has more significance than one thinks. Within this cultural hierarchy

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<sup>11</sup> Hsu’s extensive field research on the Bai in the 1930s reported that he was “unable to find any physical, fashion, or architectural differences that separate the Bai from the Han as a distinct ethnic group” supporting the notion that the Bai are simply modified descendants of the Han Chinese group today.

where Han Chinese sit at the top, to admit to being different means to admit to being less, which of course, one would not be inclined to do. To be different from the Han means to be less cultured, less civilized. Minorities start to internalize a majority gaze when living within a context of majority dominated representation. If being different from the majority is bad, they will see themselves as such and will want to be as normal as possible.

However, there are other reasons as to why the Bai might respond with “There isn’t much difference”. Bai (2010) notes that her informants would point out that many Bai are actually not “real” Bai, but are actually Han immigrants who married local women and became members of the current Bai. People may also choose to claim a Bai identity (though this is contingent upon having one parent of Bai minority status) simply for the sake of taking advantage of minority programs such as having two children instead of one, or affirmative action allowing entrance to college with lower exam scores<sup>12</sup>.

For those who identify with being both Han and Bai, they fall back on the fact that Bai wasn’t an actual identity until post-1949<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, tourism stimulates people to act ethnically upon their *minzu* label (or sometimes, act ethnically upon any *minzu* label as long as it sells). The tourist industry in Dali, in particular, has various interest groups seeking to construct their own versions of Bai history and culture. Locals also benefit

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<sup>12</sup> Notar, B. (1999).

<sup>13</sup> Bai, Z. (2010), 108-109.

from the marketing of ethnic diversity. In other words, tourism can get people to act ethnic<sup>14</sup>.

Ethnic minority issues are among the most controversial in regards to state policies because they deal with questions of self-identity and how one will fit into the context of their respective society. Repressing the expression of identity is the rejection of those people, as they view themselves, from society. People need to be able to express who they are. Different degrees of the Bai may speak different dialects, sing different tunes, and dress differently but they all identify with the state Bai category.

### **Why Language Policies Matter**

Academic interest in the study of language policy lies in the relationship between language policy and the social inequality of indigenous and minority people<sup>15</sup>.

Government language policies often reflect relations between groups. Attitudes regarding respective languages, or more specifically, the speakers of these languages, are influential in the actions—or deliberate inaction—concerning language policy. Because languages are central to a collective identity, language issues and, in particular, the choice of language of instruction in education can evoke extremely strong responses. Questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages in the classroom.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>15</sup> Esman, M. J. (1992). The State and Language Policy. *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Resolving Ethnic Conflicts. La solution des conflits ethniques. October 1992, 381-396

***Minority Language Policies in China.*** Mandarin Chinese, known as Putonghua or common speak in China, is designated as China's national official language. Because of its growing importance across the country, efforts to standardize Putonghua started in 1956. The First Character Simplification Scheme contained 2,235 simplified characters and 14 radicals (components of a Chinese character). In addition to the standardization of written form, pronunciation based on a phonetic alphabet called *hanyu pinyin* was introduced to facilitate standardization of the pronunciation of Putonghua.

China's current official stance is the support of minority languages and culture but the use of Putonghua is heavily reinforced in school. China's minority language policies have had three key stages leading to its current position. Minority languages were supported from the early to mid-1950s then severely suppressed during the late 1950s and throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a time when China wanted to wipe its historical slate clean of the Four Olds: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. A tolerance of minority languages resumed in the late 1970s.

In the 1950s, the Chinese government established autonomous governments in minority regions (much like the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture) and worked to eliminate illiteracy in these regions. In addition to policies to develop writing systems for minority groups who did not already have a written language system, both Han officials and local minority officials were trained in minority languages. In 1956, the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) Central Committee stated that minority groups had the right to use their home language and the Mandarin Chinese should only be mandated for the Hans<sup>16</sup>.

Minority language policy changed direction during the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution. Assimilation became the goal of minority education as Mandarin Chinese became the official language of school instruction in minority regions<sup>17</sup>. Requests for bilingual education and minority curriculum were denied on the basis that they opposed socialism and challenged ideological correctness<sup>18</sup>. The provision of primary-school facilities were decentralized to depend on local resources, which likely handicapped the expansion of educational facilities in these regions because of their weak economic base and lack of resources<sup>19</sup>.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, the Chinese government enacted laws and policies for the stated purpose of protecting minority groups' rights to language and culture. Chinese government policy officially states that minority languages and cultures are valued and respected. Minority groups have the right to use their languages and practice their cultures and religions as stipulated in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1982:

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<sup>16</sup> Zhou, M. (2000, 2004) as cited in Wang, Y. & Phillion, J. (2009). Minority Language Policy and Practice in China: The Need for Multicultural Education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*. Vol. 11, No. 1. United States: Purdue University.

<sup>17</sup> Lin (1997) & Zhou (2000) as cited in Wang, Y. & Phillion, J. (2009).

<sup>18</sup> Wang, Y. & Phillion, J. (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Kwong, J. & Xiao, H. (1989). Educational Equality among China's Minorities. *Comparative Education*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1989, 229-243.

*All ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secession are prohibited.*

Additionally, in the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities enacted in 1984, six articles address minority groups' rights and those of language use<sup>20</sup>. Article 37 states:

*In schools which mainly recruit students of minority nationalities, textbooks in languages of minority nationalities concerned should be used where conditions exist. Languages for instruction should also be the languages of the minority nationalities concerned. Primary school students of higher grades and secondary school students should learn [the] Chinese language. Putonghua [Mandarin Chinese], which is commonly used throughout the country, should be popularized among them<sup>21</sup>.*

However, discrepancies between minority policies and practices are significant when these laws and policies are interpreted in schools. Chinese Communist policies towards the minorities might now be more enlightened, but a certain degree of ethnocentrism still remains. According to the 1986 Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory

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<sup>20</sup> Zhou, M. (2004). Minority language policy in China: Equality in theory and inequality in practice. In M. Zhou & H. Sun (Eds.), *Language policy in the People's Republic of China: Theory and practice since 1949*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 71-95.

<sup>21</sup> Kwong, J. & Xiao, H. (1989).

