Making space for reading
A study of rural reading rooms in Yunnan Province, PRC.

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Abstract

Title: Making space for reading. A study of rural reading rooms in Yunnan Province, PRC.

This thesis aims to explore the meanings behind rural reading rooms (*tushushi*) in Yunnan Province, PRC. Rural reading rooms are small libraries attached to the village Party compound in Chinese villages; for the past decade 600 000 reading rooms have been established in administrative villages in China, and now benefit more than 1 billion farmers in what is arguably the world's most important developing nation. These reading rooms could potentially provide reading- and information spaces in villages where these have been lacking. They could be described as a major development project carried out by the state in an attempt to modernise rural regions. Reading rooms are part of the attempt to build what is labelled "a new socialist countryside" in the PRC, a major national policy package designed to modernise rural regions that have been central to central state planning on rural regions since the 11th 5-year Plan was presented in 2006.

 This thesis aims to explore the relation between state policy and local reality in relation to reading rooms; to what extent are reading rooms part of local life, and how can we understand the functions of reading rooms? Are they just part of state blueprints for rural regions or do they carry communal value?

 The thesis is based on extensive fieldwork in Yunnan Province, and follows an ethnographic approach, where grounded theory has been used both during fieldwork and the writing process. Reading rooms have been positioned within governmentality theory as away of shedding light on the usage and meaning of educational spaces within villages; as state projects with ideological underpinnings that needs to be understood both in relation to the state, and local realities.

Master's thesis

Keywords ALM, Library- and Information Studies, reading rooms, the People's Republic of China, Yunnan Province, rural areas, New Socialist Countryside, development, grounded theory, the General Administration for Press and Printing, village politics, policy implementation, guerrilla fieldwork, governmentality, Michel Foucault, spatial planning.

Innehållsförteckning

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is about the uses and meanings behind state-sponsored rural libraries in Yunnan, a region located in the far south-western corner of the People's Republic of China (PRC). State operated rural libraries, what in Chinese is referred to as *tushushi* or *nongshuwu*, have been a priority in national rural policy since 2006, when plans to establish reading rooms in all administrative villages were announced. Reading rooms are now a feature of almost every single Chinese village: there are an estimated number of 600 499 reading rooms, at a cost of 18 billion *yuan*, benefiting more than a billion farmers (Liu & Li, 2008).[1]

The campaign to establish spaces for reading- and information in rural regions have aligned with general policy plans to modernise rural areas. Following the 2006 11th Five Year Plan, national policy on rural regions has emphasised restructuring and urbanising rural space. This political campaign, labelled Building a New Socialist Countryside, (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun)* is the most comprehensive rural reform program during the post-1978 reform era (Ahlers, 2014; Göbel, 2011, 2012; Thogersen, 2012; Looney, 2015). Plans for the reorganisation and modernisation of rural areas were laid out in a document called Zhongfa No.1, 2006, a government document that has been decisive to rural policy for the past decade (Chin.Gov, 2006). One important aspect of the New Countryside is the formation of a new type of well-educated peasantry with modern skills; as a result, educational- and cultural policy on rural regions has been improved and funding allocated in order to address the issue of rural children falling behind, particularly regions labelled as "poor" (*pinkun*) in the PRC (Ahlers, 2014; Carrillo, 2011; Harwood, 2013).[2] The establishment of reading rooms has been an intrinsic part of this campaign; reading rooms could be regarded as emblematic symbols of culture and education, part and parcel of the blueprint for the planning of new rural regions in China.

Rural Yunnan was long one of China's poorest and most peripheral areas. Modernity was a slow process, hampered by difficult terrain and historically rooted poverty (Harwood 2013). Today, improved infrastructure and the transnational bounds created by tourism, tea, and agricultural products have pulled parts of rural Yunnan into the national fold, but many places remain left behind. Establishing small library rooms for reading, books and information could potentially be a valuable asset in these communities; spaces for reading are scarce in most villages, and books often difficult to obtain. ICT-education and computer literacy are rarities despite being

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[1]   About 25 billion SEK.

[2]   Chin. Gov, 2006. This includes poor parts of rural Yunnan, especially counties designated as very poor, and in need of extra state support (*guojia fupin zhongdian xian*).(Harwood, 2013; Rogers, 2017).

crucial life strategies in the modern world, and education is still a luxury beyond the basic stages. Rural children are expected to carry out agricultural tasks in their free time, not read books. Homework is done in the street, at makeshift tables, or in cramped rural houses, accompanied by the family, the television, and the general chaotic noise of rural China.

Hence my interest in the formation of reading rooms in Yunnanese villages; I wanted to explore what a small library space could mean within the community, but also as a national project where local libraries relate to discourse on a modern, scientific and advanced countryside. Here, local libraries serve the function of a dual development project, where libraries on the one hand serve communal needs, and on the other, represent a notion of national modernity, markers of cultural advancement in poor, peripheral regions like rural Yunnan.

1.2 What is a reading room?

Reading rooms are small rooms for reading and information aimed at farmers in administrative villages. They should promote reading, education, and function as information centres. They are usually found in the village Party Headquarters, a compound at a central location in the village that houses administrative offices. The reading rooms will have a selection of books, magazine and audio-visual materials. Other equipment is different depending on village and provinces: in Yunnan, they are quite basic. In some locations they might provide ICT-resources, and sometimes social activities (Liu & Li, 2008).[3]

Reading rooms were first presented at a forum in 2006 called "The administration for Press and Publication in support of the New Countryside". At this forum, what is now the General Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Televison (*Guojia Xinwen Chuban Guangbo Dianying Dianshi Zongju*) outlined a plan for reading rooms (GAPP, 2007).[4] According to this, reading rooms should alleviate the skewed balance in access to information between urban and rural areas, and also promote reading. Earlier attempts to establish small libraries in rural regions in Gansu Province had been successful in meeting farmer's request for reading material, and formed models for the reading room program.

The Administration for Press and Publishing (henceforth GAPP) is still the main bureau in charge of reading room administration at national level. There is a subdivision responsible for reading rooms, called the *Zhongguo Nongjia Shuwu Bumen*, (ZGNJSW) the Chinese Rural Reading Room division. They issue guidelines on book management and general issues in relation to the everyday workings of reading rooms. They also maintain a webpage with stories on the success of local reading rooms across China.[5] Guidelines for reading rooms stipulate that they should

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[3]   www.zgnjsw.gov.cn (in Chinese).

[4]   In 2006, the State Bureau in charge of reading rooms in the PRC was called The Central Bureau for Press and Publication (CBPP). As of 2013, this bureau is called the General Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (GAPP), following a merger with the Film- and Broadcasting Bureau.

[5]   www.zgnjsw.gov.cn (in Chinese).

be about 20 square meters, have around 1000 books, 30 different magazines or publications and 100 audiovisual or electronic titles. However, this could vary from province to province. The cost for one library should be about 30 000 *yuan*. Most of this funding is central, some is provincial and some is private; donating to rural reading rooms is common, especially from publishers and bookstores (Liu & Li, 2008). There is no officially trained staff at the reading rooms; most are managed by local volunteers or administration staff at the lowest rung of the salary scale. It is up to the individual villages to provide space and other basic equipment, including allocating a manager.

In some locations, particularly Guangdong, Gansu, Beijing municipality, Jiangxi and Qinghai, various national, state sponsored projects related to ICT have been launched as part of the reading room project; however, these are often carried out on provincial government initiative, or launched in tandem with model reading rooms in key provinces. These include the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project, the Nationwide Modern Distance Education of rural cadres Project and the Rural Comprehensive Information Service Station (Liu & Li, 2008; Wei, 2013). The Cultural Sharing Project aimed to create access points in villages along with equipment to film, document and publish materials related to local culture. The Cadre Project aimed to use ICT as a means to educate rural cadres in technology, economy, and culture, whilst the information stations had a broader usage, and were not necessarily state run: a number of NGOs and private actors were allowed to participate as a means of educating the whole community in digitization and information seeking (Rui, 2013; Wei, 2013; Yu, 2013).

But, as we shall see, reading rooms have not been a resounding success in the Yunnanese villages covered in this paper, and national initiatives on ICT and education certainly have not reached the peripheral villages of rural, mountainous Yunnan. The gap between how reading spaces are imagined at the top-levels of the political hierarchy, local interpretation of policy, and general fiscal limitations have all been pivotal in the creation of what often turned out to be empty spaces, echo chambers with a padlock that speaks of divisions that run across literacy, education, digitalisation and economic performance.

1.3 Research aim

I will critically examine the meanings, actors, and structures behind reading rooms, and how we are to understand these spaces and their function at village level; the aim of this is to illuminate to what extent reading rooms are sites for reading- and education within the village. Ancillary to this, I will also examine why the central state have been financing and promoting reading rooms in rural areas, and to what extent we can understand reading rooms as part of planning on the new socialist countryside. From a broader LIS-perspective, the aim of the research is to understand how libraries are used in a rural, developmental context and how rural reading rooms align with state ideology on educating the population, similar to how public libraries in the West have been established in urban areas as institutions for state ideology and citizen formation. If, and to what extent, this project is successful will also be analysed. Rich ethnographical detail from fieldwork will form the backbone of my analysis, based around the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss &

Corbin, 2008). I will also engage with Foucault's concept of governmentality as a mode of analysing and illuminating the role of the actors instrumental in reading room formation.

1.4 Research questions

The two research questions will serve to illuminate the research aim by engaging with both the local and the national workings of reading rooms.

First, how are reading rooms situated within the village, and what are the factors affecting the role of reading rooms at local level? What functions, if any, do they fill within the village?

And second: why are reading rooms important to the Chinese state? How are we to understand the meaning behind the campaign on reading rooms as part of state policy- and planning of rural areas, and to what extent could reading rooms be understood as linked to state ideology on village modernisation?

1.5 Disposition

The thesis is divided into two sections. The first engages with the historical, methodological, and theoretical concerns informing the background and interpretation of reading rooms. I will provide an outline of previous research, the methodology and theories used, as well as central issues related to my fieldwork and material collection. In the second section I will provide a close examination of reading rooms in practice, as spaces situated in village life. These accounts will take the shape of an ethnographic narrative, a type of fieldwork stories, and serve to inform the analysis of a range of core categories, concepts and actors that are decisive to the how and why of my overarching research question: how are we to understand these spaces as part of state policy on rural areas?

2.1 Reading rooms in a LIS context: value of research to the field

This paper draws on research from a number of related fields, mainly modern Chinese Studies, a multidisciplinary field concerned with social, political and cultural transformation in modern China. Modern libraries and reading practices have not been of major concern within Chinese studies, but rural transformations and politics form important background to my research. From a LIS-perspective, my research aims to widen an often narrow, Western focus to include what libraries represent to policy-makers in a developmental context. Reading rooms are not traditional public libraries, but part of a major policy package aimed at modernising rural regions in what is arguably the world's most powerful developing country. What libraries and reading represent to the Chinese polity is an important issue for anyone interested in libraries as part of development, democratisation processes, and sites for state visions on education and reading.

LIS-scholars in China have little interest in these issues. Most LIS-research in China follows Western trends, and current research is focussed around metropolitan university libraries, electronic resources, digitalisation, scientific publishing, Open Access and search behaviours, as well as social media and Web 2.0. There are vast numbers of LIS-related publications; a general search on libraries and China in a database like LISTA will garner a plethora of articles on fairly specialised subjects - but rural areas, and especially reading rooms, are more or less missing. In China, libraries are often equal to the emblematic, image-laden super libraries such as the Guangzhou, Tianjin, Chongqing or Hangzhou public libraries, where enormous sums have been invested in creating an image of "culture" and "modernity" in urban areas. However, to most of the population, these places are out of reach. Few urban based scholars have paid much attention to the 60% of China that have little access to these resources. Hence this study aims to fill a gap in LIS-research by probing the landscape shadowed by digitalisation, social media, copy right and scientific publishing. What could libraries mean to residents in peripheral, poor, and undeveloped regions?

A few Chinese scholars working within the field of community informatics have increasingly begun to include rural areas and NGO activities in their research, as a way of shedding light on rural information needs, and rural ways of navigating the modern world of digital tools and ICT as part of everyday practices (Liu & Li, 2008; Rui, 2013; Williams, 2013; Yan, 2013; Yu, 2013). Some have made quantitative studies based on questions sheets and structured interviewing in order to gain an understanding of how reading rooms work in practice, at the communal level (Wei, 2013). However, most of this research is focussed around NGO-activity. Reading rooms are different due to their strong links to the state; rather than being a local

project they are part of state policy on rural modernisation, a national project following guidelines issued by the state.

In this sense, they differ from most other library projects in developing regions. The role of the state in reading room provision, and the impact of a wider framework of rural state-society relations, has largely been ignored. The state is viewed as a distant but positive agent, providing funding and sponsorship of ICT-programs and book donations (Liu & Li, 2008). To what extent this works in practice is missing. Prior studies also focus on pilot projects and model reading rooms, not on regular villages where no active efforts to promote reading rooms have been made. In this paper, the villages covered are all typical in the sense that there is a reading room, but no projects connected to the reading room, such as ICT-education or reading promotion.[6]

From an historical perspective, studies on early public libraries in the West and their role in installing national ideology and providing education in rural communities form an interesting parallel to research on local libraries and state presence in the PRC. The formation of public libraries in Sweden was a result of direct state funding, a policy that took its inception in 1912 (Frenander, 2012:17). This was linked to wider reformation of the educational system, and a perceived need to bring reading and culture to a wider segment of the population (Hansson, 1998, 2005; Frenander, 2012; Torstensson; 1996). The increased state presence in the public library sphere, especially in relation to increased state funding, led to what later came to be a wholly state sponsored sphere in Sweden, with no space for private actors. Dan Andersson's doctoral thesis regarding the formation of public libraries as a mode of discipline is a good description of this process (Andersson, 2009). According to Andersson, one effect of increased state presence within the public library sphere at the turn of the last century was the slow retreat of alternative actors, such as church and labour organisations which paved the way for the state as the sole actor in the formation of public libraries as social institutions (also Frenander, 2012: 17; Hansson, 1998; Torstensson, 1996).

In Andersson's thesis, a Foucauldian governmentality framework has been applied in order to demonstrate how public libraries have represented a sphere of discipline and ideological power, linked to state hegemonic discourse on social and cultural norms (Andersson, 2009). Hansson (1998) has likewise made the argument that libraries both past and present adhere to current political discourse, part of a hegemonic structure where libraries have by and large been an intrinsic part of how social and political trends have shifted.

Even more relevant to this paper is Laura Skouvig's work on constructing library users, and the establishment of national public libraries in Denmark as a mode of governmentality (Skouvig, 2004; 2007). Skouvig, like Andersson, uses a Foucauldian framework of discipline and power to describe how libraries conditioned the public to become ideal citizens. Modern Danish citizens were to be part of a classless, and hence stable national project, the foundations of which were education and reading.

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[6]   I have focussed on English language peer-reviewed sources published in international LIS-journals. In Chinese, there are more sources on reading rooms, but most are factual descriptions on of local reading rooms rather than critical research. These articles also do not pass my criteria of being peer-reviewed and published in international LIS-journals.

Libraries were important building blocks in this social process, and the formation of national public libraries, were, in Skouvig's analysis, part and parcel of this national project.

These studies, particularly Skouvig, all align with my own reading and understanding of the educational uses of rural reading rooms in the PRC. Reading rooms are linked to the national project of rebalancing the skewed relationship between urban and rural, peasants and urbanite, whilst also attempting to create what in Chinese is referred to as a "high quality" population (*gao suzhi*). However, there are also extreme differences between contemporary China and early 20th C Scandinavia. In Denmark, state support in favour of libraries also included training librarians, and libraries were important in accommodating the needs of workers from rural regions flowing into the cities, a group deemed to be in need of education and good reading habits (Skouvig, 2004; 2007). Conversely, the NSC, and the reading room project in the PRC in many ways attempts to find alternatives to migrant labour by urbanising the rural; peasants should remain peasants, albeit with skills to develop and modernise the countryside. Also, the Chinese urban public library sector is well-functioning and catering to urban publics in both massive hyperbolic projects (like the new libraries in megacities such as Guangzhou and Tianjin) and small town versions where the systems might lack the modern conveniences of Western counterparts, but still places that have been developed and maintained according to an American/Western model of early public libraries. The first Chinese public libraries arrived in the 1920s, run by missionaries who made sure to train domestic librarians (Lin, 1998). After the Cultural Revolution, when libraries fared badly, and were shut down, these were once again opened and are an intrinsic part of the social cultural landscape, past and present.

Hence reading rooms do not fill the same all-encompassing role; they are very small and limited by comparison, and there to cater to a rural population, that, in state visions, should remain rural: the type of books offered by reading rooms, and the division between the state bureau in charge of reading rooms (the GAPP), and the state bureau in charge of the urban public library sector (The Ministry of Culture, and provincial Culture Bureaus), serves to further underline this argument. However, the ideas put forward on libraries and citizen formation in the West by researchers like Skouvig, Hansson and Andersson, are still very suited to my project. Reading rooms share many common denominators with these studies on libraries as educational arenas, past and present, and research on reading rooms could make a contribution to the understanding of how and why modern states undertake these endeavours. According to this logic, the public library could be analysed according to governmentality theory, as a way of explaining the diversity of forces and knowledges involved in regulating the everyday, by the aid of institutions that have been "progressively elaborated, rationalized and centralized, in the form of, and under the auspices of, state institutions" (Foucault, 1982: 793).

I will expand on this in the analysis section of this paper: these ideas applied to reading rooms represent a travelling concept of the "library" as a site for citizen formation that has transgressed time and place.

2.2 Historical background to rural China 1978-2006

From a Chinese perspective, it is difficult to separate reading room formation from national political ideology on rural areas, and their role in the national modernisation project. Hence an understanding of, and background to, rural China is essential in order to understand how and why reading rooms are of interest to the contemporary Chinese state. The Chinese countryside is an issue of political contention that carries enormous weight in Chinese policy making. Rural issues are often treated as separate form urban politics and rural policy is handled by special research- and policy institutes that handle what is referred to as "rural problems"(*nongcun wenti*). Ever since the modernisation movement of the late 19th C, rural areas have been the target of ideological campaigns and attempts to organise according to urban, national standards (Duara, 1988, 1991; Harrison, 2000, 2005; Stapleton, 2000). For our purposes, the mass education movements of the 1920s and 1930s are interesting parallels: they aimed to produce an enlightened, educated peasantry by providing books and rural libraries (Merkel Hess, 2009). During the years of CCP rule, the mass literacy campaigns of the 1950s carry similar content (Petersen, 1997). The famous saying by Sun Yat-sen, whereby peasants are referred to as a "loose sheet of sand" (*yi pan san sha*) still holds true in urban China (Sun, 1927: 5). The well-being of rural China has always been linked to the well-being of the Chinese nation at large: a national polity that neglects the welfare of rural China has failed; both on an economical scale (peasants produce most of China's food) but also on a moral one. Helen Siu has put it thus: "peasants are a symbol of the life force of Chinese culture and polity. Their well-being justifies the power holders Mandate of Heaven; their abuse discredits it" (Siu, 1990: 12). Put in this context, reading rooms as part of the new countryside policy package do carry strong historical and ideological roots – the state as provider, but also as guiding hand and moralistic guide. The ongoing campaigns to stifle popular culture and religion that have been a characteristic feature throughout China's long modernity are an excellent example (Anagnost, 1984, 1985, 1994; Chau, 2006; Duara, 1991; Siu, 1989; Yang, 2004). Education and the transfer of "science" have been and still is an important ingredient in this process. Reading rooms are part and parcel of this attempt to control and regulate the cultural life of villages.

Starting in 1978, when Sichuan Province became the first province to enjoy the relative freedoms of the household responsibility system, rural areas have become increasingly embroiled in the capitalist economy. The term Village Inc. (Christiansen & Zhang, 1998) is a good way to describe the entrepreneurial, capitalist driven transformations of the past 40 years, resulting in intra-village competition and enforced self-reliance (Oi, 1990; Bernstein& Lü, 2004; Takeuchi, 2014). Economic performance is crucial to the life of Chinese villages, and often an overriding concern for village- and township cadres. In contrast to the Mao-years of communal experiments with production teams and collectivisation, the new system saw households as individual units to be taxed, hence creating financial burdens, especially to poor households. The new system also created problems with corruption and lax officials at lower levels of the administration; township and village governments have been infamous as bloated, ineffective and prone to power abuse (Göbel, 2010).

