Conclusion

Through the state educational system, the Chinese government transmits its ideology of the nation and of the relationships among the peoples in China who have become categorized into static ethnic groups. Education of minorities plays a central role in implicitly reproducing notions of cultural inequality while explicitly promoting the "unity of the minzu." Students learn the names of the officially recognized minzu, as well as what it implies to belong to a minority minzu or to the majority, as indisputable, scientific facts. Thus, the classroom is an arena where processes of ethnic identification become highly relevant when minority students inevitably are confronted with the government's monopolizing interpretation of their identity. Equally important for students' self-perception as members of minority minzu are issues that remain unspoken, that are not communicated in school because they are considered irrelevant to state school education. Thus, a study of the impact of Chinese minority education on ethnic minorities' ethnic self-perceptions and identities has to take into account the fact that most non-Han students experience that their language, history, religion, and customs are considered useless (or at least less significant) knowledge in the Chinese school system. The influence of state education on the process of ethnic identification among different ethnic minorities is obviously ambiguous, and it is impossible to isolate education from other factors contributing to this process. Chinese state education is important for the government's hegemonic project to modernize society and define the Chinese nation, and as such it plays a definite role in the current resurgence of ethnic identities all over China. The perspective in this book has been local, focusing on Chinese education among two minorities and on its role in directing the form and content of their ethnic identity. I have tried to analyze what minority students in China learn about them-
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selves as members of an ethnic group during their education and thus what role education plays in directing and forming ethnic and national identity in China today.

All over China education is highly standardized in terms of curriculum in primary and secondary schools, length of study, extracurricular activities, and so forth. Some students have additional teaching in their own language, but the content of education rarely deviates from the national standard. Teachers know which books to use and what to teach. They rarely have the opportunity and are hardly ever forced to select other teaching materials. Students belonging to different ethnic minorities in China and living in the peripheral areas of the Chinese state are thus presented with a definite set of interpretations and perceptions of themselves as members of minority minzu. These are often confirmed by shared experiences obtained through this education. Students learn that almost all of the minority minzu were more "backward" in terms of economy and culture than the majority Han at the time of Liberation. They learn that the Communist Party then helped them to develop so that all minzu in China became united in a multiethnic, socialist society. They became part of the Chinese family of brother minzu. This unity was made possible not merely because of the Communist Party. The more profound and comprehensive reason, they learn, is that all minzu in fact have a common history, are descendants of the Yellow Emperor, and thus have shared identity as part of the “Chinese nation,” the Zhonghua minzu. Students also learn that within the framework of the Chinese state and constitution, all minzu in the “New China” have equal rights to develop their languages, maintain their cultural traditions, and believe in their own religions. More indirectly, though not less powerfully, Chinese education fosters in many students a perception of themselves as members of a “backward minority” simply because it denies the usefulness (sometimes even the existence) of the minorities’ own languages, histories, religions, forms of education, customs, marriage practices, values, ethics, and so forth. Sporadic attempts to introduce brief volumes about “minority culture” (minzu wenhua) outside the common curriculum in local schools are insufficient to change this tendency. True bilingual education (not merely one or two hours per week of voluntary extra teaching in the minority language) is one of the methods that might increase students’ acceptance of the value of their own language. However, this effect is often neutralized when the mother tongue, the minority language, is real-
ized to be worthless for continued education. The possibility of continuing on to secondary and higher education is completely dependent on the student's level of Chinese, not on her ability to speak or write a minority language. Bilingual education probably facilitates the learning of Chinese, but when presented as a necessity only in villages where minority children do not speak Chinese well enough to attend "regular school," it is understandable that many students come to regard it as a method employed for the "most backward," not for the value of the language itself. In the province of Yunnan, where twenty-five minority minzu (one-third of the population) live mainly in rural areas, this is very often the case.

