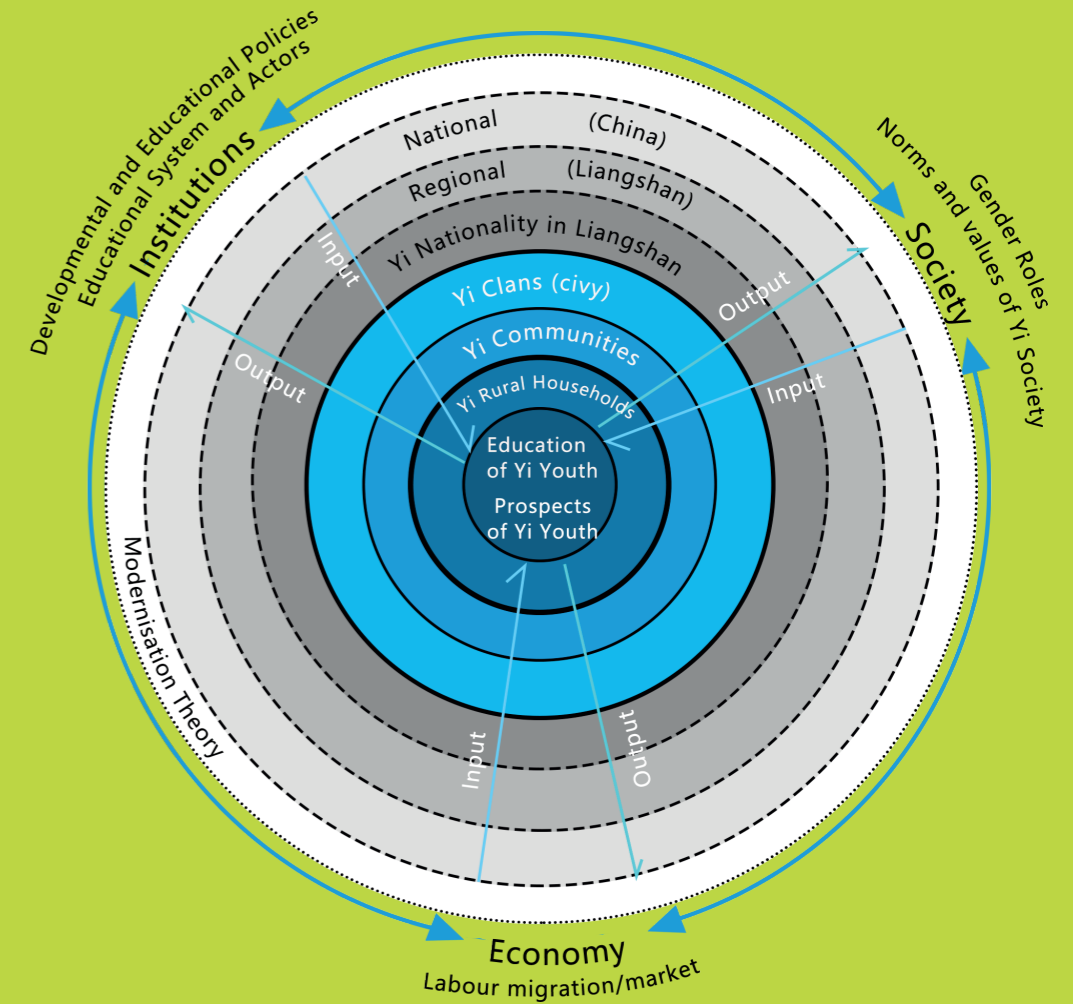


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## Education for Development

### Choices of Yi Rural Youth under the Influence of Modernisation-inspired Development in China



Ye Yang

Centre for Development Studies (ZELF)  
Institute of Geographical Sciences  
Freie Universität Berlin

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## List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
FGI	Focus Group Interview
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PRC	People's Republic of China
PE	Physical Education
TPA	Targeted Poverty Alleviation
TV	Television
UN	United Nations
WB	World Bank

## Abstract

The positive relationship between education and development is generally recognized in modern society. The popularization of school education is usually regarded as an important prerequisite and one of the core driving forces for development. This kind of thinking is also very common in China. In 2013, the authorities set the goal to eliminate absolute poverty nationwide by the end of 2020, and implemented a series of large-scale poverty alleviation projects called Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) *jingzhun fupin* nationwide. The project is aimed at areas listed as national poverty-stricken counties, mainly in the western region of China. Among them, six large ethnic minority areas known under the term 'Three Prefectures and Three Districts' *sanzhou sanqu* are regarded as the key targets of this project. In a series of policies of TPA, the education policy has been assigned a crucial role at the strategic level. This paper aims to investigate these national poverty alleviation policies and practices related to education in a specific local context. Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, which is one of the targeted 'Three States and Three Districts', is selected as the case study area. The main research objective of this study is to understand the current situation of education in this area and the influence of state intervention on the region and its people, with a special focus on the livelihood choice of local people. The paper finds that Liangshan Yi society is undergoing rapid and significant social changes in recent years and that one of the most important driving forces of this change comes from the implementation of national poverty alleviation projects and China's national modernisation development goals, including the expansion of education they entail. By analysing the influence of educational policies from multiple dimensions and levels, the complexity of education itself and the complexity of its influence in the local context are emphasized. Based on these findings, the paper questions that the poverty discourse in China may be too optimistic about the effect of education on poverty reduction. Thus, the view of education as a panacea for poverty reduction and development in mainstream discourse may be too simplistic. Therefore, there is a need to widen the space for debate and to rethink the current trends of homogenization of discussion.



## 1 Introduction

There are two influential lines of thinking about the role of education in development. One is to regard education as an investment in human capital, and the other is to regard it as a human right. The idea that education is conducive to development has long been established in the decision-making of development policies, and it has inspired the actors in this field to take action. Many countries accepted this idea and promoted the expansion of education at home. However, these strategies often did not lead to the expected results. Therefore, it is widely questioned that education can be regarded as a panacea for development. There is criticism of the assertion that there is a linear relationship among education, poverty reduction and development. According to these criticisms, the current evidence on a positive relationship between education and poverty reduction is to be found more at the individual level than at the collective level. In addition, the relationship between education and development is highly context-dependent, so it should not be generalized. Partly detached from these debates, policy makers often hold contradictory attitudes towards the role of education in development plans. On the one hand, improving education is regarded as a good thing that everyone can agree with. On the other hand, education is often marginalized in the process of policy implementation since other policies are regarded as more important. The goals of China's educational policy are strongly linked to the overall policy goal of modernisation, which is often primarily understood as economic development. The Chinese government's understanding of the role of education is influenced by the concept of human capital, which views education and economic growth as being naturally linked. Therefore, strategies for expanding and improving education are often incorporated into the national economic and social development plans.

This study is put forward under the background that China is implementing a new round of poverty alleviation projects nationwide, taking education strategy as one of the central strategies. The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of the implementation of these educational policies on the development and poverty reduction of the case study area. The main research question of this paper is: What are the impacts and the role of education on the development/poverty alleviation of Yi rural youth in Liangshan in respect to individuals, households, communities, and Yi nationality? In order to answer this question, this study conducted a one-month fieldwork in July 2019 in the study area and a supplementary study between June and September 2021. The study is based on the methodologies of ethnography and grounded theory and its specific research methods include narrative interviews, focus group interviews, participatory observations and questionnaire surveys. The respondents include primarily Yi students of different educational stages in Liangshan, as well as Yi migrant workers and villagers (who are also parents of students). In addition, some local teachers and local officials were included.

It is found that Liangshan Yi society is facing a series of profound social transformations, which are closely connected to the state's goals regarding modernisation. In this context, the state's development and education policies in Liangshan are aimed at overcoming the problem of lagging local economic development, so that these poor minority areas can catch up with the development trend of Chinese mainstream society. Moreover, the education policy also integrates other goals, including spreading mainstream culture and promoting national integration in ethnic minority regions. The present situation of education in Liangshan is showing significant changes. Especially, the scale of preschool education and basic education is expanding, which promotes a series of transformations of local society and profoundly affects the livelihood choices of the young generation of Yi. But the impact of education improvement on local society is much more complicated in practice than it is typically expected. At present, the education strategy for Liangshan pays more attention to quantity than to quality of education. The implementation of education policies is usually focused on goals that can be achieved the fastest and the easiest, such as increasing enrolment rates and improving the infrastructure of schools. Beyond that, in the implementation

of the policy package of poverty alleviation strategies, education often has to give way to other strategies, such as infrastructure construction and industrial development. Furthermore, due to the huge imbalance in access to educational resources as well as to other social resources, the role of education in promoting social mobility remains limited. To some extent, social inequality is even solidified. In the end, although the expansion of basic education has allowed poor Yi farmers to have more opportunities to get in touch with mainstream society and to leave the agricultural industry, it is still difficult for them to overcome poverty and their marginal social status.

Finally, a brief overview of the structure of this thesis shall be given. The first chapter focuses on the background of the topic, including China's modernisation-inspired development and its poverty reduction efforts, especially in ethnic minority areas. The second chapter is a review of literature on education and poverty alleviation. The third chapter will introduce the research method. Chapter 4 to Chapter 6 will outline the findings. Chapter 4 summarizes the current situation of education in Liangshan in different stages of education, paying special attention to the latest trends in the education system. In the fifth chapter, the important aspects of these trends are discussed in more detail, especially those connected to the unequal distribution of education resources. In the sixth chapter, these changes are embedded into the overall social background of Liangshan and China, so as to reflect on the impact of state's policies (including education policies) on poverty reduction and development in the area. The seventh chapter discusses the dilemmas faced by rural Yi people in overcoming poverty.

## **2 Background: Modernisation-inspired development of China**

The thoughts of modernisation-inspired development of China are the most important ideological foundation behind China's development and poverty alleviation strategies. The following brief introduction into this background will help understanding the links between the Chinese concept of development and China's approaches to education, minority issues, and poverty reduction.

### **2.1 Modernisation theory and the theoretical basis of the Chinese authorities' development concept**

China's development and poverty alleviation practice have been deeply influenced by the classical modernisation theory. According to Kreutzmann (see 2012a: 53), the Chinese state puts forward systematic and pragmatic development projects that could easily be examples from the classical books of Modernisation Theory. Many studies have paid attention to the influence of modernisation theory on China's development concept (cf. Kreutzmann 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013; Cao 2009; Li 2010). The history of this thought in the People's Republic of China can be traced back to the Mao era when many typical development strategies based on modernisation thought were already central to policy making. Still, the importance of modernisation as an ideology has become even more obvious in the post-Mao Zedong era. The radical political changes since the late 1970s were heavily inspired by the ideas of classical modernisation theory. Among them, the policies of 'Four Modernisations' *sige xiandaihua*, 'Reform and Opening up' *gaige kaifang* and the continuation of these policies all show the importance of modernisation theory for Chinese political thought. Therefore, modernisation theory is regarded as the core ideological basis of contemporary Chinese government decision-making, and it is considered that it has replaced Marxism as the 'paradigm theory' of social science and policy-making in China (see Li 2010: 340; Barabantseva 2009: 225, 229).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, most Chinese policymakers and scholars follow the modernisation theory paradigm when addressing development problems. Furthermore, the development concept closely related to modernisation has also been widely accepted by the Chinese public, which shows the universality of this ideology in contemporary China.

However, China's concept of development as modernisation has its own specific forms and intellectual roots. It is also influenced by other ideas, such as Marxism, Confucianism and Neoliberalism, and has formed a set of specific Chinese development concepts (cf. Cao 2009; Li 2010). Thus, besides modernisation theory, there are also other theories and ideas that have had a profound impact on China's poverty alleviation policies, including ideas on a 'culture of poverty' and on the 'stages of socialism' (see Shih 2007: 46). Many Chinese scholars have adopted the viewpoint of a 'culture of poverty' (cf. Lewis 1975). It is widely accepted by Chinese scholars because its ideological core is relatively consistent with Confucianism, which holds that thought is much more important than material, and therefore regards spiritual poverty as a serious shortcoming (see Shih 2007: 46). The theory on the 'stages of socialism' regards poverty as a historical stage that needs to be surpassed, reflected for example in Deng Xiaoping's slogan 'poverty is not socialism'. This view was re-emphasized by President Xi Jinping in the recent TPA project. He emphasized that helping the poor get rid of poverty and realize common prosperity is the goal of the Chinese Communist Party and China.

### **2.2 The ideological basis of the Chinese government's concept of poverty**

As mentioned above, China's concept of development as modernisation has been influenced by different ideas, which together create a shared understanding of poverty by policy makers. Here, the ideologies of Confucianism, Marxism, Modernisation, and Neoliberalism coexist. Even though they have different roots, highlight different parts of reality, and are partly in conflict with each other when looked upon more closely,

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on modernisation theory, see Lewis 1954; Behrendt 1965; Degele and Dries 2005.

these ideologies still have somewhat compatible conceptions of development. Thus Modernisation Theory, Marxism, Neoliberalism, and Confucianism all add their own aspects to the topic and reaffirm each other forming a solid ideological basis (cf. Shih 2007: 43-44). As modernisation theory has a dominant influence on China's understanding of development, this theory has also played an important role in the conceptualization and treatment of poverty by Chinese authorities. Therefore, poverty is usually understood as the result of a lack of economic development, infrastructure, education, information, investment, as well as poor people's incorrect values (see Shih 2007: 43-44).

Therefore, in the Chinese discourse on poverty, the causes of poverty are usually divided into external and internal factors. The former refers to factors beyond the people such as natural environment, history, and resources, while the latter refers to the personal factors of the poor themselves. Because external factors are usually regarded as objective conditions that are hard to change, internal factors are usually regarded as the aspects that need to be changed. For example, a perceived lack of modern values and the lack of educational qualifications are regarded as shortcomings that cause poverty and make people unable to adapt to modern society. Based on a similar analysis, modernisation theory assigns education an instrumental position in the development process, especially through imparting skills and diligence as well as by overcoming traditional values. Therefore, in the discussion about development and poverty reduction, education is always linked to other goals and ideologies in development theory and practice.

### **3 Literature Review**

This chapter will briefly summarize the research basis on the relationship between education and development. It will start from a global perspective and end with a review of the literature for the local context.

#### **3.1 A global context: Can education promote development?**

Since the end of World War II, a world culture that emphasizes progress and competition has gradually given education a central role in development. In the past half-century, it has been generally believed that increasing citizens' education will promote the development of the countries (see Colclough 2012: 136). In fact, education and development were not always linked as they are today. The research on the relationship between them, especially the research on education as a means to promote development, started in the 1950s and developed rapidly in the 1960s (see Chabbott and Ramirez 2000: 178). Although there is an ongoing debate among scholars about whether education can promote development, blueprints of education for development have long been incorporated into national education declarations and conventions and into the national development strategies and policies of many countries (see Chabbott and Ramirez 2000: 174-176; Colclough 2012: 136-137).

However, the viewpoint that is critical of the notion of education as a means to promote development holds that the evidence of the current research on the relationship between education and development highlights the pronounced dependency of this connection on specific local contexts. Thus the assumption of a linear relationship between education and development has been questioned, especially regarding claims on a positive correlation between education and economic, political, and cultural development (see Chabbott and Ramirez 2000: 164; Colclough 2012: 137-138). In the study of education and development in Pakistan by Benz, it is concluded that any general assumption about the impact of education on development is bound to fail, so it is best to conduct case studies (see 2014: 39).

The research field on the relationship between education and development has been addressed from different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Economists have been very active in this research field. Especially, the theory of Human Capital (cf. Mincer 1958) has had a profound influence on the understanding of the role of education in development, even though it has also received many criticisms (cf. Tan 2014; Dilts 2011; McGuinness 2006). The experience of many developing countries shows that the accumulation of human capital is not sufficient to promote economic growth, but needs to be combined with supportive policies and the creation of inclusive institutions (see Thomas and Burnett 2015, quoted after McGrath and Gu 2015: 20-21).

Shortly after the systematic influence of education on the economy was postulated in the 1960s, the research on the relationship between education and political development became a related research topic. At first, people were optimistic about the influence of education on political development, because education was considered to be able to influence one's values and thus their political attitude (see Chabot and Ramirez 2000: 167). But experience has shown that both the influence of education on one's values (cf. Weil 1985) as well as the political system (see Benavot 1992; Singh and Mukherjee 1993) are highly dependent on specific context as well as many other factors.

In the past few decades, sociologists have widely questioned the idea that education is merely a functional means for different ends. For example, equal educational opportunities are regarded as a necessary condition to guarantee social justice (see Izquierdo and Minguez 2003: 25-26, quoted after Benz 2014: 30), but some sociologists have questioned basic assumptions about the fairness and rationality of education. Therefore, it is believed that education may in turn often strengthen social stratification and social injustice,

rather than guarantee social mobility. Among these critical concepts, the concept of cultural capital put forward by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) is very influential. They found the importance of social and cultural mechanisms in the reproduction of inequality and explained the sustained advantages of privileged families and individuals in education and wider fields through the concept of cultural capital.

Although many studies can prove that there is a certain relationship between education and development, the causal relationship between them remains unclear. That is, education can have an impact on development, but the degree of development will in turn affect education itself. Therefore, countries with good education levels are usually richer than those with poor education levels. However, the influence between education and development can work both ways (see Psacharopoulos and Woodhall 1985: 20). Thus, research that relies on statistical data to prove the relationship between education and development often confuses the relationships of causality and tends to sideline the influence of other possible factors (see Robinson-Pant 2015, quoted after McGrath and Gu 2015: 81).

### **3.2 National level: Education and China's social transformation**

This section will briefly introduce the background related to education, development, and poverty reduction in China, including the background of China's economic development and increasing inequality, government-led poverty alleviation projects, and the present situation of education in China, especially in minority areas.

#### **3.2.1 Unbalanced economic and regional development**

After the economic reform started in the late 1970s, China experienced more than 40 years of rapid economic growth. With economic growth, on the one hand, the population living in absolute poverty has been greatly reduced, and by the end of 2020, it was eliminated nationwide according to official data. On the other hand, the imbalances of regional development have also increased. Especially the development gap between eastern China and the other regions, as well as the gap between urban and rural areas became more pronounced. Moreover, inequality in China is also manifested in the inequality of people's access to capital, education, and medical care caused by factors such as class, residence, gender and ethnicity (see Yao 2005: 38).

For a long time, the gap between urban and rural areas has been the most important form of inequality in China. Almost all those living in absolute poverty in China live in rural areas, so the government's poverty alleviation plans are also aimed at rural areas. This pattern is closely related to the urban bias of China's policy-making. Typically, the development of cities and industries is prioritized, while other policies restrict the migration of rural populations to cities and grant privileges to urban residents (see Zhang 2019: 5-6; Yao 2005: 69-70; Khan and Riskin 2001: 85). It was not until 1979 that the rural population was allowed to enter cities to look for a livelihood, but they were still excluded from equal participation in the industrialization process, economic opportunities and access to high-quality public services and welfare (see Yao 2005: 69). Moreover, they also face discrimination and exclusion from urban society (see Deborah and Wang 2009: 10), which led to the increase of urban-rural inequality. The development gap between different regions in China is considered to be related to the natural conditions of different regions, but it is also related to the state's development policies. For example, the growth in eastern China is considered to be at the expense of western China to some extent (see Bhalla and Luo 2013: 94-96).

### 3.2.2 Poverty Alleviation Projects to Diminish Inequality

In order to reduce the imbalances in regional development, the Chinese authorities have implemented a series of large-scale poverty reduction efforts. In the past few decades, China's great achievements in poverty reduction have attracted the attention of the international community (cf. UN 2015; Zhou et al. 2017; Islam 2016). According to the statistics of the World Bank, the number of people who got rid of absolute poverty in China accounts for most of those in developing countries in recent decades (see Chen 2021: 129). The government has always been the leading force in China's development and poverty reduction policies, playing the role of decision-maker, executor and supervisor (see Crane et al. 2018; Liu et al. 2020; Dunford and Bonschab 2013; Tang 2019). In 1986, the Chinese government set up a special agency for poverty alleviation,<sup>2</sup> which later set up poverty alleviation offices at all levels of government to deal with the work related to national poverty alleviation projects (see Xue et al. 2013: 1177). In addition, almost all government departments and state-owned enterprises have participated in the national poverty alleviation projects in China. Among China's national poverty alleviation projects, the 'Western Development Plan' in the 2000s attracted the attention of the international community (cf. Barabantseva 2009; Luo 2004; Chaudhuri and Ravallion 2006). One of the goals of this project was to achieve social and political stability by narrowing the widening socio-economic gap between the eastern and western regions (see Ptackova 2012: 218). Although the implementation of this strategy has improved the economic indicators of the western region, the disadvantaged position of the western region has not been greatly improved since other regions developed faster (see Bhalla and Luo 2013: 95; Yao 2005: 149). The TPA project is another national project that has a far-reaching impact on the development of western China (see Deng 2014; Li et al. 2016; Liu et al. 2016; Wang 2016; Wang and Guo 2015). The target areas of TPA are 832 poverty-stricken counties and 128,000 poverty-stricken villages designated by the state (see Chen et al. 2021: 1). These poor counties are mainly concentrated in the western regions and are often inhabited by ethnic minorities (cf. WB 2009; Dollar 2007; Khan 2005; Knight 2013; Montalvo and Ravallion 2009; Chen and Cheng 2014). The specific strategies of the project include industrial development, resettlement, ecological compensation, the promotion of education and minimum living guarantee (see NPAPEC 2018a; 2018b). Most poverty alleviation measures are only targeted at designated poor households.

### 3.2.3 Modernisation of Chinese education

China's education policy has long been oriented to the goal of modernisation. The authorities have continuously pointed out the role of education for national modernisation, especially the assumed positive role for economic development (see Yang 2002: 135; Rong and Shi 2001). Therefore, expanding and improving education is considered a key element of comprehensive national economic and social development plans (see Wang 2003: 2, 135; OECD 2016: 10; Morgan et al. 2017: 1, 3). According to official reports, nine-year compulsory education has been fully popularized since 2010 (see Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2015) and high school education (including the expanding sectors of vocational education) is approaching the goal of full popularization in recent years (see OECD 2016: 10).

Although the scale of education has expanded, the quality of education and equal access have always been a difficult problem (see Rong and Shi 2001: 3; OECD 2016: 22, 26; Morgan et al. 2017: 3). The inequality of educational opportunities in China is manifested in many different aspects. The influencing factors of educational opportunities include the place of residence, gender, ethnicity, disability and class (see Rong and Shi 2001: 111; Wang et al. 1998: 19-23). In addition, the way administrative institutions distribute educational responsibilities contributes to the inequality of educational resources at the macro-level (see OECD 2016: 9). As the state devolves the responsibility for education to local governments,

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<sup>2</sup> This agency is called 'Office of the Leading Group for Poverty Alleviation and Development of the State Council'.

which have huge differences in terms of revenue, the available resources for education show great differences in different regions and between urban and rural areas (see Wu and He 2016: 943). These inequalities have seriously hindered the potential of education to promote social mobility. Thus, the gap in access to education and in the quality of education is regarded as an important cause of social inequality and poverty in China. In order to reduce this inequality, the state has implemented a series of educational measures to help poor areas improve their education system<sup>3</sup>.

### 3.3 Regional level: Education and development in China's minority areas

As mentioned above, many of China's development and poverty alleviation policies, including education policies, are aimed at minority areas because their development and education indicators lag behind the national average. This part is about the education and development context in China's minority areas.

#### 3.3.1 Modernisation of China's ethnic minorities

All Chinese ethnic groups except for the Han nationality are called national minorities (*shaoshu minzu*) (55 in total). The Chinese concept of nation *minzu* includes the English meanings of people, nation, nationality and ethnos (see Heberer 1989: 10). All nationalities (56 in total) are regarded as subordinate to the state (*guojia*) (see Heberer 1989: 12). This was summarized by Fei Xiaotong (1986), whose concept of 'The Pattern of Diversity in Unity in the Chinese Nation' is widely accepted in China. In this concept, the Han nationality is regarded as the link connecting other nationalities and occupies a central position. But also ethnic minorities occupy an important and special position in China. Although they only account for 8% of the total population, they populate 62% of China's land and more than 90% of its border areas. Moreover, ethnic minority areas are vital to China's development and modernisation as well as its geostrategic positioning since they have important resources and are important for national defence considerations (see Postiglione 2011: 355; Heberer 1989: 16; Zang 2016: 3). However, these areas are also areas where poor people are concentrated, so they are also the main targets of national poverty alleviation plans.

Ethnic minorities are often regarded as the most traditional groups in contemporary Chinese society. They are often associated with the concepts of countryside, agriculture, poverty, tradition, religion, irrationality as well as a lack of education. By contrast, mainstream Han society is regarded as the representative of the modernity of Chinese society (see Gladney 1994: 96-97), so it usually corresponds to the concepts of the state, city, elite, modernity, civilization, intellectualism and centrality (see Zang 2016: 14-15). Therefore, contemporary development goals for minority areas are mainly to bring about their modernisation. However, the goals also exceed them. For example, there are other goals such as cultural assimilation (see Heberer 2014: 743; Lin 2007: 936).

#### 3.3.2 Poverty of ethnic minorities

For a long time, ethnic minorities have represented the majority of China's extremely poor population although their share of the total population is only about 8% (see Chen and Cheng 2014: 24). Among the poverty-stricken areas identified by the state, official ethnic minority areas account for more than half.<sup>4</sup> There are significant differences between ethnic minorities and Han nationality in terms of occupation, income and residence (see Wu and He 2016). Compared with Han areas, minority areas' industrialization,

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<sup>3</sup> The education policies for rural areas (especially in poverty-stricken areas) include: popularizing preschool education (three-year action plan for preschool education *sannian xueqian jiaoyu xindong jihua*); exemption from tuition fees and textbook fees, and subsidized meals at school (two exemptions and one subsidy *niangmian yibu*), improvement of school facilities, affirmative action (such as extra points for minority students in the entrance examinations for higher education), a rural teacher support programme, financial aid for students from preschool to postgraduate education, etc. (see Chen 2017: 10).

<sup>4</sup> According to 'China's rural poverty alleviation and development programme (2011-2020)', among the 680 poverty-stricken counties in 14 concentrated contiguous poverty-stricken areas in China, ethnic autonomous counties account for 61.9% (421 poverty-stricken counties are ethnic autonomous counties).



urbanization, medical care, communication and transportation infrastructure and living standards are less developed (see Chen and Cheng 2014: 23; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011: 13, 60; Postiglione 2011: 367). This imbalance has a potential negative impact on the social and political stability of the country, so the authorities attempt to alleviate inequality through policies and the transfer of resources.

There are different views on the causes of inequality between ethnic minorities and mainstream society. A widely accepted view identifies both the natural environment of the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities (external causes) and perceived backwardness of their culture and education (internal causes). The latter argument is very close to the explanations given in classical modernisation theory that equally views deviation from the norm of modernized society as backwardness and blames it for poverty. However, this view has been challenged by other scholars who claim that ethnic factors are not the cause of poverty of ethnic minorities. By comparing the incomes of groups with different ethnic identities in China, they show that it is regional disparities and family background rather than ethnic identities that explain the differences in incomes, while ethnic factors have no strong independent influence on their poverty (see Gustafsson and Sai 2009; Gustafsson and Li 2003). Other viewpoints see that the process of economic reform has led to the widening of the gap between the competitiveness of Han and ethnic minorities in the labour market, where minorities in poverty-stricken areas are in a weak position in the competition because of their limited education level (see Morgan et al. 2017: 1-3; Mackerras 2011 (IV): 238; Zang 2016: 19).

### **3.3.3 Ethnic education: balancing development goals and ethnic cultural heritage**

China's education system for ethnic minorities needs to balance the goals of promoting national integration and economic goals with the preservation of the cultures of the different ethnic groups. This has proved to be an arduous task (see Leibold and Chen 2014: 1). This is reflected in the constant changes and inconsistency of the authorities' policies towards ethnic minorities. The policies on language education in ethnic minority areas can be taken as an example. The policy of allowing ethnic minorities to use their own language for teaching used in the first years after the establishment of the PRC was broken by various political movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution). After the political reform in the end of 1970s, the position on the use of minority languages in school again became much more relaxed, because the authorities became aware of the need to respect cultural diversity to maintain national stability (see Zang 2016: 8). Since then, bilingual education, in both Mandarin and minority languages has become the guiding principle. So, the teaching of two languages has gradually become a common policy in many minority areas, also see Zhou (2003) and Beckett and Postiglione (2012).

For a long time, the educational achievements of rural ethnic minorities have been generally lower than those of Han nationality and especially urban students. The dual identities as members of the rural population and ethnic minorities put them in a position to be disadvantaged on two levels (see Wu and He 2016: 9). As for the reasons for this educational disadvantage, some mainstream scholars accuse the culture of ethnic minorities of a perceived lack of enthusiasm for education, which would further lead to the reproduction of poverty. These accusations against the cultures of ethnic minorities have aroused doubts, especially from Chinese ethnic minority scholars. They point out that the influence of social structure and macro policies on minority education has not been considered in the accusation (see Lin 2007; Wang 2012; Hou 2015). They point to the objective disadvantages of ethnic minorities, such as their poor economic situation and the disadvantages caused by inequalities in the provision of educational resources in ethnic minority areas in general. They also argue that despite references to bilingual education the whole education system is based on the language and culture of mainstream society, leaving little space left for ethnic minorities' own language and culture, thus, it leads to minority students tend to be uninterested in school (see Chen 2008; Hansen 1999; Gao 2010; Mackerras 2011).

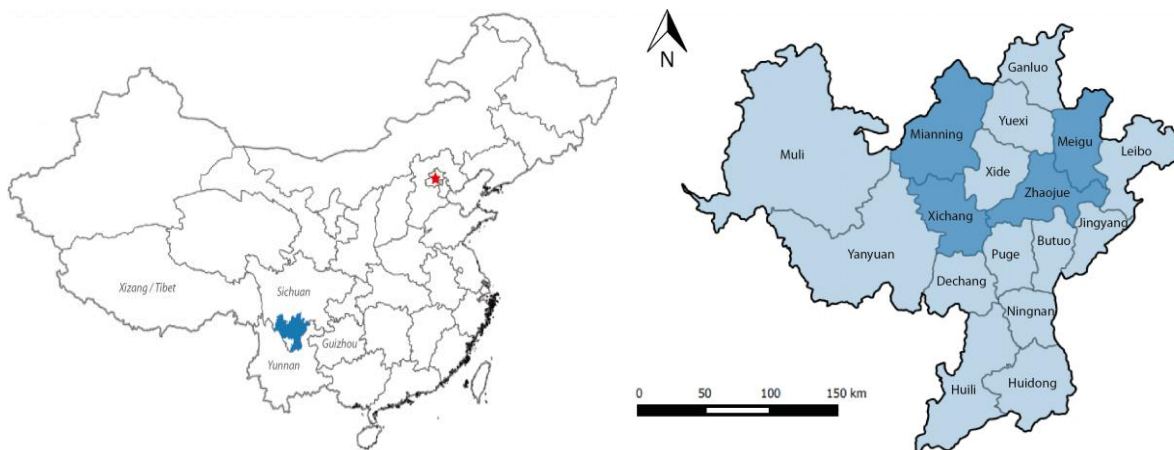
As a response to the problems in the education system in minority areas, the authorities have made different efforts. On the one hand, the education system experienced a quantitative expansion towards securing full enrolment (including an increase in the number of teachers and students) and improvements in the educational infrastructures in minority areas. On the other hand, the government attempts to reduce the gap between minority students and Han students through affirmative action policies, which focus especially on access to higher education resources.<sup>5</sup> However, the affirmative action policy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, reduces the disadvantages of minority students in accessing educational resources to some extent. On the other hand, it devalues the educational achievements of minority students in the view of mainstream society.

### 3.4 Local level: Education and development in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture

This section will introduce the basic situation of Liangshan and the Yi nationality, as well as existing research on education and development (especially poverty) in this area.

#### 3.4.1 Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture

Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture is located in Sichuan Province (south-west of China), bordering Yunnan Province (see Map 1). It covers an area of about 64,400 square kilometres (see Shang and Hu 2017: 3). The area is located between the northern *Hengduan* Mountains and the Sichuan Basin on the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 40). About 70% of this area is mountainous, with an average elevation of 2,000-2,500 meters, while valleys cover only 5-6% of the area (BHYN 2009: 3). In 2016, there was a total population of 5.12 million people, including 2.66 million Yi (51.9%), 2.29 million Han, and smaller groups of 14 other ethnic minorities. While there are also other regions with significant Yi populations, Liangshan is the area with the largest Yi population (see Liangshan Prefecture Statistics Bureau 2017). The prefecture is one of the poorest and least developed regions in China (see Heberer 2001; 2005).

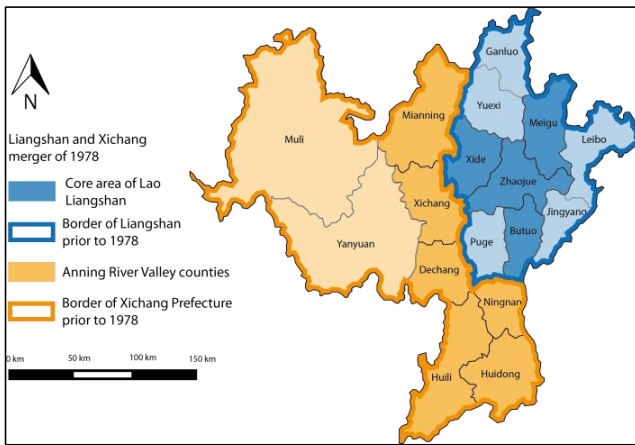


Map 1: The location of Liangshan in China and the distribution of 17 counties in Liangshan. Xichang, Mianning, Zhaojue and Meigu are the research sites of this thesis. Design by author.

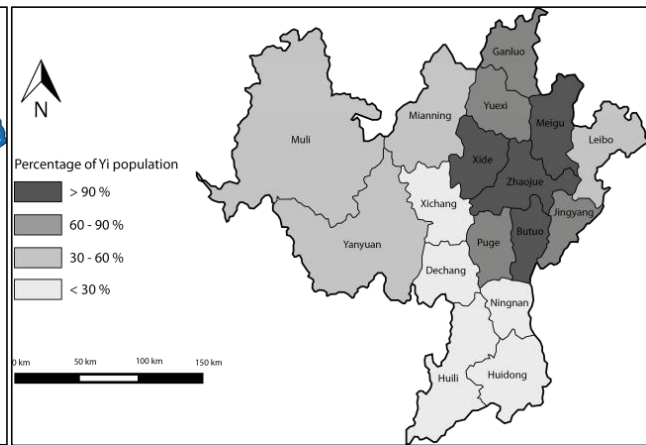
Despite being viewed as a part of China for much longer, the modern Chinese state took full control of Liangshan only in 1956 in a process called democratic reform. In the next 20 years, like other parts of China, Liangshan experienced a series of political movements. In 1978, the administrative region of Liangshan was expanded, which is called Xichang-Liangshan merger (*xiliang hebing*). It had a significant impact on the population distribution, economy, politics and other aspects of this area. (see Heberer 2007: 42; Guo 2020: 167). In this merger, the old Liangshan area (mainly Yi-inhabited area) and 8 of the 10 counties of the old

<sup>5</sup> These policies include: lowering the admission requirements of all levels of education (especially universities) and preferential enrolment quota of specific universities for minorities (see Rehamo 2018: 51).

Xichang area (mainly Han-inhabited area) were integrated into today's Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (see Map 2).<sup>6</sup> Despite having been integrated into one territory for several decades, the two parts of Liangshan have remained relatively distinct in terms of ethnic composition and local development (see Map 3).



Map 2: The Liangshan and Xichang merger in 1978. The core areas of Lao Liangshan and the Anning River Valley are highlighted. Design by author.



Map 3: The Percentage of Yi Nationality people in Liangshan Prefecture. Design by author. Based on data by Liangshan State Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook (2017).

Generally speaking, Han people live in the low-altitude valleys and foothills, while Yi people mainly live in the high-altitude mountain areas (see BHYN 2009: 269, 302). Scholars explain this spatial pattern with the expansion of Han settlement areas in previous centuries that pushed the Yi people into marginal areas (see Heberer 1989: 18, 45; 2018: 73, 83). The old Liangshan area where more than 90% of the population is Yi is the poorest part of the region. More than 80% of the poor people in Liangshan are living here. In contrast, the most affluent areas are along the Anning River Valley, which has a majority Han population (see Guo 2008: 114-115). In between, there are areas with mixed ethnic composition (such as Ganluo County). The altitude of residence is closely connected with the economic situation. Alpine areas (above 2,500 m) are the poorest. Almost only Yi live there. The mid-level areas (1,800-2,500 m) have a better situation than the alpine areas. However, they have the largest absolute number of people in poverty. Lower areas (1,200-1,800 m) have the lowest percentages of people living in poverty (see Guo 2008: 115).

Table 1: Highest Educational Degree of Liangshan citizens and national average in 2000-2020 (per 100,000 people)

	2000			2010			2020		
	Liangshan	National Average	Discrepancy (%)	Liangshan	National Average	Discrepancy (%)	Liangshan	National Average	Discrepancy (%)
college or above	1,541	3,611	-57.32	3,988	8,930	-55.34	6,776	15,467	-56.19
senior high school	4,828	11,146	-56.68	6,122	14,032	-56.37	6,861	15,088	-54.53
junior high school	11,137	33,961	-67.21	20,589	38,788	-46.92	22,732	34,507	-34.12
primary school	38,782	35,701	+8.63	50,947	26,779	+90.25	41,783	24,767	+68.70

Source: Compilation based on data of the sixth and seventh national census of China in 2010 and 2020.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In October 1978, among the 10 counties in the original Xichang area, Miyi and Yanbian were integrated into the territory of present Panzhihua city while the other 8 counties (Xichang, Dechang, Mianning, Huili, Ningnan, Huidong, Yanyuan, Muli) merged into the old Liangshan area (also called *Lao Liangshan*). The old Liangshan area covers an area of 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of over 1 million, of which almost all are Yi. The old Xichang area has an area of 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 3 million, among which the Han population is about 2.5 million (see He 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Data for 2020, from Bulletin of the Seventh National Census (No.1): Basic information of the seventh national census. National Bureau of Statistics. [published on 11.05.2021]. Online: [http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2021-05/13/content\\_5606149.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2021-05/13/content_5606149.htm). Last accessed: 12.11.2021. & Interpretation of the Bulletin of the 7th National Census of Liangshan Prefecture. Liangshan Prefecture Statistics Bureau. [published on 02.06.2021]. Online: [http://tj.lsz.gov.cn/sjfb/lstjgb/202106/t20210603\\_1926358.html](http://tj.lsz.gov.cn/sjfb/lstjgb/202106/t20210603_1926358.html). Last accessed: 12.11.2021.; Data about China, from the sixth national census in 2010. Online: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm>. Last accessed: 12.11.2021.; Data about Liangshan, from Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Liangshan Prefecture in 2010. Online: <https://tjgb.hongheiku.com/9989.html>. Last accessed: 12.11.2021.