The Chinese *hukou* system which ties you to the place you were born (rural or urban) is a further obstacle to the freedom of the rural population; the massive influx of migrant workers to urban areas has made rural-urban politics more complicated. Migrant workers remain tied to their rural *hukou*, hence constituting a type of floating population (*liudong renkou*) that nonetheless remains crucial to the rural economy due to remittances and other types of links that remain strong (Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001).[7] In relation to my research, this group is important due to their vulnerability to outside demands on education, social- and cultural skills. Reading rooms aim to address this issue, by providing increased educational resources which might improve the chances of migrant workers and village entrepreneurs alike. How rural China has fared in the information age, and will fare in the future, is an important question.

Starting in the 1990s and culminating in the early 2000s, rural politics became a pressing issue to the Chinese state due to rural unrest, protest and the massive problem of migrant workers flooding urban areas due to financial difficulties. The term *sannong wenti*, or the three rural problems, was coined to describe the state of affairs in rural areas. A series of reforms were undertaken, the two most important being the Organic Law on Village Committes (*cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhi fa*) of 1998, and reform of the tax system. The Law on Village Committees stipulated that the Village Committee be elected in direct elections at the village level. Village elections increased the importance placed on local leaders and their performance and legitimacy in the village. However, the impact of this has been limited, and could be seen as an attempt to focus rural protest at the local level (Tan, 2010; Jacka & Wu, 2016). The Rural Tax and fee Reform, RTFR, *nongcun shuifei gaige*) changed all fees collected from households into one tax, that would be no more than 5% of total income (Göbel, 2011; Takeuchi, 2014). Simultaneously, this reform also placed more pressure on localities to be self-reliant.

The shift from central socialist era central funding to provincial and regional self-reliance also meant that village- and township administrations became overburdened with the tasks of providing basic healthcare and education with less income and no extra funding from central government, especially due to early RTFR experiments (Bernstein & Lü, 2004; Göbel, 2011). This created further tensions in relations peasants-cadres, making political legitimacy at the local level an endemic problem when describing Chinese politics. Local cadres at low levels of the administration have been described as shadowy, based around patronage, unaccountable, and thoroughly corrupt (Göbel, 2010). Local leaders have been described as crucial to successful policy implementation; the pressure on economic performance has been pivotal in establishing how and why policies are accepted, from "hard" beneficial to "soft" long-term (such as reading rooms).
Simultaneously it has also created an entrepreneurial willingness to experiment, making cadre innovation a prized asset in the Chinese polity (Ahlers, 2014; Edin, 2003; Teets, 2015). This last argument does have an effect on this study, but in a different way from what I presumed prior to fieldwork; reading rooms are not part of

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[7] The *hukou*-system has been under review, and new legislation put into affect as of 2014. This new legislation would allegedly make it easier to obtain urban *hukou*. However, this only applies to rural citizens who wish to obtain urban ID in their home region, especially in small towns. This aligns with NSC-policy on urban-rural linkages, but does not help rural people residing in major cities, particularly Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. (Branigan, 2014; Panda, 2014).

the sphere of "hard" policies that will garner benefits – rather, they represent a burden at local level.

The new rural politics of the 1980s and 1990s created wide gaps between provinces; the richest regions along the eastern seaboard managed to create successful rural regions early, whereas the poorest regions in China lagged even more.
Dirlik and Zhang made an argument in the late 1990s about the "spatial and temporal desynchronisation" of mainland China, i.e. an extreme uneven development where different historical junctures occur at uneven intervals. Dirlik and Zhang means that this type of development has created a postmodern society characterised by a national narrative where past and present have been compressed in layers of different time zones that co-exist simultaneously (Dirlik & Zhang, 1997:3). This is an apt way of describing the deep structural inequalities that still (20 years later) define life for many rural inhabitants, regardless if they stay in the village, or leave as migrants. This gap in the national narrative has led to cultural- and political aspirations that operate at different levels; in different time zones if you will. Reading rooms in rural Yunnan is but one example of policy that could be described as misguided, or rooted in urban aspirations. This background is important as it illustrates the gaps between rural and urban regions in China, and the economic pressure on localities. It also illustrates to what extent polices of the Building a new socialist countryside are different form earlier types of governance, and the expectations the state places on undeveloped regions.

2.3 The New Socialist Countryside.

The campaign to Build a New Socialist Countryside (NSC) was launched in 2005-06 by the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao leadership. It was arguably the first policy campaign where rural regions were put high on the agenda of national development; an attempt to shift focus from urban, developed, industrialised regions to the neglected countryside. In document no 1 of 2006, the main focus points for the new countryside are outlined (Chin.Gov, 2006). This document could be read as a blueprint for how cadres should act in accordance with government policy; for our purposes, paragraph 6 outlines policies pertaining to educating "a new peasant" (Ibid, §6). The NSC aims to restructure rural regions according to urban patterns; since 2012 the focus has been on rural-urban coordination, whereby rural and urban regions should align to similar development goals. There has also been emphasis placed on creating "beautiful" (*meili*) villages, an idea of harmonious, prettified living environments, sometimes linked to tourism and image-making (Ahlers, 2014; Rogers, 2017).

One of the most important policies of the NSC concerns funding of the countryside. Funds from urban regions (at town and provincial level) should be channelled into rural regions in order to lessen the gap in service provision and development.
There are also earmarked funds at central level: for example, government expenditure on rural areas and agriculture rose from 339.7 billion *yuan* in 2006 to 857.97 billion in 2010 (Ahlers, 2014: 35). This means that some of the economic strain has been lifted from county- and village governments, whilst also creating greater freedom in policy implementation. County- and township governments have also been allocated greater freedom in policy implementation according to local

particularities, following notions of local dependency paths; however, this seems to have created even more pressure on being "innovative" and entrepreneurial – failed cadres and villages suffer decreased funding and criticisms (Ahlers, 2014; Göbel, 2011; Rogers, 2014; Teets, 2015). It also appears that local leaders have got a tendency to spend on already fairly successful villages and counties, as opposed to those most in need, in order to heighten overall performance (Rogers, 2014). However, how local policy at village level is implemented is a decision made by the Village Committee: as we shall see, this has affected reading room provision.

The most important policy point concerns freeing arable land; a policy that in practice means redesigning village spatial plans by freeing land used for housing or animals. Ultimately, this policy aims to restructure traditional patterns of farming, creating larger and more efficient farms along Western models. In a province like Yunnan this would in essence mean a restructuring not only of farming, but of geography; China's mountainous provinces will have difficulties in complying, and long-standing traditions of farming, and bans on small plots of land used for subsistence farming would affect local communities deeply. However, at present NSC policy mostly aims to modernise existing patterns, such as making housing more efficient, and hygienic. NSC also puts emphasis on constructing infrastructure, creating employment and educational opportunities in rural regions, especially at the county level (*xian*). The NSC also includes policy on culture, and ideology, such as creating a "new type of peasant" (*xinxing nongmin*). The new peasant should be able to meet the demands of the new labour market, understand technology, and have a high level of cultural and scientific understanding (Chin. Gov, 2006§6). The peasantry should not engage in superstition, and bad traditions and habits should be transformed. This links in with well-established discourse on creating a "high-quality" population (*gao suzhi*) as opposed to the current "low-quality"(*di suzhi*), especially represented by peasant, and ethnic minorities. Further, one of the most important measures in relation to NSC-village modernisation is "digitization" of villages and the comprehensive provision of cable television and Internet access to all rural areas: due to cheap mobile phones and an explosion on 3G and 4G networks, mobile technology has reached a broad strata of the population, also in poor areas which will become evident in my fieldwork narrative .

2.4 Village administration
Villages carry little direct decision making power. They are the lowest administrative level in a top-down political system where the central state carries the most power, trickling down to provincial, regional and town level.
The level directly affecting villages is the township government, followed by regional and provincial authorities that carry out national policy-making.[8]
NSC policy aims to give greater freedom to villages, in the hope of producing better

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[8]   The Chinese state operates at five levels, from central state, to provincial (*sheng*), prefecture (*xian*), township/town (*xiang* or *zhen*), and village (*cun*). One level gives orders to the one directly below. The central state issues national laws and policy directives that provinces are expected to fulfil. They give directions to prefectural governments, who in their turn issue directives to counties in the district. The counties issue directions to the township level who directs villages.

results and greater involvement at village level, hence sidestepping the township (Ahlers, 2014; Looney, 2015). However, this has not always been successful, and in the case studies covered in this paper, all of the villages remained tied to township decisions on policy implementation.

Chinese administrative villages (*cun*) are governed by a village committee, the members of which are directly elected by villagers, selected from a number of Party approved candidates. The head of this committee, the Village Head, is the official top cadre of the village; in relation to this project Village Heads are important as having decision-making power in how to implement policy on reading rooms, and push local interest. There is also a Party Committee, which in practice hold more power than the village committee. For example, they nominate and approve candidates for the Village Committee, which means villages are saturated in Party-State ideology. However, as has been shown, many local leader straddle local and national interests, and often have fierce loyalty to local interests regardless of national policy (Ahlers, 2014; Göbel, 2010; Harwood, 2013; Oakes, 2005). Present day programs that seek to benefit local cadres who are swift and successful in policy implementation is one attempt to handle this (Teets, 2015).
This factor, the local and national balance that local leaders straddle is interesting for our purposes as reading rooms are part of a major national policy package that is expected to be implemented by local cadres. However, as we shall see, this only works to an extent. In addition to the official Village- and Party committees, there are various Party branches, such as the youth league (*gongqing tuan*) and the women's organisation (*fulian*). Other power brokers in Chinese villages include popular organisations (*minjian zuzhi*), often based around lineage or business interest, depending on individual villages.

2.5 Yunnan Province: the ethnic factor.

Yunnan Province lies in China's far southwest, bordering Tibet, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. It is mountainous and extraordinarily rich in biodiversity; some of the world's most valuable ecosystems are located in the region.
Due to its peripheral border location, and difficult terrain, Yunnan has long been one of China's least developed and poorest provinces. Tea, coffee, tobacco and mining as well as exotic plants, fruits and tourism have helped lifting whole regions out of absolute poverty. However, poverty remains an issue, not least in some of the most ethnically rich regions, especially in border regions such as Dehong, Nujiang, and Lincang.

The province is characterised by ethnic diversity; 33% of the population belong to a group different from that of the majority Han-Chinese.[9] There are 25 different ethnic groups (*shaoshu minzu*) represented in Yunnan, from a national total of 56. Most of these reside in rural areas, and they dominate the poorer parts of Yunnan; the mountainous, difficult communities on the margins. Many speak Mandarin Chinese as a second language, and illiteracy rates are higher than in the rest of the PRC (Harwood, 2013). This ethnic richness has long been Yunnan's label in the Chinese

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[9] Ethnic minorities make up about 33% of Yunnan's population of 45 million. Most minorities belong to the 30 million rural (*cunxiang*) residents (Yunnan Province Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

world, from condemnation of ethnic practices during Maoist-rule, to ideas of the exotic other as portrayed in art and films of the 1980s and 1990s (Gladney, 1991; Schein, 2000). Since the late 1990s, ethnicity has been used to promote Yunnan as a destination region (Chao, 2012; Litzinger, 2004; Kolås, 2008). Most of these 25 ethnic labels hide a complex reality; during the 1950s, following the establishment of the People's Republic, a national project of ethnic classification was carried out, the consequences of which were the creation of 56 ethnic labels, wide umbrella terms that hid many small groups. (Mueggler, 2000; Mullaney, 2011). Today these labels have mostly been internalised by the ethnic groups themselves, but local and communal ideas on identity are sometimes stronger than official classification labels (Kaup, 2000; Mueggler, 2000).This is one of the most important things to bear in mind when carrying out fieldwork in Yunnan; ethnicity, culture and information are intricately linked, and how discourse on culture and knowledge is produced by the state informs ideas of local culture, i.e. ethnic belonging and ideas of self in relation to culture and education (e.g. Chao 2012; Harwood 2013; Liu 2013; Litzinger, 2004; Mueggler, 2000; Schein, 2000).

3.1 Methodology.

3.2 Grounded theory: fieldwork and theory as process

I have been following Charmaz (2006), and Corbin and Strauss' (2008) constructivist grounded theory both during fieldwork, and the writing process.

Grounded theory could be described as adopting an attitude of openness and imaginative thinking in relation to what happens during the fieldwork process; the absence of prior theoretical frameworks and assumptions. Grounded theory is not intended to answer a specific question or to validate an existing hypothesis. Instead, it allows the researcher to "enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 16). Grounded theory was originally constructed as a means of gathering and analysing data in situations where few established methodological frameworks where suitable, such as research based around qualitative interviewing on individual experiences of for instance disease and pain. It has been widely used in studies on nursing and patients. Ethnographic, fieldwork based research is well-suited to grounded theory as it lends freedom to the researcher, as well as a constructivist framework for analysing data according to relevance.

Charmaz (2006) makes use of several stages in data collection and analysis where interviews are coded according to topical blocks that are later refined and extracted of deeper significance. This approach is well-suited to ethnographic research based around qualitative, semi-structured interviewing. It is constructive in establishing a framework for how to analyse interviews and see deeper structures. These characteristics make grounded theory suitable for research where little knowledge or no empirical study is available. In the case of reading rooms, this process turned out to be fruitful due to its open-endedness: little research has been carried out, especially of the ethnographical type where semi-structured interviews and observations are important methods. The researcher is allowed to remain open during the fieldwork process, without falling prey to, or be hampered by, prior assumptions or theoretical frameworks. Data analysis was implemented simultaneously with data collection and adhered to grounded theory principles (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It was an interwoven process, meaning that data collection and data analysis informed one another. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), this concurrence allows for "theoretical sampling on the basis of emerging concepts" (ibid: 46).

These concepts later form what is referred to as categories, high level concepts that are deemed to be of central relevance to the research. Core categories represent the main themes in the research, and form the basis of analysis.

Data analysis started right after the first interview, and informed later interviews, building on findings and constructing concepts. A constant comparison technique was employed during transcriptions and write-up of interviews, followed by what Charmaz (2006) refers to as memo-writing, i.e. quick note-taking and brainstorming to generate ideas and early theory formation based around the emerging categories. At a later stage, interviews were undertaken once more, to confirm categories and core concepts that transpired during interviewing and memo-writing. This stage, what is referred to as gathering "deep data", inspired the core concepts that were used for analysing the key actors in reading room formation, informing the final analysis of the meaning of reading rooms.

Grounded theory principles were hence instrumental to an open-ended, imaginative fieldwork process, and helped in constructing dynamic answers to the problem concerned, where a number of actors and actions were taken into account.

3.3 Comparative approach and fieldwork

I adopted a multi-site, comparative approach. This decision was made according to grounded theory: my early research experiences made me broaden the selection criteria. Initially I wanted to do an ethnographic study of one or two reading rooms and their communal value: however, this was not how reading rooms worked. Instead I choose to use case studies from a variety of villages in the same region, with different problems and ethno-social makeup. Factors such as ethnicity, economic performance, and location could potentially make a difference to how and why reading rooms were used.

A comparative approach is also useful when deploying grounded theory, as a way of defining categories and concepts (actors). In order to establish categories and concepts, a large number of cases has to be analysed, but not so many that the qualitative, constructivist framework of grounded theory is diluted into pure quantitative comparison (which is the case with most prior research on reading rooms). It was important to leave time for more in-depth interviewing, return visits to villages, and ethnographic observation.

I also made use of socio-spatial, visual observation where the physical environment of the library and the neighbourhood (village) served as an important material in order to describe place, people, and the weave of everyday life that makes up the community interacting with, and negotiating reading, culture and the reading room as part of the village as a place (Emmison & Smith, 2004). Hence this is not a study confined to reading room usage, where questionnaires could have been used. It is an attempt to delineate the actors crucial in how and why reading rooms have been constructed, and how we can understand policy on reading rooms from a state perspective.

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The research was based on fieldwork in Yunnan Province from late January to mid-April 2017. I visited a total of 15 villages, with longer stays in 3 of the villages, all in the same region. All visits formed important material for understanding and analysing, but the villages covered in the section "Village stories" were deemed to be representative for the research at large and hence included as examples. Other villages have been important for my overall understanding, and have been used in my first round of data analysis but no follow-up visits were made.

The first stage of fieldwork was carried out in a very intensive way during four weeks in January and February. This was followed by a slower period when data analysis and memo-writing took place. The later period of fieldwork, from mid-March to mid-April, was slower, but also designed to confirm and deepen my initial data: this period allowed me to go back and do follow-up visits to confirm findings and analysis.[10]

3.4 Guerrilla fieldwork as method

I started my fieldwork without proper introductions, and no clear strategy. This followed grounded theory closely, the openness, and absence of prior assumptions. What I knew of reading rooms was based on second-hand readings, and media rapports. I had seen them when visiting Chinese villages but they had never figured in an active way. However, when the opportunity came to carry out library related fieldwork in China, they were the first thing to cross my mind. An interest in contemporary Chinese rural politics, paired with an interest in libraries as spaces for reading, individuality formation, and as arenas for communal development, made me see these spaces as experimental sites for reading promotion, information, and development. However, I also suspected that they might be a chimera; that these spaces aligned themselves with national political discourse on rural issues, and lacked local meaning and anchorage.

The background research I had engaged with prior to going to Yunnan was focussed on users, and equipment. The researchers all relied on introductions, and the co-operation of local officials, and most of their research was based around quantitative research strategies such as questionnaires (e.g. Wei, 2013; Yu, 2013). This will garner a certain type of results, mostly to do with usage. The studies also carried what could be described as an optimistic tone, in line with government discourse, and hence were devoid of criticism or deeper analysis (e.g. Li & Liu, 2008; Wei, 2013; Yu, 2013). No one included actors that were not directly connected to the reading room in the individual village, and none described the collections or physical space. Most of these studies are concerned with ICT-education, which means these studies are focussed on privileged, model reading rooms (ibid). In this study, not one of the 15 reading rooms covered had computers, or even a vague plan on how to provide basic ICT-skills at village level. I also knew that if I were to use my contacts I would go to villages that were "approved" of, where local officials would be aware of the purpose for my visit. This would hamper my results, as pre-preparations might have been made. Edin and Thogersen (2006) have pointed to how (lack of) access, and the presence of the Party-State are the two things you need

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[10] For research questions, see appendix 1.

to prepare for, and be aware of, when conducting fieldwork in China: it is crucial to consider both issues, and they will appear in my narrative, ethnographic account of case studies. With this background, I decided to engage in what I refer to as "guerrilla fieldwork" a phrase I have borrowed form Thomas Gold's very early (1980s) research on individual entrepreneurs (*getihu*) in urban China (Gold, 1989: 180, also Gamble (2005), Takeuchi (2014), and Unger (2014). Gold describes guerrilla interviewing as "unchaperoned, spontaneous but structured interviews" where notes are written up afterwards, and interviews undertaken when and where an opportunity presents itself (Gold, 1989: 180). Gold was hampered by lack of access, the need for certain permits, and research that was "designed" by higher officials. Instead, he went out in the streets, guerrilla interviewing. Following Gold's 1980s research, the phrase has appeared in other research using similar methods, particularly in ethnographic accounts. Dunfu Zhang (2015) used it for interviews with Chinese drivers of illegal taxis, as a way of being able to establish trust in an informal setting, in the taxi, at times drivers were comfortable to talk.

Takeuchi (2014) used it in when researching tax reform in Chinese villages to skirt official censoring and permits, combined with official interviews. Unger (2014) similarly used it in order to gather opinions amongst private urban vendors in situations and locations where being an official "researcher" might create a degree of mistrust. Jos Gamble (2005) used the tactic when researching transformations in urban Shanghai; riding buses, cycling and going to parties were all part of his hunt for empirical material, i.e., the voices of contemporary Shanghai.

It seems guerrilla interviewing, from its roots to the present has been mainly advocated by anthropologists working on China (as Gold himself is a sociologist researching China and Taiwan), especially in relation to urban a regions, particularly markets places and informal economies in transition. In rural areas, the same strategy is of course applicable; markets and street life are characteristic features of life in rural China and places where the researcher might carry out informal interviewing and networking. My own tactic, to pay informal, unannounced visits to reading rooms, is not classical guerrilla interviewing in the sense of going to markets and hanging out in the street, but it comes close, especially as much second-hand opinion on reading and information habits were gathered at market places within villages. In many ways, guerrilla interviewing follows a long-standing journalistic tradition of going outside, asking the concerned groups the things you want to ask, in a spontaneous way. In research, there is an ethic dilemma with guerrilla fieldwork as researchers need to make sure that the people being asked questions are aware of the purpose of the interviewing, and the way you might make use of it. This needs to be addressed during, and after the conversation. During fieldwork, my role and purpose for asking was always made clear, especially so since much material was gathered due to the curiosity my own person naturally fostered. Conversations in markets or restaurants would start off naturally, and I would steer them towards reading, information and the village reading room: here, I would make sure to make my purpose for visiting the village clear, and ask permission to use any information.

