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Good Intentions Gone Awry: Education Policy and Paradox of Consequences in Rural Ethnic China

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Abstract: This paper provides a situated critique of how evidence-based, “best practices”-oriented research can result in unanticipated consequences and perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy at the expense of deeper understanding of educational problems. I structure the paper along two analytical steps. First, I explore the sociology of unintended consequences through German Sociologist Max Weber and his contemporary critic Mohamed Cherkaoui. Second, I draw from an ethnographic study in rural ethnic communities of Southwest China to illustrate how best intentions at providing free compulsory education go awry, and how the controversial policy both fails and succeeds in fabricating its intended outcome. The ethnographic evidence highlights the unintended consequences of not only a state policy but also the fraught ways in which it is linked to other social mechanisms to produce a “successful failure.” The paper argues that by focusing on “best practices” and “what works” we often neglect the ways in which questions are posed and the ways in which assemblages of forces generate the topic or phenomenon in the first place. A research design that takes into account unintended consequences is necessarily emergent, interpretive, and open-ended.

For decades, education research has suffered an unenviable position in the hierarchy of scholarship. It is often described as unsystematic, fragmented, and lacking rigor, which has not only brewed an inferiority complex among scholars and practitioners but also given rise to a flurry of evidence-based research to identify “best practices” for reforming education (Davies, 1999; Atkinson, 2000; Biesta, 2007). The move to evidence-based research and the agenda-setting of “best practices” in education is in part due to the ways in which experimental sciences in search of causal relations have come to dominate research paradigms as well as federal level policies and funding priorities in the United States and elsewhere (Baker, 2012; Davies, 1999). For instance, in elaborating the task of evidence-based education, Davies (1999) argues:

[E]ducational activity is often inadequately evaluated by means of carefully designed and executed controlled trials, quasi-experiments, surveys, before-and-after studies, high-quality observational studies... Moreover, the research and evaluation studies that do exist are seldom searched for systematically, retrieved and read, critically appraised for quality, validity and relevance, and organized and graded for power of evidence. This is the task of evidence-based education (p. 109).

Clearly, causal or correlational designs that can provide robust evidence to test hypotheses, predict outcomes, and present “what works” have become the gold standards of research validity, quality, and relevance (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). The idea of intervention – administering a treatment or effecting a change in a given situation – is considered central to the study of policies, schools, curricula, and classrooms. Education research is tasked with generating evidence about the effectiveness of intervention, i.e. “what works” by means of experimental designs. Parallel concerns about this have been articulated in national policies in different contexts, such as the Evidence-based Education Network in the UK that provides a clearinghouse of “best practices” to teachers, and the Evidence-Based Education initiative in the No Child Left Behind Act in the US.

The confidence in evidence-based research is based on a presupposition that rational actions (such as randomized controlled field trials) will yield anticipated outcomes, and the relations between means and ends are nothing short of predictable and manipulable in an ideal-typical setting. This often gives rise to a technocratic model of educational research in which the only legitimate questions are instrumental questions that focus on “what works” – the effectiveness of educational means and

techniques – yet ignore the more important (and difficult) questions of what is “educationally desirable” (Biesta, 2007, p. 5) and how the question-posing can limit our vision of what counts as “empirical evidence.” Education is a deeply cultural, social, and political practice interwoven with the larger structure of the society. A cookbook approach to “best practices” risks dismissing the “controversial” aspects of schooling that cannot be neatly accounted for in a “what works” model of knowledge/policy production. Controversy is not something to be avoided in our question-posing, or overcome in our research objectives. On the contrary, as Sheppard (2001) argues and as the very existence of the Journal of Educational Controversy testifies, we must acknowledge that controversy is neither an obstacle nor a vice, but a meritorious part of our everyday human condition. Engaging with controversies can have epistemic merits in decolonizing particular ways of reasoning and problematizing, analytical merits in cultivating a critical spirit of inquiry to appreciate complexity and ambiguity, and methodological merits in not merely focusing on “what works” but developing sophisticated educational understandings of “what doesn’t work” and why. Engaging with controversies invites us to pose questions differently and respond to unintended consequences differently.