These inequalities are among the most extreme in the entire country. Although the per capita GDP of Liangshan ranks first among the minority autonomous areas of China (see Guo 2020: 26), the predominantly Yi-populated old Liangshan area is one of the areas with the worst economic development and education situation in the country (see Zuo 2019: 86). All the counties in this area are national poverty-stricken counties. In contrast, the southern and central areas along the Anning River Basin constitute the core areas of Liangshan's economic development. Moreover, the education level in Liangshan is much lower than the national average (see Table 1). Although basic education has made remarkable progress in the past few decades, the progress of high school and higher education is still very limited.

### 3.4.2 The cultural and historical background of Liangshan Yi (Nuosu) Nationality

The Yi nationality was named by the Chinese government in the 1950s based on standards applied in the Soviet Union. It is a nationality composed of different branches with great differences in culture, language and lifestyles (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 26). Thus, there are still some controversies about the identity of different branches of Yi people for their national identity (see Harrell 2000; 2002a). The Liangshan Yi people call themselves *Nuosu*. They are the largest subgroup of the officially recognized nationality of Yi that is distributed across several regions of southwest China, including parts of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. The officially recognized Yi nationality is currently the sixth-largest ethnic minority in China, with a total population of 8.71 million (see Census Office of the State Council 2010). The religious beliefs of Liangshan Yi people have not been officially recognized (see Guo 2020: 145) and even the local people still refer to it as 'superstition' *mixin* when they speak Mandarin, a classification given to it by the government during the Cultural Revolution. Still, religion plays an important role in Liangshan Yi society. The priests of Yi religion *bimo* are still fulfilling their responsibilities and have a high social status in Yi society.<sup>8</sup> Until today, it is still the custom of Yi families to hold *bimo* ceremonies when their family members are ill, for wedding ceremonies, funerals, ceremonies for reaching adulthood, Yi new year and other special occasions.

In traditional Yi society, people's hierarchy is strictly distinguished according to their bloodlines.<sup>9</sup> This societal hierarchy and the family branches *jiashi* are regarded as the foundation of traditional Liangshan Yi society. The family branch of Yi, known as *civy* in Yi language, means a group based on a common line of male ancestors. These networks of consanguinity were the central organizational form of politics, economy, social ethics and social assistance in traditional Yi society. They still play a core role in organizing the daily affairs of Yi society (cf. Qumu 2000: 84, 108). This is especially strong in social ethics and social assistance in Liangshan Yi society. All members of a *civy* have the obligation to help each other, especially in cases such as deaths and crime. If a person belongs to a *civy* and the power of this *civy* determines the social status of a person (see Qumu 2000: 36). Thus, the reputation of a *civy* is considered to be of great importance and is reflected in aspects such as the solemnity of funerals. Both people's hierarchy and their family branches *civy* still influence the daily life of Yi people and are central to the social customs, culture, ethics, and ideology of Yi society (see Qumu 2000: 40; Heberer 2007: 6). Furthermore, both the social status and the membership in a *civy* that is considered adequate are still the decisive factors for the consideration of the choice of marriage partners (see Ma 2001).

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<sup>8</sup> *Bimo* is a class or stratum of traditional Yi society with high social status. There is a strict hereditary system, in which only men from a *bimo* family can take this role. They are in charge of documents and ceremonies and must learn traditional Yi scriptures to do so. Thus, they are seen as the preservers and disseminators of Yi culture (see Qumu 2000: 41). There is also another type of people with ritual functions called *sun*, who are responsible for exorcising ghosts. Different from *bimo*, they do not know the Yi scriptures and their position is not hereditary (see Baqie 1997, In: Ma 2013: 90).

<sup>9</sup> In traditional Yi society, people are divided into five grades according to their bloodlines, including the ruling class (*Zimo*, *Nuohuo*), and the ruled class (*Qunuo*, *Ajia* and *Xiayi*). Inter-marriages among different classes are not allowed (see Mi 1996, In: Ma 2013: 219).



Photo 1: A *bimo* ceremony is being held for a sick person. The three people in the photo belong to three generations of a *bimo* family. Photo by author, Meigu, 11 July 2019.



Photo 2: Villagers are attending a funeral, chatting in a grove and waiting for food to be cooked. Women and men sit around separately. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 02 July 2019.

### 3.4.3 Existing research on Liangshan Yi society

In the 19th century, there were first works about Liangshan Yi society. They were written by some western scholars and travellers (for example, Legendre 1913). At the beginning of the 20th century, representative works include Lietard (1911), Yang Chengzhi (entered Liangshan in the early 1930s), Ma Changshou (2006) (entered Liangshan twice from 1937 to 1940) and Lin Yaohua (1947; 1995). In addition, there were some members of Yi elites who wrote on Yi society outside the context of traditional religious texts, for example, Qumu Zangyao (1934). These works are usually ethnographic investigation reports based on fieldwork in the area.

After the founding of the PRC, the authorities conducted a comprehensive social survey of ethnic minorities in the 1950s. Due to the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Cultural Revolution), the results were not published until the late 1970s. Here, the publications about Liangshan Yi include those by the 'Liangshan Yi Slave Society' Writing Group (1982), Hu Qingjun (1985) and Zhou Ziqiang (1983). These works systematically analysed the characteristics of the traditional Yi society of Liangshan. Since the 1980s, the political atmosphere has become more relaxed for research on minority issues. Many Chinese scholars (including Yi scholars) and foreign scholars conducted research in the area. Because the Liangshan Yi area has preserved lots of its traditional culture and social form, it has attracted extensive attention. There are some famous works about the history, society and culture of the area (cf. Lin 1947; 1960; 1995; Pan 1990; Bamo 2000; Ma 2003; Zeng 2012; Vermander 1999a; 1999b; 2004).

Especially the German scholar Thomas Heberer (1984; 1989; 2007; 2014) and American scholar Steven Harrell (2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2013) have made important contributions to the international research of the Yi society. Stevan Harrell has worked closely with local Yi and Han scholars and made an important contribution to Yi studies eventually it became a research field of its own (see Kaup 2018). Though there are a group of Yi scholars devoted to the research and translation of Yi ancient documents since the 1980s, the study on the history and culture of the Liangshan Yi society was seldom conducted from the perspective of insiders until the 1980s (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 26). Later, some Yi scholars such as Ma Erzi (2003) reinterpreted the history of Liangshan Yi society without taking the Han society as the core of their perspective on history.

There are some studies on poverty in Liangshan, which focus mainly on the implementation of national poverty alleviation plans in Liangshan (Cao et al. 2016; Guo 2008; He et al. 2012; Lan et al. 2017; Shang and Hu 2017; Zheng 2008a). The latest research focuses on the implementation of the TPA project in Liangshan

(Gao et al. 2020; Xiao 2020; Zhang and Fu 2020; Yang 2020; Ming and Wang 2019). Most of the research on poverty in Liangshan adopts a perspective of economics. Among the studies on poverty in Liangshan, the connections to the field of education have not been investigated so far.

Studies on education in Liangshan focus on the history of Liangshan's modern education system (He 2012) and the current situation of education in the Liangshan area (Qumu 2000; Rehamo 2018; Xiao 2013; Lin and Luo 2000; Sun and Mi 2004). There are also some studies that have focused on the bilingual education policy in this region (Rehamo and Harrell 2018; Ding and Yu 2013; Hu 2010; Teng 2002; Feng and Sunuodula 2009; Shih 2002) and girls' education (Liu and Ma 2006; Zhu 2020).

At present, most of the studies on education in Liangshan focus on the specific context of schools, while few studies address the role of education for Liangshan's development. As a first step, Yi scholar Rehamo (2016) stated to evaluate the impact of education popularization on Yi villages in the context of China's development and modernisation from a school-based perspective, and discussed the dynamic relationship between education, environment and Yi traditions. She also studied modern education in Liangshan and the reasons for the poor educational situation in the Yi-inhabited areas (Rehamo 2018; Rehamo and Harrell 2013).

## **4 Research design**

Most of the existing literature on the topic of education for poverty alleviation (jiaoyu fupin) emphasizes the role of education in promoting economic development. The existing studies mainly focus on the national poverty alleviation policies for education. However, a differentiated discussion on the role of education for development is largely absent because of the dominant assumption of a positive and direct impact of education on development and poverty alleviation. Thus, existing studies mainly focus on the macro-level and give little attention to local contexts, especially grassroots perspectives. A similar pattern can be found for research on poverty in Liangshan. These studies often pay most attention to poverty rates and the state's poverty alleviation policies. Education is often not even mentioned as a strategy of poverty alleviation. In contrast, the research on education is mostly school-based and the role of education in development is rarely discussed (cf. Rehamo 2016; 2018; Rehamo and Harrell 2013). Most of such studies rely primarily on quantitative methods. Therefore, this thesis aims to study the influence of national development policies (including education policies) on the local society and its people based on fieldwork and qualitative methods, in order to understand the role of education for development and poverty alleviation in the local context. This chapter will briefly introduce the selection of research sites, research questions, research purposes, the analytical framework and the research methods.

### **4.1 Selection of the research site**

Since the relationship between education and development depends on local contexts, a case study is an appropriate way of studying it. Furthermore, China's ethnic minorities are characterized by great differences in their culture, development, and the local contexts they live in, so that it is almost impossible to make statements on them as a whole (see Postiglione 2011: 355). Education is an aspect where these differences become apparent, for example, different ethnic groups are found to have different responses to the unified education policy of China (see Hansen 1999).

The reasons for choosing Liangshan as the research site include first the fact that Liangshan is one of 14 national poverty-stricken areas, and both the economic and educational indicators are some of the worst in China. Moreover, Liangshan is also a key target of national poverty alleviation plans (see Shang and Hu 2017: 10-12). Secondly, the Liangshan Yi area can be seen as a representative case for poverty of Chinese ethnic minorities and the state's responses. Thirdly, the Yi population is the sixth-largest among the ethnic minorities in China, but it has received relatively little attention from neither Chinese nor international scholars. Finally, the accessibility of the research site and the feasibility of conducting fieldwork research are also important factors that were taken into consideration.

### **4.2 Research purpose**

The research purposes of this paper mainly include the goal to analyse the potential of the popularization of education in Liangshan for regional development and poverty reduction. Secondly, this study also aims to analyse the implementation of China's new development policies (TPA) (including education policies) in Liangshan and the impacts on local people, especially on their livelihood. Thirdly, it also aims to draw attention to the educational disadvantages of poor children in the case areas and tries to understand the reasons that lead them into a dilemma. Finally, this paper also intends to understand the influence of China's modernisation-inspired development on local people in a broader sense. Though they are the ones confronted with the outcomes of national development policies, they often remain silent.



### 4.3 Research questions

The main research question of this paper is:

*What are the impacts and the role of education on the development/poverty alleviation of Yi rural youth in Liangshan in respect to individuals, households, communities, and Yi nationality?*

This is specified in several sub-questions:

- What is the current situation of the education system in Liangshan, and what changes have taken place because of national development and poverty alleviation policies?
- What are the roles and relationships of different actors in the education system of Liangshan?
- What are the causes of the poor education situation and chronic poverty in Liangshan? How are these aspects related to each other?
- How do the national development policies (especially education policies) affect the local society and its people (especially their livelihood)?
- How does China's modernisation-inspired development affect the regional development of Liangshan and the prospect of the local people?

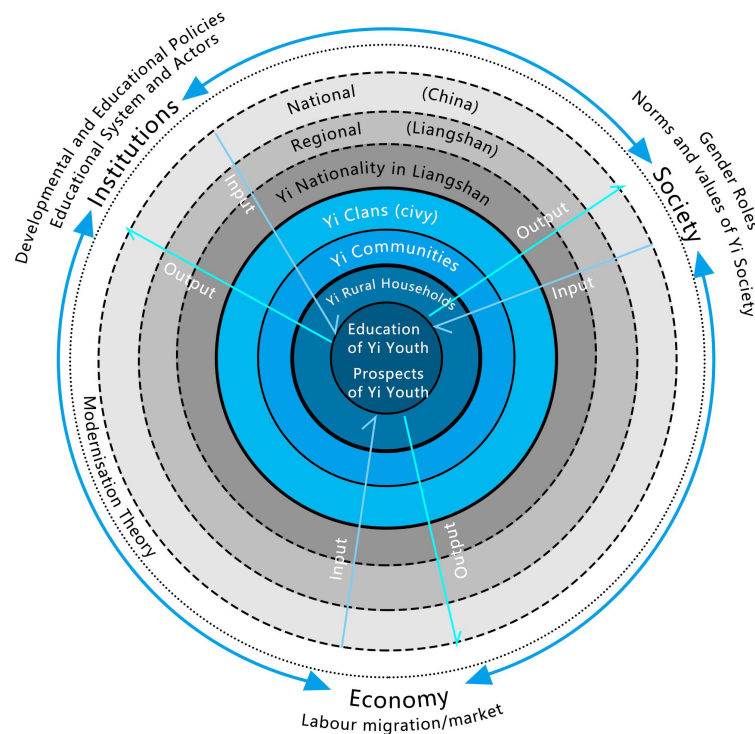


Figure 1: Analytical framework, figure design by author.

### 4.4 Analytical framework

The analytical framework of this paper is inspired by the analytical frameworks of Rauch (2009: 20, 217), Benz (2014: 39-40), Wang (1998), Hulme and Shepherd (2003: 416) and Feng and Sunuodula (2009: 689). First of all, this paper adopts the analytical framework of Rauch (2003), which is a people-centred analytical framework for poverty alleviation intervention. The framework takes into account the ecological, economic, political and social/cultural dimensions of different scales from local to global. Similarly, the analytical framework of Hulme and Shepherd (2003) is also helpful to analyse the causes of chronic poverty from economic, societal, political and environmental dimensions. Then, the frameworks of Benz



(2014: 39-40) and Wang (1998) are conducive to understanding the factors that affect individual educational achievements. Benz (2014) has built on the framework proposed by Rauch (2003) in order to analyse education and development in Pakistan in different dimensions and scales. In addition, the analytical framework of Feng and Sunuodula (2009: 689, quoted after Ding and Yu 2013: 452-453) for understanding China's minority education policy helps to understand the interaction between important actors in the decision-making process of different government levels and schools. It will help to analyse the education policy in Liangshan in this paper. Thus, the analytical framework of this paper integrates different dimensions of analysis including economic, social, political and environmental aspects and looks into them at different levels. These levels include the individual, family, community, clan, nationality and national/international level. The first five levels up to the level of Yi nationality are the focus of this thesis (see Figure 1).

#### 4.5 Research methods

This study is based on field research in three counties and Xichang City in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in July 2019, and further field research from June to September 2021. In addition, Chinese policy documents and official data are analysed and existing literature in Chinese, English and German is analysed. The fieldwork is mainly based on the methodologies of ethnography and grounded theory. The specific research methods include narrative interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews (with 5-7 Yi students in different educational stages and Yi villagers) and participatory observation (mainly in schools and villages as well as at religious ceremonies). The research targets are primarily young Yi (15-25 years old) in Liangshan, who are now in school, working outside of Liangshan as migrant workers, or staying at home doing farm work as it is typical for young women after marriage. The parents and teachers of young Yi are also important interviewees. In addition, interviews with several village chiefs, headmasters of schools and civil servants were conducted. The interview partners are randomly selected while ensuring that people of different educational backgrounds, gender, family background, age and place of residence are covered. A total of 84 interviews conducted in 2019 were recorded and transcribed (with a duration of 30 minutes to 4 hours). Other random talks were recorded in the form of field notes. As I am a woman, and men are often not present in the villages due to migrant work, it proved to be easier to talk with women, thus there are more female interviewees. All the interviews were conducted in Sichuan dialect<sup>10</sup> or Yi language (translated into Sichuan dialect at the scene by my local guide). Moreover, government announcements and documents, on-site photos, and questionnaires were gathered.

In the field research in June 2019, I mainly visited the three rural counties Zhaojue, Meigu, Mianning as well as Xichang City and several of its surrounding villages. In the second visit from June to September in 2021, I revisited these places, as well as three further predominantly Yi-inhabited counties in old Liangshan, namely Xide, Butuo and Leibo County. Xichang City, as the capital of Liangshan, is dominated by Han nationality residents (78%) and is the regional center of economic activity, transportation and education. Mianning County, which is 100 kilometers north of Xichang, is an ethnically mixed area, with a Han majority (60%) as well as Yi (38%) and Tibetan minority groups. It belongs to the Anning River Basin and is one of the more prosperous counties. The counties Zhaojue (98.53% Yi in 2021), Meigu (99.1% Yi in 2019), Xide (91.49% Yi in 2018), Butuo (97.2% Yi in 2017) belong to the original Liangshan area (data from the official website of each County). They are the poorest counties in Liangshan with a little developed education system and are among the counties with the most poverty and worst education situation in all of China.<sup>11</sup> In each of the counties, I visited the county capital and several villages.

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<sup>10</sup> Sichuan dialect is similar to Mandarin. It is commonly used in Sichuan Province.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about the economic and educational situation of those counties, see Table 4 and Table 6.

#### 4.6 Credibility, ethics and limitations

During the process of gathering information as well as after the interpretation of the empirical material was finished the results were confirmed with locals. Furthermore, the findings were compared with relevant research and official data. All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis of informed consent. As many locals are very sensitive to signatures and some people are illiterate, permission was gathered orally. All interviewees' personal information was anonymized. As a Han Chinese, trusting relationships between me and my interviewees (Yi people) were sometimes not so easy to build, especially when talking about ethnic issues. It was also difficult for me to talk to Yi who cannot speak Mandarin. In these cases, I had to rely on my Yi partners for translation.



Photo 3: A horse is eating grass in a Yi village in Zhaojue. On the left is a traditional earth house. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 01 July 2019



Photo 4: Some Yi women and children rest and chat in front of a house. Photo by author, Mianning, 22 June 2019.

#### 4.7 Entering the field

In the summer of 2019, a striking thing in Yi villages of Liangshan was the new settlements and cement roads built in the context of the national TPA project. Similar to other rural areas in China, the people who stay in the villages are usually the elderly, middle-aged women and children. Most young adults and middle-aged men work outside and almost all school-age children go to boarding schools and come home only on weekends. Thus, the most common scene in the villages is that women gather in the open space chatting, knitting clothes and taking care of children while elderly men play poker, drink beer and chat. Elder Yi women usually wear traditional clothes, while others usually wear casual clothes. Based on the experience of two surveys in Liangshan in 2019 and 2021, I found that under the large-scale TPA project, great changes have taken place especially in the predominantly Yi-inhabited counties such as Meigu and Zhaojue. Big resettlement sites for tens of thousands of people have been built near the county capitals, typically using 6-story buildings that are typical for Chinese small towns. The new apartments have been given to designated poor households who have been relocated here. Supporting infrastructures such as roads and schools have also been improved in the last few years involving major investments.

## 5 Educational transition in rural Yi areas of Liangshan

This chapter will outline the development of modern school education in Liangshan and analyse the present situation of education in different educational stages (section 4.1). National policies and China's social transition have deeply impacted the education situation in Liangshan. Educational achievements remain low, however. The actors of the local education system shift the responsibility for the low educational achievement to each other (section 4.2). This study attempts to go beyond school-based explanations for the problems in Liangshan's Yi-inhabited areas by looking at the effects of the power relations and institutional structures of the government, as they can explain some of the typical problems in the implementation of educational policies (section 4.3 and 4.4).

### 5.1 History of school education in Liangshan

This section will briefly introduce the development of school education in Liangshan. The overview will start with the early period before the founding of the PRC and the developments afterward. The historical context will help to understand the regional disparities and the sluggish educational development in the original Liangshan area.

#### 5.1.1 Formal education in Liangshan before Democratic Reform (of 1956)

In the traditional society of original Liangshan, the ruling class, especially the priests *bimo* and judges *degu* monopolized knowledge, while the other classes had no educational opportunities (see He 2012: 3-4; 40-41). The *bimo* had been the only disseminators and teachers of written knowledge in Liangshan Yi society, and they are regarded as the most knowledgeable people in traditional Yi society (see Xiao 2013: 100). They were the few people who had learned the ancient written language of the Yi, while ordinary Yi only know the spoken language (see Guo 2008: 71). Therefore, there were no schools in the original Liangshan area and locals were only taught by their parents about the experiences needed for agricultural production, social interaction and religious customs (see Xiao 2013: 9).

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the main means of the imperial court to rule over the Liangshan Yi people were violent oppression and often genocidal warfare (see He 2012: 7). However, as the attempts at military conquest were not successful due to continued resistance, the imperial court turned to a strategy of creating cultural hegemony and built schools aiming at assimilating and integrating the Yi (elites) of Liangshan into mainstream society. But this strategy was not very successful either (see He 2012: 32). At the beginning of the 19th century, there were only several newly established schools in Liangshan, most of them located in the former Xichang area. Only one school had been established in old Liangshan in Zhaojue County. A few members of the Yi ruling classes in the Xichang area started to support their children to go to school. In this period, schools in the original Xichang area began to develop while modern education was still almost non-existent in the original Liangshan. Until the early 20th century, the number of schools in Liangshan remained very small. (see He 2012: 8-10).

When the Kuomintang took over power in the area in 1912, they continued this strategy and tried to establish more schools to assimilate the local people, so as to secure their integration into the Chinese state (see He 2012: 28). However, local people had a negative attitude towards going to school (see He 2012: 12). Especially because the purpose of assimilation that was obvious in school education threatened the power of the local ruling class, they resisted school education strongly (see He 2012: 41). Still, until the 1930s, the number of modern schools had increased to more than 500 schools where about 30,000 students were enrolled.<sup>12</sup> However, there were great restrictions on the development of education in Liangshan because

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<sup>12</sup> By 1936, there were 529 primary schools in Liangshan, with 28,545 students. In 1939, there were 588 primary schools and more than 30,000

of social unrest on the local level and political turmoil and civil war on the national level during the 1930s (He 2012: 38-39). The number of schools in Liangshan still rose slowly and started to fall sharply when the Republic of China collapsed as the Chinese Civil War restarted post-World-War II. There was a suspension of classes and teachers and students left the schools (see He 2012: 34, 38). By 1949, the education situation in Liangshan was in very poor shape in general.<sup>13</sup> However, this initial period of formal education promoted the establishment of the formal education system in Liangshan and thus has had a profound influence on the present education situation in Liangshan (see He 2012: 15).

### 5.1.2 Formal education in Liangshan after the Democratic Reform (1956)

Only years after the civil war had ended, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over power in all parts of Liangshan in the process of Democratic Reform. Starting from then, a new large-scale formal education system was established. A large number of Han teachers were encouraged to work in Liangshan with the slogan of ‘helping the minorities to improve their knowledge’. Most of the time in school was spent learning Mandarin at that time (see Rehamo 2018: 57). During 1956-1978, especially during the Cultural Revolution, only mainstream culture and its language were taught in schools, while minority cultures and languages were excluded. Due to the radical political atmosphere, the scale of schools was expanded rapidly at that time (see Xiao 2013: 104). However, during the period of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), most left school again because of hunger (see Rehamo 2018: 56).

It was not until the Reform and Opening-up in 1978 that the overall education situation of Liangshan has been significantly improved in a way that lasted longer. However, there is also an obvious stratification between social classes. While the children of local elites (such as local cadres) usually received at least junior high school or secondary vocational education, most of the rural Yi children rarely went to school and only some received several years of primary education because of the intense economic pressure felt by local families. As a result, the children of local elites could get a formal job after education, thus securing their social position, while the others could only engage in agriculture as their parents did. (see Rehamo 2018: 65).

Table 2: The Expansion of education in Liangshan in 1978-2020

	1978		1999		2007		2010		2015		2020	
	school	student	school	student	school	student	school	student	school	student	school	student
Kinder-garten	71	7,310	—	56,900	197	6,005	217	76,737	573 (2017)	245,688 (2017)	658 (2019)	266,498 (2019)
Primary school	6,022	443,377	—	450,000	1,879	568,400	1,575	545,500	1,146	555,400	741	623,900
Junior high school	118	95,673	—	89,500	178	177,320	172	194,078	196	247,300	133	255,900
Senior high school	66	21,838			39	46,620	36	55,921			40	73,200
Vocational school (different types)	—	—	67	27,600	27	23,820	18	30,000	17	28,200	16	31,003
College students (minority)	—	—	3	6,148 (656)	1	11,618 (1,097)	1	14,235 (1,966)	1	15,862 (2,749)	1	20,121 (3,842)

Source: Data in 1978 are from Zheng and Li (2012: 42). The remaining data are based on the Statistical Bulletins of National Economic and Social Development of Liangshan Prefecture (1999; 2007; 2010; 2015; 2020), Liangshan State Statistics Bureau.

students (see He 2012: 33).

<sup>13</sup> There were only 6 kindergartens and 222 primary schools (with 12,495 students) still operating in Liangshan by 1949, and only 2.8% of the population in original Liangshan had visited a school (see He 2012: 42).

After the 2000s, the education system in Liangshan was gradually improved (see Rehamo 2018: 83) (see Table 2). But the enrolment rates were still not high and many students dropped out of school early. Both situations were especially pronounced for girls. Until the late 2000s, educational policies for supporting the education of rural students were implemented and the school enrolment rate in Liangshan has rapidly increased since then (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 3).<sup>14</sup> However, with the abolition of the older forms recruiting graduates into public service in 2002 in Liangshan, it became much more difficult for locals to obtain a formal position. This affected people's enthusiasm for receiving education (see Rehamo 2018: 65).

## 5.2 Present situation of formal education in Liangshan

Formal education in Liangshan has been continuously improved and the number of students and teachers has been continuously expanded. In recent decades the state has introduced many policies that reduced the costs for education in the compulsory education stage making it more accessible for students from the rural areas of Liangshan.<sup>15</sup> This chapter will address the recent trends in the education system of Liangshan in different stages of education.

### 5.2.1 Popularizing preschool education: The One Village One Kindergarten project

In 2015, Liangshan Prefecture's government issued a plan to support preschool education in rural Liangshan.<sup>16</sup> This plan (typically called One Village One Kindergarten) aims to build new kindergartens in each administrative village *cun* in rural areas so that the children learn Mandarin before they are enrolled in primary school. This is viewed as necessary since the language barrier between students that mostly speak only their ethnic minority language and the Mandarin-based education system is seen as one of the main reasons for low educational achievement in minority areas. The plan was implemented in May 2018 and most of the new kindergartens in the rural areas began to enrol students during the period 2018 to 2019. By November 2019, there were already 3,069 new kindergartens (with 128,500 students and 7,975 teachers) built in rural Liangshan (see Ma 2020: 17). Most of them use former rooms of village committees or the classrooms of village primary schools, while only a few involve the construction of new facilities because of financial constraints and the need to produce quick results.

Before the implementation of this plan, there were only about 200 kindergartens in Liangshan, mostly private ones that charge tuition fees. About 80% of the kindergartens were in urban areas. Typically, Han families and Yi families that lived in or nearby urban areas would support their children to visit these private kindergartens, a pattern that has not changed for this group even though many public kindergartens that are for free have been opened in recent years. Though private kindergartens have better infrastructure, food and teachers, they are also expensive at the same time.<sup>17</sup> Few rural Yi families can afford private kindergartens. Thus, before the One Village One Kindergarten plan was implemented, most Yi rural children directly visited primary schools, while only a small group visited preschool classes in primary schools (see Wu and Zheng 2012: 43, 45).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> These educational policies include: abolishing tuition and textbook fees and giving subsidy for boarding school students *niangmian yibu*, a lunch subsidy *yingyang wucan*, education funding subsidy for certain students, establishment of ethnic universities and affirmative action in college entrance examinations for minority students (see Rehamo 2018: 146).

<sup>15</sup> The educational policies that had a great impact on Liangshan's education include the 'two basics' *niangji* (basically popularizing basic education and basically eliminating illiteracy among young and middle-aged people), the ten-year action plan of Sichuan Province (improving basic education), the two exemptions and one subsidy policy (abolishing tuition fees and textbook fees and subsidizing the living expenses of boarding school students), 15-year free education (free education from kindergarten to high school), and the 'one village and one kindergarten' programme (building kindergartens in rural areas).

<sup>16</sup> The official name of this plan is 'Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Preschool Education' (2015).

<sup>17</sup> In 2019, the tuition fees of private kindergartens in Meigu and Mianning County were at least 3,000 yuan/semester (in a township) or 4,000 yuan/semester (in the county towns).

<sup>18</sup> Preschool classes for a one-year period were offered in primary schools. The programme was canceled after the popularization of kindergartens in Liangshan.

The new kindergartens have similar conditions as rural schools in the compulsory stage as they charge no tuition fees and provide subsidized meals. Thus, visiting kindergartens only requires parents to pay an insurance premium of 120 yuan per semester. The financial support for the kindergarten includes: the salary of teachers and the subsidy for children's lunch are supported by the provincial government, the responsibility for the construction and maintenance of kindergartens is with the county government, while the daily operation of the kindergartens is managed by the local primary school within the village (Ma 2020: 27). The newly-built kindergartens have been very successful in attracting Yi parents to send their children there. However, not all parents are interested in preschool education but rather in the offer of a free lunch and the possibility to have someone look after their younger children. The stated main goals of the village kindergartens are teaching the minority children Mandarin and cultivating what is considered 'civilized' habits (such as cleanliness) while teachers rather see the safety of children as the most important function as they tend to be without the supervision of parents for most of the day otherwise (kindergarten teacher: MS-f-25).<sup>19</sup>

Among the primary school teachers, there is generally a positive attitude towards the popularization of kindergarten education. As a matter of experience, children who received preschool education before entering the school usually have a better Mandarin level and also are more familiar with the expectations the schools raise regarding their behaviour. As the primary schools had not enrolled the first group of new students who visited the village kindergartens during the first survey in 2019, they could not judge the effectiveness of the village kindergartens. However, during the second survey in 2021, many parents and teachers interviewed both expressed their disappointment with the village kindergartens. In their perspectives, the kindergartens did not reach their goals to help children learn Mandarin. Instead, the kindergartens turned out to have been a place where children played with each other without learning the skills and behaviours expected by primary school. Moreover, in TQ village of Meigu County, there were safety issues in a village kindergarten that led the parents to resist sending their children to the kindergarten (primary school teacher: MG-m-50). This is a consequence of the widespread lack of teachers and insufficient infrastructure of the newly built kindergartens.

The new village kindergartens face a series of problems that are often caused by the implementation of the project under very tight constraints regarding time and funding. Most of the village kindergartens have insufficient infrastructure because they usually use transformed rooms of village committees or primary schools. Furthermore, though the supply of free lunch is officially part of the 'One Village One Kindergarten' plan, it is not implemented because of limitations such as that most kindergartens that are not located in primary schools have no access to kitchens. Thus, many kindergartens can only supply packaged foods such as ham and milk and some kindergartens even supply nothing for lunch and the children stay hungry (kindergarten teacher: MS-f-25). In addition, though it is officially stipulated that the class size of the kindergarten should not exceed 30 children (see Ma 2020: 16), many surveyed kindergartens have about 50 students in a class with 1-2 teachers. There are also problems from the perspective of the teachers. First of all, all the teachers complain about their low salary of 2,000 yuan/month, which is much lower than the salary of teachers in primary school and also lower than that of migrant workers. Thus, it is difficult to attract qualified teachers and the qualification requirements for the position have been lowered.<sup>20</sup> This leads to widespread insufficient qualification of teachers and contributes to the poor quality of preschool education. Moreover, many teachers consider giving up their

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<sup>19</sup> This paper uses the following principles to name the interviewees and provide some anonymous information: for example, 'Student: LL-m-20' means: position (student), name (abbreviation under the principle of anonymity) and gender (m=male; f=female), age (approximate information categorized into age groups of 5 years each).

<sup>20</sup> The official requirements of the local government for the position of village kindergarten teachers include being between 18-45 years old, having received high school education or above and relevant work experience (see Ma 2020: 16).

positions because they face great economic pressure and lack prospects for promotion (kindergarten teacher: MS-f-25). Thus, especially due to the limitation of financial support for this project and the narrow focus on expanding the number of kindergartens as fast as possible, the quality of the preschool education itself was largely ignored. Neither the infrastructures, the qualifications of many teachers nor the sizes of the classes allow for implementing kindergarten education that meets the quality goals for this state of education.

### **5.2.2 Popularization of nine-year compulsory education in Liangshan**

Especially in the last 20 years, compulsory education in Liangshan has been significantly improved. The number of students and teachers expanded strongly and the facilities of the schools improved. However, the positive effects of education expansion are offset by problems in the education system such as an unbalanced distribution of educational resources, continued early dropouts from school, poor learning achievements, prejudices against girls' education, and a lack of educational opportunities after the compulsory education stage. This section will address the recent changes in compulsory education in Liangshan, including the Yi parent's attitude towards education, the new causes for dropping out of school, and the general dilemmas of compulsory education in Liangshan.

#### **The changing attitudes of Yi parents towards education**

According to the experienced teachers, they were unwelcome guests for most Yi parents before the 1990s, when they tried to persuade the Yi parents to support their children to visit school. The enrolment rate was very low at that time and many of those children that were enrolled dropped out early. Thus, the higher the grade, the fewer the students.<sup>21</sup> Because most Yi families faced sustained scarcity in regards to basic needs such as food and clothing, education was usually regarded as a burden for the family as it meant the loss of labour force that could have been used in agriculture and induced extra costs.

Since the 2000s, the attitude of Yi parents towards education has gradually changed and they have become more positive about receiving education. As a result, nine-year compulsory education (especially six years of primary education) has been rapidly popularized in Liangshan since then.<sup>22</sup> The main reasons include first, the implementation of the state's educational policies that greatly reduced the educational costs.<sup>23</sup> Second, the legal provisions of national compulsory education made it an obligation to receive at least nine years of education, rather than a choice made by parents. These rules were enforced more vigorously. Third, education became useful to the livelihood choices of the rural Yi. Because of the social transformation of China as well as Liangshan, the Yi people now became much more integrated into the mainstream society as they gained access to jobs as migrant workers outside of Liangshan. For these new livelihoods, it is a necessary prerequisite to have received basic education.

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<sup>21</sup> According to a survey in Hebuoluo Township, Xide County in 1985, there were 240 students in this township in 1984, and the enrolment rate of school-age children was only 63.7%. There were 152 students in grade one, 61 in grade two, 15 in grade three, 6 in grade four and 6 in grade five, showing that even among those who were enrolled only a small minority finished primary school. (see Research and Education Bureau and the Secretariat of Education institute of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture 1985: 9).

<sup>22</sup> There were 530,000 minority students in primary and secondary schools in Liangshan in 2000, and 813,800 in 2010. The enrolment rate of primary school increased from 92.80% to 98.05%, and the enrolment rate in junior middle school rose from 39.73% to 72.00%. (see Chen 2012: 15).

<sup>23</sup> At present, the costs of compulsory education for families in rural Liangshan include insurance fees, the cost of study materials, living expenses and transportation. It is about several hundred yuan each semester for every student.

Before, however, the rural Yi were fully dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry. So, receiving education was hardly conducive to their livelihood unless the educated family members could get a job in the public sector after graduation. Yet only a few rural Yi could achieve this goal since the positions are limited and require at least secondary vocational education, meaning 12 years of education (see Rehamo 2018: 6; Teng 2001: 29). The form of education that was accessible for rural Yi, typically several years' primary school education, was not directly helpful for their livelihood as farmers and/or herdsmen. Therefore, most of the Yi parents saw education as of little practical significance at that time.

Only when migrant work outside of Liangshan became popular and profitable since the 2000s, did receiving education gain more practical significance for rural Yi families as the skills taught in compulsory education like the Mandarin language ability and calculation skills are the prerequisite for migrant works. Furthermore, when a child is excellent in school, he/she can continue to receive higher education, possibly getting an official job after graduation. This means that the investment in education for contemporary Yi families has both short-term as well as potential long-term returns. Finally, as the dependence on agriculture and husbandry of rural Yi families decreased because of the popularization of migrant work, the family's economic pressures decreased and the demand for agricultural labour force was reduced. Thus, children could visit school instead of engaging in agricultural and livestock farming works at home.

### **Reducing dropouts from school**

Before the 2000s, it was a very common phenomenon that rural Yi students did not attend school or dropped out of school (see Teng 2001: 29). The main reason was that their families could not bear the education costs. While the schools charged tuition fees, most of the rural Yi families had little cash income. In 2002, the earlier recruitment rules for the public sector were changed and the employment prospects connected to education became worse even though they had already been very limited. The educational path to getting a formal position became even longer since now higher academic qualifications are required (typically, an undergraduate degree is required). This entailed the need for longer education time and thus more educational investment, undermining the motivation of rural Yi families to support their children's education as the hopes for social mobility became less realistic (see Rehamo 2018: 84). Although it was announced in 2011 that compulsory education has been fully popularized in China, the unofficial data of dropout rate of primary schools in Liangshan still reached about 25% and another 20% in junior high school in 2010 (see Wu and Zheng 2012: 43). In fact, it is a common phenomenon that Yi parents support their children to receive education at least until the early stages of junior high school. However, when the children are 16 years or older, they are viewed as adults in Yi society. They are now viewed to be old enough to work as migrant workers or to get married. At this age, many of the young people themselves and their parents will begin to consider whether they should stay at school or drop out.

In the fieldwork of both 2019 and 2021, though dropping out of school in the compulsory education stage has decreased compared with early the 2010s, it is still a relevant phenomenon, especially in the junior middle school stage.<sup>24</sup> In order to reduce the dropout rates in the compulsory education stage, a policy named 'controlling dropping out and keeping the students at school' *kongchuo baoxue* was proclaimed within the TPA plan. In Liangshan, it was implemented jointly by village committees, schools and local education departments since 2018 and it aims to forcibly reintegrate school-age children who have dropped out into the education system. There are about 59,000 students in Liangshan in total who are targeted by these measures. The programme was effectively implemented in a short time frame. As a result, about 44,000 students who had dropped out of school returned by early 2019 (see Wu et al. 2019).