Guerrilla fieldwork is usually combined with other, official interviews or other types of data collection; it is a good way of amassing information, opinions, and making first tentative steps in establishing relations in a village.

To me, it was crucial as a first step in gaining access to village leaders, just as it was to Thomas Gold in the 1980s when no permits were granted to gain access to the

burgeoning scene of a whole new urban informal Chinese economy. Gold skirted this problem by simply stepping outside, finding his own contacts in streets and markets around Beijing.

I did the same: helped by extensive prior knowledge of the region, I took the local bus, stayed in the local basic hotel and showed up at the reading room with no prior introductions. This in fact proved to be a very good tactic: I did get to see reading rooms for what they really are, in a variety of places.

3.5 Interviews and informants

In addition to guerrilla interviewing, I used a qualitative approach where semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials and local inhabitants.
Often the guerrilla method was an initial way of gaining access, but was later complemented by more official interviews that were agreed to in advance, especially in relation to officials and managers. Arriving in a village, I would make a (semi)-official appointment with the reading room manager and Village Head. A set of open-ended, but pre-determined categories formed the core of my interviews, but open-endedness and space for unexpected answers and queries were quintessential, following the grounded theory framework: as my fieldwork involved extended stays in these places, I had the opportunity for follow-up interviews, and relied on the snowball effect to get access to interviewees. I interviewed the manager of the library (*guanli ren*) in all villages, and also the Village Head (*cun zhang*) and sometimes also other administrative staff such as the Village Secretary (*cun zhu ren*) and the manager of the local culture station (*wenhua zhan*). I made unofficial interviews with villagers in every village; about ten villagers were interviewed in a casual way in each village, sometimes more, sometimes less. In some cases I also interviewed higher ranking officials at township level, and the librarians at the city libraries in the regions concerned. I also made interviews with several private interest groups such as NGOs. I did not interview higher ranking officials in government administration, such as the Press- and Printing Administration, or the provincial Culture Bureau: gaining access proved difficult, and I were under both logistic, as well as time constraints that made this even more difficult. However, official policy on reading rooms is easily accessible, and the sort of questions I had would only be to confirm the content of policy; I am aware that there is a gap in this research but my overall analysis would most likely not be very different had I been able to get one or two interviews at this level. The interviews were sometimes recorded and transcribed, sometimes not: in some cases the interviewees did not agree to being recorded, in many cases interviewing were carried out in a spontaneous way on the spot, which made recording difficult (more on this under "Ethics"). In most cases I also took notes, and upon conclusion, following Charmaz's grounded theory (2006), I analysed interviews and engaged in memo-writing based around what transpired both during the interview and in relation to the village as a social space. I also did follow-up interviews, or what in grounded theory is referred to as "deep interviewing" in order to confirm core concepts and categories (ibid). My own (advanced) level of Mandarin Chinese was sufficient to ask the rather straightforward questions I had pre-formulated. Language is a problem in a Chinese context, and I would be a fool to think I grasp every nuance, or even near. Solinger (2006) makes an excellent point about the levels, variations and

immense linguistic complications the foreign researcher comes across: what does speaking Chinese really mean, especially in a minority rich setting in Yunnan? Schoenhals has put it:

> "Whereas Western universities, media, and government never would regard anyone with a reading ability in English of ten pages an hour as qualified to speak with authority on British politics, a similar standard does not yet apply to China and Chinese politics. Here even those who are functionally illiterate in Chinese may become authorities (Schoenhals, 1992: 6) "

This is still true, more than two decades later. Reporters and journalists often rely on assistance and interpreters, as do many researchers. Dialects are rarely mentioned despite being a major obstacle within China.

My own trump card is my consistent interest in Yunnan Province; I have been exposed to these dialects in the past, but this also makes me acutely aware of how Mandarin is usually a second, official language to most villagers. It might even be that my own university acquired version of Mandarin is, like villagers often say, more "standard" (*biaozhun*) than theirs. And in China, "standard" means carrying a certain type of linguistic power.

In rural China, natural curiosity is a marvellous way to forge ties within a village, and find a wide set of interviewees. Luigi Tomba makes a nice point about this when describing his first tentative steps doing fieldwork for his research on new political allegiances in Chinese neighbourhoods (Tomba, 2014: 2-3). Jakob Klein has pointed to the same thing when describing his fieldwork in Kunming on food safety and information (Klein, 2013: 379-80), and I have had the same experience – sitting down having some noodles or chatting with a fruit vendor can usually garner more information and contacts than any amount of "formal" networking: being invited for countless lunches and cups of tea was a fantastic way of talking about reading and village culture. This is where rural China makes for a fruitful research environment in a way that would be infinitely more difficult in Western, urban areas, where gaining access to people's space and time is not a given.

3.6 Ethics

Ethics in relation to rural China is complex as the researcher is often the subject of curiosity; how to establish legitimacy and trust in an environment that is characterised by mistrust of officials, and where foreigners are perceived of as state agents or tourists is tricky (Edin, 2006). In my experience, as mentioned in section 3. 4 on guerrilla interviewing, my own person would raise curiosity in its own right which is helpful, but also difficult as you need to make sure people you talk to understand your role, and purpose for asking questions. I always made sure to consider my own appearance, conduct, and role within the village, trying to maintain a balance between private conversations and research questions. My fieldwork area in Yunnan is characterised by ethnic multitude. Some groups, in very poor and underdeveloped regions, carry a stigma, an issue that will form an important part of my analysis. The ethnic issue in Yunnan means one needs to be very aware of the ethnic makeup of a region, and of interviewees. The same thing applies to poverty, which is sensitive, and could affect relations and interviews with both locals and

officials: looking good is important to local village leaders, where pressure on economic performance is great (Ahlers, 2014). I have also made the decision to keep interviewees anonymous, also in cases where this was not a request. When carrying out interviews I would always inform the interviewee of the purpose of the interview, and make sure that he/she consented to participating and being recorded. About half of the participants did not consent to being recorded, and some were not willing to be named. Hence I made the decision to keep all informants anonymous. Likewise, the villages in the thesis are not named by their proper names, nor have I specified the region even if certain geographical clues remain; however, Yunnan is a big province where many regions share similar borders, mountain ranges and issues. Keeping geographical clues like the Gaoligong Mountain or the Burmese border does not necessarily mean that anyone will be able to guess at individual villages. There is nothing about this research that is particularly sensitive or could damage anyone, nor do I have results that make anyone (say, at the level of village administration) look particularly bad. However, in a Chinese context where the state in many ways have a supervisory function and where individual leaders are assessed according to performance and successful policy implementation, I still believe that names of both people and places should be kept anonymous. This is especially true as I applied a rather untraditional method of fieldwork, where interviews have been approved but only in a spontaneous way; had I had proper research permits with prior official arrangements this might have been different, but my guerrilla methodology paired with grounded theory principles makes for an easy decision to protect interviewees, which also includes the individual villages where most if these people live and work.

To the extent that there is an implied criticism inherent in the way I describe the (mal)functions of reading rooms, these problems are structural and reside at state-level, not with individuals at village level.

4.1 Theoretical issues.

4.2 Governmentality

Governmentality is a phrase coined by Michel Foucault to describe the workings of modern governments. Governmentality could be described as the *mode* of governance, that is, the various strategies governments deploy in the making of political subjects; the methods and institutions instrumental in co-opting and appeasing the social body (Burchell, 1991; Dean, 2009; Foucault, 2009).

To Foucault, the rise of liberal democracies at the turn of the 18th C ushered in novel ways of constructing power and modes of political conduct (Foucault, 2009). Rather than the absolute power of sovereign states, modern states rely on regulation and control of the social body (Foucault, 1977, 2009). Foucault's definition of governmentality encompasses the techniques and procedures designed to govern the conduct of populations at every level, not just the administrative or legislative. Foucault's notion of governmentality has been one of the most influential theories affecting how we think about the relation between the state, power, and individuals; it is a lucid description of the everyday state apparatus that controls citizen conduct, aspirations, and self regulation.

The Foucauldian notion of "state" is not reduced to the government as a legislative council, a single policy package or individual state bureau but is rather, in Foucault's parlance, "a practice not a thing" (Foucault, 2009: 294). To Foucault, state power is equal to relations that crisscross all levels of society, what he refers to as a scheme of intelligibility for established institutions that traverse the social body; i.e. it is omnipresent but not absolute in its exercise of power (ibid). Foucault labels this *apparatus*, the institutions and practises that are pivotal to how power is exercised. This includes the concepts of disciplinary power and biopower, key concepts in governmentality theory, and to the functions of the apparatus. This apparatus is imbedded in all societal functions, e.g. it is the structural architecture of the state, or the elements of governance: prisons, hospitals, education and the policies and practices disseminated through and by these elements. Whilst being crucial in constructing discipline, the absence of sovereign or absolute power renders the idea of absolute (authoritarian) state power void; governmentality is a type of interplay where the state requires the *co-optation* of society at all levels. Here, it is important to stress how power to Foucault is never an absolute, but a complex process of co-optation and consensus between practices, institutions, and citizenry.

The closely linked concept of discursive practice goes some way towards describing this function. In discourse studies, discursive practice is what and how we talk about something, for instance sustainability as unequivocally "good" regardless of political

camp and means deployed, or exercise and health regimes as always desirable regardless of personal aptitude, or problem at hand (Torfing, 1999).These notions are part of the governmental apparatus, a co-optation of citizen conduct and desires that facilitates governance. We have internalised the notion of the healthy body, and green issues, issues that are deeply personal but have strong affect on the social body, and hence crucial to the governing apparatus. Staying healthy means less strain on health institutions, staying green will help smooth the path towards green governance and alternative solutions to energy, transportation and consumption. However, these examples also demonstrate the failure of governmentality and discourse to penetrate all social strata, and be wholly successful: health and green issues are both contested and protest against in personal conduct, and are in many ways tied to identity politics, and class, what Bourdieu once labelled "distinction" (Bourdieu, 1984).

Governmentality produces the same result, political legitimacy reached by an array of institutional practices and discourses. What Foucault refers to as "state" is this entanglement of actors that produce power. By reducing the idea of state to a dichotomy between state (as an institution) and society (as citizens) we miss the point. State here refers to how state discourse is reproduced within society, in the social body and its organisations. Governmentality is a way to describe these workings, hence it is a useful way of theoretically illuminating this study that is concerned with the state as found in various forms and guises, forming a network of actors that have all, in different ways, been pivotal to how and why rural culture and scientific advancement is of interest to the PRC state. What the state apparatus aspires to is a type of *disciplinary power*, training the actions of minds and bodies to behave in a certain, desired way (Foucault, 1977).

Foucault emphasizes that power is not discipline. Discipline is simply one way in which power can be exercised. Hence discipline is a mechanism of power which regulates the behaviour of individuals in the social body; examples of this function would include hospitals, schools, prisons and asylums. This regulation is done by a variety of strategies including organising space (architecture and planning), time (a schedule) and activities (modern examples might include promoting sustainability and green politics, banning smoking or enforcing exercise in workplaces). Disciplinary power is enforced with the aid of complex systems of surveillance, exemplified by the way Foucault famously made use of Jeremy Bentham's model for a prison, the Panopticon. The phrase *panopticism* refers to an all-seeing state that aims to supervise, control and regulate the everyday actions of the body politic by these various strategies (1977).

In relation to the PRC, governmentality theory has been widely used in order to explain the workings of the modern Chinese state, an authoritarian dictatorship where the state has retreated from the direct control of everyday life it exercised during the years of high socialism, but still a state that attempts to exercise complete control (Jeffries, 2009). The notion of governmentality is very applicable when describing the PRC and the various projects carried out by the modern Party-State. The processes described by Foucault, a disciplinary apparatus that relies on co-optation of the body politic is an extremely succinct way of describing how citizens are subjected to and made part of the national project by various programs aimed at

controlling desires, and conditioning conduct. The PRC is of course different from the liberal democracies described by Foucault, but the state in China has come to rely on similar measures as a way of legitimising and securing support (Jeffries, 2009).

Researchers from across the social sciences have used Foucault's concept to describe modes of governance in contemporary China and modes of governance. Some examples include birth control propaganda (Rofel, 1990; Farquhar & Zhang, 2005), prisons and punishments (Dutton, 1992), consumption patterns (Anagnost, 1997), housing (Bray, 2005), citizenship (Zhang, 2001; Tomba, 2014), religion (Yang, 2004), and personal desires (Rofel, 1990, Anagnost, 1997, Farquhar and Zhang, 2005).

For our purposes, the way governmentality could be, and to some extent has been used to describe the project of appeasing ethnic minorities is particularly interesting, as Yunnan is an ethnically diverse region. In Yunnan, controlling and regulating the life and aspirations of ethnic minorities as a means to integrate disparate groups in the national project has been crucial to political control (Chao, 2012, Liu, 2011, Litzinger, 2000, Schein, 2000). Liu (2011) has described the workings of the post-socialist state as an act of violence acted out by means of governing desire and aspirations to make the peoples of southwest China fit to participate in the national narrative. Erik Mueggler has described the workings of the state in southern Yunnan as a "spectral presence", a panoptic state internalised in the workings and memories of the everyday (Mueggler, 2000: 7). As we shall see, the notion of being ethnic, and what this entails and not, has been important in how reading rooms are understood and negotiated at local level.

4.3 Governmentality and spatial planning

One aspect of governmentality and disciplinary power is the control of space; the attempt to regulate social space by means of planning, a practice closely tied to modern nation-building (the widened boulevards of Paris, the Soviet squares, the attempt to raze old structures in Maoist China, the modernised LA-cityscape made for driving). The planning of social spaces and architectural structures is intimately tied to governmentality; Foucault has referred to this as the "panopticisms of the everyday", i.e. the minor but flawless devices constructed by the state to control, supervise and regulate citizen behaviour (Foucault, 1977: 223).

Foucault has made the point that we need to look at the genealogy of space in order to understand its disciplinary functions, that is, the blueprints and policies that underlie physical planning (Bray, 2005, Foucault, 1977). Conversely, by trying to look at places as spaces we also open up opportunities to see Foucault's point that disciplinary power is relational. At no time and in no place are power relations stable. This instability leaves room for resistance. This point is especially important when considering social space. Space is by its very nature dynamic, relational, and variable. Even though a space may be designed for a positive practice (such as reading rooms) the action that takes place within that space is not determined by its construction or intended use. Hence, spaces are, at any moment, alive with the potential for social interpretation and use.

Henri Lefebvre has likewise demonstrated how spatial production is a mode of governance; a project of governmentality where the state and its agents (planners, architects, engineers) make manifest the structural elements of the everyday, from cityscapes to rural libraries. Space, to Lefebvre, is not a passive container. Rather it is a site of struggle that is instrumental in producing political and social transformation, i.e., space is not just a factor of socio-economic conditions, but an active agent in shaping those conditions. Lefebvre saw space as a driving force behind the forces of capitalism and modernity, and demonstrated how space can have the power to affect communities and power relations (Lefebvre, 1991). According to this view, space and place are both powerful factors affecting ideas of identity and cultural belonging. Planning and architecture hold the power to profoundly affect society, as extensions, and entrenchments of political discourse. The surroundings and imagery of the everyday are in this sense ultimately manufactured by the state, not by everyday citizen action. They could be seen as extensions of state policy, and hence profound factors in shaping the desires, ambitions, and imaginations of the citizenry. To Lefebvre, (and Foucault), the genealogy of space is crucial in order to understand the meaning behind social spaces (such as the role of a library in the social setting of the village). Hence we need to look at the planning processes behind bureaucratic notions of idealised space; the idea of the perfect city, or the perfect village. How are policies realised in actual social space, and what was the planning process? (Lefebvre, 1991: 16-17; 90). To socially produce space means to articulate, during the process of planning, what is acceptable and desirable.

Lefebvre differed between three different types of produced space, and their functions. These leave openings for negotiating space; i.e. state planning and policy making is not absolute but could be challenged by alternative modes of spatial production at other levels. Hence, to Lefebvre, the meaning of space and place varies with context (Lefebvre, 1991).

The first of these is referred to as "spatial practices", where the state has to a great extent circumscribed individual spatial actions by the division of place into zones and regions; the second is "representations of space", i.e. the forms of knowledge that organises and represents space such as urban planning, and architecture. Similarly, to Foucault, planning is one of the devices used by the state in its attempt to regulate and discipline "the panopticisms of the every day" (Foucault, 1977: 223).The third is labelled "spaces of representation", the collective experience of space that informs social memory and has a communal function as counter-representation of state sponsored spatial actions. These spaces could be religious, mythical or hold other important local functions (Lefebvre, 1991: 36-40). This last type of spatial production challenges space as an arena of state control, and underline the idea of relational power. Space could also be produced within the community, by ordinary citizens. Hence the spatial narrative offered by the state and its agents could potentially be challenged by communally produced space. This is especially true of neighbourhoods, villages, and sacred places with locally anchored meanings.

Michel de Certeau makes an important distinction between place and space that is useful for understanding the process of village planning in China. Lefebvre and Foucault make similar distinctions, as has Edward Soja, but de Certeau is very clear in his division between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*). Place is static, "an

instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability" (1984: 117). For instance, the reading room in its physical presence is a place, as is the blueprint for the village. Space, however, is a social act, or what de Certeau refers to as practiced place (ibid). By walking in the street, going about daily errands, we transform places that are "geometrically defined by urban planning" into space (ibid: 117). de Certeau points to how planned places can never be transformed into social space simply by being *there*. Edward Soja (1989) argued that "the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translations, transformations, and experience" (1989: 118). He coined the term "spatiality" to capture the dynamic nature of space. Just as de Certeau's definition of space distinguished it from a stable notion of place, Soja's definition of spatiality disentangles notions of "naturalness" from material conditions of place and suggests that spatiality is a dynamic that affects our life experiences. Soja saw "an essential connection between spatiality and being" (ibid: 119). These spatial practices are both separate from, but also entangled with, practices of disciplinary power and are in fact, to de Certeau, what structures the determinant conditions of social life, or, as he puts it "the long poem of walking manipulates spatial organization" (de Certeau, 1984: 101).

5.1 Case studies: an ethnographic narrative

This section builds on ethnographic fieldwork stories, a narrative mode of analysing my results that will bring the social life of the villages into focus. The way of writing closely follows my fieldwork; an account of the fieldwork process through the villages. This provides necessary background to how reading rooms are situated at different levels, from state to local, and will serve to underline how reading rooms in rural Yunnan could be understood as a type of governmentality, both in terms of practices and content, and as a physical space within the village. I will give a close description of individual villages, the reading rooms, and the people, institutions and practices connected to their everyday functions. The fieldwork narrative has been chosen in order to demonstrate the workings of these categories in practice. Hence the rich ethnographic account that makes up the empirical backbone of the research will serve as a way of making translations to theoretical understandings, particularly how reading rooms are connected to spatial production as a mode of governance.

As I opted for an ethnographic narrative, I could only include a limited number of cases in the text, but all cases were important in constructing the categories for analysis, and my final understanding of how reading rooms work in practice, and what purpose they serve. The total number of case studies (15) was too large to be included, so some restrictive choices in relation to the narrative had to be made. Hence I decided to focus on representative cases. The case studies included in the narrative text are to some extent typical of 1, ethnic make-up 2, socio-economic performance, 3, location and 4, having been designed a "model" village or engaged actively in fulfilling NSC criteria on spatial planning. The 7 villages not covered were no less interesting, but would have provided little extra in terms of narrative interest, as a means of binding the reading room to village identity. Basing selection around what is "typical" is of course problematic; all the villages I visited are unique places with distinct identities. I have attempted to integrate all my data, from all the 15 villages, in the final analysis of factors affecting my research question: the village stories are a way of creating a narrative weave that brings the role of reading rooms in village life into a very tangible focus, not an attempt to engage in deep analysis of data, or theory.

I have chosen to leave the proper names of villages out of the text, and instead refer to each narrative as Case study 1, and so forth.
A list of all dates and interviews can be found in Appendix 2.

