Lessons in Being Chinese
Hansen, Mette Halskov

Published by University of Washington Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/85629

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2999747
By the end of 1982 most People’s Communes in Yunnan’s border areas had been abolished, and the peasants had contracted land under the new responsibility system. Many peasants in Sipsong Panna (and elsewhere) kept their children out of school to work in their new fields, and the new political atmosphere allowed for a more relaxed attitude toward religious practices. While the number of temples and novices in Sipsong Panna has steadily increased since 1982 in what some have called a “religious fever” (zongjiao re), the government established new minority schools, Tai classes, and special “novices classes” in order to attract more students.

THE REVIVAL OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION

Since the fourteenth century it has been common practice for Tai parents to send their sons to local Theravada temples to study the Buddhist sutras in Tai script. In many temples novices also read other material, such as traditional Tai stories and the history of the chao phaendin. Both the Nationalist and Communist Chinese governments have regarded this tradition as an obstruction to the spread of Chinese culture, language, and political rule, because it hindered the establishment of a successful Chinese educational system in Sipsong Panna. Monasteries were centers of education and religion, and virtually every Tai village had its own monastery, monks, and male novices. Novices studied for some years, after which most returned to secular lives. Some continued their Buddhist training and became monks when they were twenty years old. Normally monks enjoyed high prestige in the village, and elderly Tai today claim that it was very difficult for a man to get married if he had not been a novice.
Lay Buddhists, monks, and novices were all part of the *sangha*, the entire following of the Buddha: “The Buddha conceived of the pursuit of Nibbana [Nirvana] by layman and monk as fully complementary and reciprocal—the layman pursuing the goal in such a way as to provide the material necessities of life to the monk and the monk giving of himself to the layman by way of maintaining and manifesting the inspiring ideal and teaching and guiding the layman” (Lester 1973: 47). The role of the Buddhist laymen in the villages of Sipsong Panna was identical to that of the Tai in Ban Ping village in Northern Thailand, who earned merit by avoiding wrong actions, attending the temple, and bringing offerings to the temple, its monks, and novices (Moerman 1966: 140). Before being accepted as novices in the local temples, Tai boys in Sipsong Panna went through a period of pre-study, in which they still did not live in the temple but often frequented it, studied Tai language, and prepared to become novices within a year (in the fourth month of the Tai calendar). Often a small group became temple boys together, mostly with support from their parents, who had a share in the merit their son would gain by becoming a novice. For the parents’ afterlife it was essential that at least one son had been a novice. Each boy had a personal benefactor who supported his ordination. This person served as a kind of adoptive father and was responsible for instructing the boy about his life in the temple and making the necessary arrangements. At an important ordination ritual in the temple, the boys (who were mostly between seven and ten years old) became novices, received new names, and started wearing the yellow robe. All villagers contributed financially to the celebration in the temple, and most had parties at home as well. In the village the boys now enjoyed higher status and respect through their connection to the temple.

Between 1957 and 1980 this practice declined and even disappeared completely between 1966 and 1979 due to the repressive policy of the Chinese government. However, especially since 1982, religious expressions have returned to Sipsong Panna and with them the practice of training boys in the monasteries. In the part of Jinghong that is north of the Mekong River,

1. Though *sangha* may refer to all followers of Buddha, both lay and monastic, it often refers only to the monastic followers (Lester 1973: 48). According to Richard Gombrich, the term is ambiguous and commonly refers to those who are ordained (Gombrich 1995 [1988]: 2, 18–20).
Han influence and antireligious policies have been most persistent, and here only a few temples have been rebuilt, few boys today become novices, and school attendance is comparatively high. In other areas of Sipsong Panna, especially in the southern part of Jinghong and Mengla and the whole county of Menghai, the upsurge in religious activity has been strong.

According to several interviewees, the so-called “religious fever” began in 1982, when people finally dared to believe that they were free to restart their religious practices. However, because a whole generation had not studied in temples and monks had either fled the country or resumed lay life, the Tai faced the practical problem of finding monks who could teach the new novices in the local temples that they had started to rebuild, mostly with their own money. Most Tai families have relatives in Thailand or Burma, and, mainly through contacts with them, many villages were able to invite foreign monks to Sipsong Panna. The gradual improvement of the Tai peasants’ economy also made possible the increasing number of temples, monks, and novices. In 1982 there were 145 temples, 36 monks, and 655 novices in the whole of Sipsong Panna. Twelve years later, in 1994, there were 435 temples, 509 monks, and 5,336 novices. The largest increase took place between 1982 and 1984, according to the Sipsong Panna Prefecture Bureau of Religions.

In the first years of the religious upsurge, when many villages still did not have a monk, novices were often alone in the monasteries with nobody to teach them and without any idea of how to lead a Buddhist life. Often an elderly villager who had been a monk or novice earlier in his life would try to guide the boys. Today there are still some poorer villages without a learned monk to teach their novices, and in some villages peasants complain that their monk is insufficiently educated. Thus, there are today considerable differences among villages. To the disapproval of many foreign and local monks, novices in these temples often spend their time smoking, playing pool, and enjoying their free time.

In the numerous villages where foreign monks (mostly from Thailand or Burma) serve as educators or where local monks have been properly trained

---

2. Temples have to report the number of novices to the Bureau of Religions, which keeps statistics on the numbers of monks, novices, and temples.

3. In 1987 the county government in Mengla "urged" all thirty-four foreign monks in the county to leave Sipsong Panna, in accordance with the prefectural government's policy.
as teachers, villagers express satisfaction with the situation. Most of those I talked to were happy to send their boys to the monastery and had high esteem for the monk. However, some parents explained that even if they would like their children to go to a Chinese school, they had no way of forcing boys who preferred the monasteries. I did not find this explanation very convincing, since most of the boys were only seven to ten years old when they became novices. Teachers, however, confirmed that this was an explanation commonly heard from parents. Probably it was a tactful way for some parents to excuse themselves for not insisting on keeping the boys in school when facing representatives of the Chinese educational system. Although I always tried to make the purpose of my interviews clear to interviewees, some villagers thought that I represented the Chinese school system and feared criticism for not sending boys to school. Some later told me that they had thought that I, a university graduate, would regard their temple education as backward and useless. These parents’ reluctance to force their children to attend school illustrates that—even though most Tai have accepted the Chinese schools as part of village life and are mostly happy to have a school in their neighborhood—they do not consider such education essential. Most villagers I talked to felt that children should try the school for a few years, and if they did not like it or were not good enough, they might as well stop. If they had a good monk in the village, parents considered Buddhist education at least as good as Chinese school education in terms of learning how to read and write. More importantly, they regarded it as essential for moral training and for earning merit for their sons and themselves. The practice of sending boys to receive Buddhist education is a tradition built on religious belief and is a habitual practice for many Tai. It is a significant component of Tai ethnic identity and a practical way of transmitting Tai script, history, and cultural values. In comparison, the Chinese school in Sipsong Panna is a poor competitor.

However, due to the previous repressive policies of the Chinese government, a whole generation of men and fathers have not been novices themselves. Many consider it less important for boys today to become novices or find it sufficient for boys to study in the temple for a few months. Sometimes these men are urged by village elders to send their sons to the monasteries, and generally mothers tend to be more strongly in favor of upholding the
tradition. Again, one of the most important factors determining local support for temple education is the quality of the teaching monk. A Tai mother of two sons remarked,

[Concerning her sixteen-year-old son:] He attended the village school for two years. He passed the examination to the higher primary school [from third to sixth grade in a school three kilometers away], but he did not want to continue there. All his friends were to become novices, so he wanted that as well. Even if we had wanted him to go to school, we had no way. Now he has been a monk for three years. [Concerning the son of twelve:] He went to school for two years in the village and did not pass the examination to continue into higher primary school. He tried again, but failed. Then the teacher suggested that he should go instead to the monastery to learn Tai script, which is also very good. Education is very good, and it does not matter if it is in the school or the monastery. The monk we have now is very good. He has a lot of knowledge, and it is good for us to have him here. I hope our older son will first become a monk in four years [when he is twenty]. Then he can be a monk for four or five years, and then he can return to lay life and become a peasant. When they are twenty they are grown up and want to marry.

This mother came from a village that had invited a young monk from Thailand, who had also begun teaching Thai to all interested villagers and who planned to invite a Tai to teach Chinese to the novices. His understanding of the situation in the village corresponded to that of most of the parents I talked to: “There will be more and more novices in this village because now they can really gain knowledge here in the temple. When a monk can provide the children with knowledge, the parents are very happy to send them to the monastery. If they do not learn very much, parents will instead encourage them to go to school.” In this village the school recruited new pupils every second year, and after two years of study the children participated in an examination that determined whether they could continue on to the primary school in the administrative village three kilometers away. In the summer of 1994 nineteen pupils graduated after two years of study in this village school, twelve continued on to the full primary school, six boys became novices and
dropped out of school, and one boy dropped out without becoming a novice. The only teacher in this school belonged to the Yi minzu and spoke and understood only Chinese. All children in the school spoke Tai and only a little Chinese. There was no possibility of learning Tai in school during these first two years.

In several monasteries, monks now teach mathematics, Thai language, and (more rarely) Chinese. The most important temple in Sipsong Panna, Wat Pa Jie Maharajatan in Manting Park, has recently begun offering higher education for novices and monks who are sent back to village temples after completing studies. In this way the temple has attempted to diminish the antagonism between school and monastery education. One monk expressed the problem thus: “In the temple, children do not learn modern knowledge. In school, they do not learn how to be a good human being.” The temple in Manting was rebuilt in 1989 and reopened in 1990. In 1995 a huge building with teaching facilities was inaugurated, financed mainly by sponsors from Thailand but also with support from the prefectural government. In 1990 about twenty monks from Wat Pa Jie Maharajatan were in Thailand studying in Buddhist monasteries, and by the end of 1994 almost half had returned to start teaching in the temple. It was hoped that the capacity of twenty-five novices could be expanded to two or three hundred within the next few years. Most novices (Tai and a few Blang) came from poor villages, and many of them had parents who either could not afford or were not particularly interested in letting them continue in regular schools. In the temple they got a free education of one or three years, after which they were sent to village temples as monks. According to one of the monks in the temple, this was the first attempt in Sipsong Panna to set up a comprehensive Buddhist training that included the study of modern subjects:

The influence of religion in Sipsong Panna is definitely less than before 1957. In total there might be more monks now, but they study for a shorter period of time and are less qualified. Therefore, we want to increase the teaching of knowledge within the monasteries. Before, there was no Buddhist school [Fojiao xuexiao]. Now we are starting one, a real temple

4. Among those from this particular village who continue on to the full primary school, only a few graduate. The rest drop out after a few years.
school [\textit{simiao xuexiao}]. Here novices can go to school while studying Buddhism.

Apart from Buddhist studies in Tai script, the novices were taught Chinese by a Tai with a teacher's education, using Tai as the language of instruction. The government had given permission for establishment of the new school, insisting that Chinese should be taught with national teaching material. Thus, the novices studied Chinese-language materials intended for the first three years of primary school. One class had already graduated in Thai studies, and the temple planned to offer English classes when one of the monks returned from college. Students were also eventually supposed to receive education in mathematics, geography, and local history based upon Tai texts.