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<sup>24</sup> Taking QD Junior Middle School in Meigu County as an example. About 2,800 students should be present in the school. However, there were less than 2,000 students. So only 80% stay at school for the whole school year. Others are often absent for reasons such as working outside Liangshan.



However, according to the teachers, those students who returned to school usually had been working for several years and some were already married. Thus, it was very hard for them to integrate into school again, not least since they now have very different responsibilities and daily life. Moreover, since they are often not prepared to pay attention to the school, they tend to have a negative influence on other students. Thus, teachers regard the policy of recalling the dropout students as not helpful. According to the fieldwork in the summer of 2021, after the TPA plan was announced to be finished by the end of 2020, most of the recalled students left school again without completing compulsory education.

The reasons why Yi rural youths drop out include several factors. Firstly, economic difficulties are still one of the most important reasons for Yi students to drop out of school. Even though the educational costs in the compulsory education stage have been greatly reduced, it is still a common phenomenon that when the family lacks income or encounters major difficulties, the older children are expected to drop out of school to take over the responsibility of securing the family's livelihood.

Secondly, the lack of prospects in the education system is another important reason to drop out. Many students with poor grades in the school see no perspective on continuing education after the compulsory education stage. Instead, the common routine for students like them is to work as migrant workers later. Thus, some of them decide to quit school before graduation and begin to work earlier since it will happen on any account. For them, staying in school appears to be a waste of time. There is, however, a growing group of others who decide to visit a vocational school after graduation from compulsory education. They also cannot reach the admission grades of high school. Yet with access to government subsidies for visiting vocational schools in Liangshan, more and more junior high school students make this choice.

Thirdly, many young students drop out of school because of peer influence. Typically, when their classmates or friends quit school to work outside, they are also swayed. It is reported by the young migrant workers as well as their teachers that when they see their peers come back as successful young people who have lived in China's big cities and earned money, many students see them as role models and look forward to doing the same thing. Here, the attraction of urban life also plays an important role.

Furthermore, many migrant workers who made the decision to quit school early also pointed out that the often bad and condescending treatment by teachers accelerated their decision to quit the school. Finally, China's population policy also results in the dropping out of some students. For example, there are many Yi children in Liangshan who do not get an official identity *hukou* by the authorities because they are those who were born in excess of the stipulated family planning limit of 3 children, which are allowed in rural minority areas. Thus, they usually face constraints to visit school unless their parents pay a fine.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when a student's family migrates to another area in Liangshan, it is often difficult to obtain a local identity, which will create the problems of being rejected from the local schools unless the family secures access to the school by paying money or using social networks. Therefore, some families that cannot secure this access made the decision to have their children quit school. The long-term low educational quality in the Yi-inhabited areas of Liangshan is both a result as well as a cause of dropping out of school. The quality of schools is very unequal and the village primary schools tend to be at the low end. For example, according to an experienced headmaster of a primary school in Meigu County, the changes in the school in recent years were limited to the quantitative expansion in the number of students and teachers and the improvement of infrastructures. In contrast, the educational quality based on the average grades in the tests has not improved in the last 30 years during the time he worked in Meigu County. This is supported by

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<sup>25</sup> The fine of exceeding the family planning limit costs about 20,000 yuan in 2019 according to an interviewee in Mianning County who had just paid this fine. There are some students who could still visit school without an identity when they are accepted by the school unofficially (for example, cases in SD Primary School in MP Township, Xichang City), while others are rejected by the school (for example, cases in SB Town, Mianning County).

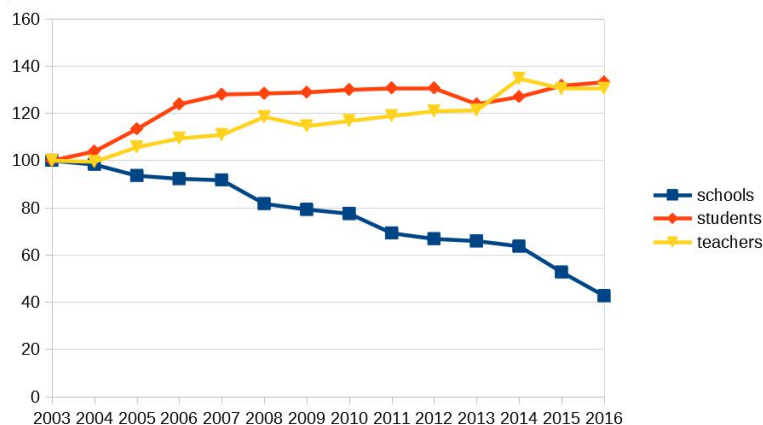
data from Teng (2001: 33) that shows the grades in three types of schools in Meigu in the 1990s. The test results have not improved so much since then.<sup>26</sup> Though the general conditions of education are much better than before, it is a common phenomenon that students are not interested in education. Instead, some students continue to quit school to work outside as migrant workers because they see cities as much more interesting than schooling (Headmaster of NNB Center School: LU-m-50).

### Construction of boarding schools

Since 2001, rural Liangshan has seen a wave of school mergers that merged many village primary schools (typically less than 200 students) into central schools on a larger scale (typically more than 1,000 students) (see Figure 2 and Table 3). The aim was to have a centralized and thus more efficient utilization of educational resources in order to reduce expenditures on education. Before, there were many small village schools with only one teacher and several students. The merged large-scale schools have advantages from the perspectives of teachers and school management such as reducing the times for commuting to schools and making the management of schools easier. As a result, the number of schools in Liangshan decreased from 3,953 in 1999 to 914 in 2020 while the number of the students increased from 562,000 in 1999 to 984,000 in 2020. Thus, the central schools are often overloaded.<sup>27</sup>

The merger of schools created specific spatial patterns in the distribution of schools. At the village level, there are only primary schools, while middle schools are all located in town centers, county centers or cities. The centralized schools usually have a much larger service radius than village schools, so most of the students must stay in school during weekdays and go home on weekends by mini-bus or walk home for half a day. The latter is done to save the transportation costs of about 20-30 yuan for one way, which for many rural Yi students is a large cost. The boarding center schools now are the common type of schools in rural Liangshan and the state has invested a lot in their construction since 2001. Moreover, part of the boarding students also receive government subsidies (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 48-49). However, the increased physical distance between students and their parents as well as the communities could lead to an alienation between the younger generation of Yi with their parents as well as culture.

Figure 2: Index of the numbers of schools, students, and teachers in Liangshan in 2003-2016



Source: Designed by author, based on the data from table 3, own calculation.

<sup>26</sup> According to Teng (2001: 33), the scores of three types of schools in Meigu (county primary school, town-level central school and village-level primary school) were about 70%, 50% and 5% of the full scores respectively. This is similar to the grades of those type of schools in Meigu in 2019. While the average scores of students in primary school in county town could reach about 70%, it was only about 10% in the lower grades and about 30% in the higher grades in the village primary school. A town-level central school such as NNB Center school is at an intermediate level with average scores of about 50%.

<sup>27</sup> For example, in the investigated SD Primary School in MP Township, Xichang City, the number of students doubled yet the infrastructure remained the same in the last years. As a result, a bunk bed meant for two people is shared by 3-7 students. Due to the shortage of teachers and classrooms, class sizes of 60-80 students are typical in rural Liangshan, a number that is about twice as much as the national standard.

Table 3: Number of schools, students and teachers in Liangshan Prefecture in 2003-2016

	Unit	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Number of schools at all levels and types	number	2,588	2,544	2,422	2,388	2,373	2,114	2,051	2,005	1,790	1,729	1,705	1,648	1,363	1,106
Number of students in school	thousand persons	645	687	732	800	826	829	832	839	844	844	800	820	850	860
Number of fulltime teachers	thousand persons	31.8	31.6	33.6	34.7	35.2	37.6	36.4	37.1	37.8	38.4	38.5	42.8	41.4	41.6
Enrolment rate of primary school students	%	94.4	95.4	97.5	98.3	99.3	96.6	96.8	98.1	97.1	98.1	98.5	98.7	99.1	99.5

Source: Based on the data from Lianashan Statistical Yearbook (2004-2017), of which 2017 is the latest published data.

### 5.2.3 Vocational education

After compulsory education, there are two typical forms of schools for continuing education, namely, high school and vocational school. Generally speaking, high schools require higher grades in the junior high school graduation examination than vocational schools. High schools mainly focus on taking part in the college entrance examination to receive higher education. In comparison, vocational education mainly aims at the training of practical skills, even though more and more students in those schools have also taken part in the college entrance examination recently.<sup>28</sup> Before the 1990s, secondary vocational schools played a core role in the training of skilled employees in different fields in China (including civil servants and teachers). All the graduates could get a formal job after graduation. At that time, visiting a vocational school was the main way for most rural students to achieve social mobility, including many Yi rural students. This career path was almost the only goal for the Yi rural students to receive education. However, these recruitment rules were abolished in Liangshan in 2002, which led to the depreciation of diplomas of vocational schools as the graduates were no longer guaranteed a formal job. This has led to a more negative attitude of Yi families about the prospects of education. (see Rehamo 2018: 84).

Because of the depreciation of the value of diplomas in vocational schools, it is difficult for the vocational schools in Liangshan (especially those located in counties) to attract students. In fact, the Yi parents see visiting vocational schools as unhelpful for the livelihood prospects of their children because of the poor quality of those schools and also the prospects (to get a formal job) are bleak after graduation compared with universities. In the end, the graduates of vocational schools are likely to have to work as migrant workers just as others do. Prejudice against vocational schools is a common phenomenon in China. Thus, graduates can hardly find a formal job, but rather those with low salaries and little job security (see Ma 2018: 42, 49). This makes the investment for vocational education unattractive for families.

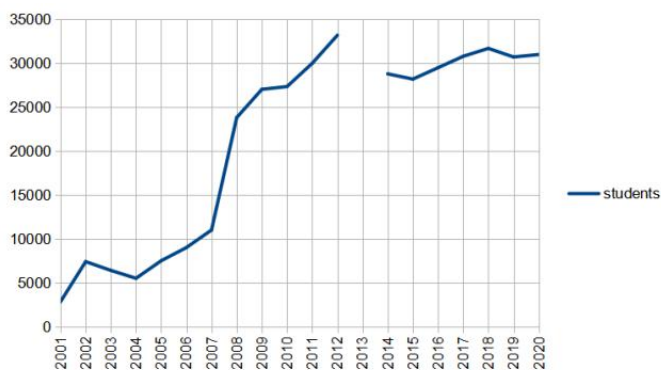
However, in order to secure sufficient enrolment in vocational schools, the local government tries to require parents to send their children to the local vocational schools, by the threat of stopping to issue all the subsidies to them (including subsidies for programmes such as returning farmland to forests, rural medical insurance, social insurance and other subsidies within poverty alleviation projects) (see Rehamo 2017: 19). However, because of the low educational quality of vocational schools within Liangshan, most Yi

<sup>28</sup> For further information about vocational education, see Liu and Chen 2013; Luo 2013; Hansen and Woronov 2013.

students who decide to visit a vocational school prefer to do it in other cities outside of Liangshan. The costs (including tuition fees, living expenses and transportation expenses) are therefore high (about 20,000-30,000 yuan/year), which far exceeds affordability for ordinary Yi rural families.

A renewed effort to promote vocational education started in the early 2010s when education was included in the national plan aimed at expanding secondary education and expanding vocational education was identified as one of the important strategies (see Figure 3). This is based on the assumption that vocational education can improve the ‘human capital’ of the youths in poor rural areas and therefore can help them to find a job with higher skill requirements and wages later. Therefore, the approach is viewed as a sustainable way to help them and their families to get out of poverty (see Hu 2019). However, vocational schools are still not the mainstream choice and there was no major expansion of vocational school students in Liangshan. For example, in 2014, among those who continued to receive education after compulsory education, students who chose vocational education only accounted for about 30% of those who chose senior high schools in Liangshan (see Ma and Ma 2017: 21). In recent years, it is typical that about 40% of junior high school graduates in Liangshan will enter senior high schools while 20% enter vocational schools (so vocational school students are now about 50% of the number of high school students), and the remaining 40% of junior high school graduates stop receiving education (see Ma 2018: 32-34). Among those who enrol in vocational schools, about 20% dropout.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 3: The development of vocational education in Liangshan in 2001-2020



Source: Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Liangshan Prefecture, Liangshan Statistics Bureau (2000-2020). [data for 2013 was not given]. Online: <http://tj.lsz.gov.cn/sjfb/lstjgb/>. Last accessed: 16.10.2021.

### ‘9+3’ and ‘3+2’ modes of vocational school

At present, there are two general modes of vocational education in Liangshan that are supported by the government. The ‘9+3’ mode refers to three years of secondary vocational education after nine years of compulsory education. It is the most popular mode of vocational education in Liangshan because it is subsidized by the government. In contrast, ‘3+2’ refers to three years of secondary vocational education and two years of higher vocational education. The support for ‘9+3’ has been implemented in Liangshan since 2014. It was already implemented in Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province before following the unrest in Tibet as a way of governing Tibetan-inhabited areas by guaranteeing that young people receive more education and get a job after graduation. In Liangshan, this project recruits more than 4,800 junior high school graduates each year since 2014 from the Yi-inhabited area to visit a vocational school outside of Liangshan (especially in eastern China) (see Jiazina 2019: 50; Ma and Ma 2017: 21). In 2016, the government promulgated the policy of connecting students in the western area with vocational schools in the eastern

<sup>29</sup> Take the junior high school graduates in Liangshan from 2012 to 2016 as an example. About 42% entered senior high schools, 21% entered vocational schools, and 37% no longer participated in education. Additionally, the dropout rate of vocational school students in Liangshan is about 20% on average each year. (see Sichuan Bureau of Statistics 2014-2018).

area of China as one of the poverty alleviation strategies.<sup>30</sup> The stated goal of this plan is to help the western area to get rid of poverty through vocational education and employment of the youths. The students in this project can get a subsidy of 2,000 yuan/year and have to pay no tuition fees (see Shengwu and Jia 2017: 13).

However, according to the respondents who participated in the '9+3' project, the state subsidies could not cover their expenses for vocational education. Therefore, their parents must cover the rest of the costs and they must also find part-time jobs in vacation times. Nevertheless, with the expansion of the scale of the students in the '9+3' project, many students with little passion for studying also joined the project. Some of them participate in it even just because their families are identified as 'poor households' and their continued access to the advantages connected to this status depends on them participating in the project. In the end, continued low educational quality and limited employment prospects have led to the poor reputation of the project in Liangshan. Locals understand vocational schools as the schools of bad students who are seen as not interested in learning at all. As a result, the number of students from Liangshan willing to participate in this project has decreased again after it was implemented for several years.

Compared with the '9+3' mode, the '3+2' mode has a longer learning time and it is more difficult to get government subsidies. However, the advantages of the mode are that the graduates can get a higher diploma and have better employment opportunities than the graduates of the '9+3' mode. Students in the '3+2' path of education can receive a college degree that is a precondition for a formal job. If they can pass the qualification examinations for civil servants and teachers, they can also get the same jobs as university graduates. This is the main motivation of many Yi families to support their children to receive this five-year long-term vocational education. Nevertheless, the costs in the five years are also very high (more than 100,000 yuan without the government subsidies), which is a heavy burden for ordinary Yi families. Still, it is not so easy for students to pass the exams for civil servants and teachers while other jobs such as nurse or kindergarten teacher are more accessible. Also, the competition for these jobs has increased since more and more students chose these majors, leading to a saturated job market for kindergarten teachers and nurses. In contrast, other majors in vocational schools such as car repair are not so popular because those jobs are considered to entail a low social status and the students in this major think that the training for practical skills in these majors is insufficient. (vocational school students: CH-f-20; XD-f-20; SL-f-20; AG-f-25; QX-m-20; DJ-m-20; YJ-f-20).

Moreover, there are other problems since more and more Yi rural students attend vocational schools outside Liangshan. Because of the limited access to information about those vocational schools, some vocational school students found out that they fell for false or exaggerated promotional claims of the vocational schools. They are disappointed with the school environment, education quality and curriculum when they begin their studies in those schools and they believe that they have learned nothing in the vocational school. Therefore, some of them have decided to quit school and become a migrant worker to stop the loss of time. For example, an interviewee reported his experience of dropping out of his vocational school in the coastal region of China. Because he spent most of his time during the semester working in factories (the school called it an 'internship') instead of attending training or courses, he thinks he was misled by the school. His decision is not uncommon and some of his classmates also dropped out of vocational school. (vocational school student: BT-m-20).

As a response to the bad reputation of vocational schools and also the poor employment status of the graduates, many vocational schools began to transform by encouraging more students to take part in the college entrance examination and continue their studies after graduation. At present, most vocational

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<sup>30</sup> The East-West Cooperation Action Plan for Vocational Education (2016-2020).

schools have set up special classes for this goal. The proportion of students in different vocational schools in Liangshan who decide to take the college entrance examination is between 15% and 64% in recent years (see Ma 2018: 46). If the vocational school no longer provides skill training meant for employment but teaches the same curriculum as senior high schools, it has on the one hand lost its original goal and characteristics and on the other hand is still in a position of disadvantage in the competition with senior high schools for the preparation of the college entrance examination as these have better conditions for this purpose. Though this shift in the orientation of vocational education temporally relieves the employment pressures of the graduates, it only postpones it and could lead to an inflation of academic qualifications. As a result, the education procedure will be longer and the costs will continue to increase, which is especially adverse to poor families' children's plans to profit from education.

#### 5.2.4 Senior high school education and college entrance examination

Less than 40% of junior high school graduates can continue receiving senior high school education in Liangshan. These numbers are even lower in Yi-inhabited areas of Liangshan.<sup>31</sup> Because the admission scores of senior high schools in Xichang city are much higher than those in Yi-inhabited areas, few graduates in the predominantly Yi-inhabited area can reach the scores needed to go there. Students from poor rural regions therefore can only compete for local positions.<sup>32</sup> However, the positions in senior high schools in Yi-inhabited areas are rare. For example, only about 20% of the junior school graduates in Zhaojue County can get a position in senior high schools. The others had to stop their education or visit a vocational school.<sup>33</sup> Though the scores are the most important factor for getting a position in senior high school, paying for a position and/or relying on the support of social networks including personal relationships with teachers, headmasters or civil servants are other possibilities.<sup>34</sup>

Presently, there are more than 30 senior high schools in Liangshan and the system is experiencing gradual expansion. However, there is an obvious stratification of educational achievements and an unbalanced distribution of educational resources in Liangshan. The senior high schools in Xichang have absolute advantages over those in other areas of Liangshan. All of the best schools in Liangshan (key senior high schools) are located here. Among the rural areas, the counties in the Anning River Basin (mainly the original Xichang area) have better educational achievements (according to the results of the unified examination in Liangshan) than those in predominantly Yi-inhabited areas. The proportion of graduates of senior high schools in Xichang who reach the admission scores for universities *benke* is about 70%-80%. They account for nearly half of the total students who can meet the score lines needed for admission to a university in Liangshan.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, attending senior high schools in Xichang (or other cities outside Liangshan) is considered as the prerequisite for admission to a university and especially a reputable key university with better employment prospects.

In contrast, the senior high school graduates in the Yi-inhabited area have much lower chances of being admitted to a university. Typically, there are only one or two senior high schools in each county of Liangshan and thus the number of students is usually very small (each senior high school admits about 500 new students each year). Most of the senior high school graduates in Yi area can only be admitted for higher

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<sup>31</sup> In 2020, there were about 68,300 applicants for the senior high school entrance examination in Liangshan (excluding students who gave up while taking the examination). In that year, 25,600 high school students were enrolled, resulting in an admission rate of 37.4% (see Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development of Liangshan Prefecture in 2020).

<sup>32</sup> In 2019, the score needed for admission at high schools in Xichang ranged between 520-620 points (out of a total score of 900 points), while it was 380 points in Zhaojue County (see Liangshan Prefecture Education Examinations Institute website).

<sup>33</sup> In 2018, there were more than 4,800 junior high school graduates, of whom only 1,000 were enrolled in senior high schools, accounting for about 21%. (see People's Government of Zhaojue County 2018).

<sup>34</sup> In 2019, the informal price for a position in a senior high school of Yi-inhabited counties was typically more than 10,000 yuan and more than 30,000 in Mianning County. The price will be determined by the gap between the students' score and the admission line. Moreover, it is quite common to use social networks for securing the access to educational resources in Liangshan Yi areas as the society has close interpersonal relationships and support networks because of the family branches *civy*.

<sup>35</sup> In 2019, the high school graduates in Xichang who reached the admission score of universities (*benke*) accounted for 49.2% of the total number of Liangshan Prefecture. (see Liangshan Prefecture Education Examinations Institute website).

vocational schools *zhuanke* as the scores-lines for admission are much lower here.<sup>36</sup> In addition, there is another special pathway to be admitted to a university based on Yi language schooling (called the first mode of bilingual education) in some Yi-inhabited areas including Xide County and Zhaojue County. This path is available only for a very small number of students. They will not take part in the general college entrance examination and have the advantage of a much lower admission score.

### 5.2.5 University education

There are about 23,000 senior high school graduates in Liangshan who take part in the college entrance examination each year in recent years and about 8,000 of them (about 40%) will be admitted to a university *benke*. About 10% of high school graduates can be admitted to a university because of affirmative policies for minority students. The other 60% of graduates will attend higher vocational education or stop receiving education *zhuanke*.<sup>37</sup> Besides regional disparities, there is a strong stratification along the lines of class. According to a survey for Yi students, the higher the educational level or the income of their parents, the more likely it is for them to receive higher education in general as well as access to universities with higher social prestige (Yang and Tan 2015: 65-68). Among the interviewed Yi college students, those who were born in urban areas and whose parents have a formal job think they have obvious advantages over other students in rural areas in terms of access to educational resources and Mandarin proficiency. It is common that most of their classmates in the school who have a similar class background like them have also been admitted by a university (college students: ZQ-f-20; MC-m-20). In contrast, the rural Yi students have major disadvantages compared to them. Though there are some rural Yi students also attending a university, they reported that they are one of the few or even the only college students in their villages. Their educational success often started early. Often they have attended a middle school in urban areas later, typically in Xichang, since they were one of the best graduates in their counties in the primary or middle school graduation examinations (college students: AS-m-25; GM-f-20; KG-m-20; ML-m-20; LG-m-20; LL-f-20; RH-m-20; XF-f-20). Table 4 shows the original Liangshan area has no successful senior high schools.

Furthermore, the number of high school positions per capita is usually below average, while some counties centralize senior high school students. Still, it is important to keep in mind that all these rural and poor counties have much higher birth rates, and thus in principle would need more schooling positions per capita of the population to allow for equal access to post-compulsory education. The Anning River Valley counties have a more even distribution of positions that is closer to the regional average. Except for Yuexi County, all of the counties offer positions in schools with sometimes good but mostly medium prospects. Xichang is among the areas with the most positions per capita. Furthermore, all of its senior high schools are considered at least acceptable in terms of educational success. Most local students, however, visit one of the elite schools that have very high chances for educational success, and access to better universities almost depends on visiting a good senior high school in Xichang.

For the choice of universities, there is only one university in Liangshan (Xichang College) and several higher vocational schools. Thus, those who get good results in the college entrance examination will usually attend a university outside of Liangshan (a popular destination is Chengdu). Most of the students in local Xichang College are Han students from other areas of China. Local minority students are heavily under-represented in this university (see Table 4). Typically, there are only a few Yi students in classes of about 30 to 40 students in Xichang College. Only some majors such as Yi language and physical education (training of PE teachers) have a higher proportion of Yi students.

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<sup>36</sup> For example, in the college entrance examination in 2019, there was only one high school graduate in Meigu County, and 25 graduates in Zhaojue County who reached the scoreline sufficient for admission to universities.

<sup>37</sup> In 2015, 22,550 senior high school graduates took the college entrance examination in Liangshan and 8,762 were admitted, resulting in an admission rate of 38.86%. Without the affirmative action policy for minority students the admission rate is only 27.77%. (see Wang 2015).

Table 4: Regional inequality in high schools in Liangshan

County / City	Senior high schools	No. of students per year	No. of students per year in schools with good or medium results	Permanent population (corrected for migration effects)	Index of Liangshan average of senior high school positions per capita	Index of Liangshan average of students in good and medium schools	Percentage of students in school with good or medium education prospects
Liangshan in total	37 (among them 7 key and private schools)	26,833	12,264	4,751,100	100	100	45.7%
Xichang	9 (4 public key and 1 private)	5,455	5,455	764,500	126	219	100%
Muli	1	570	0	134,950	74	0	0%
Yanyuan	2	1,704	960	365,300	83	123	56.3%
Dechang	2 (1 private)	1,719	1,719	220,000	127	219	100%
Huili	2	1,770	1,055	442,300	71	130	59.6%
Huidong	3	2,830	850	375,500	130	66	30%
Ningnan	1	900	900	187,700	85	219	100%
Mianning	3 (1 private)	1,919	1,325	357,500	95	151	69%
Yuexi	2	1,330	0	287,600	82	0	0%
Puge	1	1,188	0	168,300	125	0	0%
Butuo	1	500	0	174,850	51	0	0%
Jingyang	1	600	0	171,650	62	0	0%
Zhaojue	2	2,090	0	257,550	144	0	0%
Xide	3	1,350	0	171,100	140	0	0%
Ganluo	2	898	0	210,500	76	0	0%
Meigu	1	660	0	227,900	51	0	0%
Leibo	1	1,350	0	233,900	102	0	0%

Source: Design by author, based on the Statistical Yearbook of Liangshan Prefecture (2017). Online: <http://tj.lsz.gov.cn/sjfb/lsnds/tjn2017/>. Last accessed 12.03.2020. And the Enrolment Plan of Ordinary High Schools in Liangshan Prefecture in 2021, the Office of Liangshan Development and Reform Commission. Online: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20210428/20210428AODUNV00.html>. Last accessed: 19.09.2021.

### 5.3 Actors in the education system: Shifting the responsibility of low educational achievement

This part will discuss the causes of low-academic achievements and address the perspectives of different actors. A typical phenomenon is that they blame each other and shift responsibility. Thus, the discussion on the topic is stagnating. The actors will be divided into two groups. There are direct actors including students, parents and teachers and there are the administrators of the local education system including headmasters and civil servants. They participate in the local education system in their specific ways and have different interests.

#### 5.3.1 Teachers' perspective: Parents and students on the periphery of education

This part will discuss how teachers and volunteer teachers explain the low academic achievements of Yi students in rural Liangshan.<sup>38</sup> These reasons typically include a language barrier for minority students caused by little Mandarin proficiency, parents have not taking the responsibility for their children's education, and a general disinterested attitude towards education in the Yi community.

<sup>38</sup> Because of lack of teachers in Liangshan, there are volunteer teachers who work in Liangshan for a short time.



## **Language barrier for Mandarin**

It has been repeatedly mentioned by local teachers that the low Mandarin proficiency of rural Yi children is an important obstacle for them to make achievements in education. Rural Yi children typically can only speak Yi and they usually have not had any contact with Han people as well as the Chinese mainstream language. Therefore, most of them can neither communicate with the Han teacher nor understand courses (all of which are given in Mandarin) in the first few years of attending school. A Han volunteer teacher reported her experience that when she was teaching first-grade students almost nobody could understand her. Still, she would be required to finish the curriculum. As a result, the average score of the class in the term's final examination was only 9% (volunteer teacher: RM-f-20). Thus, many of the students lose contact with the curriculum in the earliest stages of schooling. As a result, extremely low average scores (often lower than 10% on average) are very common in rural Yi areas for lower grade students in primary school. The Mandarin level of the students will usually improve a few years later and therefore the average score will improve in the upper grades of primary schools (about 30%).

As a coping strategy, Yi teachers often view bilingual teaching of Mandarin and Yi language as a solution for the students' language barrier. Some Yi teachers reported that they gave their course in the two languages and it worked well. They regard Yi spoken language as helpful in the lower grades of primary school and Mandarin should be used in the upper grades when the students have already mastered the language. Though bilingual education is also supported by the government, there are many dilemmas for implementing it. For example, Han teachers can not provide bilingual courses, and the Yi teachers from different areas speak different dialects Yi that is incomprehensible for locals in their workplace (teachers: SB-f-65; XD-m-40; SL-m-55; MR-f-25; NZ-m-25). As mentioned above, the authorities regard preschool education as a solution for overcoming language barriers by having children learn Mandarin earlier. Apart from the current situation that the programme does not work so far, if it will become successful in the future, it could lead to other problems such as the young generation of Yi losing their ability to master Yi language.

## **Rural Yi students: Incompatible with school?**

In the view of many teachers, most rural Yi students are not adapted to the school. The school is an unfamiliar field for them and they often feel confused about the expectations of the school and teachers. For example, they are very unfamiliar with the insistence on order and the competitive atmosphere emphasized by the school. As a result, teachers think that most of the students lack the motivation for having good grades in the examinations, as well as for competing for positions in higher education. However, in the Chinese education system, these points are seen as the most important goals for students. Thus, teachers tend to regard the rural Yi students as unmotivated and incompetent for the competition in the field of education or as resistant to the authority of schools and teachers. This leads the teachers to question the intelligence and learning abilities of the students. Usually, the extremely poor grades in the examinations are regarded as proof that the rural Yi students are far away from the expectations of the schools and China's education system. Teachers are used to comparing Yi students in rural areas with Han students in cities. In this comparison, the Yi rural students are very incompatible with the demands of school. Therefore, the most common accusation is that the students "do not know what to do at school" and thus only "sit in the classroom waiting for the end of the courses". (volunteer teacher: MR-f-20; XQ-f-20; RM-f-20; QD-f-20; MW-m-20; QF-m-20; teacher: YC-f-25; WQ-m-40).

Moreover, besides the low academic achievements, the behaviour of students is also regarded as incompatible with the expectations of the school. For example, poor personal hygiene and what is considered impolite behaviours such as leaving the classroom during courses or entering the teachers'

office without permission are common examples. Further examples include impolite ways of speaking without adequate forms of address and the use of swear words. Teachers see those behaviours as an even more important problem than the low scores of rural Yi students since they grant them few possibilities to be successful in education anyway. Instead, accepted behaviour is considered to be conducive for them to integrate into mainstream society in order to find a better livelihood (volunteer teacher: QF-m-20; XQ-f-20; ZQ-f-20; MW-m-20; teacher: HU-f-30; QL-f-25).

### **Rural Yi Parents: Rejecting responsibility?**

In the teachers' view, most of the rural Yi parents always keep themselves out of the responsibility of taking care of their children's education. The most common argument is that the parents limit their responsibility to paying the expenses for education, while all the responsibilities of education are shifted to schools and teachers. The regulations of compulsory education would give some parents the impression that it is the school and the state that require them to send their children to the school, not themselves. Thus, the school should take the responsibility because they require the children to go there. But the teachers see themselves as overburdened especially considering the lack of teachers. In teachers' view, parents should take on at least the responsibility for supervising and encouraging their children. So, just as students are compared with 'outside students', rural Yi parents are also compared with 'outside parents', following an image of Chinese middle-class parents. Those parents are described as investing huge resources of time, money and energy into their children's education. The teachers view the parents' attitude towards education as influential for their children's attitude. According to their experience, parents who have the experience of migrant work often attach more importance to their children's education, because they usually received a certain degree of education and their working experience made them realize the importance of education. The encouragement of these parents and also their willingness to support the education of their children also encourages the children to strive for a good performance in school. In contrast, most of the rural Yi parents who are now over 35 years old are illiterate. They think that they cannot help their children with their education at all.

### **The 'culture of poverty' of Yi society?**

Due to the widespread low educational achievement in rural Yi-inhabited areas, the accusations are easily transferred from the individual to the group level, and eventually become considered as a problem of culture. Because long-term poverty and low educational achievement coexist in Liangshan, causality between the two phenomena is easily assumed. Here, the explanations common from political discourse and literature come into play. Both external factors such as the natural environment and history of the region and internal factors such as the culture and customs of Yi society are seen as the reasons for poverty and low educational achievement. This line of arguing is used as a universal explanation for different social problems in Liangshan. But although poverty is considered as an important aspect in the explanation of the low educational achievements, some Han teachers believe that there are more reasons than poverty. They see special customs of Yi culture and Yi culture as such as a central reason. According to their own experience, their home towns were also poverty-stricken areas in China. But the achievements in education and the attitude towards it were generally much better. Different from Yi parents' negative attitude towards education, their own parents typically regarded education as almost the only means to change their poor fate. (volunteer teacher: XQ-f-20; MW-m-20).

Because Liangshan is still far away from modern society in the eyes of outsiders, it is easy to criticize Yi culture for poverty and low educational achievements. Typically, there are several customs and characteristics of Yi culture that are often criticized. First of all, the large size of Yi families is regarded as an important reason for poverty and low educational achievement. The number of children is viewed to reduce

the educational resources available to the children. Thus, compared with the Han children who are usually the only child in their family that can get all the family's resources, the Yi children often have several siblings and they usually have little learning materials, extracurricular tutoring during vacation time and many children have no desks to write homework at home. Additionally, they are also more likely to leave school after compulsory education when the education costs increase.

Furthermore, teachers see the low investment in children's education also as a result of contempt for education. Compared with the huge spending on religious ceremonies and social interactions of Yi families, the teachers interpret the unwillingness of rural Yi parents to spend money on education as indicative of the low importance of education in their values. This is considered to be influenced by the overall atmosphere of the community. In communities that do not support education, it is usually more common for parents to let their children go out to work as migrant workers instead of supporting them to stay in school. Secondly, the strong gender bias of Yi society is regarded as an obstacle to women's education. Although the educational opportunities of Yi girls have greatly improved, women are in a weak position when rural Yi families allocate educational resources. Thus, girls' educational resources are even more limited than boys'. Moreover, they need to do much more housework and society has lower expectations regarding their education and career success. Thus, it is difficult for Yi rural girls to be successful in education. If they do not show themselves to be talented in school, it is difficult for them to receive support from their parents for continuing education after compulsory education. Therefore, it seems futile for girls with average or poor academic performance to study hard, because they have to accept the fate of arranged weddings by their parents to get married as soon as they graduate from compulsory education or even before in some cases. Teachers' views on the generally low educational achievement of Yi rural students have many biased views, which are not only true for Han teachers but also from local Yi teachers. Some volunteer teachers mentioned that even local teachers "look down on their students" more than they do (volunteer teacher: QF-m-20). On many views related to blaming students and parents for the students' low educational achievement, Han and Yi teachers are in agreement. However, Yi teachers do not agree with the accusation that the customs and culture of Yi lead to the students' low educational achievement.

### **5.3.2 The perspective of parents and students: Unqualified teachers and schools**

The students express that the school is not a comfortable field for them. They find it difficult to adapt themselves to the strict norms and discipline of the school, and they argue that the content of the curriculum is also difficult. Teachers explain this as the result of a lack of qualifications on the side of the students to adapt to the education system, and in a sense as a manifestation of the Yi students' contempt for the authority of schools and teachers. However, parents and students regard the low academic achievements as a result of insufficient qualifications and lack of sense of responsibility on the side of the teachers. However, because they are afraid of the teacher's authority since teachers usually have a high social status in Yi society, the students and their parents are used to remain silent with their dissatisfaction about the teachers. From the parents' point of view, one cannot solely blame their children for not being able to write their own names after several years of schooling and no one in the class being able to pass the exams. They include the teachers and schools in the responsibility for these outcomes. In fact, there is a great social distance between teachers on the one side and the students and their parents on the other side and there is little communication between them. All the teachers interviewed said that they had never experienced a case in which Yi parents wanted to communicate with them on their own initiative while parents argued that they were too busy to do so. Students usually also will not communicate with their teachers. Here, the fear of the teachers' authority played a role in widening the psychological distance between them. The following section will briefly summarize the views of parents and students on the low academic achievement.

### **Teachers lack a sense of responsibility and qualifications**

It is common that the teachers in rural Yi areas are absent from their courses. When the teacher is absent, students can only study by themselves. But most students just sit in the classroom and wait for the end of the course. Teachers explain this as a result of the lack of teachers. They have to give classes for half a day or even the whole day. Moreover, besides giving classes, they also need to deal with administration issues, training for teachers and personal affairs. In the boarding schools, they also need to manage students' daily life. All of those affairs take up their time and energy for giving courses. Moreover, many teachers are facing job burnout because of constant overworking and dissatisfaction with their job related to insufficient salaries, a lower social status compared with local civil servants and the lack of a promotion mechanism. (teacher: FU-m-40; YC-f-25; SU-m-35; XD-m-40; Headmaster of NB Central School: LU-m-50).

Moreover, parents and students also question the qualifications of teachers. This criticism applies especially to some temporary teachers who are employed because of the shortage of teachers. Typically, they have only graduated from middle school and are unfamiliar with the knowledge of the subject that they teach and they rarely prepare lessons. Thus, it is often found by the outstanding students in the class that the teachers frequently make mistakes during the courses.<sup>39</sup> The qualification of teachers is also widely criticized by volunteer teachers since they are usually college students from outside. They see some of the local teachers as not being qualified to be teachers. (volunteer teacher: MW-m-20; ZQ-f-20 QF-m-20; RM-f-20; college students: LL-f-20; vocational students: SY-f-20; AY-m-20). Also in the views of two headmasters of rural primary schools, there are problems with the qualification and motivation of teachers. While the elder teachers have usually only received high school education and have not updated their knowledge for a long time, the young teachers have a better educational background but are not satisfied with their job and are always trying to find better jobs, which leads to an instability of teaching staff. In addition, because the new regulations of the teachers' qualification examination do not require a background of professional teacher training, many new teachers are unfamiliar with the professional skills of teachers and lack work experience. (Headmaster of NNB Central School: LU-m-50; Headmaster of RH village school: RI-m-40).

### **Physical punishment and scolding for 'bad students' and the bias for 'good students'**

Although corporal punishment has been explicitly prohibited by the authorities, it is still widespread in rural schools in Liangshan. Scolding students is even more common in daily life at school. It was confirmed by the students interviewed that especially students with poor grades are often physically punished and scolded by the teacher. Typically, a violation of school discipline, signs of disrespect for the teachers' authority and poor grades in the examinations are the reasons that trigger these punishments. A common form of verbal abuse insists that the students should leave school as soon as possible because they will not achieve anything in the education system as well as in society in general anyway. Being belittled often makes it difficult for students to build self-confidence in their abilities. Those who were often scolded by teachers in the school reported that it had led them to feel both boredom and fear of the school and teachers during their school education. As a result, some of them dropped out, while others cannot continue their education because of the poor grades in the subject taught by the teachers who verbally abused them. (vocational school students: SY-f-20; AG-f-25; migrant worker: LW-m-25).