Education, every child in the nation is required to attend school for at least 9 years where they must learn Putonghua. Ethnic minorities are officially encouraged to maintain the preservation of their languages, but admission to secondary education and higher education is contingent upon one's success on a national test conducted in Putonghua. Job recruitment in government, business or education is conditional on having a level 2 or 3 qualification in Putonghua. Furthermore, standardized Chinese is used in six areas of particular focus of everyday life: (1) spoken and written language for broadcasting, films and TV programs; (2) written language for the facilities in public places; (3) written language in signboards and advertisements; (4) names of enterprises and other institutions; (5) packaging and specifications of commodities marketed in the country, and (6) information processing and information technology products.

Despite official support and encouragement for preserving native languages, there are other characteristics of the minority nationalities to be understood before discussing the PRC's policy towards them. The social and economic development of the various minority nationalities is uneven. Generally speaking, the Han as the majority group are the most developed, and those peoples who have had more contact with them are better off. In contrast, the minorities of remote areas are generally regarded as backward<sup>22</sup>.

***As if Mandarin Wasn't Already Hard Enough.*** In order to excel or advance, minority language speakers like the Bai are expected to maintain a level of Putonghua equivalent to a native speaker. The learning curve for Putonghua is even greater for speakers of

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<sup>22</sup> Hsieh, J. (1986). China's Nationalities Policy: Its Development and Problems. *Anthropos*, Bd. 81, H. 1./3. 1986, 1-20.

Southern dialects, like those in Yunnan Province, because it is based on a northern dialect. But mastery of Putonghua is advantageous in Chinese society for a variety of reasons. A person who can work in government in their native medium, compete with and deal with government in their first language, enjoys both practical and psychological advantages over competitors who are forced to function, perhaps awkwardly, in a second language<sup>23</sup>.

But language is closely linked to identity, and China's minorities are not likely to give that up easily. People act in ways that are taken as "having" a language, which is equated to "belonging" to an origin group<sup>24</sup>. Language provides the key to entering a closed society, acting as a marker to signify insider status. Speakers of multiple languages often engage in what is called codeswitching, or choosing the appropriate code for a presentation of self. Which language serves as a matrix for which speaker depends on social factors and network affiliations: age, generation, sex, etc. In other words, the use of a language depends on the context of the situation and how the speaker wants to be presented.

Code-switchers are acutely aware of how language marks a class difference. Puerto Ricans in New York, who codeswitch with each other in highly routinized ways, may or may not express awareness of Spanish used with or by African-American neighbors, but they are sensitive to white Anglos using Spanish: They map language difference onto

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<sup>23</sup> Esman, M. J. (1992). 382.

<sup>24</sup> Urciuoli, B. (1995). Language and Borders. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, 1995, 525.



race-class difference, just as it has been mapped onto them<sup>25</sup>. While ethnic minorities may prefer to use their native tongue, they must also be aware of the effect this will have on their children in school, not only in terms of mastery but also in terms of class distinction.

***Is Bilingual Education the Solution to this Problem?*** Nelson (2005) argues that bilingual education may actually increase illiteracy among minority groups. When minority groups strongly identify with their language, policies that restrict minority language use in school are often met with resistance. The rise in illiteracy among minority groups may be explained as a form of resistance against a hegemonic state power despite tolerant language policies and government efforts to increase educational access.

Learning a language is tantamount to converting to the identity of its source, to becoming an insider. Even if minority groups learn Mandarin because they are forced to militarily (as during the Cultural Revolution), or because it is in their economic interests (as with current Chinese policy motivations), speaking Mandarin creates the option of entry into the identity of being Chinese. For these reasons, the Chinese government uses language policies to stimulate minority peoples into imagining that they belong to the greater Chinese nation. The Chinese government has attempted to establish hegemonic views of nationhood through their minority policies, including language policies.

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<sup>25</sup> Urciuoli, B. (1991). The political topography of Spanish and English: the view from a New York Puerto Rican neighborhood. *Am. Ethnol.* 18: 295-301 as cited in Urciuoli, B. (1995). Language and Borders. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, 1995, 529.

However, the failure of literacy programs since 1949, particularly in Tibet<sup>26</sup>, reveals that minority groups are in fact unwilling to leave their national identities behind in favor of communism and Mandarin Chinese. The language policies failed to "construct, regulate and circulate<sup>27</sup>" CCP ideas about nationhood and cultural truths. It appears that local identity with minority languages remains strong, even when minorities claim an identity with being Chinese.

During monolingual (Mandarin) stages of China's minority language policies, literacy rates fell for every minority region<sup>28</sup>. Following the return to bilingual education in communities with long-established writing systems, there were slowdowns in illiteracy reduction, and in some cases, rises in illiteracy<sup>29</sup>. While research suggests that it is easier and more effective to teach literacy programs using native and local languages<sup>30</sup>, Zhou (2000) points out that "political situations and other factors in China have also affected the development of literacy and eradication of illiteracy, regardless of types of minority community." The manifestation of the relationship of education and politics is an important site for minorities to voice their opinions, particularly when it is difficult to speak directly within the state.

From this perspective, it is useful to look at the failure of literacy levels in minority language policy as resistance. With the rise in illiteracy, the Chinese government's

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<sup>26</sup> Zhou, M. (2000).

<sup>27</sup> Rassool, N. (2000). Contested and contesting identities: Conceptualising linguistic minority rights with the global cultural economy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 21(5), 386-399.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See for e.g. UNESCO (2003, 2003, 2008).

planning and policies appear to have failed. At the same time, the low levels of minority literacy still fit symbolically within the Chinese hegemonic framework whereby the Chinese are still superior. Though minorities are purposefully resisting language change, the increasing illiteracy rate supports China's historical depictions of Han dominance in regards to intelligence and progress and consequently, civilization.

Language policies in China are becoming more inclusive of minority language use, but because of the sensitive relationship between language and identity, they have become a site of resistance. When language policies change, switching from tolerance of minority language use to the repression of minority language use and back again affects minority parents' decisions about schooling. Zhou's (2000) research shows that parents' decisions to send their children to school and to finish the first grade correspond with policy shifts. As the CCP changes its national language policies to suit its own agendas, parents may feel that formal schooling is less about education and more about repressing minority culture. Rejecting formal education at the hands of the Chinese state is one way to resist the acquisition of hegemonic thought.