5.2 Fieldwork: introducing the region

The fieldwork region could be divided into sections dominated by the towering Gaoligong mountain range, and sections that are located in fertile plains, as well as pockets of pine forest. The Salween, or Mekong, makes its way through the region. The region is a major producer of coffee, tea, and other agricultural produce. It is a wide-stretched region that represents urban, semi-urban, and peripheral villages with a wide variety of ethnic groups as well as Han-dominated regions. Some regions are quite well-off due to successful agriculture, tourism and good infrastructure, whilst others remain left behind. This made for a good selection of case studies and a wide array of places to choose from. It is not the most visited region of Yunnan, but neither is it completely off the radar; foreign researchers and visitors are a rarity but not unheard of. Two of the villages covered in this project are located just on the border between the urban and the rural. This is also how Chinese policy makers and planners envision the future of rural areas; sites that straddle the urban and the rural and function as platforms between the two (He, 2015, Looney, 2015). The third village belongs to another, far more common category; a small, peripheral mountainous village located far from the prefectural capital. The fourth village is located in between mountains, plains and forest; it is a well-run, moderately well-off agricultural village not too far from urban districts, straddling an agricultural realm whilst also seeing the benefits of education. A brand new primary school has been constructed, making the village an educational hub for surrounding villages and hamlets. The fifth village belongs to the opposite side of the scale, a far-off village at the end of the road that has been labelled as "failed". Villages number 6, 7, and 8 are all located in the mountains, but have been successful in implementing NSC-policy on spatial planning. Villages 7 and 8 have been rewarded by extra funding, whereas Village 6 is attempting to keep up, whilst also developing tourism.

A note on statistics on local income and population:

All numbers in the narrative text is based on information provided by informants, usually the Village Head. These numbers have not been validated, with the exception of a few cases where I was able to find web pages with local statistics. However, as this was not always the case, I have decided to simply provide the oral information I received during interviews; these numbers have no major impact on my research, and comply with what is "normal" in this part of Yunnan, based on published statistics from the provincial bureau of statistics.[11] Also, as no names of villages/regions are provided due to anonymity, providing validated statistics would be difficult. Due to this reason, the statistics provided in this part of the paper are not listed in the bibliography.

5.3 Librarians: entering the reading room.

The first tentative step during fieldwork was an interview with staff at the prefectural City Library. This was my first interview, and one that also provided my first encounter with the world of reading rooms. It made me aware of how reading rooms operate according to a centre-periphery axis, whereby the centre forms the locus for

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[11] www.stats.yn.gov.cn. (in Chinese) [2017-05-25].

official translations, and the periphery is a static recipient. Librarians were important to this understanding in their role as intermediates, or transmitters, between levels of hierarchies. They were a group I initially deemed to be of little interest to my fieldwork, and this initial interview was mostly carried out due to general interest and curiosity. The involvement of local librarians was news to me; from readings and talks with my Kunming contacts, I had come to the understanding that the Culture Department, including librarians at prefectural level, is not involved in reading room management or activities. However, as librarians based in an urban enclave in what is predominantly a rural region, I assumed they might have an opinion and some understanding of the issues at stake. Following grounded theory and guerrilla fieldwork methods by definition means maintaining a sense of openness and curiosity in relation to the problem or issue at stake. Hence I presented myself at the local city library, and went away with information on not only management structures within the prefecture but also practical information on local reading rooms.

Reading rooms are not under the management of the public library, and at local level they often follow the directives of the local culture station (*wenhua zhan*). But reading rooms and public libraries are both part of the sphere that is governed by the Cultural Administration. Public library employees in China are hired by this administration, and follow guidelines issued by it: they are state employees, and adhere to state policy and guidelines on culture. Being hired by the Cultural Bureau includes responsibility for cultural affairs within the region, echoing the workings of state socialism. Jobs within this sector are sometimes the result of *guanxi* (private networks) rather than the outcome of training and career choices.

Of the seventeen employees at the City Library only two have undergone training in librarianship; they are also the librarians I am directed towards. They are both in their early forties, and have trained at Yunnan University in Kunming; however, both are born in the prefecture and have strong connections to the city.[12] The City Library is the major library in the region: there is a public library in a smaller city some three hours away. There is also a branch library in one of the city districts. The library is located in the "*sanguan*" area, a common district in most Chinese cities – san guan refers to the three "halls", in this case referring to library, museum and culture house. There are about 3000 patrons at the library that carries a limited amount of materials, confined to three quite small reading rooms with attached stacks.

Even if reading rooms are not part of the work at the library, the staff at the public library still carries a certain responsibility, even if this is limited to annual visits, and the allocation of books that are distributed to provinces from the Administration for Press and Printing (GAPP). These books are sent to the provincial Culture Department, who will distribute books to prefectures and districts. In this region, the books are sent to the local city library that will allocate the books to individual reading rooms. This is established procedure in this region, even if this might vary in different locations. The librarians describe their involvement as being of little value and without real impact; a certain involvement is expected from librarians at city- and prefectural level but only as distributors of materials. To them, reading rooms are an extra work task but one they have little power to affect. Reading rooms are managed

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[12] Interview, 29th Jan 2017.

by local leaders in everyday practice, and guidelines on books and usage are issued by the central state. They are just practical workers, assigned the rather boring job of going out to villages with books, and "support" the reading room. Like one male librarian puts it:

"If I go there once a year, nothing much will change. It does feel like a waste of time, but we have been told to go there with the books. Anyone could do it; they could send them with the mail".[13]

The librarians also express some concern that reading rooms do not function that well, due to lack of trained staff and especially due to the books that are distributed. They are seen as boring, and of little interest. According to library staff, there is a problem with the books being boring and of little interest. This is a shame, as reading spaces are lacking. Library staff with a rural background points to how they themselves would have appreciated having a reading room growing up, but the lack of interesting reading material hamper the usage and interest; however, they express hope that there will be a greater selection of books in the future, more interesting ones.

In general, the librarians I interviewed displayed negative feelings; to them, reading rooms are considered to be a policy decision that in practice is considered superfluous. When I return to the library at a much later stage of fieldwork, to do some follow-up interviewing, the fact that reading rooms are often closed seems like stating the obvious. Farmers do not read; there is no time: How could it be otherwise?[14] This, as we shall see, echoes the voices of village heads and rural inhabitants themselves, but is still an interesting thing to come from library staff. But library staff also displayed concern at the failure of reading rooms to reach a wider audience, and play a greater part in the social life of the village.

This first interview provided a dual understanding not only of the fluid organisation and interpretation of reading room provision, but also of the local reading room situation in my fieldwork area.

5.4 Village 1: the urban case. "Reading rooms are for studying, not for fun".[15]

The village is close to the city, so close it is hard to tell when the sprawling city ends and the rural areas begin. It is a prosperous village of newly constructed, impressive two-storey houses, built in traditional Yunnanese style, with courtyards and white-washed walls. Fruit orchards covered in plastic tents are everywhere. It is strawberry season, and along the road there are vendors every ten meters. The village party compound is deserted when I arrive, which is unusual; usually someone will sit in the administrative office in Chinese villages. It is afternoon, and the Spring Festival has just about ended. It seems all staff has gone home. The reading room is locked with no notice of opening hours. In the village I come across a group of local women and ask them about the reading room; they are all unsure as to whether there even is one

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[13] Librarian, Interview 29th Jan 2017.
[14] Interview 3rd April, 2017.
[15] Informant, Village 1, Jan 30th 2017.

in the village, but eventually they agree on the location, and the person in charge. They have never been there; if and when they read, they buy books. But mostly they watch television. One younger woman has a smart phone which she uses for gossip and celebrity news. "I like films a lot, and tv-series. You can find a lot of gossip like that on the net", she tells me. The older women, all in their fifties, do not know how to use a smart phone, or a computer. But, they all agree, my son does. But then it transpires that the sons are all elsewhere, one runs a pizza shop in Ruili, a couple does construction in Kunming, yet another is as far away as Guangdong Province.

The women help me find the Village Head, (*cunzhang*) and the manager (*guanli ren*) of the reading room. They unlock the room and allow me to examine the books, the borrower's ledge, and other equipment. It is clean, neat and well-organised. Good lightning, some chairs and a clean table. The ledge is kept in good order, handwritten by the manager. The books are mostly about agriculture, some about simple legal matters, a few easy read glossy novels, and a stack of children's books, of the cheap variety aimed at elementary and middle school. No picture books for younger children. Later, I will remember this reading room for its tidiness, and also the absence of political writings, at least not in an auspicious way. They are tucked away on the shelves, like any other book. The only books laid out are a few children's books. The walls are quite empty, apart from a calendar, a clock, and some floral prints.

At the home of the village head, a woman in her fifties, we have tea and snacks, and talk about the village, and the reading room. After half an hour or so, the manager appears. She is a female in her forties who is also in charge of some health clinic administration, and runs a small business with her husband.

The reading room has been in operation since 2011, and is open almost every day, for about four hours in the afternoon. The manager has been there from the start. They have no computers or other electronic equipment and have not participated in any state projects on ICT; in fact, the Village Head and the manager both seem surprised that I ask. They have never heard of it, but, as they put it, Yunnan as a province and this region in particular, are very "*lou*" places (backward) and no one will care much abut these things.[16] If they have computers in places like Beijing villages, or villages with "connections" that is to be expected – but here, in this part of Yunnan, people grow fruits and work the fields, and sometimes work in some small "*shengyi*" (business). Of course there is no money to invest in computers.

But, I say, this should be state funded, as part of state policy on ICT provision in villages. And once again:

"Well, in Beijing, perhaps".

And then they laugh, and start telling me that at least the township government really cares about the village, and I should come back next year when the new arts centre (*wenhua guan*) is finished.

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[16]   The phrase "*lou*" will appear frequently; it is an abbreviation of *louhou* which literally translates as "behind the times", i.e. hopelessly backward.

"The arts centre?" I ask.

"Well, the township decided to fund a new rural arts centre here in our village. There will probably be computers in there", the women reply.

So, I ask, is not the idea of the reading room and the arts centre quite similar?

"No, of course not", they assure me. The arts centre is for fun, it's for being together and dancing, and playing sports and music. The reading room is for studying.

This first case study demonstrate a range of important factors affecting reading room provision that became more evident as fieldwork progressed: the lack of interest and activities surrounding the reading room, the voluntary (or forced) nature of reading room management, the distribution and assortment of books on offer, and the detached attitude displayed by locals; reading rooms are spaces for studying, assigned by the (central) state. In contrast, the *local* government cares, as evidenced by the new arts centre. They will build a whole new building, for dancing and fun.
The arts centre incidentally happens to be planned for a patch of land just outside the administrative offices, opposite the reading room in a perfect illustration of the differences between a *place* assigned by the central state with the explicit purpose of educating the peasantry, and a *space* (to use de Certeau, 1984 and Soja, 1989) for real communal activity. This new arts centre might even have computers, according to my informants: this due to the fact that local government cares whereas Beijing just makes a plan for a boring reading room with educational works on agriculture.
The lack of ICT resources- and education in rural Yunnanese reading rooms is also a factor that became evident during this visit, and continued to be so in all locations all visited: in Yunnan, ICT is not part of what reading rooms do. State projects on ICT-education and provision of equipment work on a provincial basis, and Yunnan has not been targeted.[17]

5.5 Village 2: where do the books come from?
The next day I travel in the opposite direction, following the same stretch of urban sprawl to the south. This village is not far from the urban area of the prefectural capital, and is surrounded by the same fields covered in plastic as the village of the previous day. This village appears even less rural, with the highway rushing past not far from the village centre. It is also less prosperous: buildings are older, and have none of the gloss and sheen of the pretty, white-tiled but still traditional courtyard homes of Village 1. The party building is less modern, and the Village Head less welcoming, but at least the village administrative office is open and both the Village Head and the village Secretary (*cun zhu ren*) are sitting at a table, sipping tea and doing nothing much. However, despite the presence of two idle local bureaucrats, the reading room is locked in this village as well, and I start suspecting (correctly) that it might become a pattern. They seem surprised to hear that I am interested in rural reading rooms, but give their assent to talk to me when they hear that I have been

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[17]   It is the GAPP that sponsors these projects, and they work on provincial basis where certain provinces have been targeted as model or pilot provinces, such as Gansu and Jiangxi (Liu & Li 2008; Wei 2013).

introduced to the village by staff at the City Library. The librarians from the City Library will come to the village perhaps once a year, mostly to bring books. Last year they even held a small *huodong*, Chinese for "activity" which in theory could mean anything, but usually involves some speech, and some activity like dancing or singing. The librarians apparently gave some speeches, and introduced some of the new books before delivering them to the reading room manager. The secretary and Village Head claim to have little to do with the reading room, but are friendly enough, and willing to answer all my questions.

There is no ICT-equipment, but there is a computer in the Party Offices, and locals could use it, if they need to. But no training is provided. When I interview villagers later, they claim to have never used the reading room, or the computer. Two younger men carry smart phones, whereas a group of middle aged women say they prefer television, and only know how to make phone calls on a mobile, nothing else.

The manager of the reading room appears quite promptly when the Village Head gives him a call. He opens the reading room and invites me to have a look. He has been the manager for two years. Before that he was farming but now his son does most of the work in the fields, and he is available to do some *gongyi* (volunteer) work in the village. He claims to open the room most days, especially in the afternoons, and sometimes during the weekend; children will come to borrow, sometimes with the school. There are more books in the reading room, than in the local school, he claims. But, he continues, when the children get older they attend middle school in the nearby township, and have little time to come to the reading room. And most other people in the village do not care much about reading.

The books in this reading room mirror the ones from Village 1. Here though, there appears to be more scientific and agricultural materials, and some of it appears older.

I ask if he can choose which books to put out.

"No, it's the state (*guojia*), that will send the books", he states.

But, I ask, if they send new one every year, then surely you must take some away?

"Well, he says, there is a small storage space by the village temple, but mostly I keep the books in here".

How many books will you get each time, I ask?

"Not many, perhaps 100? It's a box that arrives", he replies.

From the City Library, I ask?

"Yes, or the township. But sometimes the township will take books away, they have a small library as well, but their books are not sent from the state. They need to buy them."

This is news to me; a visit to the township reveals a quite empty reading room attached to the arts centre, with a ramshackle bookcase and some titles that might or might not be reading room books. The manager at the arts centre deny that all the books are village reading room books, but do agree that some are.

He also claims that the village reading room and this reading room is more or less the same; the state delivers to both, and they "co-operate" (*hezuo*).[18] This was the only place I came across this practice: it might be that this was practice in this village, operating on a local scale, and working well in this place where the village and the township are located in a small area, at close distance: on the bus the village sand the township were so close that it was difficult to tell when on ended and the next started; a rural sprawl of villages linked to the township in a seamless string of buildings. Perhaps in cases like this, reading room activity and township culture stations might have natural and close linkages due to a spatial proximity that is rare as you move away from the semi-urban villages to the vast, widespread rural areas that make up most of Yunnan's geography.

The urban villages were my starting point, and were the most accessible villages, just a short bus ride away from the regional capital. They were located in places were alternative opportunities for reading exist, and were there are better schools for village children. In theory, villagers in Village 1 and 2 could go to the City Library, or the township arts centre. The rest of the case studies are of the more common, peripherally located village type where few alternatives exist, and where educational opportunities beyond primary school often entail boarding schools for rural children, and work for younger generations often entail becoming a migrant worker.

The remaining case studies were also villages were a high proportion belonged to an ethnic group other than the majority Han, which is a regular occurrence in Yunnan.

5.6 Village 3: The rural periphery

I leave the urban sprawl of semi-urbanised rural areas. The picture of what a reading room is, and could be, might become different with increased distance to the city proper. For outsiders with some responsibility or interests at stake, like involved librarians, villages located in rural, mountainous areas mean making an effort: it is not an easy 30-minute drive away from the city but requires a long trip and an overnight stay. The majority of villages in rural Yunnan are quite remote and located in areas far away from major cities. Village 3 is a very typical example of this: poverty is an issue, ethnic minorities dominate the 2800 people that reside in and around the village, and low education is an endemic problem.[19] These are all factors to consider, especially when analysing the meanings and uses of an educational library space.

Located several hours away from the major prefectural city on windy mountain roads in one of the poorer parts of Yunnan, in a region dominated by mountains and deep valleys, Village 3 is worlds apart from plastic sheeting, strawberry picking and urban

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[18] That village reading rooms and township arts centres would co-operate is not true; there is no policy in relation to reading rooms at township level, nor any central funding. This is handled at local level, by the Culture Bureau, and is part of township spending on culture.

[19] Number provided by Village Head, Village 3, Feb 6th 2017.

dust. In this village, like in many similar villages in Yunnan, poverty is visual. The village is run-down, the simple hotel very basic and people's livelihoods revolve around working the fields. I locate the reading room in one of the offices in the village headquarters. When I first arrive, the office is closed. There are a few people out in the courtyard, and in the administrative offices. The offices in this village are in much poorer quality than the ones in the urban villages. Everyone is friendly, if slightly wary of my interest in the reading room. This is the first time I perceive this wariness but it will happen again, in various ways. This is an important factor to consider when carrying out fieldwork in this type of region. My presence is not a regular, common occurrence, foreigners and researchers alike do not normally venture to these areas, and I do not carry an introduction, neither am I accompanied by a senior, Chinese researcher. I have decided to engage in this type of guerrilla fieldwork (see methodology section) with a very clear knowledge of the factors at stake, and the questions that will be asked.

I am aware that my strategy for carrying out research is not the most ordinary; and that by doing fieldwork this way I might be getting a certain kind of material, but could also easily be rebutted by local officials, and hence be denied access to other, equally important material, such as firsthand interviews, or even a visit to the reading room. I might also lack access to local documents and statistics – however, as some interviewees and researchers have advised me, this could never be taken for granted, regardless of who I am (Ahlers, 2014: 227). During one of my interviews with a person well-connected in bureaucratic and cultural administration circles in Yunnan, it transpires that false documents are *comme il faut*. In her experience, culture and arts related activities are treated with less weight and seriousness than matters pertaining to agriculture or village enterprises. Statistics on culture and arts could easily be manipulated, more so than other numbers and statistics on "hard" topics.

In relation to reading, and education, she claims that she has never been showed the real data by a local official in twenty years of working with these issues in Yunnan.[20] A couple of days prior to my interview, she made a visit to a village, and the Village Head and the secretary spoke in local dialect "should we show her the real numbers? Or the official ones?" at which she burst out laughing, making them lose face and creating a tense, embarrassed situation.[21] These experiences could be backed up by numerous other senior researchers with long experience of research in Chinese local governance.[22] With this background, guerrilla interviewing might give me the benefit of seeing the situation for myself; is the reading room open? What do locals think?

In Village 3, my straightforward explanation of writing a paper on reading rooms in rural areas is met with some amusement, but once the initial wariness dies down I am welcomed. A certain degree of trust is established; my purpose for coming might be

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[20] Interview, April 8th 2017. Anonymous informant with long experience of work in both public sector culture (including provincial administration of poverty alleviation and education) and NGOs, including reading- and library provision in poor villages in Qinghai, Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces.

[21] My informant is originally from northern China but has lived in Yunnan for long enough to be familiar with the regional dialects in the area she resides.

[22] Panel debate on research ethics and Chinese bureaucracy with Prof. Steven Harrell, Flemming Christiansen and Russell Harwood, Oslo, 10th Aug 2009.

strange but seems clear; opening up the village offices is not a problem. The Village Head invites me for dinner, and some of the other administrative staff tag along. They explain things about the village, trying hard to speak in standard Chinese. Reading is not a priority in this village. Here, farming and any small business that can raise local economic performance are priorities. I suggest that education could be a means towards this goal; especially in relation to ICT, and access to computers but also reading for pleasure; the habit of books, characters and thinking that is not forced, or part of examination requirements. "Yes", the Village Head agrees. "Maybe. But not here. This village is poor, and undeveloped, and no one would know how to make use of computer knowledge anyway. They would just look for entertainment, and anyhow, anyone who gets an education will never come back". "But of course", he adds, "as long as they have parents, they will make remittances, and this matters to the village; this money is important. But reading, he sighs, reading is of no use. To make money if you're from this place you need to be able to go outside to do labour, to *da gong*", which in Chinese translate as menial, hard jobs, like construction, factories or possibly various household chores, cleaning or waitressing in cities. A few lucky ones have managed to set up some small business, he tells me, and a few did attend higher education, but they seem to be struggling. The son of one of his close friends got a degree from Yunnan Normal University, but now he still works for an educational company that sells online courses and makes little money as his salary is based on sales performance.

The manager of the reading room takes me to see the collection after the meal is finished. The room is darker than, and not as modern, as the ones I've seen previously. The lightning is just a bulb, but then the manager says, he will always close before dark. If someone needs to read at night, they could just borrow the materials. There are about 700 books, some audiovisual materials, 10 magazines and newspapers, of which several are about agriculture, and some are Party publications. This is the first reading room where I spy piles of political speeches made by Xi Jinping. The collection of children's books seems identical to the ones I've seen, and all belong to the genre of the quite cheap books aimed at elementary school students in China. There are a few lighter novels, and agricultural and law/business related introductions. Some are on legislation, even on divorce and banking matters.
This is of course one important feature of reading rooms: providing guidance in matters like law and business in communities where prior knowledge is lacking. But with no help or guidance offered, the use of these materials remains limited.
In the borrower's ledge, most books are novels and children's books, at least judging from the titles. The manager affirms this. Most books are taken out by children and their parents, and sometimes a few light novels. He himself enjoys reading, especially the magazines.