However, Yi parents usually have different attitudes towards teachers' corporal punishment and the scolding of their children. Because many parents themselves also 'educate' their children by beating them, they usually do not object to the teachers also doing so. Among the parents interviewed, many regard

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<sup>39</sup> In the participatory observation of the courses, I also found that some teachers frequently made mistakes.

teachers' corporal punishment as a way of 'strict education' and they prefer this over the teachers just ignoring the students. However, in some cases where the teacher beat the students too hard, parents can also disagree and resist. In these cases, the parents support their children to no longer visit the school anymore (volunteer teachers: NZ-m-25).

Unexpectedly, the teachers admitted their use of corporal punishment and the intense scolding of students. They argued that it was necessary in the local context. The local students (the teachers call them "children from the mountainous regions") are unfamiliar with the rules and disciplines of school, which however is seen as the prerequisite of the organization of a class. Therefore, in order to build and secure the authority of teachers, corporal punishment (the teachers call it a 'strict' education mode) is considered as the most effective way. Many volunteer teachers and new teachers have the experience of changing their ways of teaching from a 'gentle' way to a 'strict' way because they felt that the former way leads to the students challenging their authority. In their views, it is conducive to the whole class when they can organize the classes in a strict way. Thus, some teachers argue that the prohibition of physical punishment and verbal abuse of students would be divorced from the necessities of the local reality.

Different from those students who are often scolded and punished, those students with outstanding grades are often favoured by teachers. These students are often regarded as role models for other students and are always praised by the teachers. Many Yi rural college students have the experience of being praised by their teachers since they always had the best scores in the class. Moreover, their teachers also helped them to get access to a good school after graduation or to find financial support for them. Thus, they are also grateful to their teachers. (college students: LL-f-20; ML-m-20). However, the bias of teachers for 'good students' makes the others students feel neglected. Moreover, once the teachers formed an impression on a student, it is very hard to change it. This demotivates the 'bad students' from making any change as their potential smaller successes are not valued. (students: GS-f-20). Teachers admit their bias towards 'good students'. They view it as a reasonable and normal emotion because they cannot take care of all the students in a large class. On the one hand, the 'good students' are not only good at exams but also respect teachers more and always obey the school rules. On the other hand, and more importantly, teachers feel that their efforts result in feedback since there is at least someone who can get relatively good grades in the exams. (teacher: FU-m-40; HU-f-30; YC-f-25; volunteer teachers: MW-m-20).

#### **5.4 Beyond the school-based discourse: The power structures of the education system and the implementation of education policies in Liangshan**

This part will expand the analysis of the reasons for low educational achievement by considering the power structures in the education system in Liangshan and the role of educational policies.

##### **5.4.1 The power structures of the education system**

In China's education system, the superior levels of government are responsible for the formulation of education policies, the compilation of teaching materials and the distribution of certain education funds. But the responsibility of organizing education on a daily basis is mainly borne by county governments (see Guo 2010: 307). Thus, the county governments need to implement the education policies formulated by the central government. Thus, the concern of officials of local educational departments is mainly to fulfil the requirements of their superiors (see Guo 2010: 401). At the same time, county governments also have a certain autonomy in the decision-making regarding the implementation of policies such as setting their priorities in the management of educational institutions and in the allocation of funds provided they basically comply with the requirements of higher authorities. As long as they fulfil the latter point, the Chinese administrative system grants local officials almost absolute rights within their jurisdiction. This

enables them to adjust the guidelines of their superiors to meet their own interests, which often leads to great differences between the guidelines and their implementation (see Ptackova 2012: 222). The decision-making power of local policies is usually in the hands of several core leaders in the local government, yet the head of the education department is not one of them. As a result, it is difficult for the education department to gain power and resources at the local level (see Guo 2010: 401).

#### **5.4.2 Decentralization of education and the structures of education financing**

In the initial years after the establishment of PCR, the state implemented free education and most of the financing of basic education was borne by the state (see Luo 2009: 124-125). In 1985, the authorities decided to devolve the financial burden of basic education to local governments, but the latter transferred the financial pressure to local communities. As a result, people had to pay for education by themselves (see Luo 2009: 127, 140). At present, different aspects of education finance are shared by different levels of government. Specifically, teachers' salaries and subsidies for students are borne by the central government, while infrastructure construction and other non-recurrent expenses are borne by county governments, and daily administrative expenses are borne by schools themselves (even though they have almost no income) (see Luo 2009: 134). Therefore, poverty-stricken areas such as Liangshan have a huge disadvantage in financing education compared with richer areas. Thus, Liangshan has to reduce all educational expenditures except for the aspects that are paid for by the central government. The pronounced economic disparities between Liangshan and other areas as well as within Liangshan itself contribute to the widening educational gap between different areas. For example, in the Yi-inhabited area, the county governments often have very limited budgets for education. Thus, the available funds for infrastructure construction and other non-recurrent expenses are very limited. At the same time, schools must pay for administrative expenses by themselves. However, they are not allowed to ask for fees from students. As a result, the schools have to save all kinds of potential daily expenses even on items such as printing materials. In some cases, teachers have to pay for expenses like chalk and printing fees by themselves.

#### **5.4.3 Data-oriented policy implementation**

Due to the strict time framework for the implementation of many ambitious educational projects, those implementing policy on the local level often tend to take the most direct way, namely, the way that can ensure that the success on specific data indicators demanded by the superior levels of government is met (see Shih 2007: 234). Because the evaluation of the policies' implementation is mainly based on quantitative indicators that are clearly defined in the policy outlines, the speed of achieving the benchmarks as well as quantities indicating success is more important than the real world sustainability and quality of policy implementation. Unsurprisingly, this leads to deviations from the original goals of some policies during the implementation phase. Education in Liangshan provides some typical examples.

The data-oriented policy implementation may not only lead to superficial and unsustainable approaches to policy implementation but also to the creation of false data. Since an improvement of education quality is a difficult and long-term task, policy implementers feel unable to comply with the goals set out above since these are based on previous false data and often entail a strict time framework to produce successes. Thus, it is common that policy implementers feel pressure to turn to means of data improvement without substantive action.

The excellent enrolment rates of compulsory education in Liangshan are an example. Although the authorities have implemented a series of policies to improve the enrolment rates in compulsory education and these have had significant success, the current official data of an enrolment rate of over 99% is too optimistic. According to the official data on the enrolment rate of primary schools in Liangshan in 2018, a

value of 99.72% was reached in general and 99.32% for school-age children of ethnic minorities (see Liangshan Prefecture Statistics Bureau 2019). However, students who dropped out during the compulsory education phase, especially in the junior high school stage, can be found in every Yi village in 2019. A teacher estimated that about 90% of the primary school students in rural Yi areas stay at school until graduation, while about 80% will stay during the junior high school stage (volunteer teacher: MW-m-20). Many students are officially enrolled but hardly appear at school. Typically, they come to school only at the beginning of the semester or when there is an inspection by higher-ranking officials. Rehamo reported that “Much of the data about nine-year compulsory education popularization is false and compiled [by the teachers] according to specific standards [of the superior unit]” (2018: 160, translated by author). Some teachers and headmasters who participated in the data compilation on compulsory education and on educational policies such as the recently promulgated ‘education balance’ policy confirmed that they must try to meet the standards of superior levels of administration (Headmaster of NNB Central School: LU-m-50; teacher: XD-m-45; FU-m-40). As a headmaster emphasized, the ‘real data’ is confidential. (Headmaster of NNB Central School: LU-m-50). However, overly optimistic data leads to a situation where the seriousness of the real situation is underestimated and the problems of the local educational system are not addressed.

Moreover, cheating in exams is considered as a more effective way to improve low academic achievements rather than improving the quality of education. Telling students the answers in the final exams is a common practice and an open secret in many areas of Liangshan (cf. Rehamo 2018: 78, 161). This phenomenon continues until today (volunteer teacher: ZQ-f-20; college student: LL-f-20; vocational student: SY-f-20). Another way to improve the grades in the final exams is to persuade the middle school graduates with poor performance at school not to take the final exam so that the average scores would be better.

#### **5.4.4 Explicit and implicit policies**

In the implementation of policies, there is further a dilemma that the policies, which are officially guaranteed at the national level (explicit policies) deviate from the implementation in reality, because of implicit policies. The bilingual education policy in minority regions is a prime example. Though some laws guarantee the rights of Chinese ethnic minorities to use and develop their own languages,<sup>40</sup> minority languages are neglected in the education system as well as in local society because of the dominant position of Mandarin, which is the language of teaching and testing in the education system and also the working language of all institutions in daily life. Here, the state balances the potential contradictions in its policies such as the goals of ensuring unity and preserving diversity held up on minority issues by operating explicit and implicit policies. Therefore, there are some policies that are not executed because local officials regard these aspects as something that they don’t need to be concerned with too much. They rather execute the education policies based on their own understanding of the implicit policies that are behind the explicit ones.

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<sup>40</sup> Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Article 4); Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy (2001) (Article 36); Amendment to the Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2015) (Article 12).

## 6 Aspects of inequality in education in Liangshan

This chapter will address specific aspects of the transitions in education in Liangshan in more detail, especially, women's educational opportunities, the allocation of educational resources and language education. They are concerned with factors along with inequality in educational opportunities occurs such as gender, ethnicity, birthplace, and class.

### 6.1 Girls' education and transformation of marriage patterns of Yi society

Yi society is regarded as a society organized by family branches *civy* that are based on patrilineal consanguinity, which makes gender inequality a stable social form. Women's roles are limited to childbearing and caring for families, while their status in religious and family affairs is very marginalized. Men occupy the main roles in decision-making and in social activities (see Liu 2007: 44). Even well-educated women have only partially improved their family and social status through getting a formal job. Therefore, it was not common for Yi girls to visit school until recently. With the popularization of Yi girls' education, the gender roles and marriage patterns in Yi society have also been influenced. This section is about the changes in this field.

#### 6.1.1 Improvement of Yi girls' educational opportunities

The education situation of Yi girls in Liangshan was clearly lagging behind that of boys for a long time, also see Pan et al. (2000) and Liu and Ma (2006) and Gong (2007). It is closely connected with the role of girls in the family. First, their role is mainly regarded as a future wife and mother. Thus, they are expected to stay at home and do farm work and housework until they get married and then continue to do these tasks in a new family while raising children. Their marriage would be arranged early by their parents according to the traditional regulations of marriage in Yi society. Second, unlike boys, girls do not have the obligation to secure the livelihood of their parents when they are old. Typically, they are no longer viewed to belong to the original family once they get married. Thus, investing in girls' education is regarded as not beneficial for their parents. Third, since girls took on most of the farm work and housework among the children, they were a very important labour force for their families. If they visited school, their families would have faced a labour shortage that endangers their livelihood. (QQ Village Chief-m-35; villager: BS-f-45-Mianning; MB-m-40-Meigu; college student: LL-f-20; LG-m-20; RH-m-20). Therefore, there were only a few Yi rural parents who supported girls' education until a few years ago (see Qumu 2007).

Under the background of the low overall enrolment rate in Liangshan, it was even lower for Yi girls. The enrolment rate of Yi girls was only 20%-30% in the 1980s in Yi-inhabited areas and about 30% in the late 1990s.<sup>41</sup> In the 1990s, girls' education slowly caught up with boys' (see Harrell 2001a: 116-119). However, the enrolment rate of Yi girls varied greatly in different regions, among which it reached only half the levels in Yi-inhabited areas than that of other regions of Liangshan.<sup>42</sup> The low enrolment rates of Yi girls did not really improve until 2000s. At this time it was still about 30% in Yi-inhabited areas such as Meigu (see Liu 2007: 52). There was a significant improvement in 2005. The enrolment rate of minority girls in Liangshan reached about 91% in primary school, and 31% in junior high school. In the last 10 years, this trend has continued and the gender gap in enrolment has gradually reduced over time (see Lewin and Wang 2011: 61, 62, 74). In line with this change, it was found that most Yi rural women who are over 35 years old had no experience of visiting schools. They reported that it was a common phenomenon that girls stayed at home

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<sup>41</sup> According to a survey in Xide County in 1985, among 3,100 people (50.51% of them female) in a township, female students accounted for only 19.4% of the students from 1979 to 1983. (see Research and Education Bureau and the Secretariat of Education institute of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture 1985: 9).

<sup>42</sup> In 1997, the enrolment rate of school-age children in Liangshan officially reached 92.54%, among which the enrolment rate of Yi girls reached 69.55%, while it was about 30% in Yi-inhabited areas (see Li 2009: 6).



instead of visiting school in their childhood. Even in areas such as Mianning County, where the economic situation was already better, only a few girls in Yi villages could go to school. Thus, those who did felt they had no sense of belonging in school and dropped out (villager: BS-f-45-Mianning). Also, women with excellent grades were opposed by their parents to continuing their education after graduation from primary school. Instead, they were required to get married (villager: MG-f-60-Meigu). Under very special circumstances, there were also cases that Yi women were supported by their families to continue to receive education and received secondary education or higher education and then got a formal job (typically as a teacher). According to an interviewee who was a teacher, it was a very difficult experience for her family to support her. She had to earn money by gathering firewood for living expenses and her family had to cut down expenses and work hard to support her. (teacher: SB-f-65). The enrolment rate of Yi girls has gradually improved since the 2000s, especially since 2010. Both the enrolment rate of primary school and middle school of Yi girls have greatly improved, though it was still obviously behind boys. At present, the enrolment rates of Yi girls and boys are almost equal and most Yi girls can receive junior high school education now. The Yi families no longer oppose girls' education as before. The improvement of girls' education has been influenced by the following aspects. First of all, the popularization of compulsory education in Liangshan played a main role. Secondly, because migrant work has become a common livelihood in the Yi-inhabited area of Liangshan, the dependence of Yi families on agriculture and animal husbandry has been reduced. Therefore, the demand for labour force at home is reduced, while receiving education has gained in importance as it is beneficial for migrant work. When the girls receive education, they can contribute to the families' livelihood through migrant work before they get married. Later, when they get married, the education of a women's education also has a decisive influence on the bride price money *caili qian* paid to the original family since the education degree of a woman is related to the ability of her to earn money later.

Although the quantitative indicator of Yi girls' enrolment and thus access to education approaches that of boys, there is still a big gap between them in terms of access to educational resources. The continuing gender bias in education is related to the gender roles in Yi society, the lack of resources of rural Yi families, and the responsibility of sons to take care of their elderly parents. The degree of gender equality in education is largely decided by the regional and family background. Though many parents interviewed expressed that their main consideration in the distribution of educational resources is the grades of their children and not the gender, students report that there still is a gender bias. For example, a Yi student reported about the situation in her hometown in Meigu. It is common to allocate better educational resources (such as securing access to a school in urban areas that requires informal payments) to boys instead of girls. Because her parents supported both boys and girls to receive better education in urban areas, they were questioned by the neighbours who think that it is not necessary to invest much in girls' education since they will get married anyway. (college student: GM-f-20). In fact, most Yi rural families have lower expectations for girls' educational achievements. Though girls can receive compulsory education today, further education is not common unless they are outstanding students, who are likely to go to university and get a formal job later. In these cases the prospect of having a college student in the family outweighs a potential gender bias as for rural Yi families, having college students means honour and hope.

### 6.1.2 Transformation of education and marriage of Yi youth

With the popularization of education in all of Liangshan, also the marriage pattern is affected. This section is about the role of education (especially girls' education) for the changes in Yi youth's marriage.

#### The transformation of traditional marriage regulations of Yi society

In the traditional Yi society of Liangshan marriage is based on certain rules. One should marry someone who also belongs to the Yi nationality (only Nuosu, not others who are officially identified as Yi) and has the same level in the hierarchy of the blood lineages in traditional Yi society. Preference is given to marry the mother's brother's daughter, while marriages of people from the same family branches *civy* are not allowed. (see Qumu 2000: 86; Shen and Yang 2011: 12-13).<sup>43</sup> These rules were strictly followed before Democratic Reform (1956). Those who violated the rules were severely punished by their family branches (see Shen and Yang 2011: 32). The government attempted three times to carry out marriage reforms in Liangshan in 1960, 1977 and 1987-1989. It aimed at reforming the regulations of traditional marriage of Yi society, such as the arranging of marriages by the parents, early marriage (before the children reach adulthood) and marriage with close relatives (see Shen and Yang 2011: 19). Though the marriage reforms had some influence on the marriage pattern of Yi youths in that generation and there were a few cases that broke the traditional rules (see Wang and Li 2019: 96), the traditional rules of marriage are still the mainstream in Yi society. Not long ago, most marriages were concluded on the basis of the promises made by both fathers when their children were very young (even sometimes not born yet), or after the girl's rite of passage into adulthood (usually at 17 or earlier).<sup>44</sup> (see Shen and Yang 2011: 23). For the engagement, the family of the man should pay a part of the bride price money *caili qian* to the woman's family. From here on, the breach of the engagement as well as divorcing a marriage involves high compensation. Thus, marriage relationships are often very strong.

Beyond marriage reforms, a series of social transformations in Liangshan and China have contributed to changes in traditional marriage regulations of Yi society. Although the traditional rules are still dominant for the marriage of young people, some regulations have already changed. For example, the phenomenon of early marriage, as well as early engagement in childhood are less common (see Zhang 2014: 81-87). Equally, marriages with the daughter of the mother's brother are no longer as common as they were before. However, the boundaries connected to bloodlines and social hierarchy remain very effective. Deviations such as marriages across ethnic boundaries and between members of different groups in the social hierarchy remain rare cases (see Zhang and Li 2007). Though the patterns of the traditional social hierarchy of Yi society are no longer an open form of social organization, they are still very important in marriage today. Therefore, the marriage pattern in Liangshan now mixes the 'traditional' and 'modern' concepts, and the latter are merging into and sometimes replacing some traditional marriage regulations (see Ma 1999; 2001). Especially those concepts and rules that are not directly related to bloodlines and social hierarchy have already changed a lot in Yi society after the democratic reform.

#### Education and the marriage of youth

Marriage decisions in Yi society have long been made based on the parents' wishes and traditional rules and young people have little autonomy. Under the hegemony of parents and family branches, any case of disobeying the rules would be severely punished. In the past, the worst punishment was the death penalty,

<sup>43</sup> For more information on the traditional marriage of Yi society, see Liu (2007); Ma (1999; 2001); Zhang and Hu (2001); Shen (2011); Shen and Yang (2011); He (2017).

<sup>44</sup> According to the Yi people's expectation of the gender roles of boys and girls in *Amo Nire* and *Mamu Teyi* (two classical books of Yi). Girls should gradually take care of their younger brothers and sisters, keep sheep and do housework from the age of six until they get married at the age of seventeen. Boys, on the other hand, did no housework until they learned to hunt at the age of eleven to twelve. They learned to deal with social affairs in their early 20s. (cf. Liu 2007: 44). In the last decades, Yi women have had different routines in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, girls still started to take care of their younger brothers and sisters and do housework at the age of six, got married around the age of seventeen, and have given birth to four to five children (or more). Many did not receive education until a few years ago. Women in urban areas, on the other hand, did not leave school until the age of seventeen, went to work, and continued to work after having two children. (cf. Liu 2007: 118).

while today it is expulsion from Yi nationality. Parents of children who disobey the rules are under great pressure from the public and their family branches. Therefore, there are many cases in which the mother threatens their children to commit suicide if they continue to refuse the parents' demands. Still, marriage decisions have become more autonomous after the Democratic Reform, especially after the 1980s. However, this mainly happened in urban areas and among more educated groups of Yi society (see Ma 1999: 30). The manifestations of increasing autonomy of marriage for young people include first, that the young people can participate in the choice of their spouse instead of a marriage being fully arranged by the parents. For different groups, this has different meanings. For most rural Yi youths, they can participate in a meet-and-greet *xiangqin* to meet the potential spouse and make a decision together with their relatives.

For educated Yi youths who have formal work, it means that they can largely choose a spouse themselves as long as they follow the traditional regulations of bloodlines and social hierarchy. Secondly, the incidence of early engagement by the parents during the childhood of their children has greatly reduced (see Shen and Yang 2011: 23). The same is true of early marriage as the age of marriage is now postponed for several years on average.<sup>45</sup> (college students: RH-m-20; LG-m-20; GM-f-20; students: XM-f-20; XB-f-20; MZ-f-15; migrant workers: RS-f-15; villagers: NZ-f-20-Meigu; XC-f-25-Meigu). Third, the choice of partners based on love has gradually appeared among the young generation born since the 1980s (Shen and Yang 2011: 8-9). They have had much more chances to contact each other in schools and workplaces.

Though it is still very difficult for these relationships to be accepted by the parents, among those who received higher education free love is already basically accepted as long as the spouse matches the requirements of the traditional marriage rules. It is said that well-educated people can be regarded as capable. Thus, they could make decisions by themselves to a larger extent. Members of this group usually get married several years later than others and also have fewer children. Still, the traditional marriage rules apply also to successful students. Until today, breaking these rules means a conflict with the family branch. Thus, most young people still follow the rules. Though all the interviewed college students expressed that they do not fully agree with those rules and referred to them as a 'feudal' element of their society, none of them said to be willing to break the rules even if they have a girl/boy friend of another ethnic group as they know it would be almost impossible to resist the demands of their families (college students: ML-m-20; LG-m-20; AS-m-25; CG-f-20; LJ-m-20; RH-m-20; students: LA-m-20; XM-f-20; XB-f-20; ZZ-f-15). However, they expressed their strong will to give their own children more freedom in their marriage choices in the future.

### **Ethnic and hierarchical boundaries of marriage**

In Yi society, the ethnic boundary for marriage is very stable and the Yi society largely remains separated from mainstream society. Until today, marriages with Han Chinese can hardly be accepted by the elder generation of Yi and such marriages are regarded as a shame for the family and the entire family branches. (Qumu 2000: 88). People will typically consider inter-ethnic marriages as a devaluation of the blood of their families and the entire family branch and all relatives will be subjected to severe pressure from public opinion. In traditional Yi society in Liangshan, Han Chinese were usually people from outside who were captured and enslaved. Therefore, the descendants of Han are regarded as the lowest group in the social hierarchy, (namely, slaves, also called *wazi*). Until today, Yi people whose ancestors were Han are still called Han-rooted *Hangen* and the other Yi people do not want to marry them. (cf. Hein and Zhao 2016). The rules are especially harsh for Yi men.

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<sup>45</sup> For a long time, the age of marriage for rural Yi youth was about fifteen to seventeen or even earlier. Now it is postponed until young people graduate from school. For most Yi students, this means that they are already over seventeen years old. Then they will work for several years before they get married. Thus, it is common now to get married at the beginning of 20.

In contrast, the rare inter-ethnic marriages of Yi people mostly involve well-educated Yi women in urban areas. Here, this phenomenon is even no longer rare today (see Wang and Li 2019: 96; Rehamo 2018: 15), while it still is in rural Yi-inhabited areas in Liangshan. For example, in the visited Yi villages with usually about 100 households, there is usually no case or at most only one to two cases of inter-ethnic marriages. The rules of intra-ethnic marriage of Liangshan Yi society (they call themselves Nuosu) also exclude Yi people from other areas in China (see Harrell 2001a: 168-169). The Nuosu see themselves as different from other Yi people outside Liangshan because they are not descendants from the same ancestors.

Moreover, they also have different languages and customs. These factors are also considered to be arguments against inter-ethnic marriages, even though the limitations of traditional rule dominate. Moreover, the boundary of marriage between the different levels of traditional social hierarchy remains stable. It is especially very important for the former ruling class (black Yi) to not marry anybody from the former ruled class (white Yi). (see Yuan 1992: 108). Compared with the taboo of marriages with people from other ethnic groups, it is considered even worse when people marry someone who has a lower position in the social hierarchy.

### **Girls' education and the bride price money**

It is a custom in Yi society in Liangshan that the family of the groom should pay bride price money for the bride's family. According to the locals, it is seen as compensation for the economic and time investment of the bride's parents to raise their daughters as well as for the loss of labour force. However, others also regard it as proof of the low social status of Yi women (cf. Quemo 2017: 53-55). Additionally, because breaking the engagement as well as divorce require the payment of a high compensation to the husband's family, which is even higher than the bride price, it is also viewed as a means to bind women so that the marriage is stronger. Besides compensation, divorces in Yi society involve the reputation of two family branches, which makes it easy to cause a conflict and thus very difficult.

The measurement standard of bride prices mainly includes the women's family background (lineage), her educational background, position (whether she has a formal job) and appearance (see Wang and Li 2019: 99). Because people usually marry with others who have comparable lineage, educational background has become the decisive factor for differentiating the demanded bride price money.<sup>46</sup> The bride prices are regarded as the manifestation of the economic strength of the groom's family and the worth of the bride. Therefore, it is often displayed in public.<sup>47</sup> At present, there is an informal standard for bride prices according to the women's education degree. In this standard, women with higher education and a formal job have the highest price while illiterate rural women are the cheapest. Rising bride prices have been a long-term trend in Liangshan and are a hot topic in local society.<sup>48</sup> Though many Yi rural families now have more income because of migrant works, the bride prices still far exceed their affordability and are the biggest economic burden for the family. This is especially so for those with more sons than daughters because the bride price paid by a men's family largely comes from the bride prices of their sisters. Donations by members of the family branch and the savings of the family are further sources for financing bride prices. Therefore, marriage in Yi society is a collective affair instead of a private affair of the young

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<sup>46</sup> If people of different positions in the social hierarchy marry, the lower rank family of a groom must pay a much higher bride price to the higher ranking family of the bride. On the contrary, a higher ranking family of a groom is accepted to pay a lower bride price to a lower ranking family of the bride.

<sup>47</sup> For example, a dozen people (from the bridegroom's family) will display the bride price money in the form of carrying cash with ropes and lifting it with bamboo poles and walking on the way from the bridegroom's family to the bride's. (see Hao and Liu 2019: 45).

<sup>48</sup> According to a survey by the Government of Liangshan Prefecture in 2015, there are great differences for bride prices in different regions. But all show an obvious growth trend. For example, in 2003, the bride price was 6,000-15,000 yuan (in rural areas) and 40,000-80,000 yuan (in cities). Until 2013 it increased to 100,000-200,000 yuan (in rural areas) and 200,000-450,000 yuan (in cities) (see Luobian and Ma 2018: 36). In 2019, according to my own survey, the standard of bride price was as follows: illiterate rural women had a bride price of about 100,000 to 200,000 yuan. Those with primary or junior high school degrees had bride prices of more than 200,000 yuan, while those with senior high school degrees were about 300,000 and a bride with a college degree required a bride price of about 300,000 to 500,000 yuan. By 2021, there was a new round of increases (college students: ML-m-20; LJ-m-20; student: LA-m-20; GA-f-15; migrant workers: LW-m-25; TQ-m-25).

people themselves. However, the authorities regard the trend of rising bride prices as a 'bad custom' of Yi society. It is identified as a cause of chronic poverty because people cannot accumulate wealth. Therefore, there are attempts to control the bride prices. However, the limitations of bride prices according to maximum prices regulated in the Marriage Law are not obeyed by the locals. Even though many locals themselves see the trend of rising bride prices as irrational, they still must participate since it is a custom and families fear being looked down upon by the public. So no parents will accept to marry their daughters without asking for bride price money.

Yi women's attitude towards bride price is contradictory. On the one hand, they are opposed to being 'sold'. But they also accept that high bride price money is a manifestation of their value and recognition for them. Though receiving education will influence women's self-consciousness (cf. Feng 1996), Yi college students equally accept the bride price custom when they get married and their high bride price is often talked about in daily life to prove their worth. On the other hand, most of the interviewed young women who are unmarried worry that they will be 'sold' because of a bride price and then will be bound by this marriage. The traditional song (called *mama de nv'er*) that is sung by Yi girls when they get married also clearly expresses women's bitterness about bride price money. In those songs, the Yi girls blame their parents and family members (especially uncles) for having arranged marriage for them for money. However, as an unexpected effect of bride prices, as the education degree has become a decisive factor of bride price, it encouraged the Yi parents to support their daughters to receive education.

## **6.2 Language education and ethnic identity**

This section will address the language education in Liangshan, mainly focusing on the bilingual education of Yi and Mandarin. As English is only a subject in school and is hardly used in daily life. The 55 ethnic minorities in China speak more than 400 languages (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 4). Mandarin is the national language and is regarded as the language for inter-ethnic communication (see Teng 2002: 66). Since the establishment of the PRC, bilingual language education has been propagated as an important educational policy in minority areas, even though it was abolished in some periods because of political campaigns. This means that both Mandarin and the local minority's language will be taught in school. The approach is considered to be conducive for both preserving the cultural heritage of minorities and the integration of ethnic minorities into mainstream society. However, Mandarin always has a dominant position in the education system as well as in society in general, while minority languages are often marginalized. (see Ding and Yu 2013; Postiglione 1999; Harrell and Rehamo 2018). According to a report, 20% of Chinese minority languages are on the verge of disappearing and another 40% are showing signs of being endangered (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 16). The decline of minority languages is considered to happen because of the popularization of Mandarin in minority areas. Some studies see close connections to current forms of language education in schools in minority regions. (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 8).

The policy of language education for minority students, like other minority policies of China, needs to achieve the goals of securing both diversity and unity. The cultures of ethnic minorities shall be maintained (diversity), while their integration into mainstream society (unity) shall be guaranteed by learning the language and culture of mainstream society, so as to realize the modernisation of China's ethnic minorities (see Teng 2002: 65; Teng 2001: 83). The language policy in minority regions goes hand in hand with the changing political agenda. Zhou (2003) divides Chinese language policy into three stages. There is an initial diversification stage (1949-1957), a monopoly stage of Mandarin (1958-1977), and a second diversification stage (since 1978). Especially during the second stage of diversification, the large-scale popularization of Mandarin has happened (see Wang and Lehtomäki 2021: 2). In Liangshan, in the first diversification stage (1956-1957), though there were Mandarin and Yi language courses in schools, Yi language at first received

more attention (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 43). During the monopoly period of Mandarin (1958-1977), especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the teaching of Yi language was totally abandoned in schools. Since the second period of diversification (since 1978), bilingual education was again implemented in Liangshan (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 44; Rehamo and Harrell 2018). It developed for a period and its importance has been reduced since the early 2000s. From here on, the number of bilingual schools decreased greatly again (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 45).

### 6.2.1 Different roles of Yi language and Mandarin

At the official level, both Yi language and Chinese have been given the same status in Liangshan.<sup>49</sup> However, in reality, Mandarin is the national language and it is dominant in the fields of economic activity, technology and urban life. Thus, it is closely connected with power, modernity and development. In comparison, Yi language is used for communication only in the Yi community and thus is always associated with the ethnic identity of Yi. Therefore, it is considered closely connected with poverty and backwardness (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 97, 109). The Yi people's mastery of Mandarin and Yi language is closely related to factors such as their living area, age, education level and social class. Yi people living in ethnically mixed areas such as the valley areas in Mianning County can usually speak Mandarin (Sichuan Dialect) fluently. This is true even for older people, also see Zhang and Tsung (2019: 86-87). They learned the language from their Han neighbours and at school. In contrast, Yi villagers who live in high altitude Yi-inhabited areas often have no experience of contact with Han. If they also have not received education (which is very common in the older generation of those who are now over 35) and have no experience going out for migrant work (which is common for women who have not received education, they almost cannot speak Mandarin at all. In contrast, the young generation of Yi who generally received education and also worked outside often can speak Mandarin fluently. As for Yi language, almost all the rural Yi can speak Yi, but few mastered the written language. The language ability of urban Yi people has decreased and some younger people cannot speak Yi anymore because they have neither learned it at home nor at school. Instead, Mandarin is the only language that will be used in their daily life. (college student: MC-m-20; ZQ-m-20).

For Yi who have mastered both Mandarin and Yi languages, the languages have different roles in daily life (cf. Hu 2010: 6-10). Here, Yi is used for communication only with Yi while Mandarin is used for communication with other people except for Yi. It is also used between Yi people when they cannot understand each other because they speak different dialects of Yi (college students: WJ-m-20; CG-f-20). Yi is always used in private and informal situations, such as at home or in the Yi community, to convey information about Yi culture, daily life and emotions. In comparison, Mandarin is regarded as the official language and it is used in public and formal situations, such as school and workplaces, to convey information related to work, studying and modern life (see Hu 2008: 66). Thus, Mandarin proficiency of Yi students is closely related to their prospects in studying and working (see Tsung and Zhang 2015: 114).

Mandarin is dominant in the education system in Liangshan. It is not only the main language for teaching and examinations but also important for daily life at school, while Yi language has little space in the education system. Only in the special 'First Mode' *yilei moshi* of bilingual language, which is only prepared for a small group of students, Yi language plays a role in education. Therefore, the Yi language is regarded as having little value for educational opportunities (see Hu 2010: 13). As a result, many Yi students neglected the learning of Yi language because it is not important for their opportunities of continuing education (college students: LJ-M-20; AS-m-25; CG-f-20; KG-m-20; RH-m-20). The language hierarchy in school is created by the evaluation criteria of schools, teachers and examinations. Mandarin ability is equated with

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<sup>49</sup> The Regulations of Yi Language and Characters in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (SCLYP, 1992) stipulate that "the official common language and characters in Liangshan are Yi language and Mandarin" (Chapter 1, Item 4) and "Liangshan has the autonomy to use, standardize and develop Yi language" (Chapter 1, Item 2).

students' intelligence and learning efforts, while minority languages ability is not recognized and marginalized at school (cf. Tsung and Cruickshank 2009: 559; Rehamo 2018: 142; Rehamo and Harrell 2018; Teng 2001).

Therefore, learning Mandarin in the field of school is considered as 'honourable' while learning minority languages is regarded as 'backward' (see Teng 2001: 88). In addition, it is considered impolite and inappropriate to speak Yi language, especially when the teacher is Han. It is argued that because Han teachers cannot understand Yi, some students use it for verbally abusing the teacher or swearing. As a result of the dominance of Mandarin in schools in Liangshan, it is common that Yi students can get much better scores in Chinese than Yi language exams on average. Also, their only mastered written language is Mandarin instead of Yi. (volunteer teachers: LN-f-20; XQ f-20; RM-f-20; MW-m-20).

However, Yi language is the only used language in the fields of religion and culture in Liangshan. It is also the most common language in the daily life of Yi people. Though the use of Yi language in the religion is not influenced by Mandarin (see Hu 2008: 64), some priests *Bimo* now use new Yi characters which is a script introduced by the Chinese state to simplify the original Yi written language to make it easier to learn in bilingual education instead of original Yi characters to copy scriptures. Though both Yi and Mandarin characters will be presented in public places in urban areas of Liangshan, also see Hu (2008: 65) and Liu et al. (2015: 145), Mandarin is typically the headline while Yi character is just a small row below. Moreover, all the official documents are also written both in Yi and Mandarin characters. But the use of Yi language has little practical value as only a few Yi people (including the civil servants) can read the language. Therefore, the showing of Yi characters in public space and in official documents is largely based on the state's official political commitment rather than its use-value.

### 6.2.2 Yi language education

Spoken Yi language is linguistically divided into six dialect areas in which Liangshan Yi belongs to the northern dialect.<sup>50</sup> It is difficult for people who speak different dialects of Yi to understand each other (see Harrell 1995: 65). Even within Liangshan, people who come from different areas officially classified to speak the same dialect cannot understand each other. There are great differences not only between the spoken forms of Yi language but also between the written languages in different areas. Before, only *Bimo* and a few other elites mastered the written Yi language, which is very complicated and unsystematic in the use of its characters. Therefore, a standardized and simplified version of Yi language was developed in order to popularize Yi language education in schools. The first attempt to create new Yi characters in the 1950s ended because of the political movements of that time (Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution) (see Teng 2002: 70-71). The second attempt started in the 1970s. The authorities tried to simplify Yi characters from an ideographic system with thousands of characters to a phonographic system with 819 characters. This makes learning Yi language easier, which is conducive to promoting the literacy of Yi people in Liangshan. As a result, the new Yi characters gradually became used and popularized in schools and administrative management (see Harrell and Bamo 1998: 64). However, the new characters still have a lot to improve and they can be confused easily. Therefore, only a few people can master the new script today. Though the state has promulgated regulations to implement Yi language education in Liangshan since 1980,<sup>51</sup> Mandarin has always remained the almost only teaching language in all schools in Liangshan.

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<sup>50</sup> The six dialect areas of Yi language are the eastern dialect (they call themselves *Nasu* and *Nisu*; mainly distributed in Guizhou and Yunnan Province), the northern dialect (*Nuosu*; Sichuan), the southern dialect (*Niesu* and *Nasu*; Western Yunnan), the western dialect (*La Lupo*, *Mishapo*; Western Yunnan), the southeast dialect (*Axi*, *Azhe*, *Awu*, *Pula* and *Sani*; Southeast Yunnan) and the central dialect (*Luoluo* and *Ripo*; Central Yunnan). Source: The general boundary of six dialects of Yi language in China (2013), <http://www.scsywx.com/userlist/scsywx/newshow-73750.html>. Last accessed: 22.10.2021.

<sup>51</sup> In 1980, the State Council officially approved the Trial Measures for the Standardization of Yi Characters. In 1981, the Yi language courses became a compulsory course in all minority schools in Liangshan (see Teng 2002: 72).

### 6.2.3 The First Mode and the Second Mode of bilingual education

Since the 1980s, bilingual education has developed rapidly in Liangshan (see Table 5) (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 45; Teng 2002: 72). However, it faces a contradictory situation. On the one hand, the promotion of Yi language is officially supported by the central education authorities, while local authorities see Mandarin as much more important for the modernisation and development of Liangshan because it is closely connected with the goal of a stronger integration of Liangshan into mainstream society (cf. Qumu 2000). On the other hand, the central authorities also have not relaxed their insistence on preserving the dominance of Mandarin in minority education as it is closely related to ensuring national unity, also see Rehamo and Harrell (2018: 1). At present, bilingual education has two forms. One is called the First Mode of bilingual education. It was introduced in 1978. Here, Yi language is the teaching language and Mandarin is a course. The other form of education is the Second Mode *erlei moshi*, which was introduced in 1984. Here, Mandarin is the teaching language and Yi language is a course. (see Teng 2001: 46, 50; Teng 2002: 75; Wang and Lehtomäki 2021: 4). Bilingual education has achieved some successes in the period after its implementation. However, since the 1990s, especially the First Mode is no longer popular because of the limitations it entails for further education opportunities and employment (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 45; Ding and Yu 2013: 459; Rehamo 2018: 142). Thus, people have formed stereotypes of Yi-language-based education, which makes most students reluctant to visit these schools (see Su and Yuan 2016). As a result, the First Mode education has become the choice of students with poor academic performance as a means of avoiding fierce competition (see Wang, L. 2018: 73).