Kwong and Hong (1989) further argue that while the use of indigenous languages in the elementary schools may have made learning easier for young students, their lack of a solid training in the Han language puts them at a disadvantage in the secondary-school entrance examinations, where Han is the linguistic medium. The use of the indigenous language at the primary level also handicaps them at the secondary level when Han replaces minority languages as the sole lingua franca in schools. Minority language

seems to slow down progress, especially because they are allowed to reject the Han language. The use of indigenous language at the primary level will backfire, placing the students at a disadvantage at the secondary and university levels.

If the Chinese government is to remain in power and prevent the rebellion of minorities, it has a delicate policy line to balance. On one hand, there needs to be a curriculum and language policy that focuses on the incorporation of minorities into the larger Chinese nation. However, if these policies are too restrictive, they can lead to the alienation and dissatisfaction of minority groups and create social disequilibrium. A greater incorporation of minorities into the policy-making process at the national level may alleviate dissatisfaction and potential instability in these regions.

There are additional external factors involved that may be contributing to the low retention rates of minorities. While China may be attempting to provide equal educational opportunities, minorities are still not achieving equal academic success for a few reasons. The number of schools in minority areas may be increasing but using numbers alone can be misleading. The quality of these schools cannot be measured with statistics. Salaries in poor minority areas are less attractive than those in the urban or more populous Han areas so attracting qualified teachers—let alone qualified bilingual teachers—can be a difficult task.

While more populous Han areas tend to have greater access to resources, there is a great diversity of socioeconomic circumstances *within* ethnic categories, associated with

location of residence. Patterns of growth, poverty reduction, and inequality have been uneven across regions. For example, using multi-province panel data, Goh, Luo and Zhu<sup>31</sup> found that between 1989 and 2004, income in coastal provinces more than tripled, while income in inland provinces only doubled. By 2004, mean per capita household income in inland provinces was barely two-thirds of the corresponding coastal province figure. Ravallion and Chen (2007) found that coastal provinces had significantly higher trend rates of poverty reduction, compared to other provinces. Poverty is most severe in remote mountainous and minority areas<sup>32</sup>.

The urban-rural dimension of inequality is also important, with estimates of the ratio of nominal mean urban income to rural income reaching as high as 3.3 by 2007<sup>33</sup>. The income gap between rural and urban areas fell after the initiation of market reforms in 1978, then increased after the late 1980s, though when adjustments are made for inflation and for cost-of living differences between rural and urban areas, the trend is less strong<sup>34</sup>. However, urban-rural income ratios still increased significantly since the mid-1990s, and the absolute gap between urban and rural incomes widened tremendously<sup>35</sup>.

Like levels of income, the urban-rural gap in income is significant. Goh, Luo and Zhu<sup>36</sup> found that the rural-urban gap in inland provinces was wider and rose faster than in coastal provinces. Research found that urban-rural income ratios in the western regions

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<sup>31</sup> As cited in the World Bank. (2009). *From Poor Areas to Poor People: China's Evolving Poverty Reduction Agenda*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

<sup>32</sup> World Bank. (2009).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 489.

were higher, above three, than those in the center or eastern regions, at about two.

Moreover, between 1995 and 2002, the urban-rural gap rose in the west and center, but declined in the east, suggesting that those parts of China where poverty is most concentrated were falling farther behind, in relative terms.

The gap in social inequality between rural and urban areas seem to be increasing further inland and further West in China, like in Yunnan Province. Rural minorities seem to suffer the greatest amount of hardship regarding education—not only do they deal with lower educational quality related to poverty, they must also deal with their own economic woes on top of learning a language that parents at home may or may not speak.

Additional efforts to supply bilingual and multicultural education seem to be of greatest need in rural areas for quality basic education.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes this challenge and is in full support of starting education in one's mother tongue. Barriers to a quality basic education lead to high illiteracy rates and a poor quality of life. It is also a threat to the survival of minority language and culture. While there are strong educational arguments in favor of mother tongue (or first language) instruction, a careful balance also needs to be made between enabling people to use local languages in learning, and providing access to global languages of communication through education.

Because questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages, the choice of language instruction—or the choice to bar a language from the classroom—is symbolic. Children who are forced to learn in another language receive two messages: 1- that if they want to succeed intellectually it won't be by using their mother tongue and 2- that their mother tongue is useless.

By utilizing the mother tongue in classroom instruction, minority pupils feel more respected. A change in the medium of instruction also brings about other changes: it makes the home culture visible, it allows learners to talk about their prior knowledge and experience and link them to new information, it brings the home and the school closer together, it opens up communication between families and teachers, it facilitates communication and participation in the classroom, and it helps learners gain self-esteem and a stronger sense of identity. In sum, using the learner's language goes a long way toward resolving many of the access and quality issues and making lessons in the classroom a lot more relevant to life outside of school.

As noted before, a careful balance must be made between using local languages in learning and allowing access to global languages for communication. According to studies, an effective bilingual program will consider the following:

1. **Children need the period from birth to approximately 12 years of age to develop their home language competence** (including both language and thinking skills) to an adult level, and these skills support them in further

learning<sup>37</sup>. They gain such skills through daily interactions with speakers of all ages, particularly older, more knowledgeable ones, and the language(s) they learn are known as the mother tongue or first language (L1). For appropriate language development to take place during this period, children must interact with others and be exposed to a range of new information and experiences.

Since children enter school long before the age of 12, it is optimal for them to *study at least one home language and to learn through the medium of that language until at least grade 5 or 6*, assuming they begin primary school at age 6 or 7. This does not prevent them from learning an official school language (L2), but it does mean that the L1 should occupy an important position in the curriculum. As children build fluency and confidence in learning through the L1, they can also learn to speak and understand the L2, then to read and write it, building on a strong foundation in the language most familiar to them.

- 2. Children normally require about 5 to 7 years of second language (L2) learning before they can learn academic subjects through this language exclusively.** Being taught academic content through the L2 represents a multiple burden for the learner: understanding the abstract concept, understanding the high-level vocabulary, and understanding the language in which it is explained.