All monks and novices I talked to were very excited about the new school that would bridge the gap between Buddhist teaching and the demand for knowledge in modern subjects and Chinese language. Very few boys in Sipsong Panna who have been novices for more than a few months manage to get an education beyond the primary school level. There are several reasons for this: their level of Chinese is insufficient, it is difficult for them to attend school while studying in the monastery, they earn no credits for learning to read and write their own language, some parents consider it a waste of money to pay for a school education that does not lead to a job or further education, and many are not motivated to get a Chinese education at all. Therefore, the higher Buddhist education in the temple in Manting is a welcome alternative for the small percentage of novices who get a chance to study there.

In the early 1980s, religious activities in Sipsong Panna were centered on rebuilding temples and restarting the tradition of temple education from scratch. In the last few years, encouraged by increasing contacts across the international borders, attitudes toward temple education have been slowly changing. Even though most Tai in the mid-1980s wanted to educate at least one son in the temple for religious purposes, many had been influenced by the extensive government propaganda that insisted that only Chinese schools could promote economic modernization. Buddhist education and modern (i.e., Chinese school) education were presented as mutually exclusive. Through their contacts across the borders, more and more Tai people in Sipsong Panna learned that in Thailand there is a closer connection between
EDUCATION IN SIPSONG PANNA SINCE 1980

schools and temples, monks sometimes participate in common teachers training courses, teachers in elementary schools may take a special course in teaching Buddhism, and larger temples offer courses for girls and boys who are not novices—and Thailand nevertheless has a developed economy. Thus, a number of interviewed Tai from south of the Mekong River questioned the thesis of the mutual exclusiveness of modern and Buddhist education.

CHINESE ATTITUDES TOWARD TEMPLE EDUCATION

Generally speaking, most Han cadres, teachers, and researchers in and outside Sipsong Panna continue to express negative views of the influence of Buddhist education on the Tai. A few researchers elsewhere in Yunnan (mostly belonging to minority minzu themselves, but also some Han) expressed a much more open view of temple education than did most local cadres and teachers in Sipsong Panna. Many local Tai schoolteachers and government officials trained in Chinese schools share the negative view, although elderly officials and teachers who have themselves been monks tend to be more positive. The most concrete criticism of temple education is that it employs backward teaching methods; because of the monks’ low educational level, too many novices are illiterate after they leave the temples; and it prevents girls from learning to read and write. Some of the most highly educated Tai monks are attempting to solve these problems. Because Tai girls traditionally were never taught in monasteries, most monks feel that it would be impossible to extend education to girls and that female education is not their responsibility. Recently, however, some monks have tried to arrange courses in Tai or Thai for all villagers, including females. Other commonly raised objections against monastery training are far more extensive and directed toward the heart of temple education. It is said, for instance, that temple education obstructs modernization by preventing the spread of Chinese culture:

But the Buddhist temple education is a religious, theological education, the purpose of which is to teach people to stand aloof from worldly affairs, detest life, and escape the present to jump out of the sea of bitterness and into Nirvana. It wants people to seek a passive life, not an active life. It gives people the knowledge of how to follow the way of Buddha, but not the strength to understand and change the world. . . . This kind of edu-
cation fosters, to a large extent, people who follow religion, the feudal ruling clique, and traditional culture. Their function is to defend feudal and religious rule. This is a force that restrains and blocks development for Tai society and culture and which faces a conflict with the historical tide of modernization. (Sun Ruoqiong et al., eds. 1990: 266)

This text on minority education goes on to argue that the only way to promote modern education in Sipsong Panna is to penetrate the traditional outlook of the Tai, who tend to prefer the well-known, old-fashioned education. Forbidding temple education is no solution; instead, ways must be found to convince people that only in Chinese schools will their children be brought up to adapt to the modernizing world. Buddhism, on the other hand, is held responsible for bringing up a population of self-centered and xenophobic people:

From the perspective of cultural psychology, the ancient and once splendid Buddhist culture has caused the religious Tibetans and Tai to create a feeling of cultural superiority that puts themselves in the center. This attitude of superiority is partly an expression of highly cherishing the concepts and behavior of their own minzu's culture, and partly an expression of despising and excluding other cultures. (Ibid.: 268).

Recently, this objectification of so-called Tai psychological characteristics has been criticized by a few Chinese researchers who are not dealing specifically with education (see, e.g., Liu Yan 1993: 279). Zhang Shiya (1992) has made a general and theoretical study of religious education in southwest China, and, although he does not discuss education in Sipsong Panna in detail, he is generally much more positive and analytical toward religious education than are most Chinese researchers of Buddhist education in Sipsong Panna. Many remain profoundly worried that Buddhism is obstructing the Tai's possibilities for development. The people within Sipsong Panna who are most negative toward temple education and see no potential in it are the Han who occupy high positions in school administration, headmasters, older teachers in administrative posts, and Han cadres in the government education departments—people with great influence on local forms of education. They tend to see Buddhist education as the main force preventing boys from having a Chinese education, and they rarely acknowledge problems within the Chinese
EDUCATION IN SIPSONG PANNA SINCE 1980

educational system itself. Many are worried that the Tai might become “even more backward” than the minorities living in the mountains, who have always been considered to be most backward by the incoming Chinese and the Tai themselves.  

Many Tai teachers and cadres, especially those living in Jinghong City, share this critical view of the institution of temple education. The Tai who have a Chinese education themselves would never let their sons participate in Buddhist education, because it would prevent them from moving upward in Chinese society. However, they tend to be more open toward the idea of cooperation between schools and temples. In the early 1950s some monks were invited to teach in the new schools, but during the resurgence of religious activities since 1980, cooperation between monasteries and schools has been extremely limited. Usually monks and teachers are in contact with each other only when teachers go to monasteries to inform monks that novices must go to school, or when monks go to schools to obtain permission for novices in school to participate in temple activities. There is a strong conflict of interest between monks and teachers, which was expressed very clearly in a junior secondary school in a small town where the resurgence of religion has been very strong. In this school thirteen out of fifteen teachers were Han, whereas 40 percent of the students were Tai and only 10 percent were Han. When I visited the school, one of the most important Buddhist festivals in the township was under way, and Tai people came from all over the neighborhood to celebrate for two whole days. However, the students in the school had no time off. The teachers’ attitudes toward this religious event were expressed clearly by a teacher who firmly stated, “This has nothing to do with us!”

A few highly educated Han and Tai in Sipsong Panna have a more positive view of temple education, mainly because they regard it is an opportunity for boys who cannot pass the examinations within the school system. However, with recent attempts by scholarly monks in Sipsong Panna to set up higher education for novices, a more respectful attitude toward temple

5. Although these government officials would paraphrase the official policy when talking in their office with other cadres walking in and out, many were more radical in their opposition to temple education when talking in private. A few (retired) cadres were, on the contrary, more positive when talking privately.
Education seems to be slowly developing among some Tai with a higher Chinese education, who (mostly privately) acknowledge that Buddhist education has not prevented Thailand from modernizing, and that it is therefore wrong to blame the tradition of educating novices for slow economic development among the Tai in Sipsong Panna. By claiming that Buddhist education is changing, they indirectly reject the common Chinese view of temple education as static. However, it is beyond dispute that temple education today is an obstacle to the spread of Chinese education and thus Chinese culture, language, nationalism, and knowledge of Chinese history. This is the main reason why Chinese authorities, including cadres and teachers, are firmly against it.

Responses to “Religious Fever”:
Special “Novices Classes” and Regulations

Between 1980 and 1983 the government in Sipsong Panna faced a situation in which school attendance was less than 60 percent and the drop-out rate very high, especially south of the Mekong River. This was a result partly of the resumption of sending boys to the temples, and partly of the new system of contracting fields, which caused parents to keep their children home to work. Some schools were almost empty, some had only female pupils, and most boys dropped out after a few years. A number of measures were introduced to force parents to send their children to school, and today the education departments, teachers, and school administrators still discuss how to increase the number of graduates at all levels. Almost 90 percent of children start school in Sipsong Panna today, but only 55.5 percent complete five years of study (Sipsong Panna Prefecture Education Commission 1992: 2). Although 67 percent of novices enrolled in school in 1994, few stayed there for more than a few years.

After the start of “religious fever,” the government sent teachers, cadres, and representatives from the government-sponsored Buddhist Association

---

6. Primary school education in Sipsong Panna is six years, but in the countryside it usually is divided into four years of lower and two years of higher primary school. An examination after four years determines whether children are qualified to continue on to higher primary school.
to Tai villages to persuade parents to send their children to school. It was emphasized that boys were allowed to become novices only after graduation from primary school, but in practice this rule proved impossible to enforce. The government decided to make the local township governments responsible for finding methods to increase the school enrollment rate (ruxue lü) and the retention rate (gonggu lü) in the villages. Generally, it was decided that monks could wear their yellow robes in school, take a few days off for special Buddhist activities, and start school even after the usual age of seven. Today the rule is that novices are obliged to start school before they are twelve. They are also allowed special treatment in boarding schools, where, for instance, they share rooms with other novices or get upper bunks so that they do not have to sleep under the bunk of a layman. One Tai teacher explained,

In the 1980s the novices did not want to go to school, so in 1987 the central government started to pay attention to this problem, and the government ruled that novices were obliged to go to school. In spite of enjoying wide religious freedom, the monks also have to follow the laws of the state, so they started to send their novices to school. Now they do come to school, but they do not study. They think it is enough to be in the temple, and they think they are like adults because of the high status they enjoy in their villages. Of course they all learn to read old Tai pretty well, but anyway they use it only for reading the Buddhist texts.

One of the most controversial experiments was carried out in Mengzhe Township in Menghai County, one of the areas where the religious influence is strongest. In 1980 only 71.5 percent of children started school there, so in 1987 the local government decided to set up a special “novices class” inside the main temple to teach novices Chinese and mathematics. In 1988 the class consisted of sixty novices between the ages of nine and nineteen from surrounding villages. The experiment lasted only two years. Although researchers and educators in Kunming spoke very positively of it, the local administration decided to abandon it because teaching was impossible when novices returned to lay life, and age differences made it impossible to accomplish the original, ambitious plan of teaching each student for five or six years.
Menghai is a poor county and lacked financial support for the experiment. Some local people also suggested that local monks might have been poorly motivated.

A few other experiments with special novices classes within schools were carried out in the mid- and late 1980s, but today there are no such classes in Sipsong Panna in temples or schools. Novices in schools are distributed among the regular classes and follow the regular curriculum. The temple that ran the experiment is located next to the village primary school, yet the monk I talked to did not know how many of the temple’s thirty-six novices went to the school. He assumed that the novices were in a special class in the school, but in fact they were not. Out of seventy-two pupils in the school, seventeen were novices. According to one of the three teachers, novices study for only a few years. As in many village schools in Sipsong Panna, all three teachers were Han, and only one understood a little bit of Tai. All students were Tai and understood very little Chinese during their early years in school.