I stay for a couple of days, talking to locals, and going back to the reading room. The staff at the Party headquarter appear slightly amused by my interest, but allow me to sit in the reading room to examine the books more closely, taking notes and interviewing the few people that stop by the Party compound. No one comes specifically to use the reading room, but a few stop by out of curiosity, to talk to the foreigner. This is helpful; most are happy to have an informal interview, and my understanding of both the village and the issues and problems confronting reading- and informational spaces in rural Yunnan increase.

Based on these informal conversations, and my interviews and talks with administrative staff in this friendly, but poor agricultural village, surrounded by green hills and steep mountains, I start thinking about the role of the state in presenting villages with reading spaces. Is the state a benevolent actor, pushing development or are these reading spaces about something else? How could this be understood? The questions for research that originally revolved around reading and information as communal practices start to take a different direction; are reading rooms just about providing a room, a place that demonstrates state presence and priorities in villages? Speeches by Xi Jinping and good methods for technically advanced agriculture seem to mirror state priorities on the new countryside, rather than promote reading and informational skills in poor regions.

5.7 Village 4: the good manager and the problem of illiteracy

Village 4 is located in an agricultural district located in a region at the foot of the high mountain ranges; agriculture here is easier than in mountainous Village 3 where much planting was done on steep hillsides. The village is not more than an hour away from the township, which is moderately well-off and very urban with both some lighter industry and a booming service economy due to tourism. There are 2400 people in the village, and surrounding village hamlets. Most people are farmers, young people leave as migrant workers. The village is not classified as poor and incomes per household average 3000/*yuan* annually.[23] Vicinity to an urban area, good roads, and fertile soil provides a stable base. Many people are of the Dai ethnic group, but the majority is Han. I arrive on the local bus, without an introduction, in line with guerrilla fieldwork, and the grounded theory approach of openness. All I know of the village at this stage is that there is a wooden bridge classified as cultural heritage at the prefectural level.

The reading room is located in the Party Offices, but is locked. The village secretary (*cun zhu ren*), a woman in her fifties, sits in the administrative offices, along with her husband. There is no one else present, but she is very welcoming and happy to show me the reading room. It's open during the afternoons, she claims, mainly for the children at the primary school across the street. If I had been there on an afternoon, during term time, maybe I would get a different impression (this is just as the Spring Festival draws to a close, not a holiday but still part of the almost month-long period when schools are closed and many people visit their home villages). The manager is busy with her second job, at the health station located just below the Party Offices. Everybody knows she has dual responsibilities in the village, and if they need her at the reading room, they will call her.

The reading room is bright, and well organised with good lightning, chairs and a clean table. The books are arranged in neat rows, and are classified according to topic, hand written signs on top of each shelf with sections like "*wenxue*" (humanities) "*xiao shou*" (novels) "*nongye*" (agriculture), "*kexue*" (science), and "*ertong*" (children's books). The same neatness is displayed in the borrower's ledge which is the same standard all reading rooms carry, issued by the GAPP.
In this ledge, the writing is clear, all dates meticulously registered along with

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[23] Statistics provided by Village Secretary in Village 4.

information on the patrons, and the price of books, in case something gets lost. This is one of the few reading rooms where all the instructions on how to handle and manage books issued by the ZNJSW have been followed. On the walls are calligraphy scrolls with phrases evoking the pleasure of reading, and the value of books, almost like any public library. There are more audio-visual materials, especially CD's for children, than I have seen previously. Magazines are in neat stacks, and newspapers put up on a proper newspaper stand.

The overall impression is good; it reminds me of the first reading room in Village 1, but with more personal care taken. I sit there for a while and look at the books, and take notes. The village secretary treats me to tea, and excuses the Village Head who is busy in the fields some way off. After having examined the room, I go to see the manager at the health station. The health station is far busier than the reading room; the manager is not a nurse, but carries out administrative tasks, and also some practical ones, like attaching a drip to a middle-aged woman with a fever. But she takes time to talk to me.

She has been the manager of the reading room from the start, in 2011. In addition to reading room activities, she has also set up *shujiao*, or book corners, in the new primary school. The village does have an attractive looking primary school, in a brand new building. The old one was deemed hazardous. The new one was funded by NSC-central funding, channelled out to villages via the township.[24] It has been in operation for a year and a half, and caters to children in the area. This makes the village into an educational hub for surrounding villages and hamlets. Children come travelling to attend this new school, and according to the manager, all the teachers are well-educated and produce above average results. They have even had an American English teacher who stayed for almost a year, the reading room manager tells me, with some pride. In the old school, the books were mainly educational, but now there have been campaigns to establish small corners with lighter reading materials to stimulate reading. In this village, the book corners were added as the local school was rebuilt.

"But", the manager says, "The children still come to the reading room occasionally, if they wish to take books home. The book corner books are just for reading at recess, or as part of lessons".

She is one of the few managers who seem to take an interest. She is in her fifties, and had her education cut short due to the excesses of the socialist, revolutionary regime. Later in life she has attended night classes when she did migrant labour in Guangdong Province. She returned to the village in 2010, to care for elderly parents, and due to her own failing health that made life in the South difficult. She was assigned the voluntary (*gongyi*) task of managing the reading room, and later that of the health clinic. She cares a great deal about these assignments; reading rooms to her are a hopeful sign that life in rural areas could improve, on every level.

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[24] Information provided by the village secretary and reading room manager, Village 4.

She explains: "Education is crucial to modernisation of rural areas. In our village, many women are illiterate, and this prevents them from doing so many things. Like being better at agriculture, and understanding law and money".

I ask if she thinks the books that are donated to reading rooms are the sort of books people in the village need, and want.

She replies: "They are scientific books, and people need to know about these things. But maybe the interest is low".

Later, I interview villagers. A group of women in Dai-style clothes sit next to a field, beside the road, and wave me over. I ask them abut reading. No one has ever been to the reading room. They never read. When I ask why they start laughing, not at all embarrassed, but in a very direct way state what should be obvious: we do not know how to. "But the cell phone", I ask. "What about the cell phone?" And they laugh. They know how to find films to watch, and some music, and how to make calls. This requires little reading knowledge; icons will guide you. And, one woman adds, "Entertainment is what is important when you work in the fields all day. You need to relax, not study".

Village 4 was one of the few villages where the reading room seemed to fill a function, especially to the children in the nearby school. The manager was one of the few who seemed to take an interest, and see the practical use of a village reading space. She demonstrates the role of an active manager, the need for a personal care and attendance if reading promotion in villages (or elsewhere) are to be successful. However, like she herself claims, and the women I interviewed in the village, if illiteracy is a problem, than what use is reading promotion?

In ethnically rich villages, illiteracy is often widespread amongst older generation, but also younger ones. Literacy rates in the PRC are high, around 96% according to the 2010 population census, and 99% according to UNESCO in 2015 (Chin. Gov, 2011, UNESCO, 2015). Literacy campaigns were an important feature of CCP policy when they established the contemporary Party-State in the 1950s, and have continued to be so (Petersen 1997). Ethnic regions have the lowest literacy rates, often due to Mandarin being a second language (Harwood, 2013, Liu, 2015). In Yunnan, around 6% are deemed to be illiterate (Chin. Gov, 2011). This is quite a high rate compared to urban areas; Beijing and other urban municipalities have rates around 1%. However, "literate" in the PRC is equal to knowledge of 2000 characters which is about middle school level reading ability (Petersen, 1997). An average high school graduate would know about 4-5000 characters. Urban, highly educated Chinese are estimated as having about 8000 characters at their disposal which points to the wide gap that exists between expectations and capacity for reading and participation in social and political life. Rural, ethnic groups simply operate a different universe; the way reading rooms have been designed and planned are an intrinsic feature of this top-down process whereby urban elites carry education and culture. The fact that rural reading rooms are operated by the GAPP through a system of book donations from publishers is quite telling of how rural villagers are deemed according to a whole different scale, with different needs than that of educated urbanites: "literate" in a rural context is equal to the reading skills of a child.

Tzu-kai Liu (2015) has researched social media practices amongst young migrant workers of the Wa ethnic group from Lincang prefecture in Yunnan, and pointed to how their inadequateness in written Chinese often create errors in usage of social media applications like WeChat, QQ, or Sina Weibo. Many schools in ethnic parts of Yunnan where young people have another first language (e.g. Wa or Dai in Yunnan, both languages with their own written alphabet) will teach transcribed versions of Mandarin, using the *pinyin*-alphabet to teach Chinese rather than pure characters.

In the case of the Wa, the lack of writing skills in Chinese has created a bubble-like community where language is decisive to networking and hence job opportunities outside the village. To many young Wa, this means their network consists of other Wa, and often lead to lowly paid jobs and a stigma of deeply seated backwardness, even compared to other ethnic groups (Liu, 2015). This, the continued idea of being ethnic, and how this impacts on self-perception in relation to reading, turned out to be a very stubborn strand in my data, clinging to statements, and colouring local notions of the reading room. To most villagers, reading rooms seemed to be yet another state-sponsored project aimed at appeasing, integrating and regulating ethnic regions in Yunnan, just as was pointed out in the introduction. Liu Shao-hua (2011) and her notion of bipolar trajectories of modernity whereby mainstream China follows one straight line and ethnic areas another, with the state constantly monitoring ethnic aspirations and desires, is useful for illustrating this. In many ethnic areas this has created a mistrust if the state, but also a notion of self as being ethnic, i.e. different from the Han, and hence not as capable. By creating a reading space in a poor, to some extent illiterate, village and donate books that illustrate central state priorities, the state engages in a mode of governance. According to this, reading rooms are places with the specific task of *educating*, rather than to involve and engage the community in reading- and information skills. This will result in a detached attitude, and a skirting of the official space as it carries little relevance. An involved manager, like in Village 4, could make a difference. But in the villages I visited she was more or less unique in her understanding of issues such as illiteracy, and that illiteracy is not linked to poverty, being a farmer or ethnic belonging *per se*. Many Village Heads and reading room managers, as well as villagers themselves echoed the women in Village 4: we are poor, and of ethnic origin, hence to stupid to understand these books. Better leave them alone; they belong to the realm of officialdom.

5.8 Village 5: the failed village.

In stark contrast to the rather prosperous and attractive Village 4, the next case study, Village 5, is a military outpost, at the end of a long dusty road. Behind the mountains looms Burma. Village 5 is what is referred to as a "failed" village. Being a failed village means you have not met the targets set up by the state. This could mean a number of things, from weak leadership to economic problems and environmental degradation. These have been targeted as special problems by the central state, and included in a reform program (Liu, 2012). In the case of Village 5, economic targets have not been met, and communal services have suffered; many households are labelled as "poor". For the purpose of this project, Village 5 no longer has a reading room, a tell tale sign of not meeting policy demands. Hence my interest in the village is an interest in how failure at other levels will effect reading room provision. Was this the reason the reading room closed down?

This village is also of strategic importance, as a military garrison, highly regulated with a strong state presence. At the same time it is also falling apart at the seams, with almost 1000 households falling below the poverty line of 2000 *yuan*/annually.[25] Many earn as little as 1500. Most people are Dai, or Burmese migrants, a shadowy group with no official registration who engages in day labour. "They come across the mountains at night. We try to stop this, but it's difficult", one of the young military police who arrives at my basic hotel to persuade me to go back to the city, tells me. We'd been discussing my purpose for coming to this village for an hour; he finds my interest in libraries to be extremely suspect. "Why don't you go to Heshun in Tengchong? There's a library", he tells me. "It's nicer".[26]

I'm surprised when he finally relaxes and mentions the Burma situation that has made imprints on life in the village, both visually with a density of ethnic Burmese, and mentally, a certain cautiousness at the sight of a stranger. There is also a military presence that permeates daily life; it was striking as the bus approached the village, military cars and staff all over, Chinese flags displayed at every building, an unusual occurrence in the PRC.

At the Party headquarters I first meet the manager of the old reading room that closed down during the autumn. He is welcoming, affable, and happy to have a chat. During the interview he answers thoughtfully, and thinks about my questions. He speaks good standard Mandarin, and explains he used to work as a migrant worker in construction, "in four provinces! You need to speak Mandarin, or who would you talk to?" Later, he came back to the village. He didn't have the physical strength to do construction. Now, nearing his sixties, he has been the manager of the reading room for four years, since 2012 when the reading room was set up. After the reading room closed in the autumn of 2016 he has been working at the village clinic for birth planning. It appears that the closure is not so much due the village having immense poverty issues, but rather a shortage of space. The Party offices are cramped, and also house the clinic for birth planning. The old reading room office has been turned into storage, temporarily. "But", the manager assures me, "it will open in April". The closure is just because they had to use this room, for "more important" things. There was nothing to do, the situation was quite acute. What exactly is stored in there remains a secret; he does not have keys to the room, and perhaps is not sure himself. But he is sure that no one ever used the reading room. People in the village are too busy, and the books too boring.

"What kind of books were they?" I ask.

The manager frowns.

"Scientific".

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[25] Income statistics provided by former reading room manager, and a secretary at the village administrative headquarters in Village 5. I also saw handwritten statistics on poor households, their total income, and composition.

[26] Heshun is a village in Tengchong, Western Yunnan, popular with tourists for its well-maintained traditional architecture. It is also famous for an old, very beautiful library that was constructed by funds donated from overseas Chinese with roots in the village.

And what kind of books would people in the village like?

He retorts, once again repeating:

"They're busy, and when they're not busy, they watch television. No one cares much about reading here, just a lot of ethic Dai-people. But the books were still boring. They came from '*shangmian*'" (from up).

"The state?" I ask.

And he frowns again and says:

"It's all from top to bottom. In China all things come from the top to the bottom, and we are the bottom, he states. It's always like that; going through levels".

And he continues:

"We are at the bottom and the books are sent from the top. But sometimes we got some other books; the military gave us used books. We also got donations from a private organisation that sends books to poor villages – we put them in the reading room. The organisation thought that was ok, but they might not know how few people actually go there.[27] But then most people in this area live in small places, in hamlets (*zhaizi*) and not in the village, and sometimes these places are far away. That's another reason few people come here". But, (he looks slightly happier), "in X, (a hamlet nearby) they have a small culture centre (*wenhua zhan*). It's nice, and a lot of people go there. They have books too, and magazines and you can play sports."

"So", I ask, "is there a difference between an arts centre and a reading room? I mean, the idea is quite similar?"

The manager thinks about this:

"Yes, quite similar. The reading room could be like that, if the books were different, and there were more activities".

In Guangdong province he sometimes went to a communal arts centre where there was a reading room, and lots of activities that the village arranged, but, he claims, this is typical Guangdong. It was the village headman and the clan organisation that arranged these things.[28] Here, that would never work.

"Why?" I ask.

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[27] This echoes the story of another interviewee, an anonymous NGO-worker who works with private libraries in Yunnan. She asked the head of the local township where she has been active if the NGO could place some books in local village reading rooms, but the township head told her "better not. They might not get read". Instead, she was offered to put books in local schools and community centres, such as the culture station. Informant, 27rd Feb 2017.

[28] Research on reading rooms in Fujian and Guangdong Province adheres to this. However, some of this activity seems to be private/NGO-initiative. If this is everyday practice or demonstration is difficult to assess (Li & Liu 2008; Yu, 2013).

And he replies, repeating the earlier statement:

"No culture; too many ethnic minorities. They don't read, or understand cultural things anyway, and they don't know how to use a computer. Here, that sort of thing would just be a waste of time."

I choose to put down most of this conversation as it is very typical. Many of my interviews and conversations carried similar content. When transcribing and/or analysing my notes, the data that emerged was one of condensation, aimed at the own village and village population; a self-derogatory way of describing local life where the reading room and its activities formed the core of the conversation. In these conversations, the reading room was always associated with the centre, as in the state. In relation to this, the local life was on the periphery of national concerns, a way of describing local life that placed the reading room and its activities at the very opposite end of what village life is all about. Reading rooms thus became associated with the centre, the state and some notion of "Beijing" (or those not on the periphery, i.e. located in the midst of developed, educated, wealthy China).

This is very clear in relation to Village 5, and might form a mode of explaining the echoing emptiness of reading rooms, the non-spaces of government policy. Perhaps the failure of reading rooms to function is connected to the top-down implementation of reading room policy. To local leaders in villages in Yunnan, they are not anchored in village life, or even relevant. They are tied to the idea of the "centre"; not to the local periphery. My next interview, with the Village Head in Village 5, provided even more evidence in this direction.

I am to meet with the Village Head the day after my first, quite successful interview with the former manager. But rumour must have been spreading that the military came to see me. I have turned into an annoying, unwanted element and no one wants to talk to me. The manager that I interviewed yesterday looks away when he sees me enter the Party Office courtyard. The Village Head, a very small, rather old and quite dishevelled looking man wearing a military jacket and traditional Dai-trousers pretends he doesn't see me. Smokes a cigarette. Makes a phone call. Speaks in one the thickest local accents I have ever heard, which makes me unsure an interview will even be possible. But eventually he does talk. Very brusquely he informs me that:

"Yes, the room will open. In April. Happy now?"

And walks off, leaving the rest of the administrative staff flustered and embarrassed.

I leave, and interview some villagers, and the medical staff at the health clinic: no one cares much about reading, but one of the female doctors used to take books to her 5-year old son. It was good, there aren't so many other places you can get books here, she sighs. Later, the son of the Village Head comes up to me and smiles, and apologizes. Asks me to come back and sit for a while, and have some tea. I decline. But the visit gave some food for thought, especially in relation to poverty, failure, and what appears to be acute embarrassment when confronted with outsiders who ask questions about the village and its failures. On the wall in the Party Offices there as a huge whiteboard with the names of all the poverty (*pinkun*) household in the village,

their income per annum, and the names of the head of the household. A white board dedicated to poverty for all to see; a transparency of failure, and a chart of those on the economic periphery of the Chinese nation state. But also a board wanting to control; to regulate and keep poverty within the realm of the state as something that could thus be remedied and wiped away. When I asked the former reading room manager about this board, he said that this is policy, from the top.

"We need to do this, to make sure we meet targets, we need to know exactly who they are, and then we can help them."

"Help them how?" I ask.

"Oh, we try to give advice, and find employment, or help with improving their skills in agriculture. Sometimes they need other help."

Such as? "They might be old. Or have debt.

Village 5 might need a reading room, but there are other problems; failed policy implementation not only operates at a practical level, such as having or not having met state targets, or lacking adequate resources to operate a reading room according to acceptable standards. It also creates a sense of failure; an idea that the village do not measure up to standards. This is perhaps even more pronounced in a minority rich village like Village 5. Here, I sense embarrassment for the first time; having been labelled as not good enough by higher levels of government. This was reflected in the way I was received, the outside researcher asking undesirable questions that further served to underline the failures of the village.

This was also the one time guerrilla fieldwork seemed less like a good plan; I wish I had been better informed on the local situation in advance. The reading room in Village 5 is yet another state project that the village needs to implement, "from top-down", as the manager puts it. But the failure of the reading room further underlines the status of Village 5 as peripheral, undeveloped and less successful.

I will expand on this in the concluding case studies, where spatial planning practices, and local leadership attitudes to reading room policy will be linked to reading rooms as a type of governmentality; the production of a new countryside, and a new type of peasant as linked to reading rooms. These case studies will further demonstrate how reading room provision has been less than successful at the local level, making the top-down nature of reading rooms an instrumental component in why and how they fail.

5.9 Village 6: "We need to do some cleaning!"[29]
In order to better understand the workings and non-workings of reading rooms that we have touched upon thus far, I will make a closer study of three villages in the same region, belonging to the same township. Many of the issues that pertain to reading room provision in the other locations are evident in these villages, especially

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[29] Township leader, Village 6, Feb 13th 2017.

in relation to how reading rooms could be understood as a type of spatial- and cultural governmentality, linked to wider transformations of physical space within the village, and the provision of a state-sponsored place for a certain type of reading materials. In these villages, NSC-policy on transformation of space has been implemented in a stricter fashion, and hence reading rooms are more obviously linked to the physical transformation of village space than was the case in the previous case studies, where NSC-policy had not been implemented as strictly. Hence these case studies demonstrate the relation between reading rooms and the spatial dynamics intrinsic to the NSC more clearly. In these case study villages, the role of reading rooms as spaces included in policy blueprints on space became more obvious; the Foucauldian (1982) reminder to look at the *genealogy* of space, the planning and policy that is instrumental in how space is made into practice, is an apt way of thinking of these places. They are part of static planning practices, not spaces for everyday life, or sites for *spatiality* (Soja, 1989) where social activity engenders and breathes life into places. The reading rooms in Villages 7 and 8 are perfect illustrations of how governmentality and place making as blueprint is not absolute (de Certeau, 1984: 117). A reading space is only a reading space if it is anchored in everyday life, and made relevant to the community, much as any library where reading promotion, and communal activity will only be successful as long as patrons are involved and willing to participate (Kulturrådet, 2015; Vårheim, 2009).