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<sup>37</sup> Dutcher, N. (1995) "The Use of First and Second Languages in Education. A Review of International Experience", *Pacific Island Discussion Paper Series* No. 1. Washington DC: World Bank. In United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2008). "Improving the Quality of Mother Tongue-based Literacy and Learning: Case Studies from Asia, Africa and South America." Bangkok, Thailand, UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 1-12, 50-52.



3. **Building a strong foundation in the L1 helps L2 learning much more than early or long exposure to the L2.** Simply using the L2 during all or most classroom time, which is known as the *maximum exposure* myth<sup>38</sup>, does not necessarily help learners acquire the second language. Though it may seem surprising, it is actually more efficient and effective to invest time in developing L1 language and literacy, because we only learn to read once, and most skills transfer to the L2 and other languages once a good foundation has been built in the L1. The result will be children who can speak, read and write both languages well, i.e. bilingual and biliterate.
  
4. **The most effective bilingual programs continue to invest in L1 thinking and learning for as long as possible.** This is because of transfer<sup>39</sup>, which is the human ability to make use of skills learned in one language while speaking another language. Learners who have the opportunity to develop high-level competence in the mother tongue will thus be able to develop high-level competence in additional languages, both orally and in writing. To maximize the power of transfer, children should ideally *continue to study the mother tongue*, at least as a subject if not as a teaching/learning medium, throughout their school careers, as well as studying the L2.

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<sup>38</sup> The maximum exposure myth is that the best way for students to learn a language is to completely immerse them in it with or without prior introduction.

<sup>39</sup> Transfer and transition are two concepts in bi- or multilingual education that are important to understand. They are often considered the same thing, but in fact they are not: *transfer* is a scientific concept that explains how we learn languages, while *transition* is an educational term indicating the point at which the medium of instruction shifts from one language to another.

## **Where the Bai need Bilingual and Multicultural Education the Most**

Socioeconomic diversity is evident within an ethnic group across regions and even within the same county. The need for bilingual education varies with the degree of poverty across the county. Poverty greatly hinders minority students from receiving an education in general and, in particular, minority literacy education. Poverty issues in minority regions in China are complicated because of the unbalanced development of the Chinese economy. Bilingual and multicultural education is of a much higher priority in rural minority areas because of the students' lack of resources and because of their isolation in pocket cultures or ethnic minority enclaves.

I spent the majority of my time observing two elementary schools in Sideng Village and Shilong Village, both rural villages of Shaxi County, for my independent study project. Both Sideng and Shilong are Bai minority areas where the main industry is agriculture. However, a special effort to preserve Sideng's culture because of its designation as a UN World Heritage Site is bringing in a steady stream of tourists that continues to grow each year. With the tourism industry growing in importance, Sideng villagers have increasing opportunities in business, hospitality, and the traditional Bai arts of woodcarving and embroidery. Though the majority of Sideng's community members were of the Bai minority, Sideng had slightly more diversity amongst its community than Shilong. In Sideng, I met migrant workers from Guangzhou, Chinese students from various regions working with a Swiss NGO to preserve Sideng's culture, and café owners from Shenzhen,

Shangrila, and Taiwan—just to name a few. In Shilong, everyone I met was of the Bai minority (with the exception of the Yi and Lisu minority students at the elementary school).

In Sideng Village, I lived with a homestay family while observing Sideng Elementary School, a government-funded elementary school that is not actually in Sideng village but instead a brisk twenty-minute walk outside of it. The elementary school used to be in Sideng but changed locations in August to expand. Local rumor has it that a hotel company convinced the government to move the school. With approximately 40 members of faculty and staff and 685 enrolled students, the elementary school serves the children of at least 18 villages. Approximately 238 children from the furthest villages live on campus in student dormitories and usually return home on the weekends. The single three-story academic building of fourteen classrooms have an average of about 50 children per class; grades 1-3 are situated in classrooms on the third floor, grades 4-5 on the second, and grade 6 on the first floor. Kindergarten teachers use Bai as a supplementary language to introduce Putonghua, but by first grade Bai is strictly prohibited in classrooms.

Less than an hour away up a windy road by van is Shilong Village, a stark contrast from Sideng's charmingly paved roads and tourists. Instead of cobblestones, Shilong's dirt roads are covered with animal feces and trash. Shilong doesn't seem to receive nearly as many visitors as Sideng. Children befriended and accepted my white-American classmates as big brothers and sisters just the same as they accepted me, an Asian

American. They held no reservations in speaking to any of us or allowing us to play a game of tag with them in the town square. In Shilong, my presence as a stranger at the school startled children for days. One girl refused to come out of her room when I stood outside and when I asked her why, she said I scared her. It didn't matter if I wasn't foreign-looking, I was still foreign to them. Based on this experience, Shilong seems to have considerably less exposure to the outside world than Sideng.

In Shilong, I lived on the elementary school's campus in the *chu cang shi* (storeroom) and ate with the students in the cafeteria. The elementary school, like the one in Sideng, serves several local villages with 8 teachers for 115 students but is instead funded by an international NGO that creates bilingual multicultural lesson plans and corresponding textbooks. Each grade has only one classroom, but unlike Sideng Elementary, Shilong has a nursery composed of two classes, *xiao ban* (small class) and *da ban* (big class), the equivalent of preschool and kindergarten in the States. Shilong's class sizes are considerably smaller, averaging about 19 per class. Shilong's classrooms, like Sideng's, are bare without central air or heat. Thirty-seven students, whose homes range from a 40 minute to 4 hour walk away, live in the school's dormitories—several of which, like the classrooms, have doors or windows that cannot close properly. During my week of observation in mid- November, temperatures dropped as low as 30° F or 0°C at night.

China's compulsory education law mandates nine years of school attendance to at least the end of middle school, but many external factors—lack of money, resources, and/or preparation—prevent them from doing so. While it was quite common for children of

Sideng Village to continue on to high school and even college, it was rare for children of Shilong Village to continue past middle school. Expectations for students from surrounding villages living within the school dormitories were even lower.