Chinese state education promotes cultural homogenization in order to facilitate communication, to ensure the integration of minority areas into the Chinese state, to promote patriotism and loyalty to the CCP, and, in a broader sense, to "enhance the cultural quality" (tigao wenhua suzhi)—to civilize—the more "backward" groups. Although rural Han are also sometimes described in these terms, there is inevitably an ethnic dimension to the description when it is applied to minority minzu whose "backwardness" is often explained as a result of cultural deficiencies. Often the languages, cultural practices, and economic life of ethnic minorities are described in texts, media, and oral communication as obstructing the development and modernization of the areas they inhabit. Belief in the civilizing and homogenizing effects of education in China is still very strong, as it was among many officials and educators promoting Confucian education among the "barbarians" on the periphery of the Chinese empire, especially during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). But the degree to which present-day education actually manages to homogenize the population remains a question. The research presented here suggests that one result of an education directed at achieving cultural homogenization may well, at least in the long run, be fragmentation and increased focus on ethnic identity. While reducing cultural differences in order to adapt to the demands in the state education system, those under the heaviest pressure to assimilate may react with increased focus on ethnic identity. This is a process evident among ethnic groups all over the world and is part of a global process of modernist homogenization that often results in ethnic and cultural fragmentation (e.g., Friedman 1990 and 1991). As an institution with the built-in purpose of mainstreaming cultural behavior and directing national sentiment and loyalty toward the state, state education plays a vital role in
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this process in China. Thus comparison of different ethnic groups' responses to state education in China sheds light on how and why a standardized education system, intended to reduce or eliminate ethnic identities, can produce the opposite effect.

Naxi children in Lijiang and Tai and other children in Sipsong Panna study the same textbooks. The methods of teaching in both areas are very similar, as is the structural arrangement of minority education and boarding schools. However, although Chinese education has been quite successful among the Naxi, it has failed to reach the majority of the Tai, and Naxi and Tai local responses to Chinese state education are profoundly different from each other. Whereas Naxi intellectuals utilize education to promote a Naxi identity, many Tai with a Chinese education are culturally stigmatized and Tai peasants with no Chinese education cannot raise ethnic, political, and economic demands within the state. Through Chinese standardized education, a powerful discourse on what it means to be a member of a minority minzu and of the Chinese nation is transmitted. For several historic, cultural, and political reasons, this has been received differently among the two groups and has produced different reactions in terms of ethnic identification.

During the Qing dynasty, private and charitable Confucian schools became the prime institutions of learning among the Naxi in Lijiang. The Naxi elite who participated in this education gradually adopted it as their own, and most teachers and students in these schools were Naxi. Chinese/Confucian-educated scholars and teachers enjoyed high status in the Naxi community, especially around Lijiang Town. In a Ming dynasty chronicle, the ruling Naxi lineage already was praised for its ability to study Confucian ethics, and Lijiang was completely integrated into the Chinese empire during the Qing Dynasty. After initial suspicion toward the modern Chinese schools established in the early twentieth century, the Naxi gradually came to accept them as the most important local institutions of learning and as the ladder to influence and prestige. Today the Naxi minority is still singled out in Chinese sources as a group of people who have proven to be willing and able to learn from "more advanced" minzu. Many Naxi have come to think of themselves as belonging to a group characterized by its "love of learning," and in spite of many serious financial problems in schools in rural Naxi areas, most Naxi parents want at least one child (preferably a son) to obtain an education beyond primary school. They regard Chinese education as their own,
and most teachers, principals, and cadres in local bureaus of education (as in local government in general) are indeed Naxi themselves. The Naxi elite who received a Chinese Confucian—and later Communist—education seemed for a long time to adopt as much as possible of the dominant cultural values of the Chinese center. Educated Naxi participated actively in the state’s civilizing projects (Harrell 1995a) as carried out among the peoples living on the state’s geographical, cultural, and political periphery. Education was a significant element in this project, and due to the fact that it denied the values of local Naxi customs, religion, history, and language, many Naxi came to feel embarrassed by their own ethnic affiliation. Existent or potential feelings of cultural stigmatization were sometimes reinforced by the state’s political suppression of ethnic identity during different periods of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and by its insistent demonstration of the backwardness of minority minzu.