The first of these villages, Village 6, was a place I could comfortably stay, and where problems with officialdom, or the jarring sense of being out of context, the wrong person in the wrong place, were absent. It is not a place for, and of tourists but it is still a place that has had experience with outside visitors. It is located at the foot of a mountain range popular both in the imagination of domestic visitors to Yunnan, as well as in real life, by hikers and mountaineers. It is a tea producing region that relies heavily on agriculture. In the hamlets and small settlements surrounding Village 6, most people are Lisu or Dai, with some Dulong (Drung), and other small ethnic groups who live off subsistence agriculture often associated with the mountain. In recent years, logging and tea have emerged as central to local livelihoods. Coffee is another crop that is being experimented with, seeing the success of other places in the region. When I first arrive in the village the reading room is locked. The Village Secretary seems annoyed at my presence and questions. The manager is away in the fields. He tells me to come back tomorrow at 11; then maybe the room will be open. Unlike many other Party Secretaries that I meet he does not have keys, nor does he seem to have any interest in me or the reading room.

The next day at 11 the Party compound is full of white Prado jeeps, signature vehicle of higher level officials in Yunnan. I feel a slight apprehension, but still walk up to see if the manager has appeared. He has not, but the room is open. The Village Secretary looks happy: "See, it's open, like I told you! Go look!" All the while I am being observed by a group of chain smoking middle-aged men who sit in the courtyard having tea. When I finally emerge from having examined yet another more or less identical reading space, in this case with a very broken light bulb and towering piles of "The collected speeches of Xi Jinping" occupying the table and most of the chairs (making reading rather difficult), they wave me over.

It is the head of the township government, the level up from the village. I wonder if it is pure coincidence that he happens to be there at the exact same time as I was about to come and meet the reading room manager, who, as it were, is not present. He is still busy, working the fields. In fact, he was busy in the fields every day for 12 days, making him one of the more elusive reading room managers during my field work process, and we never met. I had the slight suspicion that maybe Village 6 had not even appointed a manger, but knew they probably should have. So he was a ghostly, invented persona, or else maybe he did exist, away at his relative's land up in the mountains. But he was never around to lend books, or arrange the piles of political speeches, or mend the broken lightning fixtures, and so he was absent at any rate; a non-existent presence in the life of the reading room. For good measure, the reading room also remained closed all of the twelve days, apart from if I specifically asked to have it opened to check on something. Then the Village Secretary (now with keys) would open whilst looking deeply dismayed. But usually I would spy from a distance, just to see. And it was always locked. As a contrast, in almost all other villages the reading room manager was happy to be interviewed, and all villages apart from this one did have a reading room manager, one of the requirements from the GAPP.[30]

The township leader and his six colleagues explain that they have arrived to see how the "cleaning" of the village is coming along. One standard idea of NSC-policy is "cleaning"; the cleaning out of old habits, structures and ideas to be replaced with new roads, hygienic standards, scientific understanding and beautiful houses. Very politely they ask me a lot of questions, and answer mine about the history and management of the reading room, and the educational structure in the village and township. At 12, the township leader, his entourage, the village leadership and I all have a prolonged lunch, prepared by some village women; we talk for a while longer about reading, then they turn to more interesting topics - the cleaning of the village, and money, and climbing the Gaoligong Mountain; have I tried it? Yes, I have. I love these mountains. This adage creates a more affable atmosphere, and I get all the local gossip. Towards the end we return to the topic of reading; I grasp my final chances to ask the leadership some last questions before the Prado jeeps depart. And at the very end the township leader asks of me:

"Do people in my country read a lot?"

Some do, I say. And he replies, that, yes, in China some people read a lot, too. But not here, not in this village. Here, people work the land and try to save some money, they're too tired and besides, they're not educated and most of them are ethnic minorities.

"*Shaoshu minzu*? You know about this? Well, good. The ethnic minorities really do not understand a lot abut culture."

"And what about me?" he laughs in reply when I ask him if *he* reads a lot.

"Well, I'm really busy! Too busy to read!"

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[30] In the cases I did get to meet the manager it was in villages where I only stayed for a day, and the manager was busy in the fields, or elsewhere. Reading room managers almost always seemed to have another undertaking in addition to the reading room, usually farming.

During lunch we discussed cleaning processes: in Village 6, it is the old part of the village, the *gu cun,* that needs freshening up. Posters in the Party compound promote a great touristic future for the village, and they might have a point. Village tourism in Yunnan is big business, and Village 6 has better credentials than most. Located at the foot of some of Yunnan's more mythical and beautiful mountains, in mid-February the village is stunning with rape seeds in blossom, meandering mountain roads, and small Dai settlements with women in traditional clothing. Every day is sunny with high blue skies. Like the Township Head puts it:

"Have I been other places in China? No, of course not! Why would I when I was born in this place! There is no place better anyway, I mean, look, we've got mountains, blue skies, no pollution and Yunnanese food. Why would I leave?"

But still, prettiness alone will not suffice in the making of an ideal village; the local leadership elite have arrived to examine, and support the cleaning process. Wells are being dug, and the old part of town will receive a facelift, to look "more tidy, and coherent (*zhengjie*). We need to stop all the messiness with people building all sorts of houses with no plan (*guihua*)", the township leader explains.

What the old part of the village is really like is difficult to tell: it is in the process of being cleaned up. NSC-policy on rural space has been emphasising the aesthetic part of village modernisation; not only should villages be hygienic and modern, they should also be attractive (Rogers, 2017). One part of the modernisation process of Village 6 is requesting all the home owners to build a well according to certain stands. During my twelve days the wells slowly progress, one man digging at even intervals and caterpillar trucks leavening the ground. This will be followed by general improvements to the old village. Houses appear to be next up: they will follow the same routine of standardisation, to adhere to policies on the new countryside. Reading rooms are, as stated, very much part of this "cleaning" process: attachments to rural spatial planning, sites for learning situated in new, modern villages that should attempt to be not only scientific and agriculturally advanced, but also "beautiful". As demonstrated in section 2.3., the NSC-policy campaign could be understood as the most comprehensive plan for rural areas to have emerged in modern China, and also an attempt to give local leaders greater freedom in policy implementation. It attempts to balance cash flows, and channel excess funds to rural areas in need. However, this comes with certain conditions, as we shall see. Villages need to meet certain demands, and comply with NSC policy in order to benefit (Ahlers, 2014). This is especially the case when it comes to land use. One reward for freeing arable land by modernising and moving housing is extra funding to "beautify" and reconstruct the surface of the village; replacing unpaved village walkways with new surfacing, or even building whole new structures. It is no coincidence that the NSC has been relabelled "*Jianshe Xin Meili Nongcun*, or constructing a new beautiful countryside, in the latest Five-Year Plan (Rogers, 2017). To an extent this is all good. Many villages in China lack basic hygienic facilities, making, for one thing, environmental protection difficult as water pollution, drains, wells and agricultural methods sometimes have damaging effects on local ecosystems. The same applies to reading rooms, and the emphasis on improved educational opportunities in rural areas. As a concept conceived at state level it does carry an idea very familiar from early Western developments of the public library: it is at its core a democratic, all-

encompassing way of including disparate groups, regardless of location and/or class in reading promotion and cultural pursuits (Skouvig, 2004; 2007). However, if these policies are adhered to in an ad-hoc fashion, whereby short-term benefits are put before long-term goals, there will inevitably be problems with "soft" policy implementation. Top-down projects like reading rooms will garner few direct benefits, and are not easily measured according to financial benefits, or clearly visible, as with land use (Göbels, 2011; Looney, 2015; Rogers, 2014). Policy on reading, libraries, and culture at large stand a great chance of being neglected, in a way similar to the situation in these case study villages. Village 6 is a very good example of this. The township leader is not interested in reading, or libraries. My interest seemed amusing, at least after he decided that I was a harmless student, coming to research something he considers completely useless; he could just leave me to my own devices, looking at the books. To him, and leaders like him, the space for a reading room is provided; the village has got a reading room, according to national directives. But what this place is for, and how it could function as a resource to people in the village, is of little interest to leaders in villages where life revolves around agriculture and direct financial benefits.

5.10 Villages 7 and 8: The model villages

In a township located in another part of the mountain district, up winding and narrow roads, the process of freeing land, and beautifying the village has progressed further. The villages have been rewarded for successful land use, and local government has been pushing the beautification of rural space. Even the reading rooms have been housed in attractive spaces, but judging from these cases, attractive design in a spacious, new room does not equal increased usage or interest. In fact, from my case studies one could easily draw the conclusion that the more beautiful the space, the emptier the reading room. In these model villages the reading rooms were nothing but shells, examples of adhering to policy but lacking content.

I arrived in Village 7 by pure coincidence: I had visited two other villages in the township, and stayed in the local township hotel. One morning I went for a long hike up the mountain in the opposite direction from the villages I had been, and literally stumbled upon the renovated model village 7. It made for a good case study of NSC-policy, and reading rooms as part of top-down policy on spatial planning. I first found the old, deserted Party Offices, with an empty, neglected reading room attached to a class room for cadre education. This intrigued me: why an empty Party Office next to a dusty mountain road? Then I saw the health office, also deserted. I asked a woman who passed by on the road, and she directed me up a small, recently paved road. "There is the new village. They moved it," she informed me. There, to my surprise, what appeared to be a new village was located.

In Village 7, the houses are all restored and renovated in the same style, whitewashed with coherent roofs and lightning fixtures, all in the style of a traditional Chinese village. It could have been an image from a tourist brochure, or a government pamphlet promoting the success of new rural areas. A sign out on the highway pointed towards the "traditional Dai-village" (*Daizu gu cun*), another supposedly "old" village restored according to NSC-policy; the constructing of a new "beautiful" countryside. The new Party Offices are located in an open central space with newly

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laid flagstones. They are constructed out of traditional wood, with beautiful lattices and wood work; a pretty building with the fragrant smell of new wood. Apart from the party administrative offices, there is also a small local museum and, of course, the reading room. The sign outside, announcing a *nongjiashuwu*, with the emblem of the ZNJSW, is all new as well, in shining brass. However, upon arrival in the village, the reading room was not only closed but also padlocked: no sign with opening hours or names of people in charge. By the nearby local shop I find a group of mainly elderly villagers sitting in the shade, sipping tea, chewing sunflower seeds and playing chess. All the familiar standard responses swiftly appear:

"No, we don't know much about the reading room, never go there".

"Where is it?"

"I work in the fields, and prefer television to reading".

"Oh, I looked once, in the old Party Office. The books were boring. I use my smart phone; I like watching *Youke* (Youtube) clips".[31]

The Village Head sees me in his courtyard home the next day. We sip tea, and he is extremely cordial, and very knowing of NSC-policy; he is the first village head I interview that seems to understand, and keeps referring to the policy.

Village 7 has benefited in terms of extra funding as a reward for having moved and modernised housed, and freed arable land. This aligns with research on how local leaders who implement policy and complies with state directives at local level enjoy certain economic rewards. In this case the village has received extra funding to beautify and modernise buildings (Ahlers, 2014; Looney, 2015). This is a poor village in a poor district, but more on a par with Village 6 than really poor places (like Village 5, the failed village). Incomes are around 3500 *yuan* annually per household and the village has 2300 inhabitants, mostly living from agriculture, some small eateries and migrant remittances from the younger generation who have left the village.[32] The Village Head points to how the village has freed arable land, they have moved houses, and made land use more efficient, which has had positive effects on agriculture. He takes a serious scientific approach to this; there is too much pressure on the land in China, there needs to be more land that can be used effectively.
This is a good policy, and making villages like his modern, and hygienic with paved roads and good hygiene is a national concern, and he is happy to comply. Reading rooms are part of this attempt to modernise and make efficient. The books provided by the state will make rural inhabitants into better citizens (*guomin*); they can read and learn about agriculture and other matters, such as legal problems or political education. But, he sighs, of course it doesn't really work like this. Most people in this village are tired, and work too much. They have little education, and never buy books. If there is money, they will buy nicer foods or some things for the children.

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[31] Informants Village 7, 18th Feb 2017.
[32] Village Head, Village 7, 19th Feb 2017.

And what about computers? No, most people don't use them. They watch television, and many have a mobile phone to make calls, and maybe for entertainment.

But the Village Head himself claims to be a reader. When he goes to the prefectural town, he always buys some books. When he has read them, he reads them again if there is nothing new. He reads late at night, before going to sleep. Sometimes he reads past midnight.

"My wife passed away, and now reading keeps me company: I don't sleep alone that way".

I laugh, and tell him about a poster we keep at the library I work in Sweden, paraphrasing his exact phrase. Maybe, I say, that is how the reading room could work; books for company, and late nights. The village head appreciates this, but no. The reading room could never be that: it's for study, and science.

Does he borrow from the reading room? He smiles, and then asserts: "I have. I have looked. But the books in there are not the type of books I like to read at night, before I go to sleep. But if I need to know something, say, about agriculture, well, maybe I would." He smiles again, looks apologetic. We leave the reading room topic for a while. Instead we keep sipping tea and talk about Chinese literature; the Village Head quotes Lu Xun and when his daughter-in-law returns from the health station where she works, we eat a simple meal, and then he takes a bundle of keys and we leave for the reading room. In the reading room there is the fresh smell of new wood. There is a massive television, and I at first assume it is connected to one of the government sponsored online education projects, but it turns out it belongs to the village, and is just a television, with no wider function: it's stored in there temporarily due to the construction project. The books have not been unpacked and placed in order yet, the room is too new. But the titles in the boxes are the same titles I have seen in other places, educational children's books aimed at primary school, agricultural methods, some simple legal advice and the collected writings of Xi Jinping. The manager is away at a wedding; the village head says he was the manager at the old reading room, in the deserted Party Office up by the road. He has a large *gongyixin* for the village, a heartfelt wish to help and be beneficial to the village. The manager does not make money, but has been assigned the task as an honourable duty. Young people, or busy people, would never do it: they need to make money, or carry out more important tasks.

In nearby Village 8, the situation is the same. The village has been undergoing construction. A huge rock has been erected at the entrance with the name of the village, and how it is a model "ecological" village as of 2014, ecological, *shengtai*, is a label tagged onto many things in Yunnan, from, food to culture, and is probably better translated as "pure" rather than sustainable or environmentally sound.[33] The very label itself speaks of government discourse and adhering to certain principles for how to be "ideal": being green is not included in NSC-policy per se, but being

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[33] Organic, as in organic farming, is *youji*, and carries a specific agricultural meaning, however, *shengtai* could easily be confused with sustainable and is, along with *lüse*, green, tagged onto a range of both places and practices as a clever marketing device, connected to Yunnan's label as green and unpolluted.

hygienic, clean, and taking care of the village "*huanjing*", the living environment, is. The reading room is identical to the one in Village 7, located in an identical wooden building with new lattice windows and the smell of new wood. The village has a newly erected deity temple in the same nice wooden design, next to the Party Offices. Inside, there are new, quite garish deity images and some incense burning. The layout and plan of the village is highly regulated, from the European style lamp posts that line the newly paved village road, to the deity temple. Behind the new structures in the village, people keep cows and chickens, and their homes are still not particularly modern or hygienic, despite the new, nice lamp posts - no matter what, they still add an atmosphere of "*zhengjie*", (a NSC-catch phrase, meaning "clean and orderly") to the village.

In this village, the books in the reading room have not even been unpacked. There are some boxes standing on the floor, and two small ramshackle book cases. There is no table, chairs, or lightning, but I am assured that this will soon be installed. Before they built the new building, the reading room was in the old Party Office. But when asking around the village, no one claims to have been there. The same standard answers are repeated.

In most of the other villages there were at least signs of life; a borrower's ledge with names and dates that testified to some activity, past and present, and books in some sort of order. In the more ambitious, there was even some sort of logical arrangement for collections in place, like in Village 4. But in Village 7, the furniture was still missing and the books remain in their boxes; as a contrast, other spaces in the administrative compound had been furnished, and were in use. In Village 7 there is even a small museum, in Village 8, a room for cadre education and activities, and a newly constructed deity temple. But the reading rooms were hollow, places with no content, and a padlock with no sign of opening hours or contact details of the manager.

In Villages 7 and 8 the process we saw unfolding in Village 6 has already been completed, creating examples of model villages to aspire to, echoing China-anthropologist Tim Oakes' argument of how villages compete in between themselves in order to garner outside attention and credibility by fulfilling demands placed by the state (Oakes 2005). According to Oakes, the success of one village will lead to other villages emulating similar methods. What villages should aspire to have been formulated at higher levels of the polity. This creates a level of sameness in planning, that facilitates policy implementation and governance at local level, but also creates streamlined villages. In policy documents this is referred to as constructing "coherent and clean villages" with a high level of "*wenming*" or civilisation (Chin. Gov, 2006). In the case of this Yunnanese township, the villages I visited were undergoing radical physical change. Reading rooms were part of this process, but only as attachments with little content.

6.1 Analysis

Following the grounded theory approach, these stories from fieldwork in rural Yunnan have been analysed in order to categorise the main actors and stakeholders in reading room formation. According to grounded theory principles, I have analysed my data in order to illuminate the different categories instrumental to their (non)-workings. This analysis has shaped my theoretical understanding of reading rooms as a type of governmentality. The different theoretical strands and issues brought to light by close analysis of interviews and observations will form the basis of the following analytical section. I will outline the key categories instrumental in how and why reading rooms often fail, as we have seen in the case studies, and how these categories align with my theoretical framework. This analysis will serve to illuminate the initial research questions,

1, how reading rooms are situated within the village and what factors affect their (non)-workings, and

2, how we are to understand the formation and meaning of reading rooms as a national project linked to state ideology on modernisation of rural areas.

The first category is village space- and administration, the second central state book distribution, and the role of the Bureau for Print, Press and Publishing (GAPP), the third the role of state officials as represented by librarians, the fourth, the ethnic identity of large parts of rural Yunnan, and lastly, as a conclusion, the idea of the library as a site for constructing ideal citizens. These strands, or categories, form the core of my analysis, and has served to make me see reading rooms as a type of governmentality, a practice entwined with the workings of the state apparatus that aims to produce a certain type of citizen, a new type of peasant.

6.2 Governmentality and reading rooms

Research based on grounded theory and ethno-methodology entails an openness where pre-formulated theoretical assumptions are missing (Charmaz, 2006). In this case, the theoretical framework was the outcome of a slow understanding of the malfunctions of reading rooms as based around the central state as actor. Reading rooms increasingly came to seem like a top-down project, an elitist mode of installing reading spaces without local anchorage or support. The more reading rooms I visited, and the more villagers I talked to, the more evident this conclusion became. Reading rooms were located in the Party Compound, next to the administrative offices. Sometimes they were rather nice, like a well-kept group study room in an average high school, sometimes they were empty and in the process of moving (Villages 7 and 8), sometimes they were just falling apart, or smelling of mould. But the local

attitude, from top to bottom was always detached. Reading rooms were about the central state making plans for the undeveloped rural regions. The longstanding policy on a New Socialist Countryside (NSC) as outlined in policy since 2006 is important to how the role of reading rooms has been formulated. This policy is, as argued, an all-encompassing package for modernisation, and in many ways very ambitious. Xi Jinping, the current Chinese leader, has made promises to eliminate poverty and transform the rural economy; the creation of "new peasants" is important to this transformation: peasants should be entrepreneurial, technically skilled and industrious (Chin. Gov, 2006§6). Agriculture should be efficient and modern; no more hacking away at hillsides or farming for subsistence, like in Village 3 and 5. How reading and libraries feed into this is of course interesting.

The Foucauldian notion of governmentality is immensely illuminating for analysing the Chinese state and its different campaigns aimed at control and regulation; Foucault point to how power as exercised by the state is an *apparatus* that crisscross the social body, a type of power exercised through a variety of social institutions (Foucault, 2009: 294). These *techniques* for governance are what he labels governmentality. To me, the role and function of rural reading rooms is very akin to this concept, an institution sponsored by the central state, a far-away presence in rural Yunnan, that aims to produce what in Chinese is often referred to as a "high-quality" (*gao suzhi*) population, or in NSC-parlance, a "new" type of peasant (*xinxing nongmin*).