Just an hour out of the villages, into the urban city of Jianchuan, the county seat, living standards rise dramatically. The education of the Bai in Jianchuan also seems to be much better. Students have access to resources provided in the city and many even speak the Han language with family at home. Furthermore, minorities in the city are not as isolated as minorities in villages. In China, one is required to have at least one parent of minority status to gain entitlement to minority status. In Bai culture, outsiders who marry local Bai women can marry into being Bai; much more common in cities for contact between the Han and Bai is more frequent than in villages. Theoretically, one could be 1/16 Bai and still claim minority status to benefit from minority advantages as long as one parent was officially Bai on their Chinese identification card.

Urban students have greater access to resources as well as better educational facilities. In Jianchuan, I visited the office that prepares educational materials for Shilong. Mr. Yang, head of the office, gave me an office tour. He showed me where textbooks were stored and explained that in the initial stages of planning, two renowned Australian teachers helped train them in creating bilingual lesson plans. Bai locals create new texts and stories in the office in order to ensure that the lesson plans and stories in the textbooks were relevant to the children's lives.

I spent most of my time with Little Zhang, who graciously showed me around the city after the office tour. A walk around Jianchuan and a visit to a nursery, an elementary school, and the local high school—all public and government-funded—made it very apparent that urban students have greater resources and better educational facilities.

Elizabeth, the director of the foundation that funds Shilong Elementary School, prides her organization on the colorful Western décor of the nursery but Little Zhang and I accidentally stumbled upon a nursery in Jianchuan that blew Shilong’s decorations out of the water. The main building and its circular windows looked like a large sponge of color with rainbow decorations bursting out of classrooms and assorted jungle gyms scattered across the playground. Classrooms had encouraging and colorful messages like “We are all good friends” and neatly folded blankets sat on top of miniature beds in rooms dedicated solely to nap time. Classrooms with pictures, measurements, and messages were filled with neatly stacked art supplies and cubbies for children’s cups, labeled neatly with students’ names and a thumbnail picture of the young ones who couldn’t quite read their name yet. The building had three floors separated by *xiao ban* (small class), *zhong ban* (middle class), and *da ban* (big class), with students of age 4, 5, and 6 respectively. Signs on the wall requested for all to “Please use Putonghua.” According to Little Zhang, this was the first public nursery she knew of in Jianchuan; the rest had previously been privately run. This means that everything for students attending the school was free.

The elementary school in the area was just as impressive. Little Zhang informed me that there were in fact two elementary schools in the city, but she took me to the more prestigious one, and it was easy to see why. Unlike the elementary schools of the villages,

this one had a teacher dormitory but did not have a student dormitory. All enrolled students came from the city and lived close enough to commute. The elementary school grounds were slightly smaller than the nursery but academic buildings were not sparse. Little Zhang and I looked into a window to discover a science laboratory equipped with test tubes and beakers, not too different from the lab at my high school in Los Angeles. It was quite impressive to see such a well-equipped lab at the elementary school, for mine definitely did not have one, even if we could be trusted with equipment of the like.

Students who receive their education from the spartan village schools have to compete with urban students for admission into Jianchuan High School unless they want to go to a lower tiered high school in a different county. Jianchuan High School is just as impressive as the nursery and elementary school. The campus rivals that of a small liberal arts college in the United States—beautiful aesthetic scenery including trees and a river that lead to a fountain, large modern academic buildings, and a clean rubber outdoor track and field. One can assume that admission to that high school must be competitive.

Not only do Jianchuan Elementary school students have access to better resources and educational facilities to prepare them for secondary and higher education, they are more exposed to Putonghua—in the streets and at home. In Sideng and Shilong, Bai was the main form of communication, unless you were clearly an outsider. Bai is also common in the streets of Jianchuan but seems to be decreasing with the younger generations who use more and more Putonghua. Thus, the village students who have to roughly transition at a

young age to using Putonghua as the only language of instruction are at a disadvantage to the urban students who either speak it at home or are able to practice outside of school.

While the rural students of Shaxi County seem to be in greater need of bilingual and multicultural education than the urban students, the transition to Putonghua must be done carefully. There are many myths to the best method of acquiring a new language. One such myth is that the best way to learn a second language is to introduce it as a medium of instruction for maximum exposure and immersion. In fact, it is often more effective to learn additional languages as subjects of study. Another is that to learn a second language you must start as early as possible. While starting early might help learners develop a better accent, studies show that the advantage goes to learners who have a well-developed first language. A third is that the home language gets in the way of learning a second language. As stated before, building a strong foundation in the first language (L1) results in better learning of additional languages.

Even though there are many confounding factors that prevent Shaxi County children from continuing their education, the lack of a strong educational base seems to contribute strongly to a lack of motivation to continue school. This was quite evident when speaking to two café waitresses in Sideng Village, who work in Sideng but actually come from the neighboring village, Fuso. According to the girls, Fuso Village doesn't get visitors the way Sideng does; in fact, Sideng gets the most. In a casual conversation, I found that we were not too far in age; one was 16 years old, the other 22 years old. Both were Bai, learned Putonghua in school, and chose not attend high school because they did not like



to study. The 22 year old continued on to say that she did not like school as a child because it was too difficult and because she did not understand the books. Whether she meant that she did not understand the language or the lesson remains unclear.

Classroom comprehension issues seemed to be fairly common among people I spoke to in Sideng Village, although when current students were asked if they ever had comprehension issues now or ever, they always said no or avoided the question altogether<sup>40</sup>. When asked how comprehension problems were dealt with, Sideng teachers almost universally answered “with more repetition and exercises to reinforce the lesson.” Some, who lived on campus with the children, said they used Bai to explain lessons outside of class, but never during class. Many told me that children generally adjusted after just one year, the smarter ones after just half a year. Sideng teachers told me that the formative years for teaching Putonghua were grades 1-3; after that, students were generally well adjusted to the use of Putonghua in the classroom.

In general, secondary education seems to be increasing as an option (multiple sources told me that 80% of Sideng’s children continue on to high school though without official records I am not sure how they all came to this number) but the cause seems more likely to be related to the increase in resources and not because of the educational system.