Teachers who have novices in their classes often complain that they are impossible to teach and run away as soon as they encounter problems. If one or two drop out, the rest quickly follow. One teacher explained: “The novices enjoy high status in the local society, and therefore they do not listen to the teachers. They listen only to the monks. When they are in the monastery, parents also do not interfere. Teachers are afraid to scold or demand anything from the novices, because then they are even more likely to run away from school.” Economic pressure has proved to be the most efficient way of forcing parents and monks to send boys and novices to school, but it is still rare for a township government to decide to fine parents for not sending their sons to school. Mengzhe Township has high numbers of novices, monks, and temples. Approximately one thousand new pupils start school every year, but because only about 50 percent complete primary school, some administrative villages in Mengzhe began fining parents who do not send their children to school. One village decided that if parents want a son to become a novice (around the age of seven or eight), they must pay a deposit of fifty yuan to the village administration. If the boy graduates after six years of primary school, the parents get the money back. If a son manages to pass the examination to junior secondary school, the parents get an extra reward, but this rarely happens. Teachers now have to report to the county Bureau of Education every
year about the number of novices in their village, how many of them go to school, and how many have dropped out during the last year. Approximately 50 percent of the novices in Menghai County today go to school.7

Currently there are eighty novices studying in Mengzhe Central Primary School (Mengzhe Zhongxin Xiaoxue),8 and in village schools all over Sipsong Panna novices participate in the same classes as other pupils. However, beyond the primary school level, very few novices or monks attend school. Of the few boys who have been novices and manage to pass the examinations for further studies, most return to lay life before continuing their studies. However, there are exceptions, especially from Mengzhe Township, where in recent years some novices have continued on to secondary education and a few (fewer than five) have gone on to higher education.

REGULAR SCHOOLS, TAI CLASSES, AND MINORITY SCHOOLS

The provincial and central education departments have accepted that Sipsong Panna will achieve only six years of prefecture-wide compulsory education by the year 2000. Only the three county seats and a few townships in Sipsong Panna have already achieved this. In 1990 minority minzu represent 73.1 percent of the population and 76 percent of primary school students in Sipsong Panna. However, beyond primary school the proportion of non-Han students drops: in junior secondary school 58 percent are minorities, in senior secondary school 31.37 percent, in vocational schools 70.78 percent, and in specialized secondary schools 59.9 percent. In primary schools 60 percent of teachers belong to minority minzu, compared to only 35 percent of all Sipsong Panna's teachers and school administrators (Sipsong Panna Prefecture Education Commission 1992:2).


8. Each township has a zhongxin xiaoxue, which is a full primary school where pupils living in the township and the best pupils from surrounding villages can study for the last two years of primary school. Unlike the village schools, these central primary schools follow all regulations concerning curriculum. Their teachers are generally better educated, and they often have fewer students per teacher than do village primary schools. They often have boarding facilities for the students from the villages, who bring and cook their own food.
Regular Schools

The best regular schools in Sipsong Panna, in terms of educational level of teachers and the number of students who continue on to the next level, are the keypoint primary and secondary schools in Jinghong and schools located on state rubber plantations (state farms). The Bureau of Education does not administer the schools on state farms (*nongchang*), which have their own administration and policies on recruiting students and teachers. Since about 85 percent of the people living and working on state farms are Han immigrants and their families, most students in these schools are Han. Seventeen percent of the population in Sipsong Panna is connected to state farms, and most of the minorities on the farms (approximately 15 percent of the farm population) have been recruited outside of Panna or among the Akha.  

The biggest of the ten state farms is Jinghong State Farm, where more than thirty thousand people live. It has a full primary and secondary school with more than 1,700 students. The schools have 103 teachers, of whom one is Tai and the rest are Han. Normally students are recruited from within the state farm, but students from outside are allowed to enter if they pay four hundred yuan extra per year in primary school and seven hundred yuan in senior secondary school (in 1994). According to the headmaster, “very few” students in state farm schools are non-Han. The administration would not give exact figures, but other interviews showed that only occasionally does a Tai or other local non-Han from outside the farm enroll. This happens in cases where parents have a connection to a farm or when an outside school has an agreement with a state farm to send one or two of its best students to the state farm’s school after graduation from primary school. State-farm schools have no lessons in Tai, which is considered completely irrelevant since there are no Tai students. As in other schools, there is no question of offering Tai lessons to non-Tai students, even though the Tai constitute the majority in Sipsong Panna and it is a Tai Autonomous Prefecture.

The two local keypoint schools, which have the best educational facilities and financial support outside the state farms, also have the highest percentage of Han students and teachers. Both schools were started in the mid-1950s and have had an increasingly high percentage of Han students, due to the

9. See also Hansen 1999a.
EDUCATION IN SIPSONG PANNA SINCE 1980

growing number of Han cadres in the capital, Jinghong. Students today need 280 points out of 600 to be admitted into a keypoint secondary school, as compared to 200 points for the other regular secondary school in Jinghong. Members of minority minzu get 10 extra points. All representatives of the secondary school’s leadership and 78 out of 84 teachers are Han. In 1992 the school had 1,370 students, of which 227 were Tai and 830 were Han. Most minority students are the children of cadres in Jinghong, and many of the students classified as Dai have one Han parent. Mainly because of advantages within the educational system, all over China most children of mixed Han-minority marriages are registered as members of the minority minzu of the non-Han parent. In Sipsong Panna most children of interethnic marriages have a Han father and a Tai mother. From an educational point of view, they have the advantage of being brought up speaking the Chinese language while being able to exploit the favorable admission rules for minority students. Only a few of the non-Han students manage to continue on to higher education; in 1993 and 1994 not a single Tai graduate from the keypoint senior secondary school passed the university entrance examination. An administrator at the school explains this in terms of a common cultural deficiency of the Tai:

Han students generally work much harder than the Tai. The Tai are not like us Han, who find education extremely important. The Tai children are not good at “eating bitterness” [chi ku]. Their economy is rather good, they are satisfied with life, and they do not want to work hard for something. This is not like the Jinuo and the Hani, who are used to “eating bitterness.” This is a Tai autonomous prefecture, and this problem has always existed. We are discussing what to do about it, how to help the Tai students. We want to make more efforts in our “family work” [jiating gongzuo], where we talk to parents and try to persuade them to support their children’s going to school.

When the school was started in 1957, it had one special class for Tai students who learned new Tai, but this was quickly cancelled. Today there are no lessons in Tai, and the administration has no plans for restarting Tai classes, which are considered to be relevant only in villages where children do not know Chinese: “All of our students understand Chinese. We have no language problems and do not need to start any Tai lessons” (Han administrator).
A common attitude of teachers and administrators at the best Chinese schools is that the teaching of Tai language is necessary only to facilitate the learning of Chinese. It has no value in itself, nor is there any reason that Han students living in the Tai autonomous prefecture should learn the Tai language. It has no prestige, no practical function at higher levels of education, and teachers and cadres in Sipsong Panna often say that "Tai language is useless when crossing the Mekong River."

**Tai Classes**

Primary schools in Sipsong Panna may decide to offer classes in Tai language, and school teachers in Tai villages are encouraged by the Bureau of Education to use Tai to explain Chinese terms and sentences that students do not understand. In reality this is seldom practiced, due to the shortage of Tai teachers. This problem exists in other minority villages in Sipsong Panna as well where most teachers do not speak the local language. In principle, the Bureau of Education wants to appoint local primary school teachers who speak the language of the local pupils. However, such people still are in short supply, and so is outside funding to train more Tai teachers. The issue of bilingual education is normally addressed only in relation to the Tai, because other local ethnic groups—such as the Akha, Blang, and Jinuo—do not have scripts. Although a considerable number of them know Tai, they never participate in the Tai lessons in schools.

In the mid- and late 1980s several primary schools offered teaching in Tai language, but most stopped after a few years. Today many full primary schools in Tai administrative villages and county seats offer Tai lessons, but only to a very limited degree and for a small percentage of students. The major reasons for this are the poor financial situation of many schools, the shortage of Tai teachers versed in Tai script, and, not least, disagreement within the government and among school staff on the need for and utility of Tai lessons.

Most primary schools that offer Tai lessons have one class of students who, in addition to studying the regular curriculum, participate in one or two hours of Tai per week for the last one to three years of primary school. In 1986 the prefectural government decided to abandon the use and teaching of new Tai and return to a standardized version of old Tai. This created problems because a whole generation of Tai had learned only new Tai in schools. Girls
and women who had attended schools or literacy courses since the mid-1950s, and boys and young men who had grown up when few were able to become novices and learn old Tai in the temples, had all learned new Tai or Chinese. The local newspaper, which had always used new Tai, started using old Tai in 1993. According to one of its editors, many people were against this because they were not able to read old Tai, and the journalists themselves had problems adapting to it. On the other hand, many of the Tai who had been against the reintroduction of old Tai in schools seemed by the mid-1990s to be gradually changing their opinions because of the increasing contact with Thailand, Burma, and Laos. Therefore, it was surprising that in 1996 the government decided once again to return to new Tai. Because, as before, teaching material had to be rewritten, all Tai classes seem to have been interrupted during the 1996–97 academic year, waiting for the new teaching material. Obviously this move will add to the confusion resulting from teaching two versions of the script, and traditional Tai will again be taught only to male novices in the monasteries.10

When the government decided to return to old Tai in 1986, new teaching material for Tai classes in primary schools had to be edited, and this was based on the first old Tai teaching material created in the early 1950s. All schools that offered teaching in Tai during my fieldwork in 1994–95 used old Tai. However, the majority of students in secondary schools had learned new Tai, if indeed they had learned Tai at all. Often teachers and even headmasters at schools were not aware that their own school had started teaching old Tai, and many teachers and cadres seemed to believe that Tai education was much more widespread than in fact it was. This was partly a reflection of a common tendency of teachers and administrators (especially the non-Tai) to regard bilingual education as unimportant. Some had never paid attention to the actual level and scope of Tai teaching in the area, while others believed (or wanted me to believe) that Tai teaching was very widespread as a result of the official policy of supporting Tai education in schools. The majority of pri-

10. It is still unclear what the consequences of the new decision will be. Informal talks with locals in 1996 suggested that some Tai teachers felt very confused about the decision. The only explanation I was given was that new Tai is easier to learn and to use for computer programming than is old Tai.
mary schools that teach Tai arrange one special Tai class. Pupils usually may decide themselves if they want to participate, and although Han and other minzu are allowed to attend these classes, they never do. Most Tai from these classes graduate with an examination that gives them extra points for the entrance into junior secondary school.\textsuperscript{11} The keypoint primary school in Jinghong City has had so-called “bilingual classes” (\textit{shuangyu ban}) since 1978. Most of the sixty pupils in the two Tai classes in 1994 came from the nearby village of Manjinglan, and only a few were from Jinghong. The Han students (42 percent of all pupils) never participated. The children in the “bilingual class” learn Tai for two hours a week from the third to the sixth year of primary school. According to the headmaster, “The bilingual class is not so important here, because there are so many Han, and the Tai quickly learn Chinese.” A number of other primary schools started teaching Tai in the mid-1980s, but many of these classes stopped after a few years due to the lack of teachers or because a few hours of Tai did not prevent boys from going into the monasteries.