Spatial planning as a type of governmentality, as demonstrated by both Foucault himself (1977: 223), and others (Lefebvre, 1991) is particularly meaningful for understanding reading rooms. During my research process, reading rooms in essence appeared to be attachments to the physical planning of the village. Every village should have a reading room according to policy regulations issued from Beijing (GAPP, 2007). This could be understood as a blueprint for an ideal countryside where "libraries", or places for education and reading, are included. Villages provide the space, and books are distributed in a network where (in my case studies) librarians allocate the reading materials deemed suited. However, most Village Heads and local officials have little interest in reading rooms that serve no direct benefits in a system where local economic performance is put high on the agenda. This means reading rooms just sit there, neglected. Villagers themselves are not invited, or encouraged to go there. Opening hours are limited and the books quite boring. This demonstrates the limits to governmentality; power, like Foucault has argued is not absolute (Foucault, 2009). Michel de Certeau (1984) and Edward Soja (1989) have similarly made the argument in relation to space as a type of governmentality, as has Lefebvre (1991: 36). Places need social actions and communal engagement in order to become *spaces*, sites for *spatiality* (Soja, 1989: 119). Space, or spatiality are socially produced sites with deep connections between spatial practice and social *being,* i.e. the communally produced spaces I had initially hoped to find when I set out on my fieldwork. Public libraries around the world are defined by social actions that produce communal space, sites where many of us find a place for reading, reflection, dialogue and community (Vårheim, 2009). But if a reading space is just a planned location in the village, it will turn into a hollow projection, a failed attempt at a type of spatial and ideological governmentality in the sphere of reading and education. I will expand on the different shapes this theoretical understanding takes in the following section.

6.3 Reading rooms and spatial practice

Several researchers have argued that space is a basic component in the governmentality project of the Chinese Party-State (Bray, 2005; He, 2015; Lu, 2006; Zhang, 2001). I would similarly place reading rooms in the context of spatial planning as a type of governmentality. To Lefebvre (1991), planning and architecture are "representations of space", i.e. how the state envisions model environments. In my analysis of reading rooms, they could be understood as markers of state planning, physical representations of an ideal countryside. To Foucault and Lefebvre, the genealogy of planning, the blueprints and policy documents that underpin spatial practices (the physical aspect of planning; zones, regions, villages) inform us of the relation between space and power, the "anchorage in space which needs to be studied in detail" (Foucault 1980: 193). To Foucault, spatial practices are a mode of everyday governmentality, and hence needs to be addressed as part of how governmentality is practised.

A spatial reading of how reading rooms are formulated and understood as architectural structures within the village illuminates the extent to which they are part of top-down planning on villages as spatial models. Policy on the New Countryside operates according to the principle that if villages are planned and constructed according to state principles (freeing land for agriculture, clean, hygienic, and coherent) they will automatically become modern, technically advanced, urbanised zones. Reading room provision seem to operate according to the same logic: if appropriate equipment and space is provided, villagers will become educated "new" peasants. Reading rooms in this context are as much about physical planning and spatial politics, as they are about reading. They are spaces with a certain task, to improve and civilise the rural populace according to standards set by the central state, but the actual content of this activity seems to have been obliterated. Instead reading rooms are empty shells with a padlock; examples of how to carry out a policy in name only.

The failure of reading rooms to become part of everyday village life demonstrates how the type of power exercised by spatial planning as a type of governmentality is never absolute, but negotiated in everyday action. Without the actions required to create spatiality (Soja, 1989), reading rooms are just static places, state designated zones for reading. They embody an idea of what constitutes a "library" as in providing a certain type of equipment (books, a table, chairs, a borrower's ledge). But this static idea has failed to attract local meaning. Reading rooms are "an instantaneous configuration of positions and implies an indication of stability" (Soja, 1989: 119), that is, they are just places with no activity, and activity is what creates a space, a communal site of meaning – Lefebvre has labelled this the very opposite to the state designated zones, "representations of space". To Lefebvre, sites of communal meaning are "spaces of representation", i.e. sites that represent the local and are constructed by communal action (Lefbvre, 1991: 36-40). Michel de Certeau's way of describing spatial actions, the poem of walking that manipulates spatial organisation (1984: 117) is another way of describing these non-spaces: villagers simply skirt these spaces which mean the *planning* aspect of reading rooms has failed.

To answer my initial research question – reading rooms are part and parcel of how the state has *physically* planned the new countryside, but this does not mean they are successful in everyday practice. The reasons for this failure in spatial planning reside at other levels, mainly in failed management due to structural problems and top-down management. I will outline the main reasons as follows, including the category of local self-perception linked to the idea of being "ethnic".

6.4 Reading rooms and Village Administration

Following the results from my fieldwork, the Village Party Headquarter Compound is central to our understanding of reading rooms. Rather than being active communal sites that carry educational value and corresponds to everyday life, the reading rooms were, as we have seen, closed-in spaces, often locked up, and lacking in relevance to most ordinary villagers. In everyday, spatial practice within the village, they are non-spaces. One key actor in this skirting of the village reading space was the location right within the realm of village officialdom.

The reading rooms in all my case studies were part of the Village Party Compound, a planning practice that makes reading rooms part of the official sphere of village administration. The nexus of Chinese rural spatial planning is the Village Party Office, a compound at a central location in the village where various administrative offices are housed. The reading rooms in all of the villages I visited were attached to this compound, in a room next to the office for general administration. This is not stipulated in guidelines on reading rooms. In theory they could be located in a different building, but they never were which is telling in its own right. Hence the physical space and the people attached to it (staff and officials) are important to how reading rooms are situated in the village. I would argue that the Party Compound serve as reminders of the Party-State in most villages and embody the notion of the state planning and ideals. The reading room as a national development project aimed at modernising rural areas starts within the official space allocated to reading rooms in villages. As spaces this is where reading rooms belong; to the realm of the official.

At times I wondered about this, the closeness to officialdom. I always felt that by entering the Party compound, you entered the realm of officialdom. This automatically makes reading rooms part of a bureaucratic sphere, and hence places administration and local governance at the heart of the network that makes up the daily life and functions of reading rooms. The location was never commented on in my interviews; hence it was not part of my data, but many of my interviews took place within this compound, making this location central to my fieldwork. Hence the party compound, the physical space of the reading room, and the people attached to it, figured as core components in how we are to read the meanings of reading rooms at village level.

From a Western, historical perspective it is interesting to compare this to Skouvig's understanding of library formation where the daily operations of the library, including the building and its divisions, are instrumental to the construction of ideal patrons, i.e. citizens. To her, early public library formation in Denmark was a site for state ideology, which circulated through the interplay between books, patrons and

librarians (Skouvig, 2004). According to this understanding, the library room itself is important in the formation of patrons and citizens.

Reading rooms and their central location in the village is similarly a reminder of state presence in the cultural life of the village; a site for interchange between national ideas on a new countryside, and local concerns. But unlike Western libraries that have been very successful in their role as normative educational institutions, and simultaneously enjoy a high degree of support and trust within communities (Vårheim, 2009), reading rooms in rural Yunnan have failed both as normative sites and communal reading sites. The very location of reading rooms is one important consideration; officialdom in the context of ethnically rich villages in a nation that historically has been characterised by a high degree of mistrust of officials is complicated (Edin, 2006). Local village life in the PRC could easily be described akin to Akhil Gupta´s notion of the state as" implicated in the minute texture of everyday life" (Gupta, 1995: 375). Local state representatives have been actively involved in governing most aspects of life, down to the most intimate details (Mueggler, 2000; Rofel, 1990; Schein 2000). The location of reading rooms is problematic in this regard, and means that they are not necessarily cherished by most ordinary villagers. Officials, and official space are often equal to meeting demands or perhaps asking for certain benefits: a visit to the administrative offices is charged with this experience. The village administration offices is not a site one will visit without an errand, and going there to read (for pleasure or education) might not be a natural everyday act.

In this context the role of Village Heads and reading room managers is an important consideration. They are the managers of reading rooms, and decisive in how reading spaces are used within the village. Managers are appointed by the village, and remunerated according to the lowest scale; usually this means working for free as a type of "voluntary" service (*gongyi*). Like the Village Head in Village 7 stated: the manager has got a *gongyixin* for the village, i.e. a heartfelt with to help out. If this really is the case is of course difficult to assess. Voluntary positions come with certain benefits, but are above all an order in an authoritarian, socialist system where voluntary jobs with low pay is a normal occurrence (Tomba, 2014). The attitude of managers naturally has an affect on the daily management of reading rooms. The manager in Village 4 was the only person who took the position seriously, but then she had a great deal of understanding for the value of education and reading in the context of a poor village. All the other reading room managers had some sort of health problem or were older. In addition to this, my impression was that the person in charge lacked interest, cared little for books and reading and was as computer illiterate as the rest of the village. This is an illustration of how reading rooms seemed to be a nuisance and burden to most of the Village Heads.

Researchers concerned with village politics and policy implementation have pointed to how local leaders are under immense pressure to meet targets, and are measured according to economic performance (Ahlers, 2014; Göbel 2011; Rogers, 2014; Teets, 2015). This means local leaders are usually concerned with "hard" policy, on roads, agriculture, and making money. The benefits of reading space and education are more difficult; "soft" policy targets are not easy to measure.

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In the West, arts- and education have increasingly come to be measured according to scales of visitors, statistics and "success" in image-making. This is definitely the case in the library sector where New Public Management philosophy has placed new demands on measurable *performance* (Kann-Christensen & Balling, 2011). Chinese villages are the same: local officials need to meet targets and demonstrate reasonable success in economic performance. In poor counties, like Village 3 and Village 5, this is even more pertinent. Village 5 is a key-county in poverty alleviation, an earmarked village that needs to raise performance. That reading room management is not a priority is perhaps understandable. From fieldwork it seemed the richer the village, the better the reading room: Village 1, 2 and 4 were all in decent shape, even if opening hours were negligible.

My case studies were all from rural Yunnan, a comparatively poor part of China; it is likely that reading rooms in richer provinces are managed in a more thoughtful way (e.g. Wei, 2013). However, this is yet another way in which poor provinces fall behind; the neglect of what could, in essence, be an asset in places where few other alternatives exist. But like the township leader in Village 5 put it: "I'm really busy!" And probably he was busy meeting more pressing targets, like cleaning the villages in his district, and living up to the standards of the new countryside, similar to the situation in Villages 7 and 8.

6.5 Books and equipment

The next category to transpire from my data was the role of books and equipment. Reading rooms are, as stated, places for the creation of a "new" peasant. Hence the reading materials distributed to reading rooms are central: what is a new peasant supposed to be reading? How could the distribution of books explain the perceived failure of reading rooms? These questions place the state as distributor of books at the heart of reading rooms as places for citizen formation, but also as an active agent in the failure of reading rooms.

The perceived lack of relevance of books and other materials to local villagers were often repeated in my fieldwork notes; here the governmentality project of the state is negotiated and often unsuccessful due to its failure to engage with, and hence co-opt the social body. Distributing "suitable" reading materials is likely to fail, due to its elite bias, and the attempt to "civilise". The skirting of reading rooms and detached attitude to books and reading is, as argued, linked to the space itself, but also to its lack of contents. These two categories interact in the creation of empty space.

The state provides certain equipment and issues policy on how to use it, but fails in engaging local populations. Books and reading materials are decisive in this process; if books are not of interest to villagers, bur rather prescriptions for how to foster ideal citizens, reading rooms will remain empty. Who would go to the local library if all the books were donated by the state in an attempt to improve your educational level according to state aspirations?

Research on reading promotion and library provision in Sweden show that a solid understanding of, and interest in potential readers is crucial in order to make reading promotion successful, if by "successful" you mean engaging readers and stimulating

"deep" reading (Kulturrådet, 2015). Without this, reading promotion and library provision fail in engaging communities and individuals.

Following my data analysis, one could label the reading room situation in rural Yunnan as an ambitious but extremely failed reading promotion project. Much of this is due to the type of reading materials that are distributed and the lack of correspondence between the central state and local government. The central actor in this process is the General Administration for Publication- and Print (GAPP). The role of the GAPP as the main state bureau in charge is interesting. This is not the same state bureau that is in charge of public libraries and general culture in the PRC (which is The Ministry of Culture, and provincial Culture Departments), but a state organ whose task is to oversee publishing, censorship and, to some extent, propaganda and ideological work. Ideological work and propaganda are arguably key features of reading rooms, and their content. Books distributed from the GAPP are chosen in line with the overarching goal of reading rooms: to produce "new" peasants, improved and scientifically capable, suited to a new type of countryside. The fact that the GAPP, rather than the Culture Department, is the state agent in charge, further underlines how reading rooms are seen as ideological spaces, but with little care or concern for their role as libraries, comparable to that of urban public libraries.

The GAPP carries responsibility for all issues pertaining to press and publishing in the PRC; including film, television and the Internet. They also carry responsibility for censorship and certain ideological issues in relation to publishing; they oversee all new publications and actors on the publishing market, and oversee Chinese publications on the international market. Reading room provision does not figure as on of the key area of this bureau, but has been delegated to a subdivision; the Chinese Rural Reading Room department, *Zhongguo Nongjia Shuwu Bumen* (ZGNJSW).[34] The ZGNJSW distribute books annually from a group of select publishers who donate books to the GAPP – these publishers are former state enterprises with strong links to the state that date back to the old socialist system (examples would include China's major publishing chain, Xinhua). In Jiangxi Province the Xinhua bookstore (China's main bookseller chain) donated books at the estimated value of 180 000 *yuan*, and private publishers at the value of 400 000 *yuan* (Liu & Li, 2008).

This link between former state publishers, the GAPP and reading rooms is problematic in itself; it could be argued that this is a perfect way for publishers with dwindling business to stay on the market. And the books that are distributed, even the novels, might not be the most popular. At times it felt like reading rooms were depositories for unwanted old novels, the left-over books that no one wanted to buy. This was also hinted at by the librarians I interviewed. But I have little evidence, and hence this is just a reflection, or feeling, based around the common complaints about the reading materials, and my knowledge of how book distribution works.[35]

The reading rooms I visited did carry more or less the same amount of, and the same selection of books. These could be divided into five categories: Children's books,

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[34] www.zgnjsw.gov.cn (in Chinese).
[35] This could be interesting future research, but my very limited time prevented me from exploring this issue further.

agricultural technology, political works, fiction and general business/society information such as easy information on economy, banking, legal issues and social policy, usually with a slant towards rural problems. The bulk of this is agricultural books and light novels: most rooms carried around 50-100 titles in each of these sections. Children's books normally number around 50, and audio-visual materials 10-20; in some cases none there were none. This is less than the numbers stipulated by the GAPP; but when asked the managers I interviewed all replied that some books were in storage as the shelf space was not sufficient.

The collection of political writings are a prominent feature, as are technical works on improving agriculture and general guidelines in law and economy, reflecting the need for an educated peasantry. This is in line with NSC-policy. The collections of children's books are standard for China; cheap, quite simple and fairly educational as opposed to entertaining. Most books are aimed at primary/lower middle school children.

In addition to books, the GAPP also publishes and issues a standardised borrower's ledge with clear instructions on how to handle routine issues such as lending (GAPP, 2009).[36] The borrower's ledge is a handwritten book distributed by the GAPP along with the books. Reading rooms are meant to submit this when full. However, in all of the reading rooms I visited this is still some years in the future – the ledges had, according to dates, been there from the start in 2009-10, and were only half full. The GAPP also issue basic instructions on classification and physical arrangements of the books, but offer few details and no training of reading room staff. According to the librarians I interviewed, these tasks are carried out by the reading manager with no assistance. In the reading rooms covered in this project, most books were unclassified and often unorganised, with one section for children and the rest shelved with little care. In some of the better maintained reading rooms, efforts to classify and organise had been made, in a basic fashion (handwritten spine labels and arrangements according to subject and author).

The physical space of the reading room itself does not come with specific requirements, other than that reading rooms should be 20 square meters, and have tables. The reading rooms I visited all conformed to this; they were all of similar size, like an average office space or small group study room with a simple table, a few chairs and some basic lightning. Some were nicer than others, often a reflection of the general state of the Village Administration Offices.

The role of the GAPP as the main state agent demonstrate the structural problems of reading rooms; there is a wide gap between the local realities I encountered during fieldwork, and the state organ in charge. Reading rooms are supposed to be managed at local level, with the state acting as a benevolent distributor of suitable materials and good advice. In practice, this does not work – lack of local knowledge, interest and resources make reading rooms into haphazard affairs with little structure; the space was provided but little else: as if reading rooms never left the architectural blueprints. Reading rooms could be an asset; they could be described as one of the most ambitious reading- and information projects to have been initiated in a

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[36] www.zgnjsw.gov.cn/booksnetworks/channels/414.html (in Chinese).

development context (18 billion *yuan* spent in a decade on equipping villages with reading space). But from my fieldwork experience, they were seen as a burden by local officials, and mismanaged both from local and central level. One aspect of this is the role of local librarians as distributors of books; state agents whose expertise in reading- and information is disregarded.

6.6 Librarians. Distributors of books.

The representatives of the Administration for Press and Publication, GAPP, at local level are, as we have seen, often local librarians. This makes librarians into a group with an official bearing on local reading rooms; potentially they could affect management of both collections and the room itself, but they carry no official power. In relation to local government at both village- and township level, they are just paid employees of the state. This, the ill-defined role of professionals, is yet another important thing to consider when discussing why reading rooms fail, both as an ideologically saturated state project, and as a development project aimed at reading- and information promotion.

In my data, librarians appear as state representatives. They are never referred to as professionals, as in "the librarians". However, "the state" frequently appears, as in the "central state", or the "nation" (*guojia*), a vague idea that is rarely defined more clearly. Often what is referred to by "the state" is book distribution. This led me to consider the role of librarians as state envoys, the transmitters of materials and equipment. In this analysis, librarians at city- and prefectural level form important actors in the network of reading rooms; a node linking urban and rural, the distributors of books and equipment, and hence the physical embodiments of the "state" in the life of reading rooms. As such, they are a group of intermediaries that could affect how materials are distributed and understood. The librarians could be described as informal conveyors of reading and reading promotion, and hence as transmitters of state approved literature from state to village level. As cultural workers affiliated with the same state bureau that administers reading rooms, they are a relevant group of actors that have power over how reading rooms are formulated and understood. They carry no direct power, but in their work, that they loosely describe as "support" they have an impact on local affairs, and could potentially put pressure on local leaders in their role as state representatives with an urban, educated background. When they appear in villages, reading rooms will be open and books distributed from top to bottom. However, in practice this function is limited to the practical assignment of allocating the books once or twice a year: the gap between state administration might be a factor – if reading rooms were included in state policy on libraries, and not on printing and agricultural concerns, perhaps guidelines on reading rooms would adhere more closely to those on libraries in urban areas.

Their attitude and degree of involvement could be decisive at the local level; as professional librarians they are trained to promote reading and manage reading spaces. But this expertise is not a feature of how reading rooms are envisioned; retirees and those ill-equipped for other work is assigned the task of caring for the reading room, with no professional consultant. However, this role further underlines the top-down management of reading rooms: librarians distribute materials that arrive in boxes from the GAPP, but have no channel to bargain or negotiate the contents or

their own professional role. They are just distributors; reading rooms are not expected to be staffed or aided by professional staff with training in reading promotion or information resources. They are, once again, spaces where materials are located.

It is as if by providing this space, people would magically behave accordingly, echoing Lefebvre's idea of spatial practices. But this, as we have seen, is not enough.

If comparing with Western studies on libraries, such as Skouvig (2004), it is important to remember that even if the library space as such was an actor in how citizen's conduct was constructed, the active role of librarians was even more so: the interplay between, space, professionals, materials and policy was crucial. In rural Yunnan, this type of dynamic role for librarians is missing.

As argued, mismanagement of reading rooms might be more evident in poor, peripheral villages where other types of development and economic performance are priorities. This is particularly true in poor, ethnically dominated villages like the ones covered by this project. The very self-image of the village and its inhabitants do have an effect on both reading room management and usage difficult. If local leaders and managers have a detached "who cares"-attitude, and villagers feel alienated, then reading spaces will be of little use. This, the self-image of villagers formed a key category to my understanding of how and why reading rooms fail at local level.