Several students at Sideng Elementary told me that they did not know if they would go to middle school or high school or hesitated to answer at all when I asked. Many of these

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<sup>40</sup> A classmate of mine pointed out that older people were more likely to admit to difficulties in school in hindsight, whereas current students might be too embarrassed to admit classroom difficulties in front of teachers or friends. Furthermore, interviews were always conducted as casual conversation with groups or two or more as opposed to a one-on-one interrogation.

were students who also told me they did not like school, including a sixth grader who had to ask his classmate for clarification on all the questions I asked him in Putonghua.

A conversation with a classmate's host mom, whom I simply called *a yi* (aunt<sup>41</sup>), might further explain the increase of students attending high school. *A yi* told me that she had only attended middle school because there were no monetary options for high school. Even though she was capable and could have scored high enough on the entrance examination to go, her family had five children and could not afford to send them all to the high school. Though the high school was government-funded and tuition was free, she still would have had to pay for boarding and books. Families once had to stretch resources out between five to seven children, now, however, they only have to worry about one or two<sup>42</sup>. Because of this, more and more children (her two children included) are able to attend high school.

Transitional schooling like Sideng that only develops short-term oral use of the mother language (L1) is not a strong form of bilingual education because it only uses the L1 as a “bridge” or “short cut” to the second language (L2). If a school attempts to transition learners too soon, they will not have developed strong enough literacy skills in the L1 to transfer them to the second language, nor have they learned enough oral L2 to understand what they are being forced to decode. Even if students learn new content in the L2, having a well-developed L1 will allow students to transfer from the L1 to the L2 skills

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<sup>41</sup> In Chinese culture, it is common to call older women, your friends' mothers, or female friends of your parents an aunt.

<sup>42</sup> Though Chinese family-planning policies only allow families to have one child, exceptions are made for minority families, who are allowed to have 2 children but sometimes 3 depending on the province.

and knowledge such as the actual skill of reading or decoding text, reading and writing strategies, knowledge of text structure and rhetorical devices, sensor motor skills, visual-perceptual coordination, and cognitive functions and thought patterns<sup>43</sup>.

Shilong Elementary supports the development of the Bai language and culture until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Students are taught to read and write Bai written script along with Putonghua. Room and board, traditional Bai costumes (which *da ban* wears while learning traditional dances), and most books are free for students. According to the principal, grades 1-3 remain bilingual but the higher the grade level the less Bai is used. While the first and second grade classes I observed incorporated Bai into the lesson plan, the third grade mathematics class I observed was conducted completely in Putonghua. The same was true of the fifth grade class, though the teacher did pause to explain the *yan* (speech) radical in Bai. He explained to me later that it was a difficult concept for the students that would be understood better if explained in Bai.

Whereas Sideng's economic well being seemed to be increasing the enrollment in secondary school for its children, Shilong's economic well being (or lack thereof) seemed to prevent children from reaching secondary and higher education. Shilong Elementary's principal estimates that 30-40% of the village children attend high school and 20% go on to college. It is important to note that this percentage has increased compared to before, and continues to increase, but still remains low compared to the estimate of Sideng students that continue on to secondary education. Before the formal creation of Shilong's bilingual education elementary school in 2002, students were taught in the same school

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<sup>43</sup> UNESCO. (2008).

building in the same way—Bai was used as a supplemental language to explain concepts in class. One of Shilong’s faculty members, Teacher Zhang<sup>44</sup>, told me that she attended high school but despite how much she enjoyed school, could not attend college. If she had the choice of course she’d like to go back, but her father got sick so she had no choice and could not go. In fact, she said, this is the case of many students in the village. It’s not that they choose not to continue school; it’s because of all sorts of things that I [as an outsider] would not understand.

While Shilong’s bilingual and multicultural education seems to be serving the Bai minority students of Shilong Village well, it is not a perfect system. All the children I talked to at Shilong Elementary told me that they enjoyed school very much, with the exception of one Bai child who said he didn’t like school. He told me that he had problems understanding class when he first arrived. I didn’t understand how that was possible, given that the whole point of bilingual education was to help him understand Putonghua. But it wasn’t Putonghua he had trouble understanding, he couldn’t understand Bai when he first arrived. It turned out that he was originally from the city of Dali<sup>45</sup> but moved back to Shilong in the third grade to live with his grandfather. The bilingual education system may be advantageous to the children of Shilong but it is not suited for everyone who is of the Bai minority. If you don’t already speak Bai, the bilingual education system may be just as confusing as the regular Chinese system.

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<sup>44</sup> Not to be confused with Little Zhang, mentioned earlier. Zhang is a common surname in Shilong.

<sup>45</sup> See previous section “Who Are the Bai?” for information on Dali.

In addition, minorities at these Bai minority schools are just as marginalized in the Bai bilingual school system, if not more. UNESCO suggests that “*if mixed groups are unavoidable, instruction should be in the language which gives the least hardship to the bulk of the pupils, and special help should be given those who do not speak the language of instruction*”<sup>46</sup>.” Yi and Lisu minority students attend both Sideng and Shilong Elementary School and, due to the great distance between their home villages and school, comprise the majority of students who live on campus.

Poverty hinders Bai students in these rural villages but is an even greater hindrance to the education of the Yi and Lisu children, who walk anywhere from 40 minutes to 4 hours to get to school. Children as young as 5 years old are sent away from home and are expected to live in school dormitories and sit for hours at a classroom desk, despite the fact that the first day of school is usually the first time many have ever sat at a desk. It is common for young students to cry at night and wet their beds. Young students need to learn to be independent, fast. Older siblings are usually quite responsible in taking care of their younger siblings, changing their clothes and comforting them, but teachers and yard supervisors have to take care of the rest. Furthermore, the food provided in the student cafeteria is not of the highest nutritional quality and many of the students I spoke to did not enjoy it. Community members in Sideng speculate that students who live on campus do worse than the locals partly because the student cafeterias do not offer the children enough protein to sustain them throughout the day. The case may be similar at Shilong, where the regular meal was rice and one side, usually a potato-based dish. Even though I am vegetarian and accustomed to a vegetarian diet, I found that it was a constant struggle

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<sup>46</sup> UNESCO. (2008).

to stay awake after lunch despite having had a full 9-10 hours of sleep the night before. I did not ask the boarding students about the difficulties of staying awake in class, though I suspect they may have had similar sleep issues as I witnessed a *xiao ban* student falling asleep during dinner around 6 P.M.