Since the 1980s members of the Naxi intellectual elite have become spokesmen for a renewed focus on Naxi identity. This is taking place in a changing political climate that allows some expression of ethnic identity and in a modernizing society that is more open toward the outside world than before and informed about the processes of ethnic fragmentation elsewhere. A relatively high percentage of Naxi are intellectuals, cadres with positions in the local and provincial governments, teachers, and researchers. Many of them are reacting against their own stigmatization by seeking to express their identity as Naxi within the framework of the Chinese state. Intellectual Naxi enjoy high prestige in the Naxi community, as did Naxi with a Confucian education in the past. Today intellectual Naxi are utilizing their Chinese education to reformulate the content of the external categorization of themselves. They have reshaped their previously vilified “dongba superstition” into celebrated “dongba culture,” and they are using their high level of Chinese education to expand their own influence in schools, alternative education, exhibitions, and research contacts in their native area of Lijiang. This project is gaining ground in the local community outside the small intellectual circles, and many Naxi peasants today talk with pride, rather than shame, about the time when they still had a dongba in their village. Even Naxi students in secondary and higher education tell of how they had been ashamed of the backwardness of their own minzu, but now feel sorry for other local minorities whom they consider to be much more backward than the Naxi, having fewer educated mem-

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bers and lacking “a culture of their own” (*mei you ziji de wenhua*), as several students expressed it. Belief in the existence of different degrees of civilization has not been abandoned as such, but by using their knowledge of the Chinese language, their high positions gained through participation in state education, and their acquaintance with the Chinese educational and political system, the Naxi have successfully established themselves as a group with their “own culture” (*ziji de wenhua*), less backward than previously assumed.

Although education in itself obviously does not explain the Naxi’s renewed emphasis on ethnic identity and their reformulation of the content of their external categorization as a minority *minzu*, it certainly influences the process and directs the way in which their ethnicity is expressed. A relatively successful education (good participation and graduation rates) has provided the Naxi with the necessary tools (such as language, degrees, cadre positions, and the possibility of being taken seriously in political life) to establish and express themselves competently as a group in China. They are able to utilize the educational system for promoting their own position as a minority *minzu*, to create alternative education, and even to slowly influence—and possibly eventually change—the very content of state education. Chinese education, conducted in various forms during hundreds of years in Lijiang, has facilitated the integration of the Naxi into the Chinese state and helped them adapt to Chinese/Confucian, Nationalist, and Communist ethics and values. In this process they reduced a number of cultural differences and adapted not only to the Chinese state’s pressure for cultural assimilation but also to general global demands for cultural homogenization in a modernizing world. When the political climate in China allowed it, the educated Naxi elite reacted against the pressure to homogenize, by increasingly emphasizing characteristics that they defined as specifically Naxi, as core characteristics of a Naxi identity. Due to their historically close relationship with central China and their successful participation in state education, this concern with ethnic identity is in many ways less controversial than that encountered among the Tai. Naxi identity, however strongly expressed, does not oppose the Chinese supraidentity of the *Zhonghua minzu* so vigorously promoted by the government. The Naxi elite find ways and room for expressing their identity as a minority *minzu* within the acceptable political framework, and, partly for this reason, the modern Naxi elite’s identity may be able to slowly transform state institutions, such as education, from the inside. Therefore, the seemingly controlled and
well-organized way of expressing Naxi identity today might, in the long run, have consequences for Chinese society that are more far-reaching than they immediately seem.

The situation among the Tai in Sipsong Panna is profoundly different. Their first encounter with Chinese schools took place after 1911, when the Republican government established the first primary and short-term teachers training schools in the area. But the Tai already had their own institutions for learning, the monasteries, which most boys attended for a few years, learning to read the Buddhist sutras in their own script. The Chinese schools in the area had their own Chinese teachers, who taught in Chinese, understood little Tai, and taught subjects considered irrelevant by most Tai at the time. In Sipsong Panna, Chinese education resembled colonial style education in other parts of the world in the sense that it was imposed on the Tai by an external political power mainly attempting to expand its own cultural, political, and economic spheres of control. Today Chinese education is more widespread in Sipsong Panna than ever before, and the custom of sending boys to the local monasteries is changing, though not really declining, so that boys are novices for a shorter time and attend Chinese school for at least a few years as well. Still, the local authorities engaged in spreading Chinese education encounter a wide range of problems when trying to persuade Tai parents to send their children to the schools and to make sure that they stay there. They have not succeeded in stopping the Tai’s practice of sending boys to the monasteries, and Buddhism is again developing vigorously in the area in step with the improved economy of the Tai and their increased contacts with monks and relatives in Thailand.