Most of the Tai students in secondary and higher education who came from the northern part of Sipsong Panna or from Jinghong had never learned Tai in school, whereas the majority of those from village schools and from south of the Mekong River had learned some Tai (either in school or at home). Some used it for writing letters and taking notes in class, but most of those who had not also been novices found that they had never learned to read and write Tai properly, or they had quickly forgotten it because they seldom used it after primary school.

One of the few primary schools that experimented with real bilingual education was situated in an administrative village in Jinghong. Here children in the bilingual class learned only Tai for the first year. In the second year they started to learn Chinese taught in Tai. From then on more and more teaching was conducted in Chinese, but children continued learning Tai throughout the six years of primary school. The first bilingual class started in 1989 and the second in 1994, and beginning in 1995 the school hoped to

\textsuperscript{11} Out of three hundred possible points, participation in the Tai classes and examination contribute between ten and thirty extra. Regular subjects contribute up to one hundred points at the examination.
start a new Tai class each year. However, this experiment was interrupted in 1996 with the decision to return again to new Tai, and it was unclear whether the school would find financial support to continue the bilingual classes at all. Only two out of ten classes in 1994–95 were bilingual Tai classes, but the normal classes also received two hours of Tai per week from the third year onward. Ninety-eight percent of the students and half of the teachers in this school were Tai. Most of the Tai I talked to in the six villages in this district were very positive toward bilingual education, including those whose own children did not participate in it. The county Bureau of Education still considered these to be experimental classes, and there was strong disagreement on whether to continue and expand them.

The only school beyond the primary level that teaches Tai in Sipsong Panna is the Normal School, which offers one bilingual Tai class a year, the purpose of which is to train teachers to instruct in the Tai language and to teach Tai script in primary schools. At the Normal School 28.7 percent of students (and 18 percent of teachers) are Tai. When the first Tai classes after the Cultural Revolution started in 1984, all students had to participate. According to one of the teachers and to administrators, however, students did not attend these classes. They considered it a waste of time and too difficult when they did not know spoken Tai. In response, the school substituted a bilingual Tai class (first in new Tai, then in old Tai in 1990–97, and again in new Tai thereafter).¹² The textbooks for the study of Tai language were edited in the prefecture. They contained texts about the history of Sipsong Panna, the chronology of the chao phaendin, Han and Tai traditional stories, and instructions on writing letters, applications, and so on. Students themselves could not choose between the bilingual Tai class and regular classes, but all who were admitted to the bilingual class had to understand spoken Tai when they started. The attitude of students and graduates from the bilingual Tai classes toward their education was generally very positive, and several hoped to be able to start up evening courses in Tai for adults in the villages where they would be sent as teachers after graduation. Although most students criticized the tradition of sending boys to the monasteries, they maintained that the novices at least had the advantage of learning Tai script: "It is both good and bad

¹². Some students and teachers from the regular classes suggested that all students at the Normal School ought to learn spoken Tai, but so far this has not been implemented.
that most boys become novices. The bad thing is that they often stay at the monasteries and do not go home to help, that they are too sluggish and do not learn enough. On the other hand it is difficult to learn Tai in school, and in the monastery they at least have the chance to learn it" (Tai female student). The only other institution in China where the Tai language is taught beyond the primary school level is the Yunnan Institute of the Nationalities, which has a four-year university course in Sipsong Panna Tai (and in Dehong Tai). Most of the Tai from Sipsong Panna who graduate from this department are sent back to Panna as teachers, translators, or employees of the government, local television station, or newspaper. Some find work in private companies, which tend to pay higher wages.

Whereas most interviewed people in Sipsong Panna agreed on the usefulness of the Tai course at the Yunnan Institute of the Nationalities and the necessity for the bilingual class at the Normal School, they disagreed on the issues of bilingual education and of the teaching of Tai in regular primary and secondary schools. Teachers, school administrators, and members of the Bureau of Education in the three counties and the prefecture were roughly divided between a majority who saw the teaching of Tai as a temporary necessity, and a minority who wanted expansion and improvement of Tai-language instruction in primary schools, in examinations, and in secondary education. The main arguments for maintaining but not expanding Tai lessons in primary schools were that they were considered necessary only until Tai understood and read Chinese, and that they provided a means of persuading Tai parents to send their children, especially their boys, to participate in Chinese education. Therefore, some administrators emphasized that the goal of the bilingual Tai class in the Normal School was not to spread the knowledge of Tai language and culture, but to facilitate its gradual, natural, and voluntary disappearance:

*The final goal is to make all people in China speak Chinese* [putonghua]. *So the final goal of the bilingual class is to make everybody in Sipsong Panna speak our mother tongue. They can use Tai to explain in schools when necessary, but the idea is certainly not that everybody should learn Tai script*

13. Most students in the Tai department at YIN also take two years of standard Thai which has become very popular because of the increasing business contacts with Thailand.
or that Tai language should be spread further. There are too many languages in China—it would be impossible to teach them all. Teachers in primary schools may themselves decide when it is necessary to speak Tai. They have to teach Tai script, but not to all the pupils. (Han Chinese teacher and administrator in a secondary school)

Some cadres feared that because the Tai were concerned about learning their own script, they risked becoming “more backward” than the minorities from the mountains, who had always been considered the most backward. They saw the rapid development of Chinese education among the small Jinuo minority, in particular, as proof of the educational advantages and civilizing effects of teaching more Chinese and less Tai. Another common argument was that the Tai language was simply not useful in a modernizing society: “You see, it would be impossible anyway to teach everything in Tai. Take for instance this fountain pen. The Tai do not have a word for ‘fountain pen,’ and this is even more so the case in modern science. So the Tai language is too backward to use as a medium for teaching” (Han teacher). One of the monks I interviewed, who also had a Chinese education, agreed that the Tai language had not modernized, but argued that this was due to previous repressive government policies. He expressed the fear that Tai would turn into a purely religious script unless serious attempts were made to expand its teaching and use in schools. In this respect he put into words what several other Tai intellectuals and monks expressed indirectly:

Tai script has become too backward. For years old Tai was forbidden and people were forced to learn the revised script. But new Tai is useless and impractical. Even if you have learned it you cannot read the old texts. Because the Tai script was said to be a “feudal reactionary script” [fēngjiān fǎndòng wén], it did not have any chance to develop. Today only a few use it for writing, and it is very confusing to find out how to write or translate new words like “television,” for instance. In this way it risks becoming a script used only for religious purposes and for telling the old stories.

A small but growing number of Tai teachers, cadres, and students had started to raise (mostly in private) the question of introducing the Tai language into
secondary schools, expanding its use in primary schools, and making the study of Tai history and culture part of the common school curriculum and examinations. They criticized the fact that parents were forced to send their boys to the temples if they wanted them to learn Tai, and some believed that schools would be much more attractive to the common people if they were based on the Tai language and included Tai history and literature in the curriculum. Others had a more practical point of view and argued that schools would become relevant and successful among the Tai peasants only when they taught useful knowledge of agriculture in the Tai language, or guaranteed graduates attractive job opportunities. Some of the more pragmatic Han cadres felt that teaching the Tai language in schools should be extended mainly so that parents would not send their boys to the temples.

In the meantime many peasants continue to send their boys to the monasteries, although this does not necessarily imply that they are directly against their children's receiving a Chinese education. However, due to the lack of cooperation between monasteries and schools and to the rejection of Buddhism and Tai language, history, and culture inherent in the Chinese educational system, Chinese schools are less attractive. This is, of course, further influenced by the fact that parents must pay for school, children sometimes must travel far to attend school, and many parents consider it a waste when their children do not continue in the school system, do not get a job, and end up as peasants who have not learned anything about peasantry during their years in school.

**Boarding and Minority Schools**

Since 1980 the central Ministry of Education has required that boarding and semiboarding schools be promoted in mountainous and border areas in order to solve the problem of low attendance and high drop-out rates and to make sure that students attend full-time, standardized schools. As in the rest of China, the boarding-school system is praised in Sipsong Panna today not only for being a practical and economic solution in a poor rural area, but also for

---

14. In a semiboarding school, students may stay at the school for lunch. Each student gets financial support of seven yuan per month.
preventing students from dropping out of school and for making them do their homework. In addition, several Han cadres and educators in Sipsong Panna are very direct in describing the boarding-school system as an effective way of changing Tai customs and the “traditional way of thinking” (chuantong de sixiang). Most educators in Sipsong Panna were sincerely concerned about developing Chinese education among the Tai and saw the boarding system as the only way:

The minority children’s surroundings have to be changed if we are to manage to educate them. When they come here, they learn more, see new things, and develop their culture. Therefore it is good to have a boarding school for them in the city. It is much better for the children to develop here. If you do not change their environment, they do not change, but continue their habit of sending boys to the temples and living in the old way. (Han headmaster at a minority school)

There are four minority secondary schools in Sipsong Panna, and all students at these schools live there. In addition, some boarding students from rural areas attend regular secondary schools. Several full primary schools offer boarding facilities for higher primary students from villages.

Students of all ethnic groups whom I talked to at the minority schools looked, for the most part, positively on the boarding system, although for reasons other than those mentioned above. They were happy that they did not have to participate in work at home and therefore had more time to study. They found it hard to be able to visit home only once every six months, but had established close friendships with other students and were happy for the support they got from teachers in their spare time. During their education, many changed their perceptions of their religion, of other ethnic groups in China, and of their Tai identity.

All minority schools have rules about how many students should be Tai, and each year a number of students from all local minzu must be accepted, even though their points are not high enough. These schools are popular mainly because students get financial support from the government. However, because it is still a financial burden for many families to have a child in secondary school, they often find it a waste if children do not manage to con-
EDUCATION IN SIPSONG PANNA SINCE 1980

tinue on to higher education or to a specialized secondary school that guarantees a job.¹⁵

Students from regular middle schools tended to look down upon minority schools as second-rate, and many teachers complained about the difficulties of teaching in these schools, where less than 5 percent of students are Han and the vast majority come from villages where knowledge of Chinese is limited. Many students from the other schools held the erroneous view that, unlike themselves, students in the minority schools took special courses on the different minzu in Sipsong Panna and on Tai language. The minority schools in Sipsong Panna follow exactly the same standard curriculum as the regular secondary schools. The differences lie in the method of recruiting students, the special support for the schools, the fact that all students live at school, and of course the fact that minority minzu from rural areas constitute the vast majority of students. The minority schools were criticized by some teachers and cadres for isolating minorities and thereby preventing them from adapting to Chinese language and being influenced by “the more advanced” Han. On the other hand, if more minority students were to attend the regular secondary schools, admission rates would have to be lowered, special language considerations would have to be adopted, and economic support would have to be granted to these students. Most cadres in Jinghong and the other county capitals want their own children to get the best possible Chinese education to ensure their further studies and job opportunities. They would be unlikely to accept what they would regard as lowered standards for the sake of more minority students from the villages, and there is no question of introducing Tai language in these schools, because it would only make studies more difficult.