In addition to issues relating to poverty, Yi and Lisu students also have to adjust to additional language barriers. Teachers at Sideng Elementary told me that the children who had the greatest difficulty with classroom comprehension were those who lived in the mountains, the majority of which were Yi and Lisu. As with the case with Bai children, repetition and reinforcement were the solution for those who had difficulty in class, though according to teachers at Sideng Elementary, there are a few teachers and yard supervisors who are able to speak the Yi and Lisu language to help explain material in class. In addition, older Yi and Lisu students are expected to help the younger ones with any comprehension problems. Despite the extra help, a second grade teacher at Sideng Elementary told me that two of her students, both of the Lisu minority, don't understand anything at all. At Shilong Elementary, none of the faculty or staff speak Yi or Lisu. Instead, it is generally understood that the Yi or Lisu will learn Bai. There is no alternative. Teachers acknowledged that if the Yi and Lisu could not speak Bai, they could not learn Putonghua but when asked the solution for Yi and Lisu students who had Bai comprehension difficulties, teachers seemed to dismiss the idea, stating that Yi and Lisu children learned Bai very quickly in the village.

While the current situation in both Sideng and Shilong Village is not particularly ideal for the education of Yi and Lisu children, the minorities among the Bai minority, it is the best alternative China has for now. Bai children in Sideng and Shilong Village deal with educational hindrances due to poverty and have greater need for bilingual and multicultural education than Bai children in urban areas, such as Jianchuan. Despite the low percentage of Bai students that continue on to secondary education in Shilong, the bilingual and multicultural education provided at Shilong Elementary is helping increase the access to secondary education.

**Conclusion.** While China aims to improve the educational equality and living standard of minorities by enforcing the sole use of Putonghua in school, there is an important caveat to be considered in designing policies or initiatives to develop minority communities. There may be tensions between economic development goals—poverty alleviation, educational expansion, development of communications and transportation infrastructure, and even expansion of health care access—on the one hand, and maintaining cultural integrity, on the other. There may be vast differences of opinion about the priority attached to these different goals by global, national, and local stakeholders in particular development policies or projects. Communities in question should be consulted before the implementation of policies, as certain needs, such as the need for bilingual and multicultural education, varies by region.

Extremely high educational demands are made of learners from non-dominant language groups. People from the dominant group can easily remain monolingual in their home

language and succeed in mainstream schooling, since that schooling was designed for them. People from other language groups, however, are expected to undergo extra schooling to prepare themselves for mainstream education in their L2, and/or to drop the L1 after a short time to transition to L2 learning.

While data suggests that per capita there are a greater number of schools in the minority areas than compared with the Han areas, the proportion of minorities attending schools is still lower. While social class in China, as defined in the strict Marxist sense by the ownership of property, cannot be used as a means of categorizing individuals social divisions according to income and education level do persist. These differences contribute to the problems of low attendance, low retention, and low matriculation among the minorities in ways not unlike those in the West.

For example, obtaining an education is more difficult in rural areas where kids are needed to help with housework or farm work than in urban areas where one child has two parents and at least a few grandparents to look after them. Families in poor areas value immediate, rather than deferred, gratification, spending their income on food, clothing, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions and stereos rather than on books or other items beneficial to their children's education. Even if these parents value their children's education and wanted to help in their schoolwork, their lack of education qualifications will prevent them from doing so.



Furthermore, schools are the product of sedentary cultures but are novelties in many of these border regions. Even for minorities who are not nomadic, like the Yi or Lisu, attending school means abandoning their way of life, and sometimes even separating children from their families and communities. Furthermore, the school culture often seems irrelevant to the minorities. Some have never sat at a desk until their first day of school. The use of a uniform curriculum prepared in the capital of Beijing necessarily introduces a different, if not “alienating”, school culture within which many minorities find it hard to integrate. In the end, the minorities stay out of school. The dropout rate is high and those who remain do not do well academically. Few continue farther than they need to.

The failure to attain equality of education is not the same as failure to provide equal educational opportunities. True, there is much to be desired in improving the availability and quality of education, but the checkered records in the educational attainment of the different minorities shows that the problem is more complex. Here, as elsewhere, the achievement of educational equality is not a function of the availability of the schools alone but also rests on the culture and economy of the communities in which these opportunities are located. The minorities are not taking advantage of the opportunities provided, and to say so is not to blame them. Many minorities do not find the schools attractive. The physical facilities in these schools and the qualifications of the teachers are far from adequate. The government’s use of a uniform set of texts across the nation make attending school an irrelevant and sometimes traumatic experience.

China has introduced a more lenient university-admission policy and remedial programs to provide minorities with an advantage over Han students. Minority students are given financial aid in primary and secondary schools and further accommodation to their needs are made at the university level. They are admitted into university with a grade 30 points below the national requirement. In addition, remedial programs of one or two years are offered by some universities to prepare students for the regular programs. Such government measures do close the educational gap between the “privileged” minorities and the majority population, but they also accentuate the disparities among the minority groups, especially between those who succeed and those who don’t.

Because needs vary according to socioeconomic status across regions, bilingual and multicultural education is needed most for minority students in rural areas. Students in urban areas have greater access to resources and educational facilities and many speak Putonghua at home. However, students in rural areas must deal not only with issues relating to poverty but also with a school culture that is irrelevant to their lives. Bilingual and multicultural education reinforces the importance of minority culture and language and makes education more relevant for the minority students, and while it may not be the most ideal situation for the minorities at the minority schools, is the first step in increasing access to secondary education for minority students in rural areas.

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Yang Teacher (杨老师, Grade 1, Classroom 1), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 7, 2011.

Yang Teacher (杨老师, Grade 1, Classroom 2), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 7, 2011.

Li Teacher (李老师, Grade 2, Classroom 1), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 7, 2011.

A yi (阿姨, Audrey's host mom), Sideng Village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 7, 2011.

Two Bai girls (1<sup>st</sup> grade), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 7, 2011.

Li Teacher (李老师, Grade 4, Classroom 2), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 8, 2011.