Table 5: Comparison of Bilingual Schools in 1997 - 2010

		primary schools	bilingual teachers in primary schools	students	secondary schools	bilingual teachers in secondary schools	students
1990	First Mode	123	199	5,641	5	18	405
	Second Mode	249	229	20,933	60	91	9,212
	total	422	428	26,643	65	109	9,617
1997	First Mode	130	218	7,010	10	149	1,333
	Second Mode	592	612	45,825	87	308	16,408
	Total	722	830	52,835	97	457	17,741
2010	First Mode	39	167	4,854	10	133	2,134
	Second Mode	661	1,039	205,725	102	225	55,463
	Total	700	1,206	210,579	112	358	57,597

Source: Statistical Report of Education Bureau of Liangshan Prefecture (2011); Zhang and Tsung (2019: 47); Teng (2002: 75).

At present, bilingual education is almost only implemented in predominantly Yi-inhabited areas in Liangshan, while Yi courses are generally not offered in ethnically mixed areas (such as Mianning County). Here, Yi and Han students learn in the same schools. In contrast, bilingual schools are visited only by Yi students. Moreover, the Second Mode schools have always been the main type of schools for Yi students, while only a small group Yi students are in Yi-language-based schools.<sup>52</sup> Most Yi parents prefer Mandarin-based schools instead of Yi-language-based schools (see Ding and Yu 2013) because many Yi parents regard Mandarin proficiency as closely related to their children's potential academic achievements. Therefore, it is found that the demand of Yi parents for Mandarin-based schools is increasing. Moreover, it is found that the economic situation of a family has an important influence on the parents' decision of the type of schools. For families with better economic conditions, fully Mandarin-based schools are more popular than bilingual schools. In the choice among bilingual schools, the Second Mode schools are more popular than the Yi-language-based schools. (see Wang and Lehtomäki 2021: 4, 6).

<sup>52</sup> For example, in 2015, 56.77% of Yi students were in Second Mode schools, 7.6% in First Mode schools and 35.63% of Yi students were in fully Mandarin-based schools (see Wang and Lehtomäki 2021: 5).



The Yi language courses are mainly conducted in primary schools in rural Yi-inhabited areas. In later stages of education, bilingual education is still officially offered in designated minority schools. However, all schools tend to organize their Yi courses independently and often do not comply with the official requirements of offering Yi courses. This creates a wide diversity of real bilingual education. Overall, there is however a tendency of Yi courses to become less common in the two stages of middle school.<sup>53</sup> At present, the Yi language courses are in a disadvantaged position compared with Mandarin even in the Yi-language-based schools. In reality, even here many courses are given in Mandarin. Still, the First Mode of bilingual education provides an alternative way of access to higher education for minority students. As graduates from this mode, they do not need to directly compete with Han students and most Yi students for university positions, which results in a much lower college admission score. In 1996, the first group of First Mode Yi students obtained university positions (38 students) and secondary vocational school positions (48 students) (see Teng 2002: 76). After graduation, they became an early group of intellectuals in Liangshan and achieved success in their career as civil servants or teachers.

However, the educational pathway of the First Mode also has disadvantages. The graduates of First Mode schools are facing stereotypes such as having lower Mandarin proficiency and inferior academic achievement. They are also facing significant restrictions in their choice of universities and employment opportunities (cf. Rehamo 2018: 141). While ordinary schools' graduates can apply for all Chinese universities, the First Mode students can only apply for about a dozen universities (see Teng 2001: 120). The main reason for most Yi students and their parents to choose this special mode is because of their inferior position in the ordinary model of education and not because of interest or advantages in Yi language. (college student: ML-m-20; Yi language teacher: WE-m-45). Also, Yi language is not as important as one would expect for this mode. In practice, it is just a subject rather than the teaching language. One of the first mode schools (WE School) can be taken as an example. The teaching language of the whole school is Mandarin. The only difference compared with other ordinary schools is that Yi language is also one of the test subjects.<sup>54</sup> Yi language teachers of this school argue that it is unrealistic to teach all courses in Yi because there is not only a shortage of bilingual teachers, but also many subjects are considered unsuitable to be taught in Yi (Yi language teacher: WE-m-45). Moreover, the First Mode students can decide by themselves to take their college entrance examination in Mandarin or Yi language. Almost all students chose Mandarin, also see Liu et al. (2015: 166) and Ding and Yu (2013: 467). Thus, the motivation of First Mode students to learn Yi language is limited. At present, there are only five high schools having classes that officially provide First Mode bilingual education. And in 2021 there were 1,273 students who were admitted in those classes, while the ordinary high schools have admitted 26,833 students.<sup>55</sup>

One of the main choices for graduates of the First Mode for university majors is the Yi language major. There are several universities in China that have set up this major. For example, Xichang College has offered it since 1989. The establishment of Yi language as a major in university is conducive to the inheritance of Yi language and has educated a group of professional Yi language teachers. However, the demand for graduates of this major has decreased since then (see Teng 2002: 73). In fact, most of the students are choosing this major not for the purpose of inheriting Yi culture and characters. Instead, they do it mainly to get a position in the university that is accessible to them because being admitted to the Yi language major via the First Mode of bilingual education requires lower scores. Some of the few college students who chose this major in order to inherit Yi culture found that the knowledge of Yi language is not the focus in their

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<sup>53</sup> In 1990 and in 1993, two junior middle schools and two senior middle schools in Liangshan started offering Yi language courses respectively (Teng 2002: 76). At present, there are only 51 primary schools, 7 junior high schools and 3 senior high schools in Liangshan that are the First Mode schools (Ding and Yu 2013: 459).

<sup>54</sup> For ordinary school students, the Chinese course accounts for 150 points. For the First Mode school students, Yi language and Chinese each count for 75 points.

<sup>55</sup> Source: The enrolment plan for ordinary high schools in Liangshan Prefecture in 2021.

teaching programme. Instead the major entails many other subjects not related to Yi language or culture. Therefore, they have to learn Yi language by themselves (college student: RH-m-20). As for their occupational planning, like Yi students in other majors, becoming civil servants or teachers is their main goal. Nevertheless, when being a teacher, they are more inclined to become Mandarin teachers other than Yi language teachers, because the former have a higher status in the education system and there is also a larger demand for them (college students: RH-m-20; ZI-f-20; JJ-f-20).

In the Second Mode schools that should give Yi language courses according to the requirements of the syllabus, they are often not implemented as expected. Instead, Yi language courses are marginalized in most cases. Usually, schools either do not offer the courses at all or have very few class hours of Yi courses, also see Ding and Yu (2013: 460) and Zhang and Tsung (2019: 106) and Rehamo and Harrell (2018). Thus, Yi language is only used by the Yi teachers in those Second Mode schools when the students cannot understand Mandarin in the lower grades of primary school. Many studies regard this marginalization of Yi language education in schools as a result of the lack of functional value of this language (cf. Teng 2001; Zhang and Tsung 2019; Ding and Yu 2013). The interviewed college students considered it not to be a 'practical' language for them since Yi language has only a marginal role in the systems of examination and in further stages of education (college students: RH-m-20; ML-m-20). Therefore, even though most students have taken the Yi language course, almost none of them have mastered the written Yi language. They argue that the new Yi characters are relatively easy to learn but also easy to forget and they have only one course per week to practice it. (students: MI-f-10; SH-f-10; ZZ-f-15; ZJ-f-15; MZ-f-15; Focus Group Interview at LGB Central School). Moreover, it is a common phenomenon in the visited schools that Yi language courses are not provided because of the lack of Yi language teachers or in order to save time for other courses that are considered more important. (volunteer teachers: RM-f-20; QF-m-20).

#### **6.2.4 Yi language ability of the young generation and cultural inheritance**

The Yi language ability of the young Yi people is weakening. Moreover, their yearning for participation in modern society may surpass their interest in traditional Yi culture. This may threaten the inheritance of Yi language and culture. This section is about the manifestations of this trend.

##### **Decrease of Yi language ability in the younger generation**

Though Yi remains very vital in Liangshan as it is the mother tongue of most Yi youths, its role is becoming more fragile for the youths with the increasing usage of Mandarin. This is reflected in the phenomenon that some urban-born Yi youth cannot speak Yi at all and the others who can still speak Yi have fewer chances to use it. Thus, also their language ability is worse than their parents', also see Hu (2008: 62) and Liu et al. (2015: 142-143) and Yao and Yan (2020: 3). For example, the use of Yi language in the communication among Yi peers has decreased. Moreover, the Yi youths use more words taken from Mandarin when they do not know the corresponding Yi vocabulary. (college students: CG-f-20; AS-m-25; LJ-m-20; KG-m-20; GM-f-20; LL-f-20; Focus Group Interview at LGB Central School).

Many scholars have found that the Yi language ability of the young generation is weakening while their Mandarin and English ability is increasing (see Rehamo and Harrell 2018; Su and Yuan 2016; Yao and Yan 2020: 2). These languages are regarded to have more instrumental value than Yi language and also are indicative of better education and employment opportunities, while Yi language is only regarded as a local language in Liangshan's Yi community (cf. Wang, L. 2018). Therefore, parents and students have little motivation to learn Yi language. In their views, the Yi students have already mastered spoken Yi language in daily life, which is sufficient for its purpose of daily communication. Thus, they do not need to learn Yi language in schools since it is also not helpful for their further educational career anyway. In contrast, the

Mandarin ability is not only important for education but also for employment and even for entertainment (Mandarin-based TV programmes and smartphones are now one of the most popular ways of entertainment in Liangshan). As a result, the younger generation of Yi is increasingly using Mandarin in their daily life. This trend is regarded as a threat to the inheritance of Yi language and its culture (cf. Hu 2008: 63).

### **Cultural inheritance and ethnic identity**

Before 1978, Yi language was the only communication language in the original Liangshan area where only Yi lived (see Chen et al. 1985). Today, Mandarin plays a core role in the public sphere in Liangshan. In some fields, it is even more important than Yi language locally (see Liu et al. 2015: 142). Yi language is regarded as being threatened and there is the argument that it may disappear (see Zhang and Tsung 2019; Rehamo and Harrell 2018). Yet, at present, Yi is still widely used in daily life in the communities and it is considered as impolite when a Yi talks with another Yi in another language like Mandarin. Yi is still the only language used in religious and cultural activities. Furthermore, the priests *bimo* have retained their core role in the inheritance of the original written Yi and Yi culture.

Local elites in Liangshan (such as government officials, teachers or successful business people) are contradictory about whether and to what extent they should let their children learn Yi language and Yi culture. Though they are committed to the inheritance of Yi culture and see it as an important responsibility, they also see the advantages of good Mandarin ability. Thus, they are more inclined to support their children to learn Mandarin by sending them to the Mandarin-based schools in Xichang, also see Ding and Yu (2013). It is found that this trend is not new. Already 20 years ago, the Yi elites were often indifferent to support their children learning Yi language and regarded the language as a symbol of the countryside (see Heberer 2001). The phenomenon continues until today (see Rehamo and Harrell 2018). This is consistent with the prediction of Heberer (1989). He predicted that the upper class of ethnic minorities will no longer be able to understand their own languages and that these languages will eventually gradually disappear in urban areas and only continue to exist in rural areas.

Since the early 1980s, some Yi cadres in Liangshan have devoted themselves to revitalizing the ethnic culture of Yi. Their stated goal is to protect the Yi culture as well as to promote the development of Liangshan. For this purpose, they have taken a series of measures. For example, building museums of Yi culture and integrating Yi features into architectural styles in Xichang, publicizing and celebrating traditional Yi festivals, and publishing materials about Yi culture (see Harrell and Bamo 1998: 63). Though those measures happen in the name of protecting culture by integrating ethnic culture into public life, they can also be regarded as an effort for promoting tourism.

Although the heritage of Yi language and culture has a trend of weakening in the young generation, their ethnic identity is not impacted. Yi people generally clearly identify as Yi or Nuosu. All the interviewed Yi college students view the identity of Yi as innate and unchangeable. When outside of Liangshan, Yi people often show great cohesion as a group. For example, Yi students in the same university are closely connected and are ready to help each other at all times (Focus Group Interview at Sichuan Agricultural University). Moreover, there was enthusiasm for learning Yi language also among some Yi college students. They regard it as a means to consolidate their ethnic identity and to understand their own culture. They explain their previous neglect of Yi language learning with the fierce competition and time constraints because of the college entrance examination. At the same time, the Yi students no longer limit their ethnic identity to being Yi, but also emphasize their national identity as Chinese. A common expression is "I think I am firstly a Chinese, and then a Yi". (college students: LG-M-20; CG-f-20; LJ-m-20; ML-m-20).

The high degree of cohesion of Yi people can also be found among migrant workers in factories in China's Pearl River Delta region, also see Liu (2016). Here, the Yi people form communities of Yi workers managed by internal leaders. Similar patterns can be found among Yi who migrated to other areas outside Liangshan (cf. Ji 2018). Many migrant workers reported that their Yi identity often is a reason for rejection by employers. However, when they look for a livelihood outside, they can almost only rely on the Yi community there and seek help, which strengthens their identification as Yi. One of the most common expressions is that they feel connected when they meet Yi people outside. (migrant workers: TQ-m-25; SB-f-20; RS-f-15). A manifestation of their ethnic identity is that they insist on speaking Yi language with Yi people. The use of Yi is considered as a symbol of their Yi identity and creates connections with other Yi. Those Yi people who have not mastered Yi language are viewed as 'sinicized'. Therefore, also those Yi people who are a minority group in their ethnically mixed area also kept their Yi language skills to maintain their Yi identity and distinguish themselves from the majority (Han people) (cf. Harrell 2001a: 138-140).

### **6.2.5 Mandarin education in Liangshan**

School is an environment dominated by Mandarin. The teaching language, learning materials, exams are all in Mandarin. Mandarin is also part of other aspects of the students' daily life, such as via entertainment. In contrast, it is considered unrealistic to use Yi language for teaching because it is considered to lack the necessary expressive power in many fields related to modern science such as physics and mathematics. Yi students and parents go along with this and show a stronger motivation for learning Mandarin than Yi language, although most of their motivations are instrumental. Especially important for most rural Yi is that basic Mandarin skills are the prerequisite for migrant work, which is now the main livelihood of Yi rural youths. From the perspective of teachers in minority areas, they agree that Mandarin is a key to success in the education system.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, Yi language is regarded as an obstacle to educational success as the language barrier of young Yi is regarded as an important reason for low academic achievements. However, Mandarin education is not only language education, but also patriotic education. Since identification with China and the mainstream society is always an important theme of minority education. Thus, Mandarin education is regarded as an important foundation to achieve these goals even though patriotic education is also given in Yi language courses (see Harrell and Bamo 1998: 63).

### **Popularization of Mandarin and assimilation**

The popularization of Mandarin in minority regions is regarded by some as an assimilation policy aiming at building a monolingual society (see Feng 2007: 271, quoted after Zhang and Tsung 2019: 5). Furthermore, education is regarded as a powerful way to integrate ethnic minorities into mainstream society by learning its language and culture. A specific way is to implement standardized education in the whole country (see Yu 2011: 457). Viewed from another perspective, the willingness to learn Mandarin can be considered as a manifestation of Yi people's ambition to integrate into Chinese mainstream society. Most of the Yi youth who received education have internalized the rank assigned to their culture and language in schools and they often use words such as 'backward' to describe their own culture and society. Many young students realize that they and their peers are being 'assimilated' or 'sinicized'. This manifests in their limited knowledge about their own culture and their decreasing language ability. A common expression is that the longer a Yi stay in schools or in cities, the more similar they will be to the Han people in terms of living habits (such as eating habits), behaviours, accents (less Yi accent when speaking Mandarin) and even appearances (no longer dark-skinned due to less exposure to ultraviolet radiation). Therefore, an increasing level of education often means that the degree of assimilation of members of ethnic minorities is increasing while their ethnic identity is reduced correspondingly (see Heberer 1989: 51).

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<sup>56</sup> Also see Tsung and Zhang (2019: 93-97, 100-101, 109, 117-120) and Teng (2001).

The students interviewed expressed contradictory attitudes towards the trend of assimilation. On the one hand, they think that further assimilation means that their culture and even their ethnic group itself might cease to exist. This is considered as neither conducive to the development of their ethnic group, nor to China's ethnic diversity. On the other hand, they have accepted parts of the values of mainstream society. They do not seem to think that ethnic minority nationalism is a good idea. They argue that insisting on tradition makes them unable to adapt to modern society, which then leads to their whole ethnicity falling into chronic poverty. (college students: RH-m-20; AS-m-25; vocational school students: AG-f-25; SY-f-20; AY-m-20). As a Yi college student said, resisting assimilation and insisting on tradition is a form of nationalism as 'narrow nationalism', which will hinder the development of the ethnicity. Instead, to adapt to the mainstream society and some of its cultures to help the ethnicity's development would be a form of 'inclusive nationalism' that is considered to be positive (college student: RH-m-25).

Yi language and Mandarin are not equal in the context of Chinese society. Because language unification is regarded as an important factor of national unification (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 150), Mandarin has a much higher status than minority languages. Although the status of both languages in minority areas is guaranteed at the official level, a dominance of Mandarin results from manipulating the instrumental value of languages in schools and other institutions. Besides education, market forces also promote the popularization of Mandarin in minority regions, because knowledge of the mainstream language provides employment and business opportunities. This factor is considered to be more influential than education policies. Thus, the expansion of China's state power and market forces is regarded to stimulate the expansion of Mandarin education and usage, weakening the status of minority languages. (see He 2014: 45, quoted after Zhang and Tsung 2019: 152). Although bilingual education is presented as a strategy to cope with the dilemma of ensuring unity and diversity in China's language policies in minority regions, the bilingual policy in Liangshan has turned to favour Mandarin in practice (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 150). As a result, Mandarin occupies a central position in education and the public domain in Liangshan while Yi language becomes reduced to a symbol of ethnic identity. Therefore, the usage range and the vitality of the language decrease (see Zhang and Tsung 2019: 158).

### **6.3 Uneven distribution of educational resources in Liangshan**

This part is about the unbalanced distribution of educational resources in Liangshan and the inequality of educational opportunities. The most marked manifestation of the imbalance of regional development in Liangshan lies in the contrast between the Anning River Basin and the predominantly Yi-inhabited areas (the Original Liangshan area). This contrast is also reflected in the distribution of educational resources. In particular, Xichang, as the capital of Liangshan, is the political, economic, cultural and transportation centre of Liangshan (He et al. 2012: 266) and centralizes access to resources, while other parts of the region are less well supplied with high-quality public services and economic opportunities.

#### **Unbalanced abilities for providing educational resources**

The distribution of educational resources in Liangshan is closely related to the level of regional economic development. The Anning Valley area has obvious advantages compared with other regions (see Wu and Zheng 2012: 45).<sup>57</sup> This area has advantages in agriculture, transportation, mineral resources and tourism compared with the original Liangshan area and it is known as the second plain of Sichuan Province. It is the core of economic development in Liangshan (cf. He et al. 2014: 645; Li and He 2014: 92; Zheng 2008b: 49-50; Lou 2012: 38), and more than 70% of the GDP of Liangshan is generated in this area (see Guo 2020: 90).

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<sup>57</sup> The Anning Valley Area includes Xichang City and five counties in Liangshan Prefecture (Dechang County, Mianning County, Huili County, Huidong County and Ningnan County) and beyond the border of Liangshan two more counties in Panzhihua City. Source: Bulletin of People's Government of Sichuan Province. [published on 22.12.2010].

In comparison, the other areas of Liangshan are poverty-stricken areas. These areas are the key target areas of development and poverty alleviation policies. Among them, the economic development of ethnically mixed areas in the foothills (Ningnan, Yuexi, Leibo, Jinyang and Ganluo County) are in the middle level while other counties in the higher mountains and almost only Yi population (Meigu, Butuo, Xide, Zhaojue, Puge County) are even poorer, also see Luo (2012: 27). However, it should be noted that the differences between counties mainly come from the differences in rural areas, while the differences in living standards (according to the average GDP) in urban areas in different counties are relatively small, also see He et al. (2012: 271).

Since it is the counties that are responsible for providing many public services, among them many aspects of financing the education system, the local economic conditions strongly affect the amount of funds available for education. In Liangshan, there are huge disparities in local government revenue. An extreme case is the comparison between Xichang City and Meigu County. The former has almost 15 times as much revenue per citizen than Liangshan's poorest rural county. Even though not all expenses for education are dependent on local budgets (for example, the wages of teachers are paid by the central government), schools in poor rural regions still face massive financial constraints. The funds allocated to local areas by the central and provincial governments are typically earmarked for specific purposes and thus cannot be used for other local needs. The economic disparities and thus the inequalities in available funds for education have patterns that are similar to the ethnic composition of Liangshan. There is a great difference in the proportion of ethnic minorities between the Anning Valley area and the original Liangshan area. The proportion of Yi in the original Liangshan area is high (over 80%). the western county Muli, which is not part of the original Liangshan Area, is inhabited by Tibetans (33%) Yi (31%) and Han (18%) (see Liangshan Prefecture Bureau of Statistics 2017). In Liangshan, the economically most developed areas are the predominantly Han-populated areas, followed by ethnically mixed areas, while the impoverished areas are inhabited mainly by ethnic minorities (see Zheng 2008b) (see Table 6).

Table 6: Economic situation of each county in Liangshan Prefecture in 2016

	Percentage of Yi residents	Per capita GDP (Yuan)	Rural per capita disposable income (Yuan)	Urban per capita disposable income (Yuan)	Percentage of urban population	County-level per capita tax revenue (Yuan)
Liangshan	52%	29,549	10,368	25,963	37.1% (2020)	2,547
Xichang	20%	59,804	14,937	31,343	61.9% (2020)	4,971
Muli	31% (33%Tibetan)	22,029	8,006	23,462	16.9% (2018)	4,155
Yanyuan	53%	20,745	9,784	23,732	31.6% (2018)	1,919
Dechang	27%	30,998	14,527	26,047	39.5% (2020)	2,251
Huili	38%	49,522	14,425	26,265	46.3% (2019)	1,775
Huidong	14%	33,044	14,017	23,965	41.8% (2020)	2,270
Ningnan	50%	28,825	13,065	23,859	34.2% (2018)	1,906
Puge	84%	14,376	8,241	22,649	24.3% (2018)	1,059
Butuo	97%	14,052	7,068	22,950	21.9% (2018)	541
Jinyang	81%	16,850	7,022	22,450	20.0% (2020)	1,107
Zhaojue	98%	10,667	7,387	21,714	23.1% (2018)	501
Xide	92%	11,685	7,031	20,703	26.4% (2017)	607
Mianning	41%	30,004	12,235	23,760	41.7% (2018)	1,741
Yuexi	78%	12,522	7,757	22,126	30.6% (2019)	457
Ganluo	76%	12,678	6,958	22,316	22.4% (2018)	866
Meigu	99%	9,285	6,889	21,925	13.4% (2019)	298
Leibo	57%	25,433	7,865	22,039	30.2% (2018)	2,995

Source: *The Statistical Yearbook of Liangshan Prefecture (2017)*, the data of the percentage of urban population are from the latest data of official websites of each county.

There are arguments that the differences in educational as well as economic development seem to be closely related to the proportion of ethnic minorities in the region. For example, recent research reported that the average years of education of Han nationality in Liangshan is about three years longer than that of ethnic minorities (see Wang 2019: 24). However, others argue that the urban-rural differences can also explain the differences between the ethnic groups, because the ethnic minorities of Liangshan mainly live in rural areas, while Han people more often live in urban areas (especially Xichang City) where the educational and economic conditions are better (see He and Chen 2017).

Furthermore, the unbalanced pattern of educational resources within Liangshan is closely related to the history of the area. The structures of the distribution of educational resources in today's Liangshan Prefecture have been formed as early as in the Republic of China and in some cases even before. The original Xichang area already occupied an advantaged position in modern school education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it has maintained this advantage until today. Historically, since the 18th century, modern educational institutions have appeared in the former Xichang area and developed constantly since then (see He 2012: 7-8). In contrast, in the original Liangshan area, there were almost no modern educational institutions (only a few in Zhaojue County) until the 1950s (see He 2012: 9). Therefore, the former Xichang area has always had great advantages in the number of schools and students in history (see He 2012: 41). Xichang basically achieved nine-year compulsory education as early as 1998, while this goal was not achieved in the whole of Liangshan Prefecture until 2007.<sup>58</sup>

Besides the differences in educational and economic development between different areas, there are also great differences in the distribution of schools in the area. Although the state has implemented the 'balanced compulsory education development' *jiayou junheng* policy aimed at reducing the imbalance in the distribution of schools, recent research shows that only 6 of the 17 counties in Liangshan have reached the national standards of a 'balanced compulsory education development', which is much worse than the average level of the country and further proves the current situation of unbalanced education in Liangshan (see Wang and Jiang 2021: 84). Also, table 4 also shows these imbalances where many poorer rural counties lack a sufficient provision of positions in middle schools, let alone positions in well-equipped and competitive schools. With the expansion of education in Liangshan, the imbalance of educational resources distribution has become more prominent (see Wang 2019: 28). The educational resources in rural areas continue to have great disadvantages compared with those in urban areas. In contrast, Xichang centralizes most institutions of elite education in Liangshan. A generally identified pattern is that the quality of education decreases according to administrative level and to the degree of urbanization. Therefore, schools in urban areas (Xichang) have the best educational quality, followed by schools located in county seats, townships and villages.

### **6.3.1 The urban-rural gap of educational resources in Liangshan**

Under the dual structure of urban and rural areas in China, all advantageous resources (including educational resources) are concentrated in urban areas. Beyond that, the household registration system *huj*i still plays a significant role in the separation of urban and rural residents, and legal migration is restricted. As a result, the urban and rural areas have a large difference in education, medical care, employment and social security systems (see Bai et al. 2018: 13). As for access to educational resources in the compulsory education stage, residents can only receive education at their registered permanent residence. Otherwise, they are required to obtain permission from the education departments of these regions.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, rural students can hardly go to urban areas to receive education, because both the

<sup>58</sup> Source: Liangshan Prefecture Network, 23 May 2015. Online: <http://www.liangshanzhou.com/>. Last accessed: 14.09.2020. Specific article is no longer available.

<sup>59</sup> The Compulsory Education Law of the PRC (2006) (Article 12): primary school students should attend schools that serve their permanent residence.

living costs in the city and the permission of the local schools require a large amount of money and the household registration regulations create additional barriers. Therefore, the rural students in Liangshan mostly can only visit one primary school in their village. Until junior high school, only a few outstanding students who got good grades in the graduation examination have the opportunity to visit a middle school in the county seat, some even in Xichang. But most ordinary students in poor rural regions can only visit the middle schools in the nearby townships, which offer only poor education quality. After the junior high school stage, most of the students cannot get a position in senior high school. Though access to schools in this stage of education is no longer restricted by the household registration system, the low scores of the rural students result in a situation where only a few of them can meet the admission scores of senior high schools in the city (typically in Xichang). Other rural junior high school graduates can at best be admitted to the local senior high school in the county seat, also see Ding and Yu (2013: 455).

In 2001, in order to increase efficiency in the education system, the authorities started a policy of merging schools in rural areas *chedian bingxiao*. As a result, in the current distribution of schools, there are only primary schools and junior high schools in rural areas of Liangshan. These schools are mainly boarding schools with a scale of about 1,000 students. In comparison, there are several primary schools and 2-3 middle schools (among them, one to two schools also provide senior high school education) in the county seat. At present, schools in Liangshan can basically meet the needs of most school-age children to receive several years of compulsory education. However, these schools have been facing serious resource shortages since the implementation of the school merger policy.

Furthermore, educational resources in the post-compulsory stage of senior high school are still in short supply since the number of these schools is very small (under 40 in all of Liangshan). They are all located in urban areas such as Xichang City and the county seats. This makes the educational cost of attending high school relatively high since students need to live in urban areas. Thus, post-compulsory education is a great economic burden for most Yi families (college students: GM-f-20; KG-m-20). Moreover, there are also large disparities between students in urban and rural schools regarding their chances of access to a high school position. The rural junior high schools' graduates are usually not competitive with those from urban junior high schools.

However, it should be noted that the students of schools in the county seat also include some rural students who got a study position through education migration. Compared with other rural students who stay in rural areas, they have obvious advantages regarding their opportunities for a further educational career. In contrast with rural school students, students in schools in the county seats have a certain chance of going to Xichang or other cities outside Liangshan after graduation from primary school and junior high school, while most others can at least continue to study in the schools in the county seat. The students of rural schools cannot compete with them because of their low scores. Thus, most of them cannot receive senior high school education. Some of them will receive vocational education, while most will choose to work outside Liangshan after (or before) graduation.

### **6.3.2 Distribution of educational resources according to administrative levels**

This section will compare the current situation of the schools in Liangshan according to the administrative level, namely, from the schools in Xichang to counties, towns and villages in more detail. Xichang City, Mianning County (Anning Valley area) and Meigu County (original Liangshan area) were chosen as case studies for fieldwork.



## The advantages of Xichang

As mentioned above, Xichang has obvious advantages in Liangshan in various indicators related to education. All the most competitive schools with the best resources and average results in Liangshan are located in Xichang, as well as most of the higher education institutions (the only local university and several vocational schools). Thus, Xichang gathers the most successful teachers and students in Liangshan. Typically, local elites who work in the county seat send their children to schools in Xichang instead of local schools. At the same time, students who get the highest scores in the graduation examinations in the counties of Liangshan are usually admitted to schools in Xichang. At the same time, Xichang has continuously increased its investment in education to improve the school infrastructure and teachers' welfare (Yao 2008), so that schools in other areas cannot compete with them. As a result, most of those schools are experiencing a serious brain drain of both students and teachers and their competitiveness compared with Xichang has decreased in the last decades.<sup>60</sup>

## Disparities of educational resources among counties

Table 4 shows an overview of the differences of some educational indicators among 17 counties in Liangshan. This section is about a more detailed comparative analysis of the investigated cases in Mianning County (Anning Valley area) and Meigu County (Yi-inhabited area).

### 1) Mianning County: Catching up with Xichang

Mianning County has an ethnically mixed population with 43.9% belonging to ethnic minorities (mainly Yi) in 2017. There are 214 schools with 82,000 students in the county in total.<sup>61</sup> Until the early 2000s, the overall level of education in Mianning was still very low (see Xiong 2005). However, benefiting from its improving economic situation and large investments in education (compared with predominantly Yi-inhabited areas), it experienced rapid development in the past decades. The advantageous educational resources in Mianning County are concentrated in some key schools, which are located in the county seat and the best-developed town (Lugu Town). These schools (such as Mianning Middle School and Lugu Middle School) also have a relatively good position in the competition of college entrance examination within Liangshan. For example, the most famous middle school in Mianning (Mianning Middle School) has comparable results compared with schools in Xichang.

Since Mianning is an ethnically mixed area, local Yi people have more contact with Han people in their daily life. Thus, they can usually speak Mandarin (usually Sichuan Dialect) fluently. Even older people can speak a so-called Unity Dialect *Tuanjie Hua* which combines Yi language and Sichuan Dialect (see Huo 2019: 10, 22). They learn Mandarin through their Han neighbours as well as in school (many schools in Mianning are also ethnically mixed) and media outlets, also see Huo (2019: 24). The better Mandarin level of Yi people in Mianning is viewed as an obvious advantage in the education field compared with people from predominantly Yi-inhabited areas. To maintain the language advantage, most Yi parents in Liangshan prefer to send their children to schools with mostly Han students instead of designated minority schools (mainly Yi and other ethnic minority students). They believe that ordinary schools with more Han students have better education quality, which will help their children to get excellent grades in the examination and also continue to improve their children's Mandarin level. In contrast, it is mainly the locals of other ethnics (usually Tibetan and Hui) and the Yi students from families who migrated to Mianning who are visiting ethnic schools in this county. (college student: ML-m-20; student: LA-m-20; teacher: SB-f-65).

<sup>60</sup> Take Zhaojue Middle School as an example. It was a key middle school at the province level since Zhaojue County was the capital of Liangshan before 1978. However, it has experienced a serious brain drain of both students and teachers in the last decades and has experienced an obvious decline in educational achievements and attractiveness to students. (teacher: YC-f-25).

<sup>61</sup> Mianning County National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletin (2017). Mianning County People's Government [published on 13.04.2019].

The field research in Mianning was mainly conducted in QQ village in Houshan Town and ZY village in Shaba Town. It was found that the schools in the two towns of Mianning have much better academic achievements than schools in Meigu and Zhaojue at the respective level (schools in the county seat, townships and villages). In general, the Yi parents in Mianning pay much more attention to their children's education than those in predominantly Yi-inhabited areas. This is likely caused by the fierce educational competition within Mianning. This is reflected in the fact that local parents started to support their children's preschool education earlier. Before the 'One Village One Kindergarten' plan was implemented, there were already parents in Shaba Town sending their children to the private kindergarten in the township. It charges high tuition fees of about 4,000 yuan per semester. Even now, when there are new village kindergartens for free, many parents in Shaba Town still send their children to private kindergartens because of their better educational quality and infrastructure.

Moreover, it is a common phenomenon that most students will pay for after-school classes and during holidays.<sup>62</sup> These after-school classes have the aim of previewing the courses of important subjects in advance. This phenomenon has existed for a long time in other parts of China, but there are few such classes in rural areas of the original Liangshan areas. Only a few are offered in the county seats. In addition, many Yi families in Mianning choose to let their children receive education in schools with better education quality. Typically, rural Yi families in Mianning with better economic conditions support their children visiting schools in township or county towns instead of rural areas, while families in county towns try to let their children visit schools in Xichang or other surrounding cities because the opportunities for an educational career are better there.

Finally, the importance that Yi families in Mianning attach to education is also reflected in their attitude towards vocational education. For those students with lower grades who cannot visit a senior high school, they have a more positive attitude to vocational education than parents in original Liangshan. In the ZY village in Mianning, many Yi students attended vocational schools. There, they plan to prepare for the college entrance examination and regard visiting a vocational school as a second chance. (vocational school students: SY-f-20; SL-f-20). This finding was verified by the observation that there are more students from Mianning and other areas of the Anning Valley area than from the original Liangshan area in Xichang Kindergarten Higher Vocational School.

The educational quality of schools in rural areas of Mianning has experienced progress for more than ten years. For example, in the investigated SB primary school, according to a teacher of this school who is also the only teacher of the school, during her more than 30 years of working in this school, she saw significant progress in terms of students' and teachers' number and academic achievements (teacher: SB-f-65). As a result, the school has gradually expanded from offering one class to today's situation of a complete primary school and from a dilapidated classroom to today's school with two teaching buildings. Today, the average score of students in the school now reaches 70-80% of the total score, which is a new progress made in the last several years. This is much better than that of village schools in Meigu County or Zhaojue County. The average score of village schools in Meigu County is only about 20%-40% and it is even lower in the low grades of primary schools. A local college student concluded on the reasons for the better academic achievement in this village school in Mianning as well as the township school nearby. First, the village is located in an ethnically mixed plain area. It has a better economic condition because of better transportation and agricultural conditions. Second, local Yi have more contact with Han and thus have a good Mandarin ability. Third, there were schools nearby for a long time, so that the people in the generation of today's parents have usually visited at least part of primary school. Therefore, they were able

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<sup>62</sup> The tuition fee is about 400 yuan per subject.

to participate in migrant work earlier than most people from the original Liangshan area. Thus, parents understand more about education and see value in it. Furthermore, they have more financial means for educational investment. (college student: ML-m-20).

However, as a result of the improvement of the general education conditions in Mianning, the competition among the students has become more and more intense. Since there are still only two key junior middle schools and one key senior middle school in Mianning County, the positions remain limited. About 1,100 students will be taken each year to Mianning senior high school. Only the students of this school have a high possibility to get a position in universities later.<sup>63</sup> This makes the competition for the study positions in middle school closely related to the university study position. In the end, parents and their children have to compete since preschool education, which means a large amount of investment for education including migration, paying for a position in key schools and for after-school classes. Thus, a family's economic conditions become a decisive factor resulting in other forms of inequalities in education. (teacher: SB-f-65).

## 2) Meigu County: "We are the county with the worst education quality"

Meigu County had a proportion of Yi population of 99.1% in 2019.<sup>64</sup> There were only 2,792 Han people in 2016 in Meigu.<sup>65</sup> They all come from outside and typically work in the county seat as civil servants, teachers, employees of companies or business people. Therefore, the rural Yi people in Meigu have almost no contact with Han people in their daily lives unless they go to the county town or schools where they might meet some. Meigu's natural conditions are not conducive to agriculture as there is mainly mountainous terrain and limited flat land. The small patches of arable land are dispersed on the hillsides and because the climate is very cold in winter, only a few crops can be cultivated here. In addition, there are frequent geological and climate disasters such as landslides, heavy rainfalls and wildfires. (see Qunuo 2018: 109). Meigu is famous for its well-preserved traditional Yi culture, especially the religious culture (Meigu is known as the homeland of Bimo). The Yi people in Meigu are generally regarded as more traditional than those in other areas (especially in the Anning Valley area). They are more accustomed to wearing traditional ethnic costumes in their daily lives and spend more time, energy and money on religious ceremonies and the affairs of family branches *civy* (although their economic conditions are among the worst in Liangshan). For example, Meigu is famous for its bride prices in all of Liangshan.

The economic situation of Meigu County is extremely poor in Liangshan as well as in the context of China in general. Until November 2020, the county has always been a national poverty-stricken county. It is also one of the last areas that finally achieved the poverty alleviation goals set in the TPA project. In 2020, the per capita GDP in Meigu was only 16,547 yuan and the urbanization rate was at 13.4% by 2019. Its infrastructure and public service facilities are in poor condition though they were already significantly improved by TPA projects through the construction of many large-scale infrastructure projects.<sup>66</sup>

Besides the extremely lagging economic development in Meigu, there are also other social problems such as a large group of orphans due to the prevalence of AIDS and drug trafficking in this area since the 1980s (the situation has greatly improved in recent years). As the most vulnerable group, the dropout rate of orphans in Meigu is higher than that of other groups (see Yang 2011). Although some special schools (Somahua Aixin School) have been set up for these students in Meigu, only a small number of them receive some help. In the survey of schools in rural areas of Meigu, it was found that it is common that almost every

<sup>63</sup> Source: Table of the enrolment plan for ordinary high schools in Liangshan Prefecture in 2021, from Liangshan Prefecture Development and Reform Commission Office. [published on 23.04.2021]. Online: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20210428/20210428A0DUNV00.html>. Last accessed: 16.09.2021.