¹⁵. The Prefectural Minority School (Xishuangbanna Zhou Minzu Zhongxue) has the best facilities and the most financial support, and has received donations from Japan. In recent years, state support for the school was reduced so that in 1994 parents had to pay about fifty yuan per month for food and living expenses. In all minority schools (as in regular schools) students have to pay for books, clothing, and medicine, and since 1995 students in all senior secondary schools have had to pay twenty yuan per month for tuition. Financial support for boarding-school students varies, but since 1992 each school has divided the money according to students’ academic effort, participation in cleaning up, obedience, etc. In secondary boarding schools, on the other hand, students may get from seven yuan (for students with the lowest support in a minority school) to fifty yuan (for students with the maximum support in a specialized secondary school).
for the non-Tai students. Therefore, the system of special minority schools with no special curriculum is likely to continue.

CREATING BACKWARDNESS: TAI CULTURE IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

Except for the Tai in the bilingual class at the Normal School, minority students in Sipsong Panna study the same textbooks as the Naxi and most other students in the rest of China. Together with other students in Yunnan, they also study Yunnan history, and some classes in secondary education in Sipsong Panna study the recent, locally edited Geography of Sipsong Panna (Xishuangbanna dili). When asked directly what they have learned about their own ethnic group’s history, literature, and religion in school, most students in Sipsong Panna, like those in Lijiang, answered without hesitation, “Nothing.” However, when they talked more generally about what they knew about the different minzu in China, and when I read their textbooks and listened to some of their classes, it was clear that they do learn about their own minzu. However, most of what they learn is presented indirectly and tends to convey a negative image of their own cultural heritage. For instance, the fact that Tai language and literature do not have any place in secondary education transmits to students the message that they are not important subjects, not relevant for modern education or even in opposition to it.

Like Naxi students, the Tai are imbued, through their school education, with the official construction of the fifty-six minzu in China and, not least, their respective levels of development. The Tai students often realize for the first time that their classification as Dai links them with Tai people in other parts of China with whom they have no contact and of whom they know nothing. All of the Tai students I talked to were (sometimes painfully) aware that they belong to what is considered a backward minority group. Some found a certain comfort in the fact that the other minorities in Sipsong Panna were considered even more backward because they had no script or “real” religion and were poor. Before entering school, Tai students from villages had not been used to interacting with the minorities from the mountains, and many of them tended to regard these groups as inferior to themselves. This view is to a certain extent confirmed when they encounter the official textbook descriptions of the social evolution of the minzu. The following
dialogue is from a class on politics for the second year of junior secondary school in 1994. The subject was “the era of civilization” (*wenming shidai*). Approximately half of the students were Tai. The other half belonged to various other ethnic groups in Sipsong Panna such as Akha, Blang, Jinuo, and Lahu, who have generally been described in Chinese publications as occupying the low evolutionary stage of “primitive society” at the time of the Communist takeover in 1949. These non-Tai students belong to minorities without a script:

**TEACHER:** What is the characteristic of a “primitive society”?

**CLASS (in unison):** It has no script.

**TEACHER:** Right. Therefore mankind in primitive society had not yet entered the era of civilization. At the time of slave society, mankind entered the era of civilization. Before the time of slave society, people had no culture [*wenhua*], no science [*kexue*]. The most important characteristic of the era of civilization is the existence of script. In primitive society, people used knots, carvings on wood, and so forth to remember things. Genuine script developed from pictographic script. Therefore we have the following stages: from no script, to knots and carvings, to pictographic script, and finally to genuine script. Then, why was there no division between physical labor [*tīlì laodōng*] and mental labor [*náolí laodōng*] in primitive society?

**CLASS:** Because there was no script.

The Tai students learn that the other *minzu* in Sipsong Panna were more backward than themselves at the time of Liberation, but they also learn that they belong to a group more backward than the majority. They learn that (together with such groups as Tibetans and Uyghurs) they were still at the stage of “feudal serf society” (*fēngjiān nóngmù zhídù*) in 1949 and that today the area they inhabit is still considered economically and culturally backward.16 This was put very directly by a junior secondary school teacher in 1994 who was lecturing on the unequal economic development in China to a third-year class.

---

in a junior secondary school. Although the economy was the main subject, it was implicitly understood that cultural development was always directly related to the level of economic development. It was also obvious that groups' respective levels were directly connected to political and administrative hierarchies. Thus, the provincial capital would definitely be more "developed" than, for instance, a village. The teacher made the point that "backwardness" is a relative term:

TEACHER: Is there a gap between our Panna [Sipsong Panna] and Kunming?
CLASS [shouting]: Yes.
TEACHER: Right. Our Panna is very backward. Is there a gap between Jinghong City and Menghai County?
CLASS: Yes.
TEACHER: Right. Menghai is more backward. Is there a gap between Menghai County and the small villages?
CLASS: Yes.
TEACHER: Right. We all know which is most backward.

The methods of teaching leave no room for discussion or questioning of textbook interpretations of minzu and cultural development. The most common way of teaching is to follow the book strictly, with students answering questions by repeating sentences from the book, usually in unison. As mentioned earlier in connection with the Naxi, the classification of minzu is presented as a scientific truth, and students learn it by heart without questioning the origin and validity of the criteria for classification. Their previous conceptions of the various local ethnic groups were not as strict and definite as those they now come to perceive as scientifically proven and final.

At the same time, students learn about the Chinese government's minority policy, which advocates equality of the minzu and equal rights to economic development and education. They learn how the government established autonomous minority regions to ensure minorities' rights to self-determination, and how the government even helped certain minorities "to jump over some stages of history in their development" (Sixiang zhengzhi 1993: third year of senior secondary school, 127). The language in the books
is generally positive and presents a picture of the minzu as part of “one family” that makes up a common nation or nationality—the Zhonghua minzu—to which all minzu have contributed: the Han mainly with science, and the minorities mainly with songs, dances, and medicinal herbs (e.g., ibid.: 123). Indirectly the positive language and the interpretation of relationships among the minzu make it clear and unquestionable that not only the Chinese government, but also the advanced Han as a whole, have helped the more backward minorities to develop. Before Liberation the Mongols with all their leather were not able to produce leather shoes, the Tibetans with all their timber could not make matches, some minorities still practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, minority areas had no institutions of higher education, and areas such as Tibet did not have one public road. However, the text continues, “today the differences between the levels of cultural and economic development in the minority areas and the Han areas are decreasing” (ibid.: 130).

The Tai students, like those in the rest of China, do not have any specific courses in religion, but teaching about religion is part of the political lessons. Because most Tai students (with the exception of some in Jinghong City) have been brought up as Buddhists, it is not surprising that antireligious teaching in the schools seems to have affected many Tai students’ and graduates’ self-esteem and perception of their own religion, history, and customs. Many Tai students found a certain relief in the fact that they are described as having a “real” religion that is acceptable in China and not just “superstition,” which is more “backward” and not publicly tolerated. Unfortunately for the other minorities in Sipsong Panna, their religious practices are not considered to be related to one of the world religions and may easily fall under the category of “superstition.” In junior secondary school, pupils learn that superstitious people believe in gods (shen) and spirits (gui) that “do not really exist” (Sixiang zhengzhi 1993: first year of junior secondary school, 67). Superstition (unlike China’s “five major religions” of Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Daoism) is “a result of human ignorance” (yumei wuzhi) in earlier human society, when peoples’ ability to reflect upon things was developing but they were not capable of producing scientific knowledge (ibid.: 67). According to the political material taught in school, superstition prevents the development of modern science and keeps people in ignorance and poverty. In senior secondary school, students read about the characteristics
of “primitive religion” (yuanshi zongjiao), but it remains unclear what the actual difference is between this and “superstition.” According to the book *Ideology and Politics* (Sixiang zhengzhi; 1993) the characteristics of religion are use of religious texts, teaching of doctrine, use of a church or temple building, and existence of priests or monks. These are not regarded as characteristic of “primitive religion,” which has more in common with “superstition.” All of the Akha, Blang, and Jinuo students I talked to were very embarrassed about the religious practices in their villages, which they themselves called “superstition.” The Tai students, on the other hand, were very conscious that theirs was a world religion accepted by the government.

The students are presented with a very simple, basically Marxist analysis that describes religion as a social phenomenon that evolved in the class society and functioned as a means of suppressing the working people, who used it to escape poverty and misery. Therefore, religion in the long run is doomed to disappear in the socialist society where the exploiting class has been eradicated and where science, political consciousness, and human cognition continue to develop (*Sixiang zhengzhi* 1993: third year of senior secondary school, 139). On a general level, the political teaching material explains, religion in socialist Chinese society is no longer directly connected to a small, exploiting class except in the few cases where members of minorities advocate secession from China and use religion for this purpose (ibid.: 147–48). It refers to the constitution, which guarantees freedom to believe or not to believe in religion and—of greatest relevance for the Tai—which maintains that religion is not allowed to interfere with or obstruct the national education system. Thus, the students study the Communist interpretation of why religions still exist in the socialist society, how they will eventually disappear, why the government allows freedom of religion, and what this freedom implies. Students learn nothing about the teachings of the various religions, and when asked what they have learned about their own religion, most Tai students answer “nothing” or that “religion is free in China.”

The government has realized the potential of tourism in Sipsong Panna, and this has resulted in the establishment of a one-year “tourism class” at the prefectural minority school, where students learn a bit more about their own area. Students are junior-secondary-school graduates who pay tuition (1,442 yuan in 1994) to learn minority dances, additional Chinese, a bit of Thai, botany, travel psychology (*lüyou xinlixue*), norms of behavior (*xingwei*)
guìfàn), etiquette (liyì), and hygiene. Most graduates from this class become staff in the new tourist hotels or tour guides for the numerous groups that visit the area for a few days. Ironically, one of the things the students learn is “customs of the Tai,” which one Tai girl from this class described as “very useful because otherwise we would not know what our own customs and culture are.”

**THE NATIONAL MESSAGE:**

“MOTHERLAND, I LOVE YOU FOREVER!”

Since the early 1980s patriotic education has been given high priority in the minority areas on the borders of the People’s Republic. As in the rest of China, it has been reinforced after the crushing of the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the government’s subsequent campaign against “counter-revolutionary rebellion.” Nationalism has become a dominant theme in official Chinese rhetoric, media, and education. It has become a means to strengthen China vis-à-vis the international community and to erode actual or potential internal ethnic conflicts. In Yunnan Province, where one-third of the population belong to minority minzú, the government has put great effort into spreading and extending patriotic education, especially in higher education and in the areas closest to international borders. Since Sipsong Panna borders on Burma and Laos, and the ethnic groups there have strong and historically close ethnic and cultural relationships across the borders, patriotic education is vigorously promoted in the area:

Our prefecture is a “border minority area” with a border nearly one thousand kilometers long. With further reforms and an opening to the outside world, all kinds of corrupt capitalist thoughts and pornographic garbage might sneak into the prefecture in the wake of economic exchange. It is a reality of our prefecture that this may adversely affect young people. Combining this fact with the [Confucian] spirit of “putting morality first and giving all kinds of education their right position,”17 we have launched patriotic education as the essence of our ideological and political work. We have closely combined the students’ way of thinking with the realities of

17. *Daode wei shou, ge yu dao wei.*
society; we have combined patriotism with the conditions of the country, province, prefecture, and county; we have combined patriotism with love of socialism and love of the Chinese Communist Party. By doing so we have achieved striking results. (Sipsong Panna Prefecture Education Commission 1992: 5)

After the crushing of the democracy movement in June 1989, the local government held several large meetings for all the secondary school students in Sipsong Panna to inform them about what had happened in Beijing and to make clear that political and ideological work would now be strengthened among them. Most students had heard only rumors about the demonstrations in addition to the official versions, and few had heard objective reports about what had taken place. Apart from being told of the campaign to study Lei Feng and other revolutionary heroes, all schools and teachers were informed of the need to strengthen patriotic education as the main element in political and ideological work. The introduction of a course in Sipsong Panna geography in secondary schools was a direct result of the central guidelines for conducting patriotic education in minority areas, which advised that "love of the local area" was fundamental for "love of the country." Therefore, the book *Geography of Sipsong Panna* also has a short chapter about the history of Sipsong Panna, in which it is repeatedly emphasized that Sipsong Panna has always been part of the Chinese state. Furthermore, it describes the climate, natural resources, and development since 1949 and has a special section about the tourist spots. This book (taught for a total of ten lessons during the six years of secondary school) is the only material about their own area that students in some (not all) of the regular secondary schools study. Thus, the most important reason why teaching about local conditions is gaining ground in the educational system today is its role in patriotic education.