Li Teacher (李老师, Grade 4, Classroom 1), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 8, 2011.

Yang Teacher (杨老师, Grade 6, Classroom 1), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 8, 2011.

Zhang Teacher (张老师, Grade 6, Classroom 3), Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 8, 2011.

Yang Uncle (杨叔叔, host dad), Sideng Village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 9, 2011.

Group of small Bai boys, Sideng Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 9, 2011.

Four small Bai children, unknown village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 10, 2011.

Two Bai boys (6<sup>th</sup> grade), unknown village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 10, 2011.

A yi (阿姨, Frog's host mom), Sideng Village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 10, 2011.

Café waitress (16 years old), Sideng Village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 11, 2011.

Café waitress (22 years old), Sideng Village, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 11, 2011.

Principal of Shilong Elementary (张校长), interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 14-17, 2011.

Kindergarten Teacher, Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 15, 2011.

Elizabeth (founder of Shilong Elementary), interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 15, 2011.

Grade 3 Teacher, Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 15, 2011.

Two Yi boys (5<sup>th</sup> grade), Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 15, 2011.

Grade 1 Teacher, Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 16, 2011.

Zhang Teacher (张老师), Student Supervisor, Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 16, 2011.

Grade 5 Teacher, Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 16, 2011.

One Yi girl (da ban), Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 16, 2011.

One Bai boy (6<sup>th</sup> grade boy from Dali), Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 16, 2011.

One Yi girl (1<sup>st</sup> grade), Shilong Elementary, interview by Priscilla Hsu, November 16, 2011.

APPENDIX A – ITINERARY

06-Nov: Depart from group trip in Dali  
 06-Nov to 13-Nov: Observation in Sideng Village  
 14-Nov to 17-Nov: Observation in Shilong Village  
 18-Nov to 19-Nov: Observation in Jianchuan City  
 20-Nov to 23-Nov: Personal travel time through Shangrila, Deqin County, and Fei Lai Si  
 24-Nov to 05-Dec: Personal time in Dali City to write the ISP  
 05-Dec: Return to Kunming

APPENDIX B – BUDGET

6-Nov	taxi to bus stop	11
	bus to Jianchuang	34
	bus to Sideng	10
12-Nov	Gift to Shaxi Cultural Center	300
	homestay family	350
13-Nov	van to Shilong	50
	medicine	30
18-Nov	Gift to Shilong Elementary School	200
	van to Jianchuan	10
19-Nov	bus to Shangrila	53
20-Nov	bus to Deqin	67
	hotel room	50
21-Nov	taxi to Fei Lai Si	20
	hotel room	40
22-Nov	hotel room	40
23-Nov	van to Shangrila	80
	hotel room	30
	taxi to bus stop	10
24-Nov	bus to Dali	80
	taxi to hostel	10
	hostel	25
25-Nov	hostel	25
26-Nov	hostel	25
27-Nov	hostel	25
28-Nov	hostel	25
29-Nov	hostel	25
30-Nov	hostel	25
1-Dec	hostel	25
2-Dec	hostel	25
3-Dec	hostel	25
4-Dec	hostel	25
5-Dec	bus to Kunming	102

## APPENDIX C – CONTACTS

Zhang Su Hua (张校长) : 13529650265  
*Bai Bilingual School Principal*

Lei Mei Lun (Elizabeth): 15368895019  
Founder/Direction of Shilong Bilingual Elementary School

Yang Zhu Min: 13324943311  
*Office Director of Jianchuan Branch*  
Jianchuan Office: 4524520 (hours, 8:30-12, 1-5)

Sideng Village elementary school: 4721262

Yang Shu Shu: 15912253459  
*Sideng Village Host Dad*

## APPENDIX D – SUBJECTIVE ACCOUNT

It was only the third day and I couldn't wait to leave. “你很孤单吗？” “No, no, I'm used to it. It's just that I don't speak Bai so I don't have much to say.” I tried to reassure the yard supervisor at Shilong Elementary that I wasn't lonely but I was dying with impatience on the inside. For two years, I had slaved over Chinese textbooks, trying to learn this impossible language, and despite having gained some understanding of Putonghua, I was still sitting in this school in China, unable to understand any of the conversations going on around me. Ironically enough, you can speak Chinese in China and still feel like you're in a completely foreign country. Though all my Bai hosts were incredibly welcoming and warm, the two weeks I spent in Bai communities were a little frustrating due to the language barrier.

Overall, my experience went fairly smoothly. I did have some trouble trying to get people to open up to me about their schooling experience but the community at large received



me well. I actually think that people in the villages were much more hospitable and helpful than people in the cities. I did not encounter too much difficulty traveling from place to place but since I usually knew the name of the places I was trying to reach, how to say bus ticket and bus station, I was fairly confident with my Chinese. In China, it is fairly easy to get to the bus station without any idea of what the bus schedule is and get a ticket. What I found most helpful (and would recommend to future ISPers), is to learn as many food names as possible and to invest in an electronic English-Chinese dictionary. Other than that, a good sense of humor and an understanding that Chinese society sometimes will never make sense to an American, make the ISP period a great adventure.

For more information on the Bai-Chinese Project, a great resource for the NGO SIL East-Asia (an offshoot of SIL International) is their website, at [www.eastasiagroup.net](http://www.eastasiagroup.net). More about the Bai bilingual program can be read on their 2009 10-year report, found here: [http://www.eastasiagroup.net/sites/default/files/pdfs/10\\_year\\_eag\\_progress\\_report\\_in\\_english.pdf](http://www.eastasiagroup.net/sites/default/files/pdfs/10_year_eag_progress_report_in_english.pdf).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Students may want to explore the following topics in the future:

- The effect of *hanyu pinyin* on Chinese students learning English.
- The effectiveness of bilingual and multicultural education in helping urban minority students gain access to higher education.
- The effect of the one-child policy on children in the classroom.
- The difference in achievement and/or creativity of only children versus children who have siblings.
- The difference in the quality of education amongst different minority groups in Yunnan Province.
- A prominent scholar in this field, Professor Mette Hansen asked the key question: What knowledge of their own identity do ethnic minority students gain from their formal education? The answer to this question could potentially be a strong argument for bilingual education and cultural preservation.