<sup>64</sup> Meigu County covers an area of 2,537 km<sup>2</sup>. In 2019, there were 278,872 registered residents, of which 276,661 were ethnic minorities, accounting for 99.2% and 99.1% were Yi minority people. In 2019, there were 42,000 primary school students, 5,574 junior high school students and 2,188 senior high school students in Meigu County. (Source: Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Meigu County in 2019).

<sup>65</sup> Source: Statistical Yearbook of Liangshan Prefecture (2017).

<sup>66</sup> Source: Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Meigu County in 2020 and in 2019.

class has several students who have lost at least one of their parents or have family members who are serving sentences in prison. This makes their life and schooling extremely difficult. These children are called 'unsupported children' *shiyi ertong*, they account for about 25,000 children in Liangshan in 2012 (see Yan 2012: 259). Also, they are easy to drop out of school, which partially explains that the percentage of students who graduated from primary school to junior high school is only 66.8% (according to official data, the real percentages are likely lower). In 2010 only 17.08% of junior high school students continued to senior high school, which is obviously lower than in other counties.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, Meigu County has always been a focus area of the central and prefecture government and NGOs (for example, Suomahua Foundation; Liangshan Women and Children Foundation). In recent years, especially during the implementation of TPA projects, Meigu was always in the focus of the projects in Liangshan by the prefecture authorities because it is considered to be the most challenging area to realize the goal of getting rid of extreme poverty (Education Bureau official: FL-m-40).

The education level of Meigu County is often regarded as the worst in Liangshan in the impression of local people. (teacher: FU-m-40). This assessment is based on the uncompetitive results in the college entrance examination, which is the most important goal of receiving education after the compulsory education stage and a typical reference point for educational achievement in Chinese society. In fact, almost no senior high school graduates of the two high schools in Meigu can reach the undergraduate admission scores.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, parents who regard education as important often attempt to support their children to go to other areas for education. Due to the long-term low academic achievements and serious brain drain, the government of Meigu decided to set up a branch school in Xichang in 2013 to attract good teachers and students. According to their experience, the most qualified teachers are reluctant to work in Meigu County. This special branch has achieved much better results in the college entrance examination. It attracts the best graduates from Meigu County, among them also students with a registered permanent residence of Meigu who have visited schools outside Meigu (such as in Xichang) before. Typically these students did not get a sufficient score for a position in the high schools in Xichang and resort to their home county's best school.<sup>69</sup>

There is a huge gap between the education quality of schools in urban and rural areas of Meigu. At present, the schools with the lowest educational achievements and quality are usually small-scale rural primary schools. Most of those rural schools have already been merged into larger central schools since the early 2000s. The remaining small village primary schools that have not been merged are still present because there are no other schools in a large area nearby. These schools generally lack supervision because they are located in remote mountainous areas with inconvenient transportation. Thus, there are few inspections. Furthermore, in the view of superiors in the education administration, these schools will be merged sooner or later, so they lack interest in managing them. The remote small schools often lack funds and are little noticed, hence they have poor infrastructures and a severe lack of educational resources (including teachers). There are usually only one or two teachers in a school who determine the teaching times and teaching plan. Thus, it is common that the class time in these schools is much shorter than in other schools (the usual class time is from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) and the teaching plan is also only loosely organized. Both students and teachers lack the motivation to achieve good educational results and poor examination results are common. The remote primary schools are experiencing a loss of students because

<sup>67</sup> Source: The enrolment plan for ordinary high schools in Liangshan Prefecture in 2021, from Liangshan Prefecture Development and Reform Commission Office. [published on 23.04.2021]. Online: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20210428/20210428A0DUNV00.html>. Last accessed: 18.09.2021.

<sup>68</sup> There is only one student who reached the admission score of the university *benke* in 2019, and there are some more who reached this goal in 2021.

<sup>69</sup> The new Meigu Middle School (Xichang Branch) will admit more than 400 students each year. The students in the Xichang branch have much better scores in the graduation examination than those who visit the two senior high schools in Meigu. Among the first batch of graduates who graduated in 2016, 47 students entered universities and the undergraduate admission rate in 2019 has already reached about 40%. (see Pan et al. 2018: 12; Meigu County Middle School (Xichang Campus) Admissions Guide for Autumn 2020. Online: <https://www.zhonzhuan.com/lessondetail-22684>. Last accessed: 17.09.2021.

some students migrate with their parents to other areas (typical in the Anning Valley area) and receive education there. It is believed that the educational achievements there are generally better. With the overall decline of these schools, some teachers also left. This is in contrast to the expansion of rural schools in the Anning River Valley area.<sup>70</sup>

As a case study of a small village primary school, NZK Village Primary School in a Yi village in Meigu County was chosen. The school is located on the top of a mountain, which is more than a two-hour drive from Meigu County seat. In 2019, there were only three dilapidated adobe houses and three plastic board houses in the school. At present, all the teachers in the school are volunteer teachers from an NGO. Before the volunteer teachers came to this school, there was only one local Yi teacher with a primary school degree who has now become the teacher of the newly built kindergarten of this village. Several years ago, when only one teacher was in the school, the teaching activities were extremely loose and the students' academic performance was extremely poor (the average score was always below 10%). At that time, many parents did not support their children going to school because they believed that their children could hardly learn any knowledge at school anyway. The work of the volunteer teacher has greatly improved the quality of education in the school, which encouraged parents to support their children to go to school again. Therefore, the scale of the school has gradually expanded and the average scores in the examinations have also improved.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the results are now comparable with other rural primary schools nearby. In addition, in the past two years, NZK village has been included in the TPA project. Almost the whole village has been rebuilt since. A new settlement, a new kindergarten and a primary school have been built (which were still not put into use in 2019 during the fieldwork). Compared with the old school site, the new school has a much better infrastructure. The old classrooms still faced problems such as leaking rain and very cold temperatures in winter. Furthermore, because there was no kitchen, students could only eat ham and milk instead.

However, teachers are still pessimistic about the students' educational prospects as they see that their possibility of receiving education after the compulsory education stage is still very small. Due to the long-term failure of schooling in this village, there was no one from this village who had received higher education. Only recently, several villagers started to attend high school in the county seat of Meigu. In the past, there were very few people who received junior high school education and many younger people had only received a few years of primary education because from the fourth grade of primary school, the students from this village had to go to another primary school far away, so many students dropped out of school. As a result of long-term slow education development, parents' educational expectations for their children are very low. The parents of the students in NZK village school are almost always illiterate. Most of the villagers can not speak Mandarin at all and also have no experience of migrant work. Instead, they have been in the village working as farmers and herdsmen for their whole life. Until today, there are still not many villagers who work outside. Those who left belong to the younger generation (20-30 years old) and have received several years of basic education. A teacher said that it is impossible for parents to take higher education as their children's educational goal when there are no college students in the village at all who could be role models (volunteer teacher: NZ-m-25).

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<sup>70</sup> In the investigated schools in the Anning River Valley area (SD Primary School in MP Township and SB Primary School in SB Town in Mianning, as well as in rural Xichang), it was found that new immigrants from the original Liangshan area fill the positions in rural schools. Thus, the scale of these schools is expanding because of migration.

<sup>71</sup> There were more than 100 students in 2019 in the NZK primary school with 4 classes, while before there were only a dozen students and they did not always go to school on time.

It was also found that compared with other rural Yi parents, local parents were not as supportive of girls' education. Instead, they usually limit the goals for education to receiving a few years of basic education so that the children can go out to work. Most graduates of the schools will attend junior high school in the township nearby which is about a one-hour drive from the village. However, there are still parents who are unwilling to support their children to receive junior high school education, because of the education costs and the family's economic pressure. Thus, they prefer that their children can work outside and earn money earlier. They even refused the help of volunteer teachers who were willing to help pay the tuition fees for their children.

The plan of dropping out during the junior high school stage is also common among the students. They often lack confidence in their opportunities for further study because of their low scores compared with the students from the township. Moreover, because they are usually several years older than the usual age for junior high school as they enrolled late, they are at an age in which they are expected to take more responsibilities for the family's livelihood. (volunteer teacher: NZ-m-25).

#### **6.4 Migration and redistribution of educational resources**

Liangshan is experiencing large-scale movements of population. The phenomenon is closely related to the unbalanced regional development. The imbalance of educational resources between regions in Liangshan is among the pulling factors of inter-county/area migration. This part discusses the phenomenon of large-scale migration in Liangshan and its influence on educational opportunities from different aspects such as the preconditions, temporal and spatial characteristics and contradictions of migration.

The best educational resources in Liangshan are concentrated in the Anning River Valley area, especially in Xichang City, while the educational resources in predominantly Yi-inhabited areas have great disadvantages in comparison. Within the counties, there is another great difference in education resources between urban and rural areas. Most schools in rural areas of Liangshan cannot meet the basic requirements of national school-running standards.<sup>72</sup> As mentioned above, due to China's population registration system, people can only receive compulsory education in schools nearby. Therefore, students in areas with poor education resources have difficulties in accessing better schools and thus have great disadvantages. In order to overcome the disadvantages, they can only strive to emigrate to areas with better education resources, although this is not easy.

For a long time, the main trend of migration in Liangshan has been a movement from original Liangshan areas to the Anning River Valley area, and from alpine areas to low-altitude areas. Population mobility in Liangshan is closely related to the regional economic situation (see Xu and Chen 2018: 66). Therefore, the most developed areas (Xichang city and Dechang County) showed a net inflow of population, while the rest of the counties in Liangshan showed a net outflow. It is reported that the migrating population is mainly young and middle-aged labourers, and the main reasons for their emigration include the lack of local employment opportunities and poor local public service facilities (including education) (see Xu and Chen 2018: 66), as well as migration that results from people following their family members (see Liu 2017: 57).<sup>73</sup>

According to the interviewed migrant families (in MP Town of Xichang and SB Town of Mianning County), the commonly reported motivation for their migration is the strive for a better life, including considerations for securing access to better education resources for their children. They reported their experiences of dissatisfaction with teachers and the widespread lack of learning successes in their home areas in rural

<sup>72</sup> The national school-running standards require sufficient funds and educational resources, and the teaching of the entire national curriculum. Schools should have a rational allocation of teachers and eliminate excessive classes, and the gap between schools in the county should be narrowed. There are 2,071 schools in Liangshan that cannot meet the standards (see Ma and Ma 2017: 20).

<sup>73</sup> It is reported that the main reasons for the relocation of Yi residents include better employment opportunities (86% agreement), better transportation conditions (77%), better education conditions (68%) and relatives and friends in the place of migration (66%) (see Liu 2017: 57).

Zhaojue or Meigu. They believe that the schools in their new sites of residence offer better education quality and that their children have improved in the examinations though they still face other problems because of their background as immigrants.

#### 6.4.1 Prerequisites for migration

Economic and social capital are the main preconditions for successful migration of Yi families in Liangshan. For individual migrants who only aim at access to better educational resources, excellent examination scores also play a decisive role. For example, outstanding rural students in Liangshan can also get a position in schools in urban areas as those schools select the best rural students and give them direct access.<sup>74</sup> However, there are some families that decide to give up these positions because they cannot afford the high costs of receiving education in urban areas, especially in Xichang. Instead, they decide to let their children visit schools in the county seats where the costs are lower.<sup>75</sup> For the migration of an entire family, a great amount of economic capital is needed, especially because of the costs of buying or renting a house and land in the new places of residence (see Xu and Chen 2017: 76-77).<sup>76</sup> This requires almost all the savings of a typical rural Yi family and may require them to take on debt. Another important precondition for migration is the help of relatives who have already moved to the new place of residence. This makes the migration much easier and more feasible. The kinship relations are the most important social capital for the Yi families and they attach a high significance to care for maintaining the bonds to their family members. Thus, Yi families usually live together as a residential group. Living together with relatives might be in itself the goal of migration. Kinship networks are also very important for individual education immigrants.

When their families cannot afford the migration of the entire family, some try to put their children in foster care with relatives who live in places with better general education achievements, so that their children can receive education there. In particular, relatives who are teachers or civil servants are usually regarded as the ideal person to ask for assistance. The successful members of a family clan have the responsibility to help other relatives according to the ethics of Yi society. Many students with migration experience have reported their experiences of having lived with relatives in other areas, often from the primary school stage. They believe that they have benefited from these experiences because they have experienced great improvement in their educational achievements after moving from counties like Meigu or Zhaojue to schools in Xichang or county towns. (students: CG-f-10; GA-f-15; LS-f-20; EM-f-15; FX-m-15; college students: KG-m-20; CG-f-20; GM-f-20).

Many immigrants' families are aware that their family expenses will increase since they changed their residence. In particular, the costs for daily living expenses are rising since they now have to buy food as they do not have land anymore. Also, the costs for the children's education are rising. For example, it was found that in order to get a position in the local schools of the target areas of migration in Liangshan, an extra fee (about 500-3,000 yuan/year) needs to be paid to the school, which strongly increases the cost of education. In contrast, when students visit a school in the compulsory education stage in their registered permanent residence, it is almost free (cf. Xu and Chen 2017: 77; Liu 2017: 57).

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<sup>74</sup> Typically, those students who have an outstanding score in the graduation examinations of primary and junior high schools in rural areas can get a high school position in Xichang or in schools in the county seats.

<sup>75</sup> The cost of education in urban areas of Liangshan is about 20,000 per person and year (see Rehamo 2018: 67). According to the interviews, visiting high schools in Xichang is even more expensive than visiting a university in Chengdu because the schools charge tuition fees. There is a need for a tuition fee for extra classes that are conducted in addition to the officially required classes at evenings and weekends, buying study materials, transportation, accommodation and living expenses. Typically, at least 8,000 yuan per semester is needed (college students: GM-f-20; LJ-m-20).

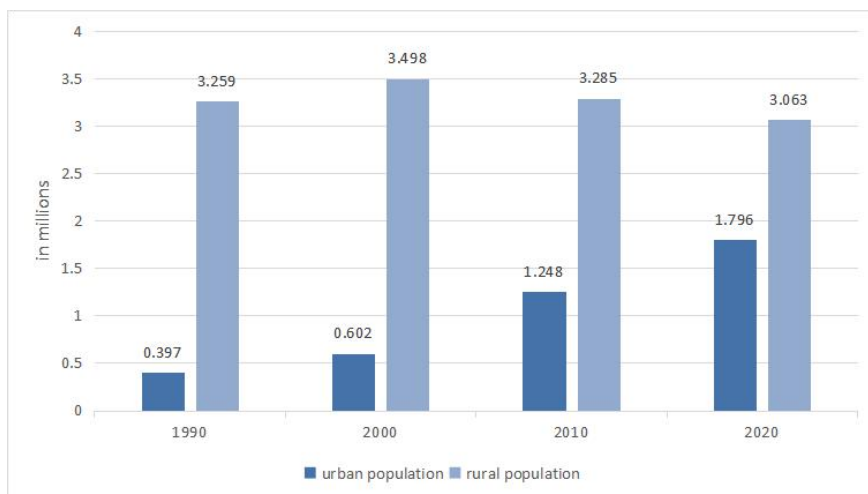
<sup>76</sup> The survey in 2019 showed that the cost of buying an old earth house in rural areas of Mianning County is at least 100,000 RMB. The costs of renting houses are several hundred RMB per month. Few people will buy land in the places they migrate to (even when they buy land, the transaction remains unofficial since the land is owned by the government and the villagers only have use rights), but choose to rent land there, which costs about a few hundred yuan per mu of land (one mu is one fifteenth of a hectare) or a certain amount of crops (several hundred kilograms of crops) as the rent. In recent years, due to the increasing number of people moving into Anning River Valley areas like Mianning, the prices of old houses have experienced an increase.

Therefore, the migrants inside Liangshan must rely more on migrant works to earn a sufficient cash income. In addition, most new immigrants do not have local household registration because the local government wants to control the continuous inflow of population. They view migration as a burden to local public service facilities and the ecological environment. As a strategy, the local governments of the target areas of migration are unwilling to give the new immigrants a local household registration unless they pay a number of fees to them.<sup>77</sup>

#### 6.4.2 Migration: When and how?

Already since China's reform and opening up, the phenomenon of large-scale migration in Liangshan has been observed. People mainly migrate to urban areas, to places near the major traffic lines and generally to valley areas (see Erjin 2020: 47). In addition, many people leave Liangshan and migrate to other regions of China, typically outside of Sichuan Province. Their number has doubled since 2010 (about 0.66 million) and now reaches about 1.26 million. The general trend of migration in Liangshan is from the high-altitude mountainous areas to the low-altitude areas and from the original Liangshan area to the Anning River Valley area. Here, Xichang has the largest net gain of immigration (about 190,000 (+25%) additional residents since 2010). At the same time, the rural population in Liangshan was shrinking in absolute numbers (see Figure 4). (see The 7<sup>th</sup> Census of Liangshan in 2020). There were several phases of large-scale migration. After the implementation of the Household Contract Responsibility System in 1978, there was a wave of relocation in the Yi-inhabited areas for the purpose of reuniting with relatives who lived in other places, as many families had been separated for different reasons since the mid-1950s (cf. Ji 2018: 167-172).

Figure 4: Urban and rural population development in Liangshan in 1990-2020



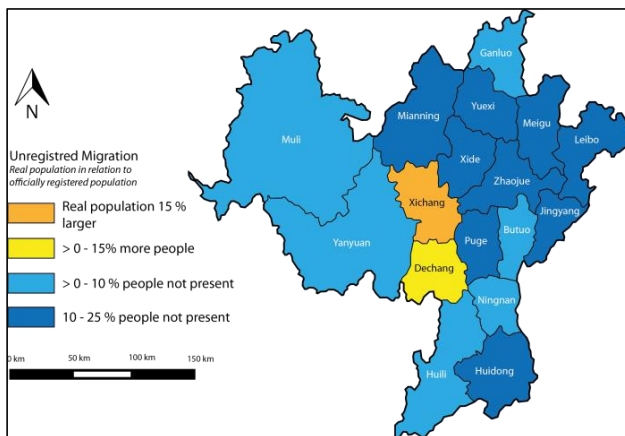
Source: The 7<sup>th</sup> Census of Liangshan (2020). Design by author.

Since the 2000s, the trend of migration has been expanding. By 2018, the number of people who moved across the boundaries of counties (and cities) in Liangshan reached 150,700 (excluding those who moved to places outside of Liangshan or within a county). Of them, 87% moved to the Anning River Valley areas. Here, Xichang City is the most important target area. It has attracted about 53% of the total population who moved into the Anning River Valley areas. As a result, the proportion of immigrants in Xichang and its rural areas has exceeded one-fifth of the original resident population in recent years. (see Liu 2017: 56; Xu and Chen 2018: 12). The migrants in Liangshan generally move from less developed areas to wealthier areas, often creating chains of migrations. People from the alpine regions move to the foothills, those into the

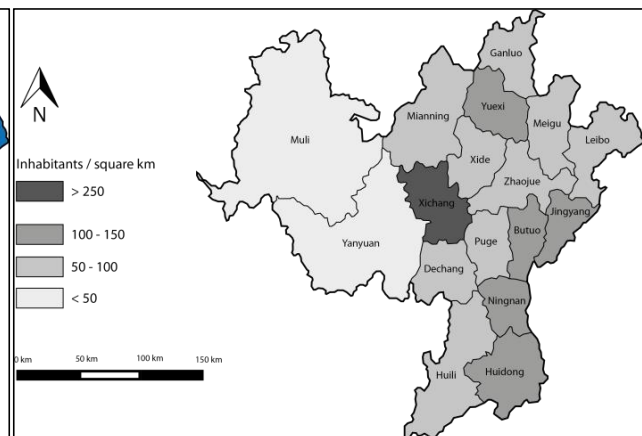
<sup>77</sup> A case found in SB Town, Mianning County showed that the migrant families had to pay at least 20,000 yuan to the local Public Security Bureau to get a local household registration in 2019. A family that moved to Mianning ten years ago did not get a local household registration until 2019 after they paid this fee. As a result of this long-term exclusion from access to local public services, the older children of this family have not visited a school. (villager: MN-m-50-Mianning).



valleys and people in the valley areas into urban areas. The main driving forces of these chains of migration are urbanization and regional imbalances. Many counties are experiencing rapid urbanization, sometimes exceeding 10% of the entire local population moving to urban areas in a few years. According to the 7<sup>th</sup> national census, Liangshan's share of urban population has increased 9.4% from 2010 to 2020 and now reaches 37%. The urbanization rate of the Anning River Basin is relatively high, reaching 49.03% on average, while that of the remaining mainly Yi-inhabited counties is only 25.69%. When the residents in the rural valley areas move into urban areas, the residents living in the mid-mountain and alpine regions have the possibility to move into the valley areas, also see Liu (2017: 56). Because of migration, the population has further concentrated in the Anning River Valley area where the population density is already the highest. However, there is also a trend of urbanization in the rural areas of Liangshan as local county seats and some townships have become destinations for migration from surrounding rural areas as many rural residents cannot afford migration to the Anning River Valley region, see Map 4 and Map 5.



Map 4: Unregistered migration in Liangshan. Indicates the percentage of population not present in its officially registered location. Design by author. Based on data by the Liangshan State Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook, 2017.



Map 5: Population density in Liangshan. Design by author. Based on data by the Liangshan State Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook, 2017.

The chains of migration can also be found in SB Town in Mianning. In the decade this area has experienced a part of the local Han people living moving to urban areas (typically, to Xichang City or county seat of Mianning or the best-developed local township, Lugu Town). This allowed local Yi people living in mid-mountainous areas to gradually move into the valley area. They bought houses or homestead land (and built houses by themselves) from Han people. Now they moved from their old earth houses into brick houses, while the Han moved into urban high-rise buildings. Later, Yi people from the predominantly Yi-inhabited areas immigrated to the area and bought the old houses of the local Yi, and some also rented their land. Many of the local Yi people have already worked as migrant workers for a long time and have no intention of keeping up farming and animal husbandry anymore because they consider it to be unprofitable. Almost all young and middle-aged people work outside as the main means of livelihood. In this town, it can be found that the local Yi people are influenced by the local Han people. For example, they can usually speak Sichuan dialect fluently (the language of the local Han) and are used to drinking tea, which is a typical lifestyle of the Han people in Sichuan. In the eyes of local Yi people, they are not only different from the local Han, but also different from the Yi who immigrated from predominantly Yi-inhabited areas of Liangshan (teacher: SB-f-65; villager: BS-f-45-Mianning; college student: ML-m-20).

### 6.4.3 Contradictions of migration

As the scale of migration continues to expand, local governments regard it as a new burden on public services and land reserves, as well as an increased management burden. Therefore, some governments of target places of migration began to prohibit migrants from moving in (cf. Chen and Xu 2019: 51). First of all, some local governments attempt to hold the immigrants in an illegal status by not giving them local household registrations, which allows them to deport them at any time. As a result, the new immigrants lack many of the rights (including access to public services) that the locals have (cf. Chen and Xu 2019: 76). As a result, the immigrants' children must pay for access to the local public resources such as school positions.

Besides, they still face the risk of being rejected by the local junior high schools after graduation from primary school because the local schools will give priority to local students. Only when there are still some remaining positions the immigrant children will be considered. For example, in SD Primary School in rural Xichang, there were several interviewed primary school graduates in 2019 who could not visit a local junior high school because they had no local household registration. They were only accepted if they paid a fee to the school or got excellent grades in the graduation examination. Thus, some families planned to let their children drop out of school because they cannot afford the fee and it is also not realistic to return to their official home area for further education since almost all their relatives have moved out and it is far away from their current residence. The interviewed immigrants reported that they had never thought about encountering these difficulties long after their migration. (student: QG-f-15; villager: SD-f-45-Xichang).

On the other hand, there are also problems for the places of emigration. In contrast to the population growth in the valleys and urban areas, many poor, rural and mountainous areas experience a rapid loss of population. This leads to the common phenomenon of abandoned land and houses in the villages. For example, it is reported that in a typical emigration area in the alpine region in Xide County, among the 170 villages, 103 have experienced a loss of more than half of their former population (see Liu 2017; Xu and Chen 2018: 14). For these villages, the serious loss of population means that the development of those areas is hindered further. Especially considering that the migrant population is usually young and middle-aged people and those with a better overall economic situation, the loss hits the villages hard.

Another typical problem encountered by immigrants is difficulties in integrating into the local community. At the same time, the immigrants have lost contact with their former community. Thus, their scope of social networks becomes limited to their small group of immigrants that is mainly composed of relatives. For example, in SB Town, Mianning County, it is found that most of the new immigrants live in the high-altitude mountainous area, while the local Yi residents usually live in the valley area. People living in high mountain areas seldom go down the mountain, except for visiting the market or for school activities, while the local Yi people almost never go up the mountain (for example, the 20-year-old local guide had never been to the local immigrant communities). So there is little communication between the two groups even though they both belong to the Yi minority. The new Yi immigrants also have little contact with the local Han people.

In addition, the isolation of Yi immigrants is even more obvious when they immigrate to Han communities. For example, Ji (2016; 2018) studied Yi immigrants who moved to Han-populated rural areas outside Liangshan. At first, Yi immigrants and local Han people tried to communicate with each other. However, the friendly relationship gradually evolved into keeping a distance and even hostility appeared because of the stigmatization and resistance to Yi immigrants from the local Han. In the end, Yi immigrants have formed a Yi community that remains isolated. They continue to organize the community based on the organization means of traditional family branch. Thus, they have the responsibility to help each other so that everyone can survive in the Han community and they are united when they face conflicts with the local Han.

The initial motivation of immigrants is to improve their living conditions because their original places of residence have almost no employment opportunities and the land is not well suited for agriculture. This makes young and middle-aged people leave to seek a better life by moving to areas with better economic conditions. However, not all of them have achieved this goal. Some people are even facing greater livelihood difficulties after migration. This is largely due to the fact that they do not have any resources in the places they migrate to. Furthermore, they are easily excluded by local communities and lack access to public services. As the migrants have no arable land, they must rely on migrant work to earn money to pay for the rising expenses, which include the extra costs of access to public resources, the rent of houses, and the expenses for food since they are no longer self-sufficient. This leads to a situation where their livelihood strategies become more dependent on just one aspect, migrant work. This entails greater risks considering the disadvantages of Yi migrant workers in the labour market<sup>78</sup>. After many years of moving to a new place of residence, the Yi migrants still had not improved their living conditions as they planned. It proves especially hard for them to accumulate wealth.

In contrast, the most obvious improvement may be the children's education, because the educational quality in the new places of residence is usually much higher than in their original home regions. However, they continue to have a great disadvantage compared with local children in terms of access to educational opportunities. Finally, migrants have also experienced difficulties in the TPA projects in recent years. They were left out of the registration for TPA projects by the local governments because they had moved out for a long time. However, they were also not taken into consideration in their new places of residence because they did not have a local household registration, thus not belonging to this jurisdiction. This has turned them into a group that is ignored by both sides. Although they asked both sides to register them as officially recognized 'poor households', their demands were rejected. This makes them feel abandoned and has also created envy for the villagers in their original places of residence who got government subsidies to some extent.

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<sup>78</sup> A similar phenomenon was found in the case of Yi immigrants in SB Town in Mianning and MP Township in rural Xichang in my fieldwork, as well as for Yi immigrants in Renshou outside of Liangshan (cf. Ji 2018).

## 7 Chronic poverty in Liangshan and the role of education in poverty reduction

The following chapter is about a series of transitions that Liangshan society is going through in the fields of gender relations, language, distribution of educational resources, migration, and their manifestations in local education. On this basis, this chapter embeds the current situation of education in Liangshan into the local as well as national background, especially the background of the TPA plan, which has had a profound impact on Liangshan in recent years. Also, the potential of education to alleviate local poverty will be addressed from three perspectives. The first is the impact of how the TPA plan was implemented locally. Second, the discourse on the causes of chronic poverty in Liangshan will be analysed. The third part is about how education affects the livelihood strategies of rural Yi families.

### 7.1 The implementation of the TPA plan in Liangshan Prefecture

This section is about the implementation of the newly implemented national poverty alleviation plan (TPA) in Liangshan and its specific impacts. China's poverty alleviation and development policies have many similarities. For example, they all focus on the underdeveloped rural areas in western China.<sup>79</sup> The programmes also all attach importance to the construction of infrastructures, the promotion of investment, preferential policies and attempts to bring about cultural changes. The Western Development Strategy is a typical case of these strategies. Although the development policies have had a far-reaching impact on the development of western China, they failed to achieve their original overarching goal of narrowing the development gap between the eastern and the western parts of the country because the former continued to develop faster than the latter. Furthermore, most development policies eventually become projects with a strong focus on infrastructure construction (see Joeng 2015). Correspondingly, some measures closely related to the interest of the poor, such as education, medical care and social security, have not received enough attention (see Lan et al. 2017: 85; Postiglione 2011: 367). Therefore, these projects only have an indirect effect in helping the poor (see NPAPEC 2018b: 58-67). The TPA plan outlines a broad set of measures (see Table 7). Its implementation in Liangshan will be addressed now, focusing on the implementation and effects of strategies such as education, infrastructure construction, resettlement projects, industrial development and the transfer of labour force.

Table 7: Targeted poverty alleviation project's goals in Liangshan

Income	Raising the annual per capita income of poor households above the national poverty alleviation income standard (about 3,600 yuan in 2018)
Basic needs	Ensuring food and clothing security
Education	School-age children complete compulsory education
Health	Free medical insurance (95% of medical costs are covered)
Housing	Resettlement housing and self-built houses that meet the standards of safe housing

Source: Design by author, based on NPAPEC 2018a; 2018b and own fieldwork results.

#### 7.1.1 The poverty alleviation projects carried out in Liangshan since the Democratic Reform

The Chinese government's interventions for poverty alleviation in Liangshan started directly after the Democratic Reform in 1956. From 1956 to 1977, the main strategy was to distribute goods (such as farm tools, food and clothing) and to give loans to the poor. Furthermore, the improvement of public services such as medical care, education and the construction of infrastructure was important. From 1978 to 1985 the implementation of the Household Contract Responsibility System privatized agriculture and animal husbandry and enabled many poor people to basically guarantee their food and clothing. However, absolute

<sup>79</sup> This is not solely a geographical concept, but rather refers to the general concept of underdeveloped areas in China. Most of these are in the western regions, but there are also exceptions.

poverty remained widespread in Liangshan. A turning point was in 1986 when the Chinese government began to conduct poverty alleviation projects in an organized and planned way. Liangshan Prefecture was listed as one of the 18 concentrated contiguous poverty-stricken areas in China. Four counties of Liangshan were listed as national poverty-stricken counties and a series of poverty alleviation projects were implemented from 1986 to 1993 in Liangshan. (see Guo 2008: 83-84; Liu and Zhao 2013: 108).

From 1994 to 2000 the influential National Eighth Five-Year Plan for Poverty Alleviation was implemented. The primary goal in Liangshan was still solving the problems of food and clothing for the poor at that time (see Guo 2008: 103). In this period, a so-called image poverty alleviation project *xinxiang fupin* was implemented. Changing the habits with regard to cleanliness as well as other ideas and habits of the minority poor were the focus and went along with resettlement efforts *yimin fupin*. However, as the financial poverty alleviation resources of this plan were mainly concentrated in the industrial sector, it had little impact on the Yi-inhabited areas where agriculture remained the dominant livelihood. (Guo 2008: 112). Moreover, the chosen way of developing local industries for natural resource extraction also led to local ecological problems (see Guo 2008: 119; Heberer 2014).

From 2001 to 2010, the Chinese government put forward the Outline of China's Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development (2001-2010). 11 counties and 1,188 villages in Liangshan Prefecture were included in the national poverty-stricken counties (villages), which means that almost all the predominantly Yi-inhabited areas in Liangshan became the focus of this project. In this period, the population living in absolute poverty in Liangshan decreased significantly, while the per capita income increased. In particular, the so-called 'Three Houses Reconstruction' project gave subsidies (3,000-5,000 yuan per household) to Yi residents living in houses with poor building quality (wooden houses, thatched houses and stone houses) in order to help them build a new house had a large impact. By the end of 2011, there were 141,000 households and about 635,000 Yi people (one-seventh of the rural population in Liangshan) who participated in the project. (see Liu and Zhao 2013: 109; Ming and Wang 2019: 26). After this project, since 2011, a new project called New Village of Yi Families *yijia xinzhai* with higher standards for rural housing construction has started. It aimed to build 1190 new villages in Yi-inhabited areas by 2015. It involved 98,900 households and nearly 500,000 people.<sup>80</sup>

This section mainly focuses on the TPA project, which was implemented from 2013 to 2020. Similar to China's other poverty alleviation strategies, it includes a package of strategies, such as developing characteristic local industries, the promotion of labour force export, resettlement projects, the improvement of education, the provision of medical insurance, minimum living guarantees and ecological compensation payments (see NPAPEC 2018a; 2018b).<sup>81</sup> The series of poverty alleviation projects implemented in Liangshan Prefecture since the 1950s have had a profound impact on the local society. All projects adhere to the development goal of modernisation, and always focus on the strategies that are considered to have an important impact on the macroeconomic conditions, such as large-scale infrastructure and industrial development. These strategies have great achievements, which are reflected in the significant improvement of the infrastructure condition, the scale of education, and the growth of the economy. One of the most remarkable achievements is that all the people formerly living in absolute poverty in Liangshan were officially lifted out of poverty in 2020.

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<sup>80</sup> Source: Sichuan Daily. [published on 05.09.2011]. On the Portal Website of Liangshan Prefecture People's Government.

<sup>81</sup> NPAPEC is the official publication explaining the TPA projects issued by the National Poverty Alleviation Publicity and Education Center.

### 7.1.2 Education strategy

The Chinese authorities regard improving basic education in poor areas as one of the priority tasks of poverty alleviation projects. Therefore, a series of documents supporting education in rural and poverty-stricken areas have been issued.<sup>82</sup> With the implementation of the education policies in Liangshan the costs for education for poor families are reduced, thus encouraging more poor Yi children to receive education as economic pressure was the most important reason for giving up education before.<sup>83</sup> The education strategy for poverty alleviation in China is influenced by the understanding of human capital theory and the ideas of classical modernisation theory on education. The main targets of educational measures are the western regions of China, especially the minority areas (see Quluo 2018: 103). For a long time, schools in rural poverty-stricken areas have faced some typical problems, such as poor infrastructure conditions and insufficient numbers and qualifications of teachers. Thus, a series of measures were promulgated in order to improve the school infrastructure, increase the teachers' income, and reduce education costs for local families.<sup>84</sup>

The main goals of the education strategy are improving the education system and expanding the scale of education (especially expanding preschool education and vocational education), and popularizing boarding schools (see Zhao 2019: 184). The important role of education in poverty alleviation is often emphasized at the official level and it is also recognized by local officials and intellectuals.<sup>85</sup> However, compared with other strategies (especially infrastructure construction and industrial development), the importance of education policy remains marginal at the implementation level because it requires long-term investment and produces visible effects only several years in the future (see Pan et al. 2018: 6). This does not fit into the tight time framework of the national poverty alleviation projects that aim at producing quick results (poverty alleviation cadre: TY-m-30). Therefore, those implementing education policies (usually the local Education Bureau at the County level) will translate the general task of promoting education into the specific goal of improving quantitative indicators in the education system (such as enrolment rates and dropout rates). These goals are easier to achieve and allow local and provincial officials to prove the completion of the plan more quickly.

### 7.1.3 Resettlement strategy

Resettlement is different from the local migration patterns in Liangshan. The former is based on large-scale projects organized by the government while the latter is made up of many small acts of self-organization. The resettlement plans in Liangshan can be divided into forms of local resettlement and relocation over longer distances. Which approach is used mainly depends on the local natural conditions and geographical location of the targeted place. The resettlement projects usually relocate poor Yi families living in high-altitude areas to nearby low-altitude areas or to nearby towns. In most situations, resettlement happens within the same county (see Chen et al. 2020: 66).

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<sup>82</sup> These documents include 'Opinions on Implementing Education for Poverty Alleviation Project' and 'Implementation Plan for Poverty Alleviation' by Education in Deep Poverty Areas (2018-2020), as well as documents on improving preschool education, compulsory education and vocational education in poverty-stricken areas. Here, the documents 'Several Opinions of the State Council on the Current Development of Preschool Education', 'Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Implementing the Nutrition Improvement Plan for Rural Compulsory Education Students' and 'Opinions of the State Council on Further Promoting the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education and the Action Plan for East-West Cooperation in Vocational Education' (2016-2020) are important.

<sup>83</sup> The policies implemented in Liangshan in order to reduce the education cost include: 'One Village One Kindergarten', a nutrition improvement plan (providing free meals), the '9+3' programme with free vocational education, the plan for 15-year free education (free education from kindergarten to high school) and the 'Three Exemptions and One Subsidy' policy (exemption from tuition fees, and payments for textbooks, exercise books and other teaching materials).

<sup>84</sup> The programme 'Comprehensively improve the basic conditions for compulsory education schools with weak condition in poverty-stricken areas' *quanmian gaibo* aimed at narrowing the gaps in education on a regional and urban-rural scale and promoting the equalization of basic public education services. Specifically, improving the infrastructure of rural schools, the plans for training teachers such as 'Notice of the General Office of the State Council on Printing and Distributing the Support Plan for Rural Teachers (2015-2020)' and 'National Training Plan for Primary and Secondary School Teachers' were the focus.

<sup>85</sup> In the interviews, local officials and intellectuals usually expressed their view that education would be the only way for the poor Yi children to get rid of poverty.

In comparison, self-organized migration is more flexible, and much of it crosses the boundaries of regions and counties. The resettlement plans are based on the logic that the natural environment and geographical location of poor families' current residences are not conducive to development and poverty reduction. Thus, resettlement is seen as a means to get rid of poverty as people are relocated to other areas with better conditions. This reflects the development view of the authorities, in which development is not carried out in rural mountainous but in urban areas. (see Kreutzmann 2012b: 119). Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has implemented large-scale poverty alleviation and resettlement projects in western minority areas, which aimed to relocate minority populations to centralize and urbanize their settlement patterns, see also Gao et al. (2019).