6.7 The ethnic story: the production of a high quality population

The final core category in delineating the failures and non-workings of reading rooms is the ethnic identity of most villages covered in this paper. State discourse on being ethnic is entwined with ideas of civilisation and population quality (Harwood, 2013; Liu, 2011). This, the discourse on what being ethnic means in the PRC has had a strong impact on self-perception and attitude to reading and culture as defined by the state. As demonstrated in the introduction, the ethnic diversity of Yunnan has been decisive in positioning the province within the nation-state. Various projects of governance aimed at appeasing and co-opting non-Han groups have been carried out, both during the years of high socialism, and the reform-era. During the Cultural Revolution, being ethnic was a target of attack, and many ethnic minorities suffered immense onslaughts on culture, language and livelihoods. During the reform-era, the attitude towards minorities is more complex as state legitimacy in contemporary China is based around national harmony and patriotism. Ethnic minorities have been important players in establishing the idea of a peaceful, heterogeneous nation, and the CCP Party-State has aimed to include rather than exclude whereby many ethnic groups have enjoyed preferential treatment, according to present-day policy campaigns (Gladney, 1991; Kaup, 1997; Schein, 2000).

However, following China's rapid path towards economic modernity, minority regions have often fared badly; most of the regions labelled as poor are populated by ethnic groups (Harwood, 2013; Wu and Tian, 2010). This is very true of Yunnan where the ethnically rich parts are among the poorest parts of the province, and have been targeted as problem areas – various state development projects have targeted

these regions in attempts to make rural Yunnan modernise and catch up. These projects are top-down, and even if successful in part, they also aim to install a national type of development where ethnic traditions and livelihoods are seen as hindrances to modernity (Harwood, 2013; Hathaway, 2012; Hyde, 2007; Liu, 2011).

Shao Hua-Liu has argued that ever since the ethnic peoples of southwest China were fully integrated into PRC political culture, they have been the targets of political campaigns and projects of governance that have profoundly altered and taken advantage of the life aspirations of ethnic peoples on the margins of the nation. She describes this process as a type of "bipolar" politics: to her, ethnic areas in the southwest follow their own trajectories of modernity that differ significantly from that of mainstream China (Liu, 2011). I find this argument to be important in relation to state sponsored cultural projects like reading rooms: it might explain much of the detached attitude and general suspicion of state attempts to regulate and impose cultural aspirations.

According to grounded theory, the researcher should allow statements and interviews to carry their own significance (Charmaz, 2006). In my data analysis, the idea of being ethnic and hence backward keeps reappearing as an explanation for why local villagers avoid going to reading rooms in rural Yunnan. All of my 15 case studies are taken from regions were ethnicity is an important factor. This is true of most of rural Yunnan, a reflection of Yunnan being China's most minority rich province. As previously stated, 33% are non-Han, or *shaoshu minzu* – ethnic minorities - most of who reside outside of the urban centres (Yunnan Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Wu & Tian, 2010). However, I had not expected the ethnic factor to appear quite so frequently in my analysis of the meaning of reading rooms. But it appeared with almost the same frequency as "I'm busy working in the fields, and have no time for books", a category that I interpreted more as a detached, uninterested attitude rather than a real explanation to do with reading. In contrast, being ethnic was directly linked to personal capacity for reading, and using the reading room, not just being "busy". Being ethnic appeared to be a way of explaining *cultural* short-comings as opposed to ploughing a field or harvesting tea, which is based in actual *practice*. In some cases, my questions prompted the issue, as I would ask about the ethnic composition of a village, but this was not always the case. Usually it was raised in a spontaneous way, as in the interview with the manager in Village 5, or villagers in Village 4, or the Village Head in Village 7. In these conversations, places were described according to a logic whereby ethnic meant *culturally* backward. The more ethnic the region, the more backward the population, and hence ill-suited to activities of the type associated with reading rooms, such as reading books, using a computer or obtaining a higher education.

This means most of my case studies belong to a category assigned as especially backward, with the exception of the urban villages, Village 1 and 2, where the issue of ethnicity as an explanation of rural disinterest in reading was not raised at all. The poorer and more peripheral the village, the more frequently the ethnic category appeared. This means the ethnic card is a central actor in the non-workings of reading rooms in rural Yunnan. It might even be the most important factor affecting the understanding of how and why reading rooms fail. If local self-perception, and

general educational levels, prevents a majority of villagers from feeling that reading could be of interest, reading rooms will naturally be skirted.

They will be spaces with no relevance, and above all, not for *us*, the way a person who was bullied for being chubby in sports class might forever skirt the gym or a person with a lifetime experience of low school performance might feel that the books at the public library have nothing to do with him/her.

The statements that were repeated, and formed an important category for my analysis, could be paraphrased as "there are too many minorities in this place, no one understands reading and culture", and "We (I) are ethnic minorities. Reading is not really for me, I don't understand books", as if being ethnic and reading books were irreconcilable, and anyone should be able to understand this. If this is interpreted as a meme of local understanding, then state projects on reading and culture are bound to fail due to local internalisation of what being ethnic means, at least in poor, peripherally located agricultural villages in Yunnan.

When discussing ethnicity, and poor rural regions on the margin, the places that exist in those "desynchronised" spaces Dirlik and Zhang (1997) refers to it is important to remember that these places have repeatedly been targeted as "uncivilised" throughout most of China's long modernity. Louisa Schein has labelled them yardsticks against which to measure the progress and modernity of the nation at large (Schein 2000). Placed in this context, the local interpretation and use of reading spaces in rural Yunnan is perhaps not so strange: they are yet another state apparition, a means to control, appease, and civilise. In studies on Chinese ethnic regions, the relation between ethnicity and the state apparatus (the institutions and arrangements that make up the "state" as a practice, in Foucault's understanding) has been emphasised in a number of ways.

Frank Dikötter has described the workings of Chinese race and nation from a historical perspective where the "pure" Han is measured against outside barbarians. According to Chinese racial logic one could potentially become culturally Chinese by acquiring Chinese language and customs, but never biologically (Dikötter, 1992). Contemporary state discourse on ethnic minorities in the PRC mirrors this understanding. The present day division between Han and *shaoshu minzu* took its inception in the 1950s when a major classification program was carried out: 56 ethnic categories were outlined, many of which hid more complex realities. In Yunnan, the Yi but also the Miao are good examples of standardisation of many subgroups (Gladney, 1991; Mueggler 2000; Mullaney, 2011). For most of the socialist era, these categories have rarely been contested but rather consolidated as part of personal identity (Kaup, 2000; Litzinger, 2000; Schein, 2000). This process has continued into the present, in a capitalist guise, whereby Han often control land and resources in minority regions due to established socio-economic patterns and access to capital and networks. This has been especially true in a region like Yunnan where many minorities have a history of poverty and of existing on the margins of the nation; Harwood and Liu both describe how this process has had a profound impact on life opportunities and self-identity (Harwood 2013; also Hyde, 1997; Liu, 2011; Mueggler, 2000).

This is a striking feature of life in many of the villages covered in this project. If a village produces high quality Pu'Er tea, the trade is often controlled by outside investors. If a village has a tourist enterprise, this is often controlled by outsiders. In Lijiang, Yunnan's most famous tourist spot, 97% of old town entrepreneurs are outsiders (Chao, 2012; Hung, 2015; MacKhann, 2001). In the villages I visited this was a feature of the daily economic life of many places. Even local shops in many villages, such as the village supermarket where people go to buy ice lollies, soft drinks and other commodities were, when you asked, often run by someone who moved out to Yunnan from central and over-populated provinces like Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan or Jiangxi. They fill gaps in the service economy, and grasp opportunities that locals are unlikely to or unable to act upon.

This attitude also prevails in the self-derogatory descriptions of the cultural level of both village and self. Why would reading benefit someone like me, in a village like this? We work the land, we haven't got the time to read, and even if we did, we do not understand books, was an oft-repeated sentence. This, the understanding, or description of self as being ill-suited to reading feeds into the other problems and issues I have outlined; the state as actor and benevolent provider of a certain idea of "suitable" reading materials for a vision of a new type of countryside, with a new type of productive, high-quality peasant, in itself implying that the current type of peasant would be unproductive and of low quality, a notion that sticks to many ethnic minorities. I was often asked why I came to Yunnan, and, specifically, why to this "backward" (*lou*) place? Who cares about this place? Why don't you go to Shanghai, or at least Kunming (the provincial capital)? This idea of the own village speaks volumes of national ideas of centre and periphery, and local self-image.

The new countryside, and the various state projects attached to it, could be a positive thing in many ways. Development projects in the PRC have to a great extent been successful in lifting regions similar to the one where I did fieldwork out of poverty (Harwood, 2013). But they have also had an affect on ideas of self-perception, and local aspiration, a hopeless straining to become "modern" in a nation where many cultural experiences and abilities do not always translate in the same way (Liu, 2011). To some of the ethnic groups residing in these villages, even their language is useless in the local reading room, not to mention outside the village. Here, reading rooms in rural Yunnan could offer a place where reading and practising literacy skills could be undertaken with little pressure, and offer a space away from crowded families and general noise; however, due to structural problems and ideological misrepresentation, many local villagers share an idea of reading rooms as being "not for us. We do no read books, we work the land, and besides, we are ethnic minorities." I would argue that these things are connected, and deeply affect how reading rooms are regarded at the local level, within the village.

7.1 Conclusion: Libraries and constructing ideal citizens

I initially had an idea that reading rooms could be understood as *social spaces* within the village, composed of a range of active actors, from state to local. But rather than being dynamic spaces, reading rooms turned out to be static sites linked to state ideology on a new countryside, and a new peasant. They are cultural and educational attachments to spatial planning on the New Socialist Countryside, not the communal spaces for reading and cultural activity that I had hoped to find. At local, communal level reading rooms carried no value at all, which prompted me to rethink my research agenda, and interest in these spaces: reading rooms were not about communal activity or local reading promotion but about state planning.

Reading rooms operate at the ideological level, as planned spaces, but in practice, they are a headache to local officials, who will make sure to provide the space, but little else. When someone like me turns up, this becomes even more obvious: they were always willing to display the space but also very honest – we are busy in the fields, we have little interest in the books provided, we are peasants, and above all, we are ethnic minorities.

Hence reading rooms in rural Yunnan could be described as a failed state project in an ethnically rich developing region; a peripheral place where state projects on reading fail to take root. Reading rooms are skirted by most locals, and demonstrate the limits of governmentality; a space does not equal social action, a library room and books do not equal reading activity. The fact that reading rooms so often remain closed and distanced from local life is a structural problem with roots at national state level, and the way reading rooms are managed. The system for distribution of books, and the role of the Bureau for Press, Print and Publication (GAPP) staunchly place reading rooms within a state sponsored sphere that carries immense ideological content. The GAPP strictly adheres to State Council and Ministry of Agriculture blueprint on the new countryside in its selection of books (Chin. Gov, 2006 §5).

This seems to have fostered a gap between national policy and local implementation. The mismanagement of reading rooms is also connected to local leaders and their unwillingness to adhere to polices, especially "soft" policy that will garner no direct economic benefits (Edin, 2006; Göbel, 2011, Rogers, 2014; Teets, 2012). Most Village Heads had little interest in reading rooms; they made sure to provide the space, but little else. Hence many reading rooms exist as locked spaces that demonstrate state priorities at the spatial level, but that are ignored in relation to content and meaning.

It could be argued that reading rooms are state spaces, there to condition the mode of conduct, and instil values and behaviours across the social body of the peasantry, to paraphrase Foucault.

But in these Yunnanese villages, this is a failed endeavour, making Lefebvre's notion of spaces of representation quite telling. Spatiality requires social action, and in rural Yunnan this action takes place elsewhere. The peasantry is busy in the fields, moving to urban areas, watching *youke* on their smart phones and gossiping by the local store. However, if reading rooms were less top-down, and local leadership had a higher degree of involvement, it is possible that these reading spaces could offer a place for studying in villages where no other such space exist. Reading rooms could potentially form nodes for reading in poor communities, but unless you engage and involve both the local leadership and villagers, reading rooms will remain locked; empty shells that are the result of national ideas on science and education where the library is seen as a civilising space in an attempt to create a "new" peasant.

The idea of the "library" as a site for education and production of cultural capital and norms within the social body is not exclusive to the PRC. Early modern Western public libraries were founded according to similar beliefs. Laura Skouvig's work on the construction of library users in Denmark at the turn of the last century makes for a parallel to how the Chinese Party-State envisions reading spaces in rural areas, the production of a "new" peasant, capable of modernising agriculture and urbanising rural regions out of backwardness (Skouvig, 2004; 2007). This aligns with historical campaigns on rural areas in China, from mass education to anti-superstition; the idea of the rural as being malleable, regions that can be moulded into desired shape by social and technical design. Reading rooms are part of this historical obsession with modernising the rural. They are the spaces, or tools, the state provides for bringing modern education to rural regions. That these spaces are libraries is telling of the way the concept of the library has travelled and traversed times and place. Like in Skouvig's story, the library is a place suited to the construction of ideal citizens. Bruno Latour has made the point that no place or social phenomena is truly new or modern; as we sit in a classroom we simultaneously participate in an historical idea of the classroom; the gadgets and practices connected to the activity of learning transgress the boundaries of here and then, past and present (Latour, 1993). Reading rooms represent the same phenomena: they are sites that embody an Enlightenment idea of learning, reading and education. By constructing these spaces, the state hopes to simultaneously construct a new, modern, advanced citizen in places where everyday life is often characterised by hard work, poverty and little use or knowledge of reading.

This, the gap in interpretation between the library as imagined site, and the library as communal space for reading and cultural activities, is a problem that rural reading room agents at all levels need to address if reading rooms are to have a role other than locked-up places lacking local relevance.

8.1 Summary and future research

I have demonstrated the main issues and dilemmas in how and why reading rooms are used, or not used in rural Yunnan. I have based this on rich empirical evidence from extensive fieldwork in Yunnan Province. I based my research on grounded theory, which enabled me to make use of an open, experimental fieldwork methodology, without prior theoretical assumptions. Later, based on my empirical evidence, I came to see reading rooms as part of state policy on a new socialist countryside, educational sites for the production of a new peasant. Within this context, reading rooms could be understood as a type of governmentality, Michel Foucault's concept of how modern states govern and exercise power through an array of social institutions that co-opt and infiltrate the social body. I developed the concept of governmentality further by placing reading rooms in a context of spatial planning as a type of governmentality; here, the notion of how spaces are created not only by planning blueprints but rather by social actions was important to my understanding of how reading rooms are negotiated, skirted and made into non-spaces at village level. This *avoidance* is arguably due to a host of structural problems in how reading rooms are administered and managed, particularly at central level.

My fieldwork region in Yunnan is but one small region of China, carrying specific particularities that might not translate to other regions, ethnicity being one unique characteristic. However, the structural problems I have outlined are probably true also of other places, such as the role of the GAPP and the distribution of reading materials, and the spatial location of reading rooms. This is also true of the analysis of why the Chinese Party-State takes an interest in rural reading space.

It would be interesting to engage further in research on the interplay between national policy making and local implementation in the sphere of culture and reading in Chinese villages. The role of local leaders and their role in policy implementation and reading room formation followed me all through fieldwork, but lack of time and access to much of the needed data and staff prevented me from including this material. This issue would have required proper introductions, more time, and my research would have been very different. In this case I focussed on the reading rooms, not local politics. However, it would be interesting to see in-depth research on this issue.

It would also especially interesting to examine the role of the GAPP and the distribution of books – how books are selected, and what reading materials are deemed "suitable", and why. And, at last, it would be immensely rewarding to research alternative reading spaces, and reading practices in villages; other than reading rooms, what options are there? What role does literature play in the life of Chinese villages today?

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Appendix 1: Questions and observations

- Is the reading room open when I arrive? If not, why?

- When is the reading room open?

- Who is the manager?

- What tasks does he/she have?

- What books are there?

- How are they arranged and classified?

- Are there magazines and newspapers? Audio-visual materials?

- What is the reading room like? The layout, chairs, equipment, lightning

- What is the borrowing system? (ledger – if so, according to what system?

- What books have been checked out? When? By whom?

- Who comes to the library?

- Are there activities? If so, who arranges?

- What is the relationship with the city library?

- Who is in charge of book provision (at different levels)?

- Is this top-down or does the library/village have decision-making power over book provision, equipment, opening hours, and activities?

- Are the books/magazines/equipment relevant to the village/villagers?

- What about children's books/activities?

- What about ICT and computers?

- Other reading and cultural spaces within the village? Such as religious space or an arts centre (*wenhua zhan*/*wenhua guan*)?

- About the village: population, ethnic make-up, work opportunities and livelihoods, incomes, cultural activities?

Appendix 2: Villages and Informants

Case study 1:
Visited 30, 31 Jan. return visit 5th Apr 2017

Reading room manager: Female, Han, 46 years. Been the manager since 2010 when the reading room opened.

Village Head.: Female, Han, 57 years.

Village Secretary: Female. Han. 54 years.

Local villagers, 12 people in total, most Han, some Dai and Yi, ages 18-67.

Case study 2:
Visited 1st & 2nd Feb 2017, return visit 5th April 2017.

Reading room manager: Male, 67 years, Yi. Been the manager since 2014.

Village Head: male, Han, 53 years.

Village Secretary: male, Han, 48 years.

Manager Arts Centre (the township): male, Han, 54 years

Local villagers: 9 in total, 5 Han (3 male, 2 female), 2 Yi (female), ages 34-73.

Case study 3:
Visited 4-9th Feb 2017

Village Head: male, Lisu, 43 years

Reading room manager: male, Lisu, 64 years. Been the manager since 2012.

Village Secretary: male, Dulong, 47 years

Village administrative staff: 4 in total, 3 Lisu (2 female, 1 male), 1 Han (male). 33-52 years.

Local villagers, 16 in total, 19-76 years, 11 Lisu (7 female, 4 male), 2 Dulong (female), 3 Han (1 male, 2 female).

Case study 4:

Visited 12th Feb 2017. return visit 4th April 2017.

Village Secretary: female, 47 years, Han

Husband of village secretary: 49 years, Han

Reading room manager: female, 57 years, Yi

Health station nurses: females, 24-33 years, 3 Han, 1 Yi

Local villagers: 37-69 years, 5 Yi, 4 Dai

Case study 5:

Visited 1st-2nd March 2017.

Former reading room manager: male, 53 years, Lisu

Village Head: male, 49 years, Dai

Village administration staff: 32-37 years, Dai

Health station doctors: one female, two males, 32-44 years, Han¨

Military police officers: male 28 & 33 years, Han

Local villagers: 35-56 years, 4 Dai (3 female, 1 male) & 5 Lisu (4 male, 1 female), engaged in small scale trade and agriculture.

Case study 6:

Visited 16th – 28th Feb 2017, return visit 1st – 3rd April

Village Secretary: male, Lisu, 46 years

Village Head: male, Lisu, 39 years

Township Head, male, Han 43 years

Government township officials, male, 33-54 years, 1 Han, 2 Lisu

Village administrative staff, 37-48 years, 2 Lisu (male), 1 Dai (female)

Local villagers in the village and hamlets around, 17-76 years, 11 Lisu (9 female, 2 male) 9 Dai (4 female, 5 male), 7 Han (5 female, 2 male).

Engaged in agriculture and small trade (market goods, local shops, tea cultivation, coffee and tourism infrastructure, i.e. driver and mountain guides).

Case study 7:
Visited 3rd-7th March 2017. Return visit 28th – 30th March

Village Head: male, 58 years, Han

Reading room manager: male, 64 years, Dai

Local villagers: 47-69 years, 3 Han (female), 6 Lisu (4 female, 2 male), 5 Dai (3 female, 2 male).

Outside workers (5), 3 males, 2 females, 33-42 years, Han.

Villages not covered in "Case studies":
Village 9: Visited 13-14nd Feb. Interviews Village Head and reading room manager.

Village 10: Visited 9th March. Interview Village Head.

Village 11: Visited 10-12th March. Interview Village Head and reading room manager.

Village 12: Visited 13th March. Interview reading room manager.

Village 13: Visited 18th March. Interview Village Head.

Village 14: Visisted 19th March. Interview Village Secertary.

Village 15: Visited 25-27th March. Interview Village Head and reading room manager.

Also local villagers in all villages.

Others
Librarians, Regional City Library, 29th Jan 2017 and 3rd April 2017.

Male, 41 years, Han.

Female, 36 years, Han

Female, 44 years, Han

NGO-workers
Female, 38 years, Han, interviewed in Dali 27th Feb 2017.

Female, 42 years, Han, interviewed in Kunming, 8th April 2017.

Abbreviations

CCP (Chinese Communist Party).

GAPP (General Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television).

NSC (New Socialist Countryside).

PRC (People's Republic of China).

ZGNJSW (*Zhongguo Nongjia Shuwu Wang,* Chinese Reading Room Network).