Patriotic education is incorporated into politics and history classes, and in recent years the government has arranged special "speech competitions," with patriotism as the topic. When I was in Sipsong Panna, the secondary school students took part in a competition for the best patriotic speech in standard Chinese (as opposed to the local Yunnan dialect). A number of local competitions were set up in secondary schools, and the winners from each school in the prefecture competed against one another. The other students also wrote essays about patriotism, and many blackboard messages in schools
had patriotism as their theme. Since it was just after the 1994 Asian Games in Japan, many of the patriotic speeches concerned China's greatness as reflected in its number of gold and silver medals. Otherwise, speeches and short essays were much alike in their highly emotional way of repeating the official, nationalist rhetoric of textbooks, such as, "I love my own China. Some people from outside have asked me if I am a Korean or Japanese just because, being an Aini minzu [sic], my skin is dark. I answered, 'I AM A PURE CHINESE! [dididaodo de Zhongguoren]'" (female Akha participant in the competition). A central element in patriotic education is that all minzu should be convinced that they belong to, and together make up, the Chinese minzu, the Zhonghua minzu. Furthermore, it is promulgated that all minzu have contributed to the history and development of China and that therefore "the Han can never depart from the minorities, the minorities never from the Han, and the minorities never from each other." Thus, the nationalistic content in education focuses on the common history and common political/economic/cultural interests of all people within China. Common symbols are the mythical Yellow Emperor; the Olympic sports heroes; and the national flag, emblem, and anthem:

TEACHER: What is the subject today?
CLASS: The national flag, the national emblem, and the national anthem.
TEACHER: What should all citizens do?
CLASS: Love the national flag, love the national emblem, and love the national anthem.
TEACHER: The national emblem symbolizes the union of all people under the leadership of the great Communist Party. How should we treat our national emblem?
CLASS: We shall all love and respect our national emblem.
TEACHER: We have to love our fatherland and love socialism. Can love of the fatherland and love of socialism be separated?
CLASS: No.

(1995, junior secondary school)

In published directions on how to conduct patriotic education among minorities, it is often emphasized that teachers should take care to avoid Han
chauvinism and avoid giving the minorities the impression that they are backward.\(^1\) In order to prevent minorities from turning against China and becoming “local nationalists,” they should be convinced of their contribution to and role in the socialist Chinese state as minorities. Thus, by promoting the creation of local teaching material the government attempts to address the contradiction between official propaganda and policy, which praise \textit{minzu} equality, and the minorities’ practical experiences, which demonstrate the low valuation of their own languages, histories, and religions. Within the educational system there is a clear conflict between the government’s wish to show how \textit{minzu} contributed equally to the history of China, and presentations of the alleged scientifically proven backwardness of minorities. The last is needed to construct a developed Han majority vis-à-vis the less-developed, childlike minorities—a counterimage that legitimizes paternalistic help to improve so-called backward customs. That Tai students seem to be more influenced by the construction of themselves as members of a backward group than by superficial statements about their contribution to Chinese history and society suggests that the government’s own presentations of minorities to a large extent undermine its nationalistic propaganda among them.

\textsc{Tai Students’ Ethnic Identity: The Conflict Between Family and School Education}

Most Tai students in Sipsong Panna have learned at least some Tai script in primary school, so that they can recognize consonants and vowels. Only a few have learned enough to be able to read and write Tai fluently. Apart from the students in the bilingual class at the Normal School, the only course about Sipsong Panna is a brief Sipsong Panna geography course, which is taught only in some secondary schools. As compared to the Naxi, the Tai, because of the small percentage of Tai teachers, have heard much less about their own history, stories, traditions, and language from individual teachers in school. Students from other ethnic groups in Sipsong Panna have learned even less about their own history and culture, and only a small minority of them has

\(^{18}\) See, e.g., Xie Benshu et al., eds. 1994; and Yunnan Province History Society et al., eds., 1990.
ever been taught in their own language. With very few exceptions, these students expressed regret about this. Nevertheless, whereas many Naxi intellectuals were critical about the absence of curriculum that is directly relevant to their understanding of their own culture, the Tai students at higher levels of education were less concerned about this. Compared to the Naxi, who often explicitly expressed pride in their cultural heritage, many Tai students beyond the level of junior secondary school were ashamed and critical of the “backward habits of their family,” the “tradition of sending boys to temples,” and the “low level of education among Tai.”

There is, however, one aspect of ethnicity that Tai students repeatedly mentioned as a source of pride, namely their script. One reason for this might be that their school education allows them to view their script as a proof of “relative development” and “literary tradition.” Their religious practices, on the other hand, are presented as “obstructing modernization,” their belief in spirits is labeled as “superstition,” and the history of the chaophaendin and the independent state of Sipsong Panna is not likely to be part of the curriculum at all. Thus, while many Tai students at higher levels of education attempted to disassociate themselves from the cultural practices of their Tai families in the villages, they retained the Tai script as an accepted ethnic marker. In his study of Tai history and ethnicity, Shih-chung Hsieh found that the institution of the Tai king, the chaophaendin, was the most crucial factor in Tai ethnic identity and solidarity (Hsieh 1995). My fieldwork convinced me that the chaophaendin’s role in the ethnic identification of the Tai has been profoundly challenged during the last forty years, when the Tai increasingly have been forced to identify themselves in relation to the Chinese rather than to other Tai people south of Sipsong Panna. The chaophaendin, who has been physically absent from Sipsong Panna for the last fifty-odd years, has cooperated with the Communist government and has not attempted to maintain his influence in the Tai community. Furthermore, school education presents the Tai students with an interpretation of history that minimizes the role of the chaophaendin and makes clear that a Tai identity focusing on the previous king would run counter to the interests of the Chinese state. All of the students I talked to knew that historically Sipsong Panna was ruled by the chaophaendin. Many knew that the chaophaendin was in Kunming (although some thought he was long dead), but most had no idea why he was in Kunming and not in Sipsong Panna. To the younger generations of Tai today, the chaophaendin...
phaendin does not seem to play a significant role in their identification as Tai. Whereas the chaophaendin (and other living chao as well) still enjoys very high status among the Tai, I found that it was mainly among monks and Tai over the age of fifty that the chaophaendin was a major symbol of Tai identity. For most Tai it primarily was language, script, and religion that identified them as Tai in China and in contrast to the Han.

All Tai students were interested in learning their script, and they often emphasized that they would have participated in training in their own language even if it was not part of the examination. The majority realized that learning standard Chinese was indispensable for increasing their chances of further education, but at the same time they maintained that learning Tai ought to be part of school education. Students from the other ethnic groups without a script felt that learning Chinese was the most important task and that studying a local language would be a waste of time. Partly for this reason, local teachers generally praised ethnic groups such as the Akha and Jinuo for being more open than the Tai toward the Han and for putting more effort into learning Chinese and succeeding in school. Unlike the Tai, the Akha and Jinuo regarded school as the only way to escape poverty and backwardness. Many local minorities in Sipsong Panna know some colloquial Tai, but thought that learning Tai script would be merely an extra burden. It would not help them within the educational system or in getting a job later on. In this respect there was a conflict of interest between the Tai (one-third of the population) and the other minorities (one-third of the population combined), and on these grounds many cadres argued that the Tai language has no place in secondary education or in any of the non-Tai villages (villages in Sipsong Panna tend to be ethnically homogenous).

Compared to the Naxi intellectuals and students I talked to, the Tai who had attended Chinese schools at a higher level were generally much less explicit and demanding in their wishes to strengthen the position of Tai culture within education. In contrast to the Naxi, the Tai intellectuals have no “Society of Tai Culture,” they have very few researchers, and they have less influence at decisive administrative and political levels. Except for the few students who were novices or monks, they tended to disassociate themselves from their cultural heritage and upbringing in their villages to the point of expressing embarrassment about their religious practices and the poor knowledge of
Chinese in their villages. It is mainly in the course of their education beyond primary school that they experience a contradiction between the things they learn during their childhood in the Tai villages and the content of school education. In their families, religion constitutes a significant part of village life, the only language employed is Tai, novices and monks enjoy high status, and most of them have heard stories of the Tai king and his kingdom from parents and grandparents. In school all of these aspects of Tai village life are repudiated as being worthless or even an impediment to modernization and the students' own careers. Most students therefore feel that they have no choice but to disassociate themselves from village traditions.

Whereas students in the bilingual classes at the Normal School (approximately forty students per year) and in the Tai classes at the Yunnan Institute of the Nationalities (approximately fifteen students per year) are well trained in their own script, the only Tai students in secondary and higher education who have a profound knowledge of their own language and history are those few male students who also are novices or monks. One of the things teachers and monks agree on is that it is a very heavy burden to be a novice while also attempting to perform sufficiently well in primary school to pass the qualifying examination for secondary school. Therefore, the few student novices who do succeed and wish to continue into secondary or higher education are normally very hardworking and highly motivated to study. All monks today are aware of the law of compulsory education in China, and many of the better educated among them want their novices to learn mathematics, history, and other languages in addition to Tai. Some monks now support novices in higher Chinese education, in the hope that they will return to the temple afterward as qualified teachers. However, other monks support their novices' going to school mainly because they have no other options, and they would rarely force them to stay in school against their will. The novices in school have to follow two full study programs. The knowledge they gain in the temples is by and large irrelevant in the Chinese school.

The few novices who had made it into secondary education had all attended a central primary school during the last two years of their studies, and they did not get extra points at the examination. Although they agreed that it was very difficult to pass the examination, none expressed regret at having been a novice, and all spoke with affection about the education they
received in the temple. They emphasized that all of their knowledge of Tai language, history, religion, and literature had been acquired in the temple or from their grandparents, not in school. They considered it a great advantage to have learned Tai script so well, and they used it for taking notes in school, for transcribing Chinese and English words, and for writing letters home.