The resettlement projects have been implemented under several national poverty alleviation plans such as Western Development Strategy, Poverty Alleviation in the New Century and Building a New Socialist Countryside (see Xue et al. 2013: 1163), as well as the TPA project. In Liangshan, they aim to build more large-scale and concentrated villages, which is in contrast with the scattered pattern of traditional Yi villages. Compared with the education strategies, the resettlement projects have immediate and highly visible effects, so they can be used to prove the achievements of local politicians and administrators (TPA project cadre: TY-m-30). Moreover, the project is beneficial to the management of local ethnic minorities as they now live in places that are more accessible to the state's institutions. Finally, the resettlement projects are also beneficial to China's huge infrastructure construction industry, which is closely related to the interests of many state-owned companies.

There are several reasons why the resettlement plan is officially seen as conducive to poverty reduction. Firstly, it can help to improve public service facilities for education and health care in villages. The relative lack of education and health care are viewed as important causes of poverty. Secondly, because there are frequent natural disasters in Liangshan's mountainous areas, for example, landslides on deforested mountain slopes, moving away from these areas is regarded as not only beneficial to villagers' livelihood, but also beneficial to the local ecology. Finally, moving away from the relatively isolated rural living environment is also considered as conducive to cultural change so that the villagers will accept the 'modern' values of Chinese society. Because the latter ambition has proven to be very difficult despite repeated efforts, leaving the original living environment and livelihood is regarded as an important strategy to modernize the villagers.

Various housing renovation plans have aimed to improve the villagers' living environment in Liangshan for a long time. Two plans mentioned above were important: the Three-houses Renovation plan that was implemented (involving 140,000 people) in the 2000s, and the *yijia xinzhai* plan (involving 500,000 people) implemented in the first five years of the 2010s. These projects were followed by the TPA relocation plan (involving 300,000) from 2013 to 2020.<sup>86</sup> During the field investigations in 2019 and 2021, large-scale centralized resettlement projects in all the Yi-inhabited areas in Liangshan were built. In particular, large-scale residential areas were built near the county seats (for example, in the investigated counties such as Meigu, Zhaojue, Leibo, Butuo, Mianning and Xide County) or townships. Usually, more than 10,000 villagers who were classified as 'poor households' were resettled in each of these locations. This makes the resettlement projects also large-scale urbanization projects. Resettlement is mainly implemented in two forms. For poor households, the government builds houses and the villagers pay a part of the construction costs (usually 10,000-20,000 yuan). The other is the policy for non-poor households, in which the villagers build their own houses (which costs at least 110,000 yuan) while the government gives some subsidies (usually 20,000-40,000 yuan per household).

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<sup>86</sup> Source: Outline of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (2016).



Photo 7: Newly-built resettlement site, in Niuniuba Township. Photo by author, Meigu, 14 July 2021.



Photo 8: Dancing on the square of new resettlement site, in Niuniuba Township. Photo by author, Meigu, 17 July 2021.

The villagers' attitude towards those projects is mixed. On the one hand, they hope to benefit from the national poverty alleviation projects. For example, many families combine the projects with their own needs for constructing a new house. On the other hand, they also worry about other problems after the relocation.

First of all, one of the most common worries of the villagers is the loss of their former livelihood after the resettlement. As most of them still make a living that is at least partly based on farming and animal husbandry, people are worried about losing their livelihood after they get relocated. In the survey in 2021, residents who moved to distant settlements had given up their cultivated land and animal husbandry to varying degrees. Most of the cultivated land in their former villages was vacant, and some pastures were included in the scope of the programme Returning Farmland to Forests. As a result, the elderly and middle-aged women who typically used to rely on agriculture and animal husbandry lost their livelihood, while young and middle-aged men and unmarried women now almost all work outside. If there are no family members who can work outside, families will encounter major livelihood problems. In some cases, they can get national subsistence allowances, but these are unsustainable and unstable because the list of recipients is updated every year. Most importantly, there is a lack of local employment opportunities in the resettlement sites. Although there are examples that the local government tries to build new factories or so-called modern large-scale agricultural parks near the resettlement projects, these jobs are far from enough to solve the employment problem of new residents.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, there are some families who have not move to the resettlement sites because of these worries. In particular, many elderly Yi people are unwilling to change their lifestyle and prefer to stay in the villages.

Secondly, those families who need to pay most of the costs of resettlement by themselves are facing great economic pressure and may even fall into debt because of building their own houses. In the investigation, some cases were found in which the local government refused to give villagers the promised compensation (40,000 yuan per household) for the new houses after they had finished building them with their own money. The government argued that they did not build the houses according to the official blueprints. However, the villagers said that they had never heard of this requirement before the construction, nor had they obtained a blueprint. (villagers: HZ-f-50-Xichang; DS-m-45-Meigu).

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<sup>87</sup> For example, a newly built factory in Meigu County, near the Niuniuba resettlement site is already among the largest in Liangshan. Still, it can only provide 500 positions (the planned positions are 2,000), while there are nearly 20,000 new residents in this township.



Thirdly, the houses built by the government are regarded as not practical for daily life, especially since there are usually no pens where livestock can be raised.<sup>88</sup> Livestock is very important for the Yi families as it is needed for religious sacrifices and when guests visit the family. When a family can no longer raise its own livestock, it needs to buy animals for social and religious occasions at high prices. Furthermore, the government-built houses are usually too small.<sup>89</sup> Especially the living rooms are too small since they are no longer suited for holding a religious ceremony and to receive guests. For these reasons, the self-built houses of Yi families were much bigger and often had a yard.



Photo 9: Living room of a house in the new-built resettlement site, in YZ village, Niujiawan Township, Butuo County. Photo by author, Butuo, 16 August 2021.



Photo 10: Newly built resettlement site, in YZ village, Niujiawan Township, Butuo County. Photo by author, Butuo, 16 August 2021.

Moreover, almost all villagers are unwilling to demolish their old houses. However, this is the prerequisite for getting a new government-built house. Demolishing the old houses is demanded by national policies and half of the government subsidies are given only when the old houses are demolished (see NPAPEC 2018a: 71). This is because of the government's goal to improve the visual impression of the region and other institutional purposes such as transfers of building rights among different regions. Firstly, the shabby appearance of old houses is regarded as a "manifestation of poverty" (TPA project cadre: TY-m-30).

Therefore, it is demanded that the old houses are demolished. Secondly, if the houses are not demolished, some villagers will likely continue to live there and thus will not move to the new houses as it is only possible to continue farming in the old place of residence. Moreover, another important reason for the insistence on demolition is the transfer of rights for using land for construction. The Chinese government has formulated a red line on the conversion of cultivated land into built-up land to curb the excessive occupation of arable land due to urban sprawl in order to ensure domestic food security. Therefore, there are projects known as 'Increase of Urban Construction Land Linked with the Decrease of Rural Construction Land' *tudi zengjian guagou*. This means that the rights for occupying construction land can be transferred from rural to urban areas by demolishing houses in rural areas. Cities can use these land-use rights for further expansion.<sup>90</sup> Thus, there are several other goals of implementing resettlement projects that are not necessarily based on the goal of poverty alleviation.

<sup>88</sup> Some resettlement projects built concentrated pens separated from the residential sites.

<sup>89</sup> The houses are usually built according to a standard of less than 25m<sup>2</sup> per person (see NPAPEC 2018a: 70).

<sup>90</sup> By dismantling rural homesteads, the construction land is officially transferred to the category of cultivated land. Thus, rights to new construction land can be used for urban expansion somewhere else. (Decision of the State Council on Deepening Reform and Strict Land Management (see Guo Fa [2004] No.28). The construction land rights in Liangshan are usually purchased by the governments of the cities that participate in the financing of building new houses in the resettlement sites. Some resettlement projects in Liangshan are predominantly based on projects under the framework of 'The increase of urban construction land linked with the decrease of rural construction land'. In this situation, all households can receive a new-built house in the concentrated settlement site for free. The only precondition is to demolish their old houses. (for example, TQ Village, Meigu County). For urban governments, this is a lucrative investment since land use rights can be sold to private developers at very high prices in their localities.

#### **7.1.4 The strategy of developing place-specific industries**

Developing place-specific industries is one of the key strategies in the TPA project (cf. NPAPEC 2018a: 34-38). Liangshan's existing industries mainly include the exploitation of natural resources and minerals, special agricultural products, and tourism. These existing industries are mainly concentrated in the Anning River Basin. The large-scale enterprises in Liangshan are usually those connected to natural resources, mainly including the mining of rare earth minerals, other forms of mining, metal processing and the generation of electricity. Although these industries have made important contributions to Liangshan's GDP, they have also brought ecological problems. Moreover, they are also not labour-intensive, which makes it difficult for local people to get jobs in those industries and thus participate in the wealth they generate.

In recent years, the promotion of the industrialization of local agriculture gained the attention of local authorities because of the central government's concepts for the modernisation and industrialization of agriculture. Some characteristic agricultural industries have been developed in Liangshan, including buckwheat (see Ruan 2017), potatoes (see Chen et al. 2018) and walnuts (see Zhu 2016; Li et al. 2012). These developments of industrialized agriculture are based on investment by external enterprises, while villagers can rent land from the firms and work in the new agricultural parks for salary.<sup>91</sup> The agricultural estates are usually located in the best and flat land along the highways. As most of the local residents' land is leased in this way now, they have to find other ways of maintaining their livelihood, such as going out to work (men and young people) or working in agricultural estates (middle-aged women).

The second way of promoting the industrialization of agriculture is to establish agricultural cooperatives organized by local governments. At present, this approach has not been popularized on a large scale but has only had some pilot projects. There are still difficulties in management and popularization at the implementation level. For example, in LM Township in Meigu County, a poverty alleviation cadre reported that a large-scale green pepper plantation was developed in this township in recent years. However, because the government also encouraged villagers to plant walnuts before, which led to significant price reduction because of overproduction, farmers lack trust in the government's suggestions today. Moreover, because many products with high added value are usually labour-intensive, many villagers are unwilling to plant them as many families do not have enough labourers (TPA project cadre: LM-m-30).

#### **7.1.5 Exporting labour force**

The strategy of labour export aims at transferring the rural surplus labour force to urban areas where it is needed in local industries. This is regarded as a win-win strategy. On the one hand, this strategy shall alleviate the shortage of workers in labour-intensive industries in China's coastal areas. On the other hand, it is considered to be conducive to poverty reduction in rural areas by providing the locals with job opportunities (see NPAPEC 2018a: 47). Besides increases in income, the strategy is also considered to increase the contact of the poor with modern society, again showing the connections to the project of modernizing the values of the rural poor. Since the early 2000s, Yi villagers in Liangshan began to work as migrant workers in larger numbers. This trend reached a peak around 2013 (see Fan and Hou 2019). In 2019, the number of people who work outside of Liangshan reached 1,309,200 and their income reached 22,899 billion yuan in total, resulting in an annual per capita income of 16,039 yuan (see Liu 2020). Therefore, labour export is of great significance to the overall economy of Liangshan and to the income of poor rural families. Migrant workers' transferred incomes are the most important cash income for rural families, while agricultural work helps maintain the basic needs of food and clothing.

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<sup>91</sup> The survey in Sikai Township of Zhaojue County shows that the agricultural enterprises were built in the last years because of the support of the central government under the TPA project. This area has the best and the biggest flat land areas in Liangshan's Yi-inhabited areas. There are several large-scale agricultural enterprises for the planting of vegetables and fruits, which are sold to the whole country (mainly to supermarkets in coastal areas). For the villagers, the rent of land is about 500-800 yuan per mu and year, and the daily salary for working is 60 yuan.

The Yi migrant workers typically work as factory workers in southern China, as agricultural workers in north-western China, and as construction workers, as specialized construction workers on high-voltage lines as well as service workers in the whole country. Most Yi migrant workers rely on kinship networks to find jobs and they usually work as a group. They organize their groups around self-selected 'lead worker(s)' who usually have rich work experience and can communicate with employers. Liu (2013; 2016) called this form 'lead worker system'. It is very common in the Yi migrant worker groups in factories of the Pearl River Delta region. Thus, for a long time, the labour export of Yi villagers has been based on forms of self-organization and it has remained this way so far. However, in recent years, as the labour export strategy has also been adopted as one of the poverty alleviation measures for the TPA project, local governments (especially the employment bureaus) began to participate in the organization and dispatching of labour export. Liangshan has a cooperative relationship with Foshan City in Guangdong Province. Therefore, Liangshan will send a certain number of Yi workers to factories in Foshan every year.

However, the labour export organized by the government is usually rather small-scale. It is still the choice of only a few people to rely on the government's organization when they go out to work. There are few acquaintances in government-organized projects and the Yi workers prefer not being alone when working in distant regions of China that are unknown to them. In addition, the government also organizes short-term job training and in order to encourage people to participate in migrant work, the government of Liangshan has promulgated some subsidy policies such as reimbursement of travelling fares and subsidies when people stay outside for a long time. However, these subsidies are only aimed at officially recognized poor households, also see NPAPEC (2018a: 45-54).<sup>92</sup>

However, some problems hinder the poverty reduction potential of the labour export strategy. The most important dilemma is that the Yi workers are still marginalized in the labour market in China. As a result, they usually only get jobs that are highly unreliable and have no guarantees, also see Liu (2012: 39-40). Almost all Yi migrant workers are temporary workers, which means that they usually just substitute labourers for peaks of labour demand (cf. Liu 2016). The migrant workers interviewed said that they can only find short-term jobs (sometimes for only one week). At other times they can only wait for a job opportunity. During these days they consume a lot of their income for living in the city or transportation fees for going home.

Therefore, a common phenomenon is that even if Yi migrant workers work outside for one or half a year, it is difficult for them to save money. To make matters worse, they also face stigmatization in the labour market as members of the Yi ethnic minority, which allegedly comes from past incidents of mass violence. In such incidents, Yi workers clashed with employers as large groups due to wage disputes. Therefore, there is a stereotype of Yi workers as 'threatening' and 'low-quality' people, which makes it more difficult for them to get jobs. Thus, rejection by employers is a common experience of many Yi migrant workers. The given reasons for the rejection are usually ascribed to the poor language skills and low educational degree of Yi workers. (migrant workers: LW-m-25; MB-f-25; QQ-m-15; RS-f-15; SB-f-20; TQ-m-25). This is a means for employers to devalue Yi workers, which makes it easier for them to pay lower wages and provide less job security. Also, due to past experience, many employers are afraid of the unity of Yi workers, and they are worried about conflicts, also see Liu (2012: 38).

Moreover, there are other problems caused by the labour export such as the loss of labour force for the families remaining at home as well as for the home areas in general. This is not conducive to regional development and for agricultural development. Especially, the shortage of young and middle-aged workers

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<sup>92</sup> More details can be found in 'The Guiding Opinions on Further Promoting the Labour Transfer and Output of Poor Households with Files and Cards in Liangshan Prefecture (No.10 [2018] of Liangwei Commission)' and 'Special Implementation Plan of Skills Training and Employment Promotion for Poor Families in Deep Poverty Counties in Liangshan Prefecture'.

leads to an increased burden on the elderly, women and children who stay at home. As a result, families have to reduce and simplify their activities in agriculture and animal husbandry. For the home regions of migrant workers, though the export of labour services brings some income in the form of remittances, it also means brain drain and a lack of regional development vitality. In the long run, labour export will likely further consolidate the marginal position of Liangshan in China's market economy and the dependence on other regions will remain or even increase.

To sum up, the current poverty alleviation strategy reflects the mainstream society's understanding of development that is rooted in the goal of modernisation. The focus of the poverty alleviation strategies on the construction of quasi-urban residential areas, industrial development and market participation are prime examples of this orientation. They are based on implicit assumptions about the superiority of mainstream culture. Therefore, they are all organized in a top-down way, which makes it difficult for local officials to formulate strategies according to local needs (see Guo 2008: 171-172). The villagers as the recipients of the poverty alleviation policies not only did not participate in the formulation and implementation of policies, but also often did not even know the contents of the policies.

Although the relevant policy information was distributed to the villagers in the form of posters or documents, none of the villagers interviewed had read these documents. They are written in Mandarin and Yi language yet most villagers are illiterate for both languages. Thus, the complicated texts are obviously not meant for them. Instead, the villagers' access to information mainly comes from the villagers' meetings organized by village committees and the exchange of information within the village. This gives the grassroots level of government the absolute authority to explain policies. Therefore, government officials at the township level effectively have almost absolute authority on the implementation level. While higher-level units of government act as decision-making institutions, China's poverty alleviation projects are implemented in the county-level units, which delegate these tasks further to local township governments (see Guo 2008: 158).

The village heads are usually regarded as those who know the situation of their own villages best. This centralization of detailed decision-making power in the hands of individual low-level officials has important repercussions that undermine the poverty alleviation efforts. As the village heads are considered to know the local situation best, they are given the right to select 'poor households'. This often makes personal relationships the decisive factor in allocating poverty alleviation resources (cf. Guo 2008: 173, 178-179). Therefore, a common view of the interviewees is that the village head had given the quotas for poor households to his relatives. Beyond this, there is another motivation for the local cadres not to choose the poorest families. Considering the need to complete the project, choosing households that are not as poor as others makes it easier to achieve the ambitious goal of lifting people out of poverty and securing that they will not slide back into poverty.

Therefore, the villagers questioned the fairness of the policy implementation conducted by the village committees. A typical criticism was that the selection criteria for poor households were not adequate. It is believed that the decisions were rather determined by the personal relationship with the village head instead of the poverty condition. The villagers said that they did not participate in the selection and decision-making process, but were at best informed of the results. As most measures in the TPA plan are only aimed at the selected poor households (56.3 million people were selected in the whole country) (cf. NPAPEC 2018a: 27), other villagers are very dissatisfied because they are excluded from the new forms of welfare. (Focus Group Interview at Meigu BG Village; villagers: PS-m-30-Meigu; students: XM-f-20; XB-f-20; ZZ-f-15). However, the village head claimed that they did not abuse their power and that those families with obvious difficulties (for example, families with little labour force, disabled family members, or orphans) had

always been selected into the list of poor households. Nevertheless, as the living conditions of most households in a village are similar, any decision may cause dissatisfaction. Here, the issue is also at the level of allocating quotas of poor people, partly based on government statistics that claim unrealistically low poverty rates.

## **7.2 Chronic poverty in Liangshan Yi minority areas: The perspectives of insiders and outsiders**

This part will compare the views of insiders and outsiders on the causes of chronic poverty in Liangshan Yi minority areas. These views analyse the stereotypes of mainstream society on the causes of poverty of Liangshan Yi minorities. Understanding these views can help to explain the logic of poverty alleviation measures including education measures.

### **7.2.1 The causes of chronic poverty in Liangshan Yi minority areas**

In the existing Chinese literature, the main causes of poverty in Liangshan are summarized as a combination of conditions of the natural environment (less for agriculture and frequent disasters), geographical location (located in mountainous areas, inconvenient transportation and little access to market participation), and restrictions in terms of infrastructure and public service facilities (health and education), which further lead to the poor level of health and education. Finally, some traditional cultures and customs of the Yi people are also regarded as causes of poverty. (cf. Chen and Cheng 2014; Lan 2013: 76; Ming and Wang 2019: 23-24; Cun and Xu 2008: 24; Liu and Zhao 2013: 110-111). Based on these dominant views, a series of corresponding countermeasures were implemented. First of all, people who live in the high mountainous area are relocated by resettlement. Second, the poor are demanded and prepared to participate in the market and mainstream society through promoting basic and vocational education and labour migration. From the other perspective, according to a survey of 125 Yi people, they identify the reasons leading to their chronic poverty in their low income, the costs of agricultural production, for example, the price of chemical fertilizers and pesticides is high, natural disasters, diseases, remote geographical location (inconvenient transportation), little property, a lack of family members to work outside, a low education level and high education costs (see Chen and Cheng 2014: 79). Insiders and outsiders agree in their view on poverty in Liangshan on the points of the natural environment and geographical location and the lack of education as reasons.

However, there are also some comments expressing notions of cultural essentialism about the poverty of Liangshan Yi people. One of the most common explanations is that Liangshan was still in the stage of a slave society before the Democratic Reform. This is said to have led to the problem that the local culture is still too far away from modern society to adapt to it since people's ideology remains attached to the traditional society. These viewpoints hold that the local people's poverty is caused by their belonging to the Yi ethnic group and that poverty in Liangshan is poverty because of cultural reasons. This is representative of widespread biased views, especially the accusations of 'backwardness' against Yi culture, the idea that poverty is caused by 'ignorance' and a lack of competitiveness. The poor are considered to be responsible for their own poverty, and thus aid by the state is considered to increase the dependence of the poor on the government. Moreover, influenced by the ideas from the concept of a 'culture of poverty' (Lewis 1975), the mainstream view holds that these characteristics will be inherited within the family so that poverty can be transmitted from generation to generation (cf. Guo 2008: 22-23). This seems to be able to explain the long-term poverty in Liangshan and why the state's aid could not solve the problem so far. Therefore, improving the education level of the poor is pushed to the forefront of poverty alleviation strategies as measures in this field are considered to change the value systems of the poor. This criticism of Yi culture identifies some 'traditional customs' of Liangshan Yi people as the causes of their poverty. The authorities agree with these views and therefore think that it is necessary to change these 'bad customs' to overcome

poverty. These customs mainly include the large size of families because of the concepts of fertility and gender (cf. Ming and Wang 2019: 25), some irrational consumption customs (cf. Gan et al. 2012: 15465; Ma 2000), alcoholism and the lower importance of sanitation. The following part will mainly focus on the aspects of family size and consumption customs.

At present, Yi families in rural areas usually have at least three children (those who work in urban areas are only allowed to have two children), and most often have four to six children, however, in some special cases also ten and more. By contrast, local rural Han families in Liangshan generally have two children and most Han families outside Liangshan have only one child because of the one-child policy.<sup>93</sup> The factors that affect the number of children in rural Yi families include the parents' age, the children's sex ratio and the region. Yi women start having children after marriage (about 20 years old) and often continue until they are about 45 years old. Thus, before mothers are over this age, they may still have more children. Then, the number of sons is very important for their further fertility decisions. It was mentioned before that a Yi family should have at least one boy, and that it is considered to be better to have more than two sons because of the important role of men in Yi society.

In contrast, there is no expectation for the number of girls, but at best it should balance with the number of boys to offset the bride price money needed when the sons marry. Therefore, it is typical that families with more children usually have not reached the goal of having two boys earlier. As for the region, it is found that the number of children in Yi families in the Yi-inhabited areas is usually larger than in the ethnically mixed areas. For example, in the Yi families in rural Mianning a number of three to four children is common while it is four to six children in rural Meigu. From the outsider's point of view, the large number of children of Yi families overburdens the families. Thus, the resources (including educational resources) available to each child are extremely limited. Therefore, they cannot receive 'good education' thus lack competitiveness in the labour market later. These views of mainstream society are influenced by the widespread concept of 'bearing and rearing better children' instilled in the one-child policy that demands fewer children who receive more attention in fields like education.

Moreover, the consumption of Yi at religious ceremonies, weddings and funerals is considered to be 'luxurious', 'wasteful' and thus detrimental to wealth accumulation. According to a survey, religious consumption accounts for about 12% of Yi families' consumption, which is about 3,500 yuan annually per household (see Wang and Dong 2020). Another survey comes to similar conclusions, assessing the proportion of religious consumption at about 14% (see Gan et al. 2012: 15464). In my own survey, the villagers affirmed that religious consumption occupies a good part of their daily consumption. A common phenomenon is that Yi villagers' daily consumption is extremely low so that they can accumulate savings for the religious ceremonies (the needed goods are animals for sacrifice and beer). However, since the animals such as pigs and chicken are usually fed by the people themselves, the consumption at rituals is not always cash consumption. The specific costs for a ritual are very different. They mainly depend on whether a funeral or wedding is held or whether there is a family member who is sick.<sup>94</sup>

However, countering the criticism of such expenses, studies point out the relationship between these patterns of consumption and Yi traditional culture and social structure, in which these seemingly 'irrational' serve an important purpose (see Guo 2008: 23; Ruan 2017). As Heberer pointed out, when people really try

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<sup>93</sup> The one-child policy of China was abolished in 2016, yet birth rates continue to stagnate or even decline.

<sup>94</sup> The biggest expenses for religious rites are the funerals for parents (all sons share the costs of the sacrifices (at least 20 cows with many pigs) worth at least 200,000 yuan) (also see Luobian and Ma 2018: 35-38) or for the funeral of the wife's parents (at least two cows which is about 20,000 yuan are needed). If there are family members who got sick, several *Bimo* rituals are needed. The costs of these rituals are different because the needed sacrifices are based on the severity of the disease. For example, a sheep and several chicken as sacrifices (worth more than 5,000 yuan in total) are considered adequate for serious diseases or several small pigs and several chicken (worth more than 2,000 yuan in total) are used for less serious diseases. In addition, every Yi family needs to hold at least two *Bimo* ceremonies a year independent of special occasions. The cost of these normal ceremonies mainly varies according to the family's economic situation (often about 1,000-2,000 yuan per time).

to understand the logic of Liangshan Yi society, they can understand the meaning of behaviours that are at first considered irrational (2007: 6). The consumption at religious ceremonies or weddings and funerals is considered to be very important to the status and prestige of people and their family branch in Yi society. (see Wang and Dong 2020; Ma 2000: 132; Hao and Liu 2019: 45). Almost all the villagers interviewed, including Yi college students, regard the costs of rituals as a heavy economic burden, but they also emphasized the importance of the solemnity of these ceremonies. For example, whether the funeral is solemn reflects the filial piety of children. If people try to save money on these 'big issues' (especially funerals), they will face the big pressure of public opinion, which affects the reputation of their family and even of their family branch *civvy*. Moreover, the ceremonies have an important role in creating and maintaining social networks, as well as for nutrition balance, since people usually only eat grain and potatoes while the ceremonies are almost the only instance in which they will eat meat.

### **7.2.2 The causes of poverty in Liangshan's Yi-inhabited areas: The insider's perspective**

Liangshan has been closely associated with poverty in the impression of mainstream society because of its representation in the media and impression created by continuous national poverty alleviation policies. Moreover, outsiders' opinions also influenced local people's understanding of themselves. Typically, the view that Liangshan is more 'backward' than the outside world has become a common assumption of local people. In the context of the Chinese discourse on poverty, the official understanding of poverty mainly refers to certain standards in economic dimensions such as low income and low wealth (see Shih 2007: 427). Besides, it also includes social and cultural dimensions (see Guo 2008: 58, 60).

In comparison, in the perspective of Yi villagers, they often describe their poverty referring to a lack of cash and to the monotonous diet (many only eat potatoes). Many of them have internalized an identity as 'poor people' because of the subtle influence of the country's long-term poverty alleviation policies in the region, in which Liangshan is defined as a national deeply poverty-stricken area. As a Yi college student said, "We did not think we were poor before. When people from outside came to us and said that we were poor, then we were viewed as poor. In fact, our daily life has remained similar, and we did not distinguish between the poor and the rich before." (college student: RH-m-20). Here, the implementation of national poverty alleviation projects has made the locals feel that they are inferior, which has made them aware of their poverty and aggravated an inferiority complex (see Shih 2007: 117, 207).

Most Yi villagers interviewed report that they have been facing economic pressures for a long time. These pressures typically come from spending on 'big issues', such as marriages, funerals, medical expenses, housing construction and education expenses. In particular, the illness or death of family members easily causes a family to fall into poverty because of high medical expenses, the holding of religious ceremonies, and the loss of labour force. In contrast, the expenses for bride prices can usually be roughly balanced unless the family has too many sons. In daily life, rural Yi families rarely consume in ways that require cash as they are almost self-sufficient. The only cash-related consumption is to buy some daily necessities and agricultural-related products from the market once or twice a month (each time for about 100-200 yuan).<sup>95</sup> In comparison, the income of most Yi families is mainly composed of agriculture and animal husbandry and from migrant works. The former solves the problem of food and clothing, while the latter is the only major source of cash income. In recent years, the increase of migrant workers' income has gone hand in hand with an increase in consumption, which makes it difficult for most Yi families to have savings. Thus, they are very vulnerable to livelihood risks.

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<sup>95</sup> A survey of the consumption patterns of Yi families shows that food consumption accounts for 52% (mainly from self-planted grains and self-raised livestock), cultural/religious consumption for 14%, medical care for 12%, education expenditure for 6.3%, means of production for 6%, and housing for 9.7% (see Gan et al. 2012: 15464).

In the view of Yi intellectuals, poverty in Liangshan is mainly a result of its natural environment and geography as well as the influence of national policies. A Yi scholar criticized that many cultural accusations about Yi minority are raised because of ignorance of Liangshan Yi society. In his point of view, both poverty and other social problems in Liangshan are the results of the lack of education of locals and their marginalization in mainstream society. In his view, the two aspects of low education level and the exclusion of Yi villagers from mainstream society are interrelated. However, he did not agree that the lack of education was caused by the culture of ethnic minorities, but rather by insufficient investment in the education system. He criticizes that the current poverty reduction measures are mainly focused on infrastructure construction and cannot help the Yi villagers directly. (cf. Hou 2015).

The perspectives of Yi college students on the reasons for poverty in Liangshan are obviously influenced by the mainstream education they have received. They believe that Liangshan, as an inland mountainous area with inconvenient transportation, has disadvantages in the communication with the outside world, and that the natural conditions in Yi-inhabited areas are not conducive to the development of agriculture. Therefore, both market participation and self-sufficiency remain not very successful. In addition, they argue that the geographic location, the cultural closure of Yi society and the low education level further caused a gap between Yi society and mainstream society. As a result, locals have little chance to get decent jobs, which leads to very limited livelihood choices outside agriculture and animal husbandry. However, all the accessible livelihood choices at present can hardly help the rural poor to get rid of poverty. The students also pointed out that the unequal development within China is also caused by the inclination of national policies. Liangshan was neglected for a long time in national development plans. Thus, it has hardly developed in the past few decades. For a long time, the main development model of Liangshan was resource development based on the external investors, and the local people could hardly participate in it. Only some had the rare chance to get low-wage employments. (college students: LJ-M-20; AS-m-25).

### **7.2.3 The causes of poverty of rural Yi: Comparison of internal and external perspectives**

Influenced by ideologies such as Neoliberalism, the discourse on the poverty of minorities in China has formed several stereotypes. In contrast, the voice of the poor is ignored. Among the mainstream views on the causes of poverty among Yi people in Liangshan, there are many biased views, such as accusations of ‘laziness’, ‘feudalism/tradition’ and ‘low quality’. This section aims to compare the different interpretations of these stereotypes by insiders and outsiders.

#### **‘Laziness’ accusations**

In the views of outsiders, the Yi villagers are ‘lazy’. Many outsiders who have visited Liangshan base this judgement on several impressions. First, the poor personal hygiene of people is regarded as proof of laziness. Second, outsiders observe that Yi villagers (especially men) usually do not work in daily life but rather “play poker, bask in the sun and drink beer”. Third, some families have already lived in mountaintop areas in an old earth house for several generations. The outsiders argue that migration would be necessary and beneficial. Since many people don’t move, the outsiders see another sign of laziness. Fourth, some Yi people are involved in criminal activities (such as drug trafficking, theft, prostitution). They are regarded as unwilling to work hard but trying to make huge profits through illegal activities. Finally, those who depend on government subsidies for a living are regarded as accustomed to relying on the government and no longer willing to work.

From the perspective of insiders, all Yi respondents find it hard to accept the accusation that they are ‘lazy’. The young Yi people view their parents as very hard-working and argue that otherwise they could not survive in such a difficult environment. Those who work outside usually engage in the hardest jobs which



Han workers are now unwilling to do. (migrant workers: RS-f-15; SB-f-20; TQ-m-25; MB-f-25; QQ-m-15). They described a normal day for their parents as the following: the day for their mothers always started before dawn and getting up was followed by farm work, feeding animals, preparing meals and more farm work until about 6:00 p.m. Besides, she had to take care of several children and do housework. Since the sowing time of different crops is from March to June, and the harvesting time is from July to November, only the cold winter has little farm work and allows them to sometimes take a rest. The young and middle-aged men are usually working outside as migrant workers. When they stay at home, they take a rest. Thus, they will participate in recreational activities like playing billiards, playing cards, singing and drinking beers, but they will also engage in parts of the agricultural work during their time at home, especially those tasks requiring heavy physical labour. Yi men generally do not participate in housework. Ruan (2017: 215) explained further that the whole working time of Yi farmers in a year is concentrated to three months a year, but that this is also mainly because of the lack of land resources so that it is difficult to carry out more agricultural activities.

Second, Yi families still living in mountain top areas do not do so because of a lack of motivation to improve their living environment. They rather have no opportunities to engage in migration. The migration of Yi families has been a phenomenon for a long time. But it requires a great amount of capital. Thus, for those living in high mountain areas, migration is very difficult since they are often the poorest families in Liangshan. Therefore, they are usually the last ones in the chain of migration inside Liangshan. Moreover, many families living in alpine areas also mainly base their livelihoods on animal husbandry. Therefore, they need pastures in the high mountain areas. Staying there is not caused by laziness or a lack of motivation, but is based on existing livelihood considerations and restrictions on access to capital.<sup>96</sup>

Third, it was found that many materials distributed by the government in Yi villages imply the meaning of reminding Yi villagers to keep higher sanitary standards, such as the distribution of washbasins, washing machines, washing powders. The local people are very sensitive to the outsiders' accusations of poor sanitation.<sup>97</sup> A more neutral viewpoint on the accusations of Yi family's sanitation recognizes that outsiders impose their own standards on Yi society, which obviously does not take into account the objective conditions in Yi villages, for example, the lack of toilets, bathing rooms and washing machines. In fact, the people in Yi communities follow hygiene standards that are appropriate for their daily life considering they must engage in agricultural activities and feed animals. (college student: LL-f-20). In addition, it is observed that people living in the new settlements have much better sanitation conditions as a result of the new access to the necessary facilities and the declining importance of agriculture and animal husbandry. This clearly shows that poor sanitation was in large part caused by living conditions and cannot be interpreted as a sign of 'laziness'.

The crime problem in Liangshan has always been a major topic. Drugs, AIDS, poverty and ethnic conflicts are considered as the most prominent problems in Liangshan Prefecture (see Like 2017: 5; Luo 2020: 5). Drug crime and a series of problems derived from drug trafficking and addiction (including human trafficking, theft, robbery, murder and prostitution) have seriously affected the social order in Liangshan (see Like 2017: 6; Sun and Li 2013: 43). As a result, these problems have further contributed to the stigmatization of Liangshan Yi people in mainstream society. However, the reasons for the crime of some Yi people are much more complicated than 'laziness'. As a common explanation, most scholars agree that the low education degree and lagging local economic development caused the unemployment of the local young people, which is regarded as the context of some people engaging in drug crimes. In addition, it is

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<sup>96</sup> In addition, most families living in the alpine areas have already moved out because of TPA resettlement projects in recent years.

<sup>97</sup> When I visited rural Yi families, they usually asked me not to mind about the hygiene of the house. When we were eating together, they asked me if I was used to the way they eat and sometimes even gave me disposable bowls and chopsticks.

also related to the legacy of opium cultivation in this area, thus people did not regard drugs as dangerous or problematic at first, but saw them as a way to earn money. (cf. Tang 2009: 109; Ma 2000: 120; Sun and Li 2013: 42, 44; Luo 2020: 7). In the view of Yi college students, this is closely related to the lack of legal awareness of some people. Before they got involved in the drug trade, people did not realize the harsh punishment they might face. Later, they are already unable to get out because of addiction. (college student: XF-f-20). Liu (2011) tells the story of how a first generation of Yi youth went to the city and for the first time came into contact with drugs and thus also contracted AIDS. In the end, for many of them, this journey ended at the cost of their lives and Liangshan was hit by the disasters of a drug economy and the spread of AIDS for decades, both of which have seriously affected the development of this area.<sup>98</sup> As an example, Zhuhe Township in Zhaojue County is one of the areas with the most serious drug problems in Liangshan. An interviewee from there told about her experience that almost all young and middle-aged men (but often also women) in this village participated in drug abuse and drug trafficking when she was a child (about 10 years ago). Some of them died very early, while others are still in prison until today. Thus, there are many orphans in this village who are mostly raised by their grandparents or other relatives (vocational school student: AG-m-20). The drug problem in Liangshan has greatly improved, especially in the past decade. On the one hand, due to the government's severe crackdown on drug crimes, most people who engaged in the drug trade and use were imprisoned. On the other hand, because of the painful lessons, the Yi community started to manage the drug abuse by themselves based on the organization of their family branches.

Finally, with the increase of government assistance in Liangshan Yi-inhabited area, the accusations of laziness and welfare dependence of local people followed. For example, AIDS patients who received minimum living allowance *dibao* (about 40% of the total) from the government are sometimes accused by others of being 'lazy' or "unwilling to work but relying on government" (cf. Wang et al. 2019: 392). Similar accusations have been raised against the 'poor households' who received government subsidies. In contrast, families that receive the minimum living allowance think it is not sufficient to make a living and its distribution is unstable because the list of targeted households changes every year.<sup>99</sup> Other families that have not received any subsidies think they are far away from living from the state's aid. Thus, only a few rural Yi can rely solely on welfare payments for their livelihood.

### **Accusations of being 'traditional' and 'backward'**

The former Liangshan area was officially defined as "the last slave society in China" in the 1950s. Therefore, people often use the expression "one step across a millennium" to describe the changes of Liangshan since then. Until today, Liangshan Yi society is still regarded as far away from modern society that is represented by the mainstream society in the Chinese context. In particular, some of the Yi's customs are regarded as 'traditional' and 'backward'. First of all, Yi people's belief in the bimo religion is regarded as a superstition of ghosts, a typical and devalued heritage of traditional society. Second, Liangshan Yi society is still a society linked by blood relationships. Family branches *civy* are still the core of daily life, which again is regarded as a typical feature of a traditional society (cf. Guo 2008: 207). Third, the low social status of women is also regarded as evidence that Yi society is still 'traditional'.

For the insiders, at first, Liangshan is not a homogeneous society. This is reflected in that the degrees of 'modernity' and 'tradition' of Yi people in different ages and regions are very different. Here, a common view is that the younger generation of Yi people are more 'modern' while the older generation is more 'feudal' because the former received much more education and also have had more contact with

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<sup>98</sup> The spread of AIDS caused by injecting drugs was the main route of transmission in Liangshan Prefecture in the past. By 2017, there were 50,000 cases of AIDS infections in Liangshan, accounting for about 50% of the number in Sichuan Province, the province with the highest number of cases in China (see Wang et al. 2019: 389).