The relatively few Tai from Sipsong Panna who do get an education beyond junior secondary school tend to dissociate themselves from their village’s cultural heritage. In only a few primary schools do Tai children learn Tai, and this is useless (some say a hindrance) anyway for continuing on to secondary or higher education, where all teaching is based upon the Chinese language. In addition, their religion, their history as a kingdom, and their myths, stories, and songs are worthless in state schools and may even be interpreted as running counter to the schools’ and government’s promotion of the common Zhonghua minzu identity and the common history of China as a unified nation. This produces in many Tai students and graduates a feeling of cultural stigmatization—it makes them express embarrassment at their own back-
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ground, the religious practices in their families, the poor knowledge of Chinese in Tai villages, and the low number of Tai graduates beyond the level of junior secondary school.

Unlike the Naxi, the Chinese-educated Tai intellectuals tend to play down their ethnic identity and stand aloof from whatever they associate with Tai identity and culture. They find little space within the Chinese educational system for an ethnic identity that almost inevitably risks becoming politically sensitive, due to its strong connection with religion, alternative schooling in monasteries, and the history of the Tai as the rulers of a kingdom. It is difficult for them to succeed within an educational system that gives almost no consideration to their own language and demands that most students leave their village surroundings at the age of thirteen to live in a boarding school based on moral values and cultural practices significantly different from those they have been brought up with. This, I believe, is one of the reasons why Chinese education still has little bearing on the lives of most Tai—either they simply do not participate in it or they let their children attend school for only a few years. As a result, most Tai are unable to formulate their own political, economic, and cultural interests within the context of the Chinese political system. Unlike the Naxi, they do not have a strong (Chinese-trained) elite that is able to promote their interests as a minority group in China. One of the main arguments used by the government to persuade the Tai to send their children to school is that it is the only way to modernize the economy and improve living standards. This is not convincing for those who have contacts with relatives and friends in Thailand, because they realize that modern education in other parts of the world does not necessarily imply rejection of Buddhism or other religions. Leading monks in Sipsong Panna are cooperating with monks in Thailand and Burma to improve and expand the Buddhist education of boys in Sipsong Panna, and many rural Tai welcome this as a positive way of combining modern education and Buddhism for their sons. Because the only educational option open to Tai girls remains the state schools, parents who have only daughters tend to be more interested in the Chinese schools than are parents with sons.

If the purpose of state education in Sipsong Panna is to direct loyalties toward the state and promote the supraidentity of the Zhonghua minzu while diminishing local ethnic identity and eradicating major cultural differences, it does to a large extent succeed among those Tai who participate—at least
for the time being. However, the majority of Tai do not attend Chinese school for more than a few years, partly for the very reason that the schools ignore and even reject their history and their own cultural and economic life. In the aftermath of the cultural and political suppression during the Cultural Revolution, many Tai have revitalized religious practices and developed contacts with Tai in other countries as a direct result of renewed economic and cultural contacts across the borders with Burma, Laos, and Thailand. State education fails to provide most Tai with tools to express themselves as a group and as individuals in the Chinese state. The few experiments in Sipsong Panna with extended bilingual education, combined with the data collected during my fieldwork, suggest that only an education taking Tai language, culture, and history seriously; cooperating closely with monasteries; providing students with knowledge of direct relevance to the daily economic life of rural Tai; and providing real training for jobs will attract more Tai to Chinese secondary schools. Although some Chinese researchers and cadres have reached the same conclusion, most still fear that this kind of education will spark a stronger focus on Tai ethnic identity and thus run counter to one of the foremost cultural purposes of state education, namely homogenization. One could argue that by keeping the majority of the Tai outside the schools, the educational system indirectly fosters a strong ethnic identification that is just not formulated within the framework of the state and therefore poses a greater political threat.