Some novices who had continued into secondary education had met with resistance from their grandparents, other elderly villagers, and some of the monks, whereas their parents were generally happy that they had continued in school:

The old people in our village do not want us to become like the Han [Hanhua], nor do they want us to learn modern things. . . . After I had studied for three years in the monastery, I was curious to learn new things about the world and other languages. . . . Therefore, I wanted to go to school. But I felt at home in the monastery. I like reading the Buddhist sutras, so I also wanted to remain a novice and perhaps become a monk. Although some of the monks were against my going to a Han school, they still wanted me to remain a monk while attending school.

The few novices and monks who continued into secondary education encountered contradictions between their religious belief and the content of education in the Chinese schools. They were also faced with a basic indifference toward their religion in daily life at the boarding school. They came from an environment where their lives were centered around temple activities to a school that ignored the Buddhist festivals held in all Tai villages and that basically regarded their religious activities as a waste of time and a hindrance to development. During secondary education the monks and novices learned that in China all minzu have the right to have their own religious beliefs. But at the same time they were taught that religion teaches people to escape life and prevents them from modernizing their economy. Still, the novices and monks in secondary and higher education whom I have talked to denied that school education had in any way influenced their opinion of their religion. Their previous temple education and continued ties with other novices and monks made them less inclined than the other students to deviate from previous beliefs and opinions about their own cultural background: “During my education all teachers taught according to Marxism and dialec-
tical materialism. I always disagreed with their viewpoints on religion and history. I have learned a lot of new things, but I do not agree with everything and I have not changed my mind about my own religion” (twenty-year-old monk and student). And in the words of another student and novice, “Before starting in school we already knew what it meant to be a Tai and believe in Buddhism. No school can ever change this.” However, since Chinese schools have a negative attitude toward religion, and Tai language has no place in the Chinese educational system beyond primary school, many monks who want an education prefer to obtain it in Thailand, where “they really appreciate us monks,” as several told me. Every year ten monks receive official scholarships to study in Thailand, but in fact a much larger number leave—some to visit family members and some to do business. Monks may go freely to Thailand, and every year several monks and older novices from Sipsong Panna manage to raise private financial support toward education in Thai temples.19 Therefore, for boys, Chinese education is no longer the only alternative to education in the temples in Sipsong Panna, and with the improved economy and increasing contacts with Thailand, more novices and monks will probably look for educational opportunities there. Many parents regard the temple education in Thailand as a higher (sort of secondary) education after training in the local monastery.

Obviously, the novice and monk students were very positive toward the institution of temple education, but among the other students this topic often sparked heated discussions. During my interviews it became increasingly clear that young students in junior secondary school were much more sympathetic toward the customs of their own family and other villagers than were students in senior secondary school. This was especially so in regard to religion. A question that never failed to arouse laughter, giggling, and lively discussion was whether a female student would prefer her boyfriend to have been a novice and whether she would let any future son become a novice:

**GIRL A:** I would prefer my husband to have been a novice, because then he could teach our children Tai script.

**GIRL B:** I would also rather marry a novice.

19. When monks want to go to Thailand, they need permission from the Bureau of Religion. Since 1994 this permission has been relatively easy to obtain.
GIRL C: Sure, I would prefer to marry somebody who had been a
novice. We Tai believe in superstition [sic!], and if a boyfriend has
not been a novice, he might say nasty things and behave badly.
ALL: Certainly! It is best to marry a man who has learned something
in the temple.
INTERVIEWER: What if you have a son?
GIRL B: My son has to be a novice!
INTERVIEWER: Why?
GIRL A: Boys should be novices. They can study at the same time—
it's no problem.
GIRL B: Or he can become a novice after he finishes primary school.
Many boys do that.

(Three thirteen-year-old Tai girls,
first year of junior secondary school)

GIRL A: I do not want a boyfriend who has been a novice, because
that would mean that he has not been to school for a very long time
and therefore does not know enough. Still, I would prefer a Tai to
a Han, as long as he has not been a novice.
GIRL B: That is not true, as of course a novice can go to school as well.
Now novices can also continue into middle school and even col-
lege. I think it is good to have a boyfriend who has been a novice.
They learn a lot and they know Tai script.
GIRL C: I do not care if he has been a novice or not. The most impor-
tant is that he has studied in school. If he has not been to school I
definitely do not want him. He could learn Tai script and read the
Buddhist scripts in an evening school.

(Three Tai girls, first year of senior secondary school)

Generally students were very realistic in their attitude toward temple edu-
cation and their own school education. They were all very much aware of
the fact that Tai language, culture, and history play no role whatsoever in
success within the educational system. While saying that they would wel-
come more Tai training in schools, they emphasized that schools would never
expand Tai education as long as it was useless for obtaining higher educa-
tion, for the Chinese state as a whole, and therefore also for their own ambi-
EDUCATION IN SIPSONG PANNA SINCE 1980

tions. A sixteen-year-old female student remarked, “How could I have a boyfriend who had been a novice? Then he would not have been a good student in school, would he? The most important thing is to study, and, as it is now, the things you learn as a novice are of no use in school. Therefore it is damaging to your school education if you spend time being a novice. You simply won’t get a good job!” Another female student was conscious of the role the school played in reducing the importance of Tai language and knowledge:

A boy can be a novice and also go to school. I think that is the best way. They get more knowledge if they are novices for a period of time and they learn our own language. . . . We Tai have become more and more like the Han [yue lai yue duo Hanhua], especially here in the city. We often try to become like the Han. There are many more Han than Tai, and therefore they will never become like the Tai [Daihua]. Furthermore, we study Chinese and Han culture in school. They do not learn our language and know nothing about our customs.

The majority of female students in junior secondary school were positive toward temple education, whereas most older female students firmly stated that they did not want a boyfriend who had been a novice and that they would certainly never let their son become one. Male students tended to be more positive toward temple education. All had friends and close relatives who were or had been novices, and many had to make what they thought was a difficult choice between school and monastery. Again, the youngest male students were most positive toward temple education. Of course, age-related differences, such as level of reflection and the ability to express one’s own thoughts, between students in junior and senior secondary school explain some of the variety in response. However, the students’ increasing repudiation of their own cultural background could also be partly explained by their long-term stay in boarding schools, which prevented them from participating in village life, and by the curriculum.

The majority of Tai students who graduate from higher, specialized secondary or higher education have lived in city boarding schools since they were thirteen years old, sometimes even since they were eleven (since higher primary school). For six or seven years (in secondary school) and an addi-
tional three or four years (in college or university), most visit their families only once every six months, they speak Tai only with fellow Tai students, and they stop participating in religious activities. In order to succeed within the school system, students need to disassociate themselves from their religious background, their language, the things they have learned from elderly people about Tai history, and their own assumptions that they belong to a dominant group with valuable traditions. Only when putting aside what they have learned at home and realizing the overwhelming importance of learning Chinese, studying Chinese history, criticizing backwardness, propagating the *Zhonghua minzu*, and repeating the nationalist/patriotic messages will they have a chance to continue in the educational system. Therefore, most Tai intellectuals and students who have ambitions to continue into higher education are more preoccupied with adapting to the cultural values supported by schools and propagated in the broader context of Chinese society than with struggling to win a place for Tai culture within this system. The conflict between family and school is much more intrusive than for the Naxi and requires a choice from the students. This also helps to explain why the number of Tai students who manage to study beyond junior secondary school is still so small.

To a certain extent the hopes of many officials and school administrators of changing the cultural habits of the Tai by placing them in the “new surroundings” of boarding schools have been fulfilled. Students do start to have doubts about their religious background and play down the role and significance of their own experiences in their Tai villages, their history, and their language. Therefore, the Chinese-educated intellectual Tai have no contacts and no feelings of shared interest with the other strata of educated Tai, the monks. Many of the Tai students and intellectuals feel stigmatized and express embarrassment about their cultural heritage to the point of rejecting it. However, some students, particularly those past their mid-twenties, have recently started to express regret and discontent at not having had the opportunity to study their own language properly or to develop a modern Tai vocabulary, and at having been taught that Buddhism is incompatible with modernization. They have started to question the thesis that the Tai are a xenophobic, slowly developing people. However, these are a small group of individuals without scholarly or official positions to enable them to raise and push these questions within the Chinese political system.
Although minority schools are sometimes criticized for isolating minorities and preventing them from raising their academic level through close contact with Han students, they do have some positive effects on Tai students’ ethnic self-esteem. Outside class students mostly speak Tai with Tai classmates, with whom they also share their religious upbringing. In boarding schools most Tai students for the first time in their life make friends with youth from the other minorities. The Tai are aware that many teachers find the minorities from the mountains to be more hardworking and conscientious in school than themselves. This does not seem to diminish their sense of superiority resulting from the historic Tai dominance in Sipsong Panna. With very few exceptions Tai students also admitted that in spite of having Akha, Jinuo, Blang, or Lahu friends in the school, very few would marry one of them. Even if they wanted to, their parents would not accept it. As one eighteen-year-old female Tai student said, “If I fell in love with an Akha and wanted to marry him, my parents and grandparents would definitely object to it, but then . . . I never could fall in love with an Akha.”

The first school for the Jinuo minzu (approximately eleven thousand people, most of them living on Jinuo Mountain) was started in 1956, and it was also during the mid-1950s that the first primary schools were started in Akha villages, mainly with Han teachers from outside Sipsong Panna. These teachers did not speak the local language and met with many problems. The Akha and Jinuo were suspicious of the newcomers who settled in their villages and tried to convince them to build schools. They were very poor and saw no use in letting their children attend school rather than work. Hunting became another issue of dispute when farmers and cadres from farther inland in China were sent to Panna to start rubber-producing state farms. Before planting rubber trees, the new farmers needed to cut down vast tracts of jungle, and because the Akha and the other ethnic groups in the mountains depended on the jungle for their hunting, this often resulted in clashes between locals and incoming Han farmers. This did not work in favor of the Han who tried to start new schools.

Gradually though, Chinese primary schools became common in many Akha and Jinuo (and other) villages. Today most Akha and Jinuo children attend
primary school for the first four years. But then most need to pass an examination to continue on to the fifth grade (around age eleven), and they have to go to a higher primary school in a nearby village, often walking several hours to and from school every day or staying at a boarding primary school. It is also very difficult for them to follow an education based entirely on Chinese language, and as a result many drop out after a few years. Only in those Akha and Jinuo villages where teachers are local and speak the local language do they explain in the children’s own mother tongue. It is, however, hard to get teachers who are able to do this. There are not enough Akha with a teacher’s education, and most teachers who are sent to a poor village try to get a transfer to a more developed village or township as soon as possible. Some of the Akha students I interviewed emphasized that the Akha villages might be less developed and less attractive than Tai villages, but “at least the Blang villages were even more backward.” In this way, it seemed that everybody was able to find somebody whom they considered worse off than themselves and whom they could consider to be more backward. As one Akha said, to the great amusement and agreement of other students present, “I do not want to be a teacher in the poorest places, in a Blang or Lahu village, for example. . . . Just imagine, they know even less about science and have less knowledge than we Akha do!”