<sup>99</sup> The current minimum living allowance in Liangshan has different standards. Generally, it is about several hundred yuan per person and quarter (three months). And not all the members of a family will be included in the list.

mainstream society in general. (QQ Village Chief-m-35; volunteer teachers: MW-m-20; SB-m-20; QF-m-20). At the regional level, the Yi people in the Anning River Valley area, where the economy is more developed and the proportion of Han population is larger, are considered to be more integrated into mainstream society and are considered as more 'modern' than the Yi people in the original Liangshan areas. However, the Yi people in the Anning River region are also regarded as more assimilated into Han society. Moreover, Yi people living in urban areas are also seen as more 'modern' than those in rural areas. At the individual level, someone's education degree, social class, and experience of contact with mainstream society will affect his/her integration into mainstream society as well as the degree of 'modernity' assigned to the person. These trends show that it is inappropriate to regard Liangshan as a homogeneous traditional society.

Second, the negative perception of *bimo* religion is controversial, as it has not been recognized as a religion at the official level (cf. Guo 2020: 100). During the Cultural Revolution, its religious ceremonies were defined as 'superstition' *mixin*. This term is also used by the locals when they speak Mandarin. However, they do not share the devaluing meaning, but regard it as their legitimate faith. Local intellectuals are thus more inclined to call it *bimo* culture and regard it as the core of Yi culture. However, in the education system oriented along the lines of atheist mainstream society, the belief in ghosts is considered as a negative heritage of traditional society. Thus, those who preside over the rituals are more likely to be regarded as 'charlatans' than religious masters. The most frequently mentioned example of outsiders is that people hold *bimo* ceremonies to cure diseases instead of going to the hospital and that the Yi spend too much on these ceremonies. Both behaviours are viewed as irrational. However, in the eyes of Yi, a *bimo* is not a 'charlatan' who earns money with false claims, but an inheritor of Yi culture and of lofty morality. *Bimo* played a role as religious masters of ceremonies in Liangshan Yi society for thousands of years. Moreover, they also play a core role in explaining Yi culture and history. Therefore, they are seen as the most knowledgeable people in Yi society until today. For the Yi people, the *bimo* ceremonies organize important nodes in their daily life and the general life course (cf. Bamo 2003).

All the young Yi interviewees think that they can at least get spiritual comfort from *Bimo*'s ceremonies. At the same time, they will also visit hospitals. For the Yi college students, they emphasized that "not everything can be explained by science" (college student: ML-m-20). And they also have experienced or heard stories of curing diseases through *bimo* ceremonies, which strengthened their belief in it. Most importantly, holding ceremonies is closely related to a person's Yi identity. People must keep in touch with their ancestors through these ceremonies before they are recognized as members of the *civy* (family branch) as well as members of the Yi ethnic group. Therefore, Yi people who have received higher education and live in urban areas will still abide by the rules of holding ceremonies, even though they should be atheists as national cadres and Communist Party members according to the regulations of the Party (see Guo 2020: 99). Moreover, these ceremonies also have significance for the social relations of Yi as the ceremonies are often the centre of people's social interaction. Because people need to cooperate in daily life and help each other when encountering risks and resisting disasters, it is helpful that people will invite many relatives and neighbours to participate in the ceremonies to maintain close social relations. Therefore, the efforts for those ceremonies have a series of meanings beyond the religious sphere, as they ensure the reputation of the families and family branches, strengthen social interaction and ensure people of their identity.

Thirdly, for the Yi women in rural Liangshan, the main tasks are childbearing, housework and farm work, and the preference for boys is still dominant in society. Therefore, this makes Liangshan Yi society easily regarded as a traditional society with extremely low status of women. The Yi men insist that the status of men is closely related to their obligations for their families and that the different roles of men and women are caused by practical needs rather than a gender bias. The most important factor behind the inequality is

the importance of the family branches *civy* and their organization via paternal blood relationships. The number of male members of the family branches is regarded as representing the fighting power of a family, which was very important in the past when small-scale fights against other family branches happened regularly. Besides, only male descendants can be recorded in the 'family tree' *jiapu* of Yi branches. Thus, the number of males is very important for the growth and inheritance of Yi family branches. Moreover, in practical considerations, sons are also much more important for the parents. For example, only sons are obliged to support their parents for their retirement and hold funerals while daughters almost fully lose contact with their parents after they get married. (QQ Village Chief-m-35; college students: LL-f-20; students: XM-f-20; XB-f-20). In addition, having no sons or no children is considered shameful in Yi society and it will seriously affect people's social status. For example, people forbid childless people to participate in religious ceremonies and they will not be included in the Yi family tree after death (villagers: MH-f-40-Meigu; MZ-m-40-Meigu; Focus Group Interview at BG Village in Meigu County).

### **Accusations of 'low quality'**

Rural Yi people are often accused of having 'low quality' *di suzhi* by mainstream society because they do not abide by the behavioural rules that are regarded as 'civilized' in Chinese mainstream society. Often, this is considered to be due to their lack of education. In the mainstream society, there are stereotypes on Yi male migrant workers, which hold that they are 'rude', 'dangerous' or 'barbaric', also see (Liu 2016). In this regard, the interviewed Yi college students speculated that the negative impression of the mainstream society might come from the stereotypes formed in the 1980s by the local residents of the ingoing places of Yi youths since most people have no experience with Yi people in their daily life. The image of Yi migrant workers as one of the most marginal groups in the labour force and some criminal incidents (drug trafficking and group violence) further strengthened the bad impressions. The students agree on the explanation of the low education of Yi people in these groups as the reason for the impression. They argue that their fellow Yi are often unfamiliar with the rules of mainstream society and attempt to use violence to solve problems. However, people ignore that the anger of Yi workers is often due to the discrimination they are subjected to in the mainstream employment market. (college students: ZI-f-20; LL-f-20; AS-m-25; CG-f-20).

Similar to the accusation of a traditional lifestyle against Yi people, the college students think that it is unreasonable to regard Yi people as a homogeneous 'low quality' group. For example, they indicated that they are working hard to maintain the positive image of Yi groups (college students: ZI-F-20; LL-f-20; AS-m-25; CG-f-20). However, even if they received good education and behaved themselves according to the standards of the mainstream society, they were still treated unfairly in some cases. For example, when applying for jobs, they were still rejected because of their Yi identity (college student: XQ-m-20). As a result, the common Chinese accusation of 'low quality', originally referring to low education degrees and insufficient Mandarin proficiency, has become a common accusation when employers reject Yi workers or give them lower wages, also see (Wang, M. 2018).

### **7.3 Transitions of educational opportunities and the livelihood choices of rural Yi youth**

This section will discuss the livelihood choices of rural Yi youths in Liangshan. These predominantly include agriculture and animal husbandry, migrant work, self-employment and formal positions in the public sector. The middle-aged and elder generation usually have a livelihood in agriculture and animal husbandry, while for rural Yi youths who have not received higher education, migrant work is at present the most common livelihood. Moreover, though self-employment is still the choice of a minority, it is becoming increasingly important in the last decades. Formal jobs (especially as civil servants and teachers, which require a high education degree) are still regarded as the best livelihood because of the stability and high social prestige.

Before the Democratic Reform in 1956, the main livelihood strategy of Liangshan Yi people was agriculture and animal husbandry. At that time, the handicraft industry and commerce had not been separated from agriculture. Since 1956, while transforming the private handicraft industry, a number of industrial and mining enterprises have been developed. A local industrial system was built including metallurgy, electric power, coal, building materials, food and textile in Liangshan. (see Guo 2008: 78). However, during the period of Maoism, the vast majority of Liangshan Yi people continued to live in their traditional way of livelihood. Only a few people have received education, and few have gone out to seek employment (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 2). After the economic reform in China in 1978, commerce began to develop rapidly in Liangshan, and a number of small traders and private entrepreneurs appeared. Although the educational degree and management abilities of those traders and entrepreneurs were not high (see Guo 2008: 78-80), they were still pioneers in the modernisation of Liangshan at that time. (see Heberer 2007). Since the 1980s, the trend of Yi farmers to go out to look for employment in other regions of China has appeared under the context of more relaxed population mobility policies. Since the 1990s, Liangshan rural Yi people have been more and more closely connected with the mainstream society, which is reflected in the increase of labour migration and the planting of cash crops. At that time, school education also has become gradually more popular for the rural Yi families. Since the 2000s and especially after 2010, migrant work has gradually become the common livelihood choice of most Yi rural youth. Now, although most Yi families still maintain the livelihood of agriculture and animal husbandry, the scales of both are decreasing. As a change of common livelihood strategies, the rural Yi families now combine labour migration with a decreased scale of agriculture and animal husbandry (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 3-4).

### **7.3.1 Young people are leaving agriculture and livestock breeding**

In the past, almost all Yi family labourers engaged in farming and animal husbandry (see Ruan 2017: 209). They were self-sufficient and had almost no cash income. The grain was mainly used for self-consumption and feeding animals, while the rest could be sold. Animals are used for farming (cattle), transporting (horses) and eating (cattle, sheep, pigs and chicken). Livestock was also used for paying for weddings and funerals instead of using cash. The religious ceremonies and entertaining guests were almost the only occasions for rural Yi to eat meat. Beyond this, there was only a small amount of cash crops that could provide a little cash income. As for the family divisions on labour, women usually bear most of the agricultural work, while men took on heavy physical labour, such as ploughing. Grazing was usually done by elderly people and children. (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 17).

The importance of agriculture and animal husbandry to Yi families in rural areas is decreasing. Because of the increasing demand for cash, self-sufficient life is no longer viable for many. Due to the limited area of arable land and the low prices of crops, Yi farmers can hardly get cash income directly from agriculture.<sup>100</sup> The main source of cash income in agriculture and animal husbandry is from livestock and some cash crops (such as walnut, pepper and tobacco). However, because of the decrease of the scale of animal breeding of most Yi families that will be addressed later (the total number is generally less than 20) and the need to consume most of them during religious ceremonies and hospitality, the quantity of livestock that can be sold is very small.

According to official data, the average annual disposable income of the rural population in Liangshan was 10,368 yuan in 2017.<sup>101</sup> The interviewed villagers reported that it is difficult to have a precise overview of their income since it is scattered across many small transactions. But they gave a rough range. In their estimates, each household can earn about 10,000-20,000 yuan from agriculture and livestock in cash each

<sup>100</sup> The prices of potatoes, corn, buckwheat, the most common crops in rural Yi areas of Liangshan, are all about 2-3 yuan/kg in 2019.

<sup>101</sup> However, considering that this data includes about half of the rural Han population and other incomes not derived from agriculture and animal husbandry, the income of rural Yi people can be expected to be lower. (see Liangshan State Bureau of Statistics 2018).

year.<sup>102</sup> Because of the popularization of migrant work and education in rural Liangshan, many young people are no longer available for agricultural work. Therefore, families are experiencing a labour shortage for farming and animal husbandry. Thus, many families have reduced or even abandoned the cultivation of labour-intensive cash crops and also have largely reduced animal husbandry. (see Ruan 2017: 211; Rehamo 2018: 124).<sup>103</sup> This has affected the local ecological environment, including reduced demand for pasture. (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 20). The livestock manure that was used as fertilizer in the past has to be replaced by chemical fertilizer now because of the decrease of livestock, which leads to pollution and additional costs (see Ruan 2017: 215).

Moreover, animal husbandry is an integral part of Yi culture and its reduction might also indirectly affect the cultural inheritance (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 21).<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, although the income from migrant work is much higher than that from farming, the latter is still commonly regarded as the fundamental guarantee for food and clothing. Typically, middle-aged women and elderly people stay at home and continue to engage in agriculture. Those who work outside Liangshan will return home during the busy agricultural season (such as July). Therefore, the main sources of food of rural Yi remain their own planted crops, supplemented by buying rice and instant noodles.

Furthermore, besides the reduction of the household labour force for agriculture and animal husbandry, the development of agriculture in Liangshan faces many other unfavourable factors. First of all, most of the arable land in Liangshan Yi minority areas consists of small plots located on the hillsides. Therefore, it is difficult to improve agricultural production efficiency since it is impossible to resort to large-scale and mechanized agricultural production. Secondly, the ecological environment is fragile, and natural disasters increase the vulnerability of farmers' livelihood. Third, the agricultural policies put farmers in a disadvantaged position in the market since the price of primary agricultural products is low and the labour value of farmers is seriously devalued. These unfavourable factors for engaging in agriculture and the attraction of cities make agriculture less attractive to the younger generation. Therefore, most Yi young people are reluctant to continue to engage in farming and animal husbandry in rural areas and prefer finding other livelihoods in cities.



Photo 11 : Sheep herding in the alpine region, in AF village, Zhaojue County. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 24 July 2021.



Photo 12 : Yi farmers harvesting potatoes, in AF village, Zhaojue County. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 24 July 2021.

<sup>102</sup> These incomes mainly include: selling cash crops (about 2,000-10,000, depending on the area of arable land) and occasionally selling animals (about 100 yuan/chicken, big pigs about 2,000-3,000 yuan; sheep about 3,000-5,000 RMB; cows about 80,000-10,000 yuan, surplus grain for about 2,000-3,000 yuan).

<sup>103</sup> The number of sheep, cattle and horses raised by Yi families is decreasing. Many only keep a small number of pigs (usually only 2-3) and chicken (less than 20) for their own consumption. The cattle and horses formerly working in agriculture are being replaced by agricultural machinery.

<sup>104</sup> Livestock plays an important role in religious sacrifice, social communication and clothing of Yi people.





Photo 13 : Yi farmers working on a new agricultural estate for strawberries, in Sikai Township, Zhaojue County. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 01 September 2021.



Photo 14: Yi farmers select tomatoes on an agricultural estate, in WQ village, Zhaojue County. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 23 July 2021.

The authorities aim at bringing about agricultural modernisation. They regard the smallholder farming economy as the reason for the slow development and low efficiency of the agricultural industry. For example, in the TPA project, the authorities have built some large-scale agricultural estates in Liangshan. According to my own survey,<sup>105</sup> these projects are joint ventures by the local government and external enterprises that share investment and management. The new agricultural businesses are located in the best former paddy fields in the Yi-inhabited areas of Liangshan. They mainly plant cash crops on a very large scale and are directly produced for the markets in China's coastal areas. In those projects, the local farmers provide their land-use rights and serve as cheap labour. Besides, they are not able to participate in the projects directly because they are defined as not having the necessary modern agricultural and market knowledge. There are case studies about the agricultural industrialization in Liangshan, which show that these new industries have excluded the farmers from the profits. Instead, the involved enterprises eventually make the most profits (cf. Ruan 2017). These cases show that the approach of promoting the industrialization of agriculture is likely to push farmers out of the agricultural industry.

### 7.3.2 An alternative livelihood choice for Yi farmers: Migrant work

In the 1990s and the early 21st century, Yi farmers who went out to work could only earn meager incomes. Even worse, they also suffered from diseases, drugs and arrests as they entered marginal and criminal milieus (see Liu 2011a). Later, the labour shortage in labour-intensive industries in China's coastal areas and the popularization of education in rural Yi-inhabited Liangshan made it possible for the Yi youths to earn money by migrant work (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 24). Especially since 2010, the income of migrant workers has increased a lot, so the scale of Yi migrant workers has also increased significantly since then (see Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 11).<sup>106</sup> The income from migrant work is much higher than that from farming and animal husbandry. Highlighting this, the locals often said that "the income of working outside for one month is higher than that of farming for one year" (migrant worker: TQ-m-25; teachers: SB-f-65; XD-m-40; college student: ML-m-20). Therefore, the young generation of rural Yi are turning to labour migration as their main livelihood and the rural Yi families have adopted a mixed livelihood of agriculture and labour migration. Most young and middle-aged Yi people (especially men) work outside for most of the year. Although it is still difficult to get savings by migrant work because of the instability of the jobs, most Yi migrant workers can bring some money home, which is a very important income (even the only cash income) for the family.<sup>107</sup> Besides the income from migrant work, there are also some other reasons for Yi youths to choose migrant work as their livelihood. Firstly, the rapid growth of the population in Liangshan

<sup>105</sup> It is conducted in Sikai Township, Zhaojue County in September 2021.

<sup>106</sup> In 2003, there were only about 50,000 Yi people working outside Liangshan, accounting for 1.1% of the total population. By 2010, this number had reached 542,000 (see Kang et al. 2012, quoted after Harrell and Rehamo 2013: 23).

<sup>107</sup> Typically, a Yi migrant worker who works in factories can bring back home about 10,000-20,000 yuan per year. Those who are engaged in especially hard and dangerous jobs (for example, as construction workers and workers on high voltage lines) may earn several times more than people working in factories (more than 8,000 yuan a month). However, these jobs are also very unstable.

has increased the pressure on the land resources. Thus, some young people choose to go out to work, even if they cannot get surplus income. This can at least reduce the burden of feeding more people for the family. Secondly, the demand for cash of Yi families is increasing, so it is difficult to continue a self-sufficient lifestyle. Finally, young people's yearning for city life is also a motivation to go out. Some of them even drop out of school in order to go out to work earlier. However, most young people underestimate the difficulties of migrant work and also expect too much from city life. Some young Yi migrant workers told about their hard experiences in cities in the first years and expressed disappointment (migrant workers: RS-f-15; SB-f-20; LW-m-25; TQ-m-25; MB-f-25). They still have very limited choices of jobs, typically including odd jobs in factories, construction work, high voltage construction work, and certain forms of service work. It is difficult for young Yi workers to get a permanent position and almost all are temporary workers (see Liu 2016). They usually need to work for up to 12 hours per day and have to move frequently to different places following job offers. The city life they yearn for is often limited to the workplace. Time for entertainment is only possible when they have not found a job yet.

However, in these phases, they will also consume a lot of their savings since the living costs continue while they have no income. Most Yi migrant workers have encountered different forms of exclusion and discrimination in cities. The most common saying is that "many factories do not want us (Yi workers)". It is more difficult for Liangshan Yi migrant workers to get jobs (even more difficult than Yi people from Yunnan, because they are seen as less rebellious than Liangshan Yi) and their salaries are easily cut. With the accumulation of work experience, many Yi migrant workers realize that there is little prospect for them in the livelihood of migrant work since they cannot accumulate wealth from the jobs and they will be rejected by employers after a certain age (about 45 years old). Nevertheless, many found that they have no alternatives because if they stayed at home they would become a burden for their families. Due to the instability and the constant risk of losing their job, few families give up their agricultural livelihood completely (unless they move to other places where they have no arable land). This new mix of livelihoods changed the division of labour within the family. Fathers and newly grown-up children go out to become migrant workers, while mothers stay at home to take care of the elderly and young children and to handle farm work and housework. Most Yi rural children have at least one parent (typically the father) who is absent for most of the year. Thus, the older children have to take on more responsibilities for taking care of younger brothers and sisters, housework and agricultural work. This leads to a reduction of their time available for school and thus has a severe impact on their education.

### **7.3.3 A new trend of livelihood choices: Small trade**

Commerce is a relatively new phenomenon in Liangshan Yi society. According to Yi tradition, all surplus production materials should be shared with family members. Selling these things was regarded as not in line with the ethical norms of Yi society. Therefore, traders are a new group for the Yi society, which appeared in the 1950s. According to Heberer (2007), the group can be divided into different types of entrepreneurs and traders such as the former state cadres, people who have inherited a handicraft industry and small traders (2007: 90-92). Before they started to run a business, they were farmers, cadres (about a quarter) or employees/workers (see Heberer 2005: 411). Compared with Han entrepreneurs, Yi entrepreneurs usually run small business that need less investment, human capital and technology. They are typically in some small industries and handicrafts, in transportation, construction, catering, trade and other service industries (see Heberer 2005: 412). The start capital of private enterprises of Yi business-people mainly comes from their family branch members. Thus, according to Heberer (2005: 413-414), about a quarter of companies run by Yi business-people can be considered as family businesses.



However, the support of families is a double-edged sword. It can not only help the enterprises to get starting capital (otherwise all capital needs to be accumulated by years of migrant work) and trusted employees, but can also become a burden to the business as the businesspeople need to care for all the members of the family branch. (see Heberer 2005: 415-416). In Liangshan's private companies, Han and Yi entrepreneurs both tend to employ members of their own ethnic groups. However, the scale of Yi enterprises is still very small. Therefore, there are also only a few Yi employees in the local private sector (see Heberer 2005: 419). For example, in Meigu and Zhaojue counties, where the proportion of Yi exceeds 99%, the shops in the county seat are still mainly run by Han businesspersons from other parts of Liangshan or from areas surrounding Liangshan. Yi traders usually run stores for Yi traditional clothing or mobile stalls with less capital requirements. In the township of those Yi-inhabited areas, the small traders are mostly local Yi people. They usually run in daily necessities shops, shops for farm tools and for other items for the rural demand.

This section will mainly focus on small-scale traders. Although running a business is not a widespread livelihood in Yi society so far, the increase of migrant workers leads to an increase in cash-based consumption and thus created business opportunities. It is observed that more and more Yi young people run small businesses in the county seat of their home areas, which is now considered as an alternative to migrant work. The typical business scope includes transportation services (formal or informal taxis), daily necessities stores, stalls selling snacks, stalls selling farm products such as livestock, fruits and vegetables, and repair shops, restaurants, hotels and barbershops. There are also some small entrepreneurs based in the agriculture sector who raise fish and chicken, or plant fruit trees and herbs in order to sell them. These small businesses usually have low requirements for capital (usually less than 100,000 yuan) and technology.

It is worth noting that women are also widely involved in these businesses. For example, traditional clothing shops, small daily necessities shops and food stalls, as well as some service industries are common fields of self-employment for women. Compared with Han traders, Yi traders have the advantage of local social networks, and Yi customers are often more willing to patronize their shops. Still, the Yi traders interviewed said that the profits of their small-scale trade is just enough to make a living and that the income is not stable. Especially in some over-competitive fields such as informal taxis and daily necessities stores, the profits have dropped sharply in the past few years. Yi traders think that the main advantage of self-employment over livelihood such as migrant work lies in the convenience of being able to take care of their families. They usually have not given up agriculture and rather run a small business as a supplementary livelihood for obtaining cash income.

#### **7.3.4 Formal work as the best livelihood choice**

As mentioned, there are three typical positions that are regarded as formal jobs by local people in Liangshan's Yi-inhabited areas (namely civil servants, doctors and teachers). These formal jobs now all require bachelor's degree diplomas, which can be obtained in university education and higher vocational education. Only a few years ago, secondary education diplomas were often sufficient. In order to get a formal job, people with the required education degree need to pass a corresponding qualification examination. Generally speaking, obtaining formal jobs is the ultimate goal for almost all Yi college students. They are expected by their parents and family branches to get a formal job (preferably as a civil servant) in Liangshan after graduation. It was mentioned before that few Yi college students are employees in the private sector and the public sector is almost their only choice. This is based on the expectations of their families, as well as requirements of programmes, which helped them pass the college entrance examination. In so-called targeted projects *dingxiang*, they must return after graduation and work several years in a designated institute. Moreover, the students also realized that they have no advantages in the labour

market outside of Liangshan. In fact, ethnic minorities can expect to be treated more equally in the local public sector than in the private sector. Almost all the interviewed Yi college students plan to become civil servants or teachers in Liangshan after graduation. However, it is more difficult for graduates of higher vocational schools to obtain those formal jobs than for college students. If they have not achieved the goal, they must still work as a migrant worker later. The official income of formal jobs has no obvious advantages compared with that of migrant workers and is sometimes even lower. For example, most rural school teachers think that their income is not enough to maintain a decent life.<sup>108</sup> However, formal positions have the advantage that they are highly stable and can also bring social prestige for the employees and their families. (college students: LG-m-20; GM-f-20; RH-m-20; KG-m-20; AS-m-25). They become important to relatives as they can help other family members to get access to educational resources or other public resources. Therefore, formal jobs are still regarded by the Yi families as the best livelihood choice.



Photo 15: traditional Yi clothes store, in Meigu County. Photo by author, Meigu, 16 June 2021.



Photo 16: small trader sells apples on the street near WQ village, Zhaojue County. Photo by author, Zhaojue, 2 September 2021.

To sum up, the development of education in Liangshan and the state's development (poverty alleviation) interventions have had a complex impact on different levels from regions to individuals. The overall development of Liangshan Prefecture is accompanied by a widening development gap between Liangshan and the mainstream society as well as a widening gap within Liangshan. This trend in education is reflected in the expansion of education with the simultaneously cemented inequality in the distribution of educational resources. For the Yi youths, receiving more education means that they are also more influenced by the mainstream culture. Especially the increase of girls' education has affected the traditional marriage model and gender roles in Liangshan in some aspects. Moreover, the popularization of education of Yi youths has influenced their livelihood choices and ethnic identity (including language use). Thus, Yi rural youth are leaving agriculture and animal husbandry and are making more diversified livelihood choices, including labour migration, small trade or employment in state departments. The individual livelihood strategies are closely related to the education level of a person. In general, the goal of elite education (here referring to higher education) of Yi people is to train local managers and educators, who play a role as the bridge between the mainstream society and the minority society. Correspondingly, the goal of mass education for rural Liangshan Yi youths is to educate them about the language and values of mainstream society, including the cultivation of patriotism. This makes them qualified Chinese citizens and can meet the basic requirements of mainstream society for workers in the labour-intensive industries. At the regional level, the popularization of education allowed most of the Yi villagers to participate in the market economy. The resulting large-scale labour migration contributes to the local economy to some extent. However, it also means the loss of labour force for local development. This leads to increasing dependence of Liangshan Yi-inhabited areas on the demand for their workforce in mainstream society.

<sup>108</sup> At present, the basic salary of an ordinary civil servant or an ordinary teacher in Liangshan is only about 3,000-4,000 yuan per month. But there is usually an undefined amount of bonus at the end of the year. For the middle school teachers in Meigu the bonus is about 40,000 yuan per year.

## **8 Discussion: the modernisation of Liangshan and the perspective of Yi youths**

This discussion part is mainly about the difficulties faced by rural Yi youths when they pursue educational careers and attempt to overcome poverty. Though education may prove to be helpful, under the current situation of unequal educational opportunities, it may also consolidate their disadvantaged position.

### **8.1 The dilemma of marginalization**

Liangshan is in a marginal position in the Chinese as well as the global economy. The main industries of Liangshan are concentrated in natural resource development, agricultural product processing and tourism and the development of these industries mainly depends on external investment. Therefore, the main role of Liangshan in these industries as well as in China's market economy is to provide raw materials, natural resources and cheap labour. According to Fragmentation Development Theory, for the marginal groups, modernisation means that they become dispensable to the economy. Their labour and products are not needed, and they are not important as consumers either (cf. Scholz 2004: 229). Following the theory, the manifestations of the marginalization of the Yi ethnic group in Liangshan in the global economy include that firstly, the Liangshan Yi-inhabited areas have always been among the poorest areas in China and the Yi farmers usually have very low cash income, thus their consuming capacity is very limited.

Secondly, the main livelihood of Yi farmers is a combination of agriculture and animal husbandry industry with labour migration. As for the agricultural livelihood, the agricultural products of locals are mainly for self-sufficiency but do not participate in the market. For migrant work, they are facing even worse exploitation than most other migrant workers in China. They must accept low wages, a poor working environment and employment instability. Thus, both livelihoods strategies allow them only to participate marginally in the economy. Unreliable livelihoods are the core reason why the rural Yi cannot get rid of poverty. Their educational disadvantage relative to the mainstream society has always been regarded as the root cause of their disadvantage in the employment market, which is also the reason why education is often put on the agenda for regional development policies in Liangshan.

However, few people regard the disadvantaged position of ordinary Yi people in the job market as the result of their exclusion and discrimination. Low educational achievement as an explanation of their marginal position rather rationalizes it. However, discrimination is real. In the fields that Yi workers are engaged in, they always get significantly lower wages than other groups (for example, Han workers). The pricing disparities of these groups are not only due to the difference in education levels, but based on the devaluation of Yi workers' labour force. These devaluations are the result of long-term stigmatization and marginalization that will be explained in the following part.

When the first group of Yi people went out and attempted to seek a living there, they failed and some even fell into criminal activities (including drug trade, theft and robbery). Later, the prevalence of drugs and AIDS in Liangshan led to the stigmatization and marginalization of Yi groups in mainstream society (see Liu 2011a). Until today, they continue to be marginalized in the development of China (see Liu 2011b: 408). In the process of the contact between Yi youth and mainstream society, they experienced different degrees of exclusion. However, the high price of the initial interaction with mainstream society has not stopped the new generation of Yi young people from pursuing a life in the cities and the modern world. They are more generally educated and learned lessons from their predecessors. However, they continue to experience exclusion and discrimination in the cities as a stigmatized minority group at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Today, this is reflected in their passive position in the labour market and their limited access to public resources in their workplaces (including education resources). This makes most labour migrants unable to effectively overcome their poverty.

## 8.2 Stigmatization and identity dilemmas

Liangshan's Yi-inhabited area is regarded as a very underdeveloped area. Moreover, with the crime problems, which are also a manifestation of extreme poverty in this area and unfavourable media coverage, stereotypes about Yi groups and Liangshan were formed. As a result, they are often viewed as a 'dangerous' and 'barbaric' group in mainstream society. Many young Yi people have partially internalized those stereotypes about them, especially those about their poverty and 'backwardness', which are also promoted in their school education. The influence of the values of mainstream society leads to contradictory psychology about their identity as Yi minority. On the one hand, they affirm their Yi identity and argue that it is an unchangeable identity, and they also learn in their communities a certain sense of superiority over other ethnic groups. On the other hand, the Yi identity makes them feel discriminated against in the outside world and feel abased in some cases that are typically related to the 'backward' status of their ethnic group.

Moreover, even for the winners in the education system among Yi people, there is a sense of abasement to some extent because they are always confronted with the accusation that their achievements are based on affirmative action rather than accomplishments (cf. Rehamo 2018: 175; Shih 2007: 157). As Shih (2007) argued, if the privilege of ethnic identity only means the protection of the disadvantaged groups in a society, it is difficult for them to feel self-esteem and confidence in their ethnic identity (2007: 157). This can be observed by looking at the unwillingness of Yi college students to talk about their 'privilege' in access to positions of higher education.

## 8.3 Dilemma of assimilation: Ethnic integration and cultural nationalism of Liangshan Yi people

'Sinicization' or the identification of Han society as the development direction of all minority societies has long been the main idea to solve the minority problems in China (see Zang 2016: 7). This idea is influenced by Confucianism, which sees assimilation of other ethnic groups as a better means of governance than violence (Heberer 1989: 18). Therefore, strengthening ethnic integration has become the main goal of ethnic policies. It is considered as not only conducive for the acceleration of the social transformation in western China, but also good for the strengthening of social stability.

Some scholars go as far as viewing the identification of ethnic groups as such a potentially destabilizing factor (cf. Ma 2007). Thus, these scholars argue that the current system of regional autonomy should be changed in order to strengthen national integration and unity of the country (cf. Hu and Hu 2011; Ma 2007), which has caused an international debate. Short of this position but still clearly focused on promoting national integration, institutions like schools are conveying the values of mainstream society to ethnic minorities (see Postiglione 2011: 371). Thus, national identity and patriotism education are important contents in the minority education of China.

With the popularization of education and the transition of livelihoods of the young generation of rural Yi, the tie between the Yi young generation and mainstream society has been strengthened compared with their parents. This is accompanied by a trend of ethnic assimilation in which their minority characteristics have been weakened. The process of popularizing basic education has played an important role as it has become a window for ethnic groups like the Yi who had little contact with mainstream society to learn mainstream languages and cultures. As a result, the younger generation of Yi uses Mandarin in more situations than their mother tongue.

In general, those Yi who live in urban areas and received more education show the greatest adaptations to mainstream society and they begin to see their traditions and customs critically. Thus, Yi culture is no longer valued as before and is even regarded as a symbol of 'backwardness' from their viewpoints. This trend will further influence the identity of the younger generation of minorities, which was predicted by Heberer who

argued that the improvement of education levels may also mean the alienation from ethnic identities and culture (see Heberer 1989: 51). Many scholars, especially Yi scholars have been worried about the loss of Yi culture and traditions. For example, Harrell and Rehamo regard it as “the tragedy of cultural diversity and the of the Nuosu people themselves” (2013: 22).

However, the reality is not so pessimistic yet. Until today, the Yi people still maintain a high degree of ethnic identity. In fact, Liangshan Yi people are regarded as an ethnic group, which has well preserved its traditions and culture. This may be attributed to their ancestor worship and the importance of blood lineage, as well as their marriage model and national pride. Here, the boundaries of marriage between ethnic groups play a core role in the assimilation of Yi groups. According to Mackerras (2011), the willingness to marry Han people can often show the attitude of ethnic minorities towards being assimilated. Thus, those ethnic groups who resist intermarriage are often especially focused on maintaining their ethnic identity (2011: 13). The intermarriage between Han and Yi is slowly becoming possible, but is still not accepted by most of the elder generation. Besides, the subtle distrust relationship, which may be caused by the historical accumulation of conflict-laden ethnic relations and the sense of superiority of Han people (see Ji 2018; Heberer 2007) also consolidates the ‘ethnic boundary’.

A sense of pride as a Yi is especially evident among Yi intellectuals. This group often tries to find a balance of national and ethnic identity. The interviewed Yi college students argued that their national identity as a Chinese and the ethnic identity as a Yi are not contradictory but have different meanings, even though the national identity is said to be more important than the ethnic identity. The most frequently heard viewpoint is that “I am at first a Chinese, then a Yi”. As Heberer (2007) said, the nationalism of Liangshan is different from a tough cultural conservatism. Instead, its main purpose is to demand the valuation of their language and culture (2007: 211-212).

## 9 Conclusion

While Chinese mainstream society holds an overly optimistic attitude about the positive effect of education for poverty alleviation, this paper holds that education should be carefully regarded and not uncritically taken as a 'panacea' to fight poverty. As Gómez and Gaete (2019: 7) pointed out, the generally poor educational results in specific groups are the result of social structures. Therefore, education can be either a strategy to fight poverty or one of the factors to make it permanent. However, in the Chinese context, minority education also includes other goals besides reducing poverty such as cultural assimilation. The development and education policies of minority areas in China are mainly based on the goal of realizing modernisation and assimilation to achieve both economic and political goals in these areas. The underdevelopment of the minority areas has influenced the further economic growth of China and threatens the unity of the nation. A social transformation caused by the state's intervention has been observed, and the impact on the locals is complicated. On the one hand, they have more opportunities to contact and integrate into mainstream society. This means more choice of livelihoods and a reduction of their marginalization in society.

Nevertheless, it also brought challenges for Liangshan Yi. Until today, they are still facing various dilemmas that hinder them from improving their circumstances further. Though the state has implemented a series of development policies in Liangshan's poverty-stricken areas (mostly Yi-inhabited areas) with the goal of modernisation, it should be noted that modernisation has two sides. Though the purpose of 'development' is to gradually integrate the people in remote areas into the mainstream society of the country, this will endanger the 'traditional' lifestyle and local economic development strategies, and require transformations (Kreutzmann et al. 2012: 41).

Forty years after Deng Xiaoping proposed the Reform and Opening Up, the rapid growth of China's economy was accompanied by rapid social transformations and widening social disparities. Although the long-term poverty alleviation projects have improved the economic indicators of western China and officially eliminated absolute poverty, the relative disadvantages of the western region have not really improved because other regions are developing even faster. However, this problem is not addressed. The discourse on the economic and educational disadvantages of minority areas usually falls into a circular argument. In the end, the poor were considered to be responsible for their own difficult situation. Although the Chinese government expresses strong confidence in solving social problems including minority issues through economic growth, the current model of economic growth lacks the inclusiveness needed to meet the interests of socially disadvantaged groups. Instead, most of the benefits of economic growth are obtained by the rich while the poor are often excluded (cf. Bhalla and Luo 2013). In the context of this focus on macroeconomic considerations and the growth of wealth and power of the state and national elites, minority policies have shifted from a focus on autonomy and culture to economic development, which is closely related to the development goals inspired by classical modernisation theory. According to Kreutzmann (2012a), "the classic minority policy has been replaced only superficially by the regional development policy. At a deeper level, it still hides the goal of economic modernisation" (2012a: 66, translated by author).

China's modernisation development goal has penetrated into areas like Liangshan Prefecture, which had little contact with mainstream Chinese society in history. Since the 1950s, the authorities have implemented a series of development policies (including education policies). Still, Liangshan's Yi-inhabited areas have been always facing serious development problems. It was not until the implementation of TPA in recent years that officially nobody suffered from absolute poverty. The poverty alleviation projects had a significant impact on infrastructure and public services, industrial structure and cultural heritage. These

influences have also penetrated into the daily life of locals. As a trend, the locals are changing their traditional lifestyles and values, and are increasingly influenced by the values of 'modernisation' and mainstream society.

Although the members of the Yi ethnic group in Liangshan still largely adhere to their beliefs, culture, language and customs, a trend of ethnic integration and cultural assimilation can be widely observed, for example, in the language use and daily life of the young generation of Yi people. For these changes, education plays a core role since it is the place where young people learn about mainstream culture and its language. Moreover, education also leads to the deepening of the existing social stratification in Liangshan. Those families with superior capital can maintain their position and access the educational resources allocated by the state for minority areas in the name of affirmative action policy. Superior educational resources and higher education opportunities remain scarce resources and the poor are usually far from a competitive position with local elites. Therefore, though the rapid expansion of the scale of education in Liangshan in the past two decades has improved the general situation of basic education of rural Yi youths, the opportunities for them to improve their plight through education are still extremely low. With the limited education they receive, they can only participate in mainstream society marginally, for example, as low-wage migrant workers. They are still largely excluded from the economic opportunities and welfare of the economic growth of China. The rural Yi youths are facing a dilemma in which they are on the one hand attracted by cities and modernisation, but also dragged back to Yi society on the other hand. Though they no longer see the rules of Yi society as their guidelines in the same strictness as older Yi do, they still generally follow them because of the authority of their parents and family branches. At the same time, they are attracted by the mainstream society because of its modernity and prosperity and thus attempt to pursue achievements according to the values of the mainstream society at the individual and ethnic levels. The resulting ambiguity will thus continue to be a part of the young Yi people's life decisions.

## 10 References

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