The Chinese concept of “minority education” implies education that is specifically directed towards the ninety million people who officially do not belong to the Han majority. They are “national minorities,” and in the Chinese debate on minority education there is a tendency to regard them as one relatively homogenous group of people in need of more or less uniform special considerations within education. It is widely believed in China that standardized education will acculturate these people—with their various languages, religions, family structures, customs, and economic lives—to the degree that their ethnic identities will be of only minor significance in the Chinese state and society. Thus, the Chinese government and many cadres engaged in education continue to trust that by emphasizing a common Chinese language, history, and culture, while largely ignoring ethnic and cultural differences, standardized education can replace local ethnic identities with national sentiments of unity. Education may incorporate the teaching
of local languages to the degree that is deemed necessary for achieving popular participation. It is feared, however, that a relaxed attitude toward centralized control of curriculum might result in increased focus on ethnic identity and local political demands.

My research concerning Akha and Jinuo responses to Chinese education has been less comprehensive, and my conclusions in that respect are therefore only preliminary. It appears that, due to the historically low position of the non-Tai in Sipsong Panna, some minorities from the mountains find in Chinese education a way to refute the prejudice against them that is still prevalent among Tai students and peasants. The number of Akha and Jinuo who participate and succeed in education is still relatively low due to poverty and a lack of proper schools in their villages, but they are nevertheless praised by cadres and teachers for being more industrious than the Tai and more interested “in learning from more advanced mīnzū”—that is, the Han. This praise of the Akha and Jinuo clearly has an impact on students’ self-perception, and although the school education demonstrates to them that in the Chinese context they are regarded as even more backward than the Tai, many seemed to accept this image of themselves as backward more easily than did most Tai. They are used to being looked down upon by the Tai, know that the area they inhabit historically was ruled by a Tai king and government, and may see in Chinese education a means of combating their traditional low status and limited power. Many Akha villages celebrate when a student continues on to secondary—and especially higher or specialized secondary—school, and there seems to be a more determined attitude among the Akha and Jinuo students not to return to their villages as peasants after graduation. Thus, a local, historically inherited, ethnic hierarchy can play an important role in determining responses to state education, and some groups apparently see assimilation as a strategy for changing their own position within the local community, government, and administration.

In sum, the evidence demonstrates that belief in the Chinese state educational system’s ability to control ethnic identity is not justified. The standardized educational system cannot by itself instill in students an identification with the state, nation, and CCP that eliminates the importance of their feelings of ethnic affiliation. By diminishing the cultural and political values of minorities’ own languages, customs, and histories, while at the same time transmitting hegemonic interpretations of what it implies to be a minority
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*minzu* in the Chinese nation, the educational system in fact risks producing among ethnic minorities an *increased* emphasis on ethnic identity and cultural differences. Local factors such as the historical relationship with central China, ethnic connections across borders, religion, language, and personalities of individuals make possible a wide range of responses to the standardized education. Standardized state-controlled education is in no way capable of eradicating the importance of these factors, but it plays a role in determining the direction and form of ethnic identity processes. Most groups who adapt well to Chinese state education have been well integrated into the state for a long time and are relatively well adapted to the dominant culture. They are thus able to utilize successful participation in the educational system to express ethnic demands within the framework of state institutions and the media. They may be able to use their Chinese education to bring about new forms of institutionalized learning that give more room for expression of the group's own interpretation of its history and culture. In comparison, those minorities who fail to adapt to the school system and tend to have fewer highly educated members from the state schools have often historically experienced a stronger form of cultural and political peripheralization within the state. When these people engage in activities such as ethnic and cultural relationships across the borders, their ethnic identification and expressions may conflict with the political interests of the state. Contacts based on an ethnic or religious sense of community across the political borders of the PRC may constitute a positive alternative for an ethnic group that experiences a high degree of cultural and political peripheralization in the Chinese state. However, groups with no such international ethnic or religious contacts have fewer alternative ways of expressing themselves and finding support for cultural practices that are incompatible with the political, ideological, and educational systems in China. Cultural homogenization is not necessarily achieved by insisting upon a strictly standardized education that leaves no room for cultural values and practices that are not officially promoted by the government.
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