During the Chinese government’s minzu fieldwork project in the 1950s, researchers reached the conclusion that the Jinuo and the Akha in Sipsong Panna could to different degrees be characterized as belonging to so-called “primitive societies” (although some Akha areas were described as having developed private land ownership). Most of the Akha and all of the Jinuo were described as being influenced by a sort of primitive communism, in which people shared everything, practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, practiced a form of “primitive nature religion,” and the Jinuo lived in large clan houses with as many as one hundred family members. Through the teaching of the theory of social evolution, so vividly adopted by the Communists, existing local ethnic hierarchies in Sipsong Panna were in some respects cemented and confirmed. In the broader context of the entire People’s Republic, groups from other areas were of course added to the hierarchy, and the Han were found at the top of the evolutionary ladder, but at the local level the form and content of education confirmed the Tai’s historical experience and memory of who were rulers and who were subjects, who was
associate with the state and who with the jungle, who were Buddhists and who were not.

Tai, Akha, and Jinuo boarding-school students live, eat, and study in the same place and have much more social interaction across ethnic affiliation than most of their parents or grandparents ever did. Many of them make friends, but at the same time they often express strong opinions about one another's customs and cultural practices—opinions that are influenced by the content of the Chinese education. One of the things that Akha and Jinuo students often mentioned to me as typical of the relationship between Tai and other local groups was their different attitude toward language. Most Akha who have not been to school, and especially those over thirty, can speak or at least understand Tai. However, when I asked students if Tai also understood the Akha language, they always laughed or looked at me with curiosity. “Of course the Tai do not speak Akha,” I was told. Many students said that, in fact, many more Han than Tai learn Akha—not those Han employed on the rubber plantations or working as cadres, but Han who live and work in Akha villages, especially those who have married Akha women. I often heard Akha and Jinuo students say that whereas Akha are interested in learning other languages, the Tai are not.

Another issue that often resulted in discussions (sometimes rather heated ones) between Tai and other students was religion. The reason for this, I believe, was that due to their Chinese school education, which emphasized how religion and superstition obstruct modernization, students felt that it was very important to disassociate themselves from religious practices in their villages. Because they were aware that superstition was regarded as worse than religion—as more backward, more obstructive toward development—it was always important for them to fight back when members of other ethnic groups attacked their superstitious practices. One of the discussions I overheard in this connection demonstrated this very clearly. I was interviewing three Akha girls, and slowly, as often happened, other students came by to watch and listen. The Tai audience became provoked by some of the things the Akha said, and a discussion developed among them.20 One Akha girl said that a major difference among the Tai, Akha, and Han was that the Tai were especially “eager to perform superstitious activities.” She said that because

20. The discussion was in Chinese because the Tai and the Akha did not understand each other's languages.
the Tai believe in Buddhism, “they have a lot of superstitious activities.” This made one of the Tai jump to her feet and announce that since the Tai believe in Buddhism, their religious activities are precisely religious activities and not superstitious ones, and that in fact it is the Akha themselves who practice superstition. Another Tai girl then asked the Akha in the room to tell about their own superstitions, and one Akha girl started to tell, clearly embarrassed, about the nipha (female shaman) in their village. She told about how the nipha tried to cure sick people and how she could see in her dreams which girls from the village should become her students. The Tai students corrected the girl during her story; for instance, when the Akha girl said, “The nipha knows about medicinal herbs,” a Tai girl said, “She only knows a little, though.” The discussion went on for some time, until one Tai loudly exclaimed, “This is really superstition,” and the discussion was taken over by the Tai, who exchanged horrified memories of how they had seen a nipha perform her rituals on television. The Akha clearly felt bad about this, and several tried to say that their father or uncle or someone else in the family did not believe in the nipha anymore, whereas most admitted that their mother still insisted on calling for the nipha in times of sickness. The discussion more or less ended when one Akha concluded that “women are much more superstitious than men. Men are more open, I do not know why!”

On other occasions, too, I found it striking how eager many Tai students and intellectuals were to defend their own position against the minorities from the mountains—to stress their history as a dominant ethnic group with a script, a religion and a recorded history (of which they in fact knew very little). The dominant Chinese discourse on the historically unequal relationship between the minority minzu and the Han—with their objectified position as the most developed and modern ethnic group, and therefore in charge of major political decisions—seemed to have a profound influence on Tai in the educational system. They felt under pressure from the propagation of atheism, modernism, and development, which to a large extent force them to disassociate themselves from learned values and beliefs, from their socialization as Tai. They felt that they were in fact “backward” compared to what they had learned about the Han. At the same time, many of them found it important to defend their position against the Akha and Jinuo, whom teachers often praised for being more engaged and sincere in their studies than the Tai. In fact, the Akha have a quite low percentage of students in school compared
to the Tai, mainly because many Akha villages are poor, isolated, without electricity, and sometimes without enough food. Often less than 10 percent of Akha children in a village primary school continue on to fifth grade. Still, teachers in schools all over Sipsong Panna and most cadres engaged in education say that the Akha and Jinuo perform better than the Tai in school—or rather, that they come from less but achieve more. One headmaster of a minzu minority school expressed a prejudiced view commonly heard among teachers:

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

Many Han teachers told me that by rejecting Chinese state education, the Tai “risk becoming even more backward than the minorities from the mountains.” The fact that the Akha and Jinuo are praised by Han teachers and cadres for being willing to work hard and try to perform well in school provides them with status and the possibility of being regarded as “almost” more developed than the Tai. The Akha and Jinuo have no alternatives to the Chinese education, and they have few educated members, yet they are represented by teachers as hardworking, diligent people who are more open toward cultural change than are the Tai. This appraisal is possible because they seem to accept the presentation of themselves as backward and welcome the state’s attempt to educate and civilize them in the Chinese school system. The Akha and Jinuo students and graduates apparently (at least for the time being) find it easier to accept that they learn only Chinese in school and not their own language, and that they are considered a backward group. If Akha or Jinuo students do
not perform well in school, they tend to blame themselves and the backward conditions in their villages, whereas the Tai are more likely to blame the school system for not teaching their own language and for making it impossible for boys to study at the monastery and school at the same time. The Akha students I talked to were also much more embarrassed about their family and village than were the Tai. Some even told me that they were jealous of the Tai girls’ traditional costume, which they considered much more beautiful than those worn by the women in their own villages—costumes that symbolized poverty and backwardness to themselves and to the Tai.

By accepting both the school’s construction of their own ethnic group as backward and the need to discard their cultural habits and the importance of learned values, educated members of groups such as the Akha and Jinuo may in fact manage to challenge their own peripheral and subordinate position within the local ethnic hierarchy. In this respect, their assimilation may be regarded as a political strategy.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Chinese authorities have encountered huge problems in their efforts to establish state education in Sipsong Panna. As in other minority areas of China, the basic goal is literacy in Chinese, so that the local population can participate in political administration and in modernizing the economy. Ideologically, the education of minorities is perceived as uniting the people of China in an atmosphere of ethnic brotherhood, as playing down and ultimately eradicating ethnic differences while promoting Chinese language, culture, and history. Education in the post–Cultural Revolution era must demonstrate, especially to minority minzu in border areas, that only participation in modern school education based upon Chinese language and history, socialism, patriotism, and atheism will bring about the desired economic development. Minority languages are granted a place in the educational system only when they facilitate the learning of Chinese or when doing so is considered an inevitable necessity to persuade people to attend the schools. Local history and culture are incorporated only to the degree that they help promote the supra-national identity of the Zhonghua minzu.

Due to scarce resources and limited national financial support at the local level, the lack of teachers with a knowledge of Tai language, and disagree-
ment among cadres on the issue of bilingual education, most Tai children receive all of their primary education in Chinese, which few speak when they start school. The language problem is one important reason for the low percentage of Tai with a secondary or higher education. Some researchers, local teachers, and cadres argue that the introduction of Tai courses in more schools will not only make it easier for Tai children to learn Chinese, but will also result in more Tai boys attending school instead of participating in temple education. However, sporadic Tai training in school would not eliminate the fundamental contradiction between the content and form of the Chinese school system and the Tai people’s cultural religious practices. Neither would it convince rural Tai parents that future employment, an improved economy, or higher local status would result from their children’s advancing in the Chinese school system. Indeed, many Tai girls with a junior (sometimes even a senior) secondary education manage to find jobs only in the tourist industry—jobs that are despised by many Tai.

Intellectual Tai with a higher Chinese education constitute a very small part of the Tai population, and they are much more passive and aloof than Naxi intellectuals in their expressions of ethnic identity. They tend to distance themselves from aspects of Tai cultural identity that are in direct conflict with their Chinese education. Tai who have received a longer Chinese education focus most on language, less on religion, and not at all on the king and the kingdom when expressing their Tai identity. Because a Tai ethnic identity centered around the king and the history of the kingdom would oppose and offend Chinese propaganda about the Zhonghua minzu and its historically legitimised power in Sipsong Panna, this particular aspect of Tai ethnicity is probably the most sensitive and politically unacceptable. Furthermore, the direct collision of Tai temple education with Chinese education makes the religious aspect of their ethnicity problematic for Tai intellectuals to defend. Tai script, on the other hand, plays an important symbolic role as proof of a “high culture” and as a transmitter of religion, history, and traditional Tai literature. However, it also has a practical value in the villages, where many parents want their children to know the script that they themselves have at least a modest knowledge of. This means that a focus on Tai script and language in fact also runs counter to the promotion of Chinese education, which emphasizes the need to abandon one’s own language in favor of Chinese. Thus it seems that for the minority of Tai who participate beyond secondary level, Chinese educa-
tion to a certain extent causes them to abandon their religion, accept the construction of themselves as members of a backward group, disregard their history as a kingdom, and support the thesis of the uselessness of the Tai language. However, a number of factors have begun to pull Tai intellectuals and students in the opposite direction. Increasing contacts with Thailand and Burma have shown them that their language is useful outside Tai villages. Many express the wish to continue their studies in Thailand. Furthermore, they find in Thailand proof that Buddhism does not necessarily exclude economic development. As a consequence, some younger Tai students and intellectuals have started to see new potential in their own language and religion, and some are developing a new, growing solidarity with Tai peasants and monks.

Very few Tai go through the educational system at all, and most drop out after primary school or at least junior secondary school. For the vast majority of Tai living in the villages, Chinese school education has little impact on ethnic identity and cultural practices. To increase the influence of school education, the government would probably have to change the form and content of school education to make it directly relevant to the Tai’s language, religious beliefs, and economic conditions. But many cadres and teachers fear that this would defeat the ideological purpose of school education in that it would support the already strong Tai identity rather than attempting to break it. Running counter to the government’s intentions, the Chinese educational system in Sipsong Panna excludes many Tai. The resulting low level of Chinese education makes the Tai largely incapable of strongly and efficiently formulating and promoting their own cultural, political, and economic interests within the context of the Chinese state. At the same time, by insisting upon an educational system that excludes all aspects of Tai culture and diminishes its value, Chinese policy involuntarily strengthens ethnicity among the vast majority of Tai who do not participate in this education. Realizing that their language and religion are the main reasons for their exclusion from Chinese education, many seek alternatives that support, rather than reject, their way of life by turning toward monks, improving temple education, and strengthening connections with other Tai and Buddhists outside China. Those who participate in long-term Chinese education and become affected by its assimilative intentions tend to become stigmatized, and therefore they, too, welcome alternative explanations—such as those derived from cultural contacts in Thailand—of their culture as valuable and useful.