The instrumental rationality underlying evidence-based research often produces simplistic understandings of reason and rationality in decontextualized settings. That rationalization often leads to irrationality, and the fact that apparently irrational behaviors can have very rational foundations testifies to the paradoxical nature of instrumental rationality. Take bureaucracy as an example. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls bureaucracy “a social phenomenon” that often violates its own alleged ideals so that “everyone has a bureaucratic horror story to tell” (1993, p. 4). Cherkaoui asks similarly: “Why does bureaucracy, a rational organization of people

and things, and something capable of ensuring a vital form of predictability for modern society that is exceptionally efficient, become such an obstacle to it, and generate so many dysfunctions” (2007, p. 56)? In other words, through formal rationalization of laws and regulations, bureaucracy is set up as a means to organize societies in coherent and systematic ways. While a bureaucratic system is expected to operate like a logical machine in the interest of establishing rational social practices, in reality, bureaucratic objectives are challenged by contradictions between official norms and localized social values and by the ironic fact that the means supposedly served by bureaucracy often becomes an end in itself. The rational automation of the bureaucratic machine produces its very antithesis: unpredictability, absurdity, and even oppression and violence.

Just as a pure rational action rarely (if ever) exists in real life, the results of government policies and human actions are often contrary to the intended outcomes of rational planning. Moreover, the ways we problematize educational issues are further shaped by disciplinary, governmental, and social discourses – as Foucault brilliantly argues in *The Order of Things* (1973) – which confer both visions and blind spots for what counts as problems, evidence, and knowing. Therefore, to move beyond the “technical,” “instrumental” concerns of “what works” requires a broadening of methodologies to include the “cultural role of research” (de Vries, 1990, as cited in Biesta, 2007, p. 18-19) in providing rich interpretive possibilities for understanding and imagining social reality differently. As Keith and Pile (1993) reminds us, social scientists should be cautioned against asking questions of “arbitrary closure” and presenting questions as if they were universal and context-transcendent. Making sense of social practices that are neither straightforward nor predictable and recuperating from our “data” more than its face values requires us to contest taken-

for-granted borders, build new linkages among seemingly unrelated social processes, and create what is “not yet” in our theoretical arsenal and social imagination.

Taking up this Special Issue’s call for a critical reflection on the paradoxical nature of education, this paper provides a situated critique of how good intentions can result in unanticipated consequences and perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophesy at the expense of deeper understanding of educational problems. The paper argues that by focusing on “best practices” and “what works” we often neglect the ways in which questions are posed and the ways in which assemblages of forces generate the topic or phenomenon in the first place. I structure the paper along two analytical steps. First, I explore the sociology of unintended consequences through German Sociologist Max Weber and his contemporary critic Mohamed Cherkaoui. Second, I draw from an ethnographic study in rural ethnic communities of Southwest China to illustrate how best intentions at providing free compulsory education go awry, and how the controversial policy both fails and succeeds in fabricating its intended outcome. The ethnographic evidence highlights the unintended consequences of not only a state policy but also the fraught ways in which it is linked to other social mechanisms to produce a “successful failure.” The findings, I argue, cannot be derived from a research design based on a vision of causation or correlation among measurable variables. A research design that takes into account unintended consequences is necessarily emergent, interpretive, and open-ended.

Revisiting Sociology of Unintended Consequences

French sociologist Mohamed Cherkaoui developed an intriguing trilogy to explain the unintended consequences of human actions. Cherkaoui (2007) used the term “third world” to designate the paradox of consequences, alongside the “first

world” of natural phenomenon and the “second world” of anticipated outcomes of the plans of human activities. While the first world unfolds in a cosmic plan especially in the Christian interpretation of divine omniscience and higher reason, the second world develops along predictable, conventional circumstances. The theorization of the “third world” expresses the idea that there is no direct correlation between individual interests and behaviors on the one hand, and their collective effects on social structure and order, on the other. Good can come out of vices and vice versa. There is a paradoxical relation between private acts, often driven by self-interests, and societal outcomes, often unintended and unbeknownst to the individuals, which can be either positive or negative from the viewpoint of the collective. An example of the unintended consequences of human actions is the theory of the “invisible hand” developed by Adam Smith (1776) in *Wealth of Nations*. The invisible hand, per Smith, is the mechanism within which self-interested individuals labor and compete with one another in the free market, and by intending only for their own maximal gains, render the revenue of the society as great as it can be. Invisible hand facilitates the transition of an individual’s behaviors into an end which has no part of her/his intention. Cherkaoui explained:

[M]acrophenomena are the consequences of the actions of actors who did not aim to produce them. Actors are not, generally speaking, capable of predicting the distant outcomes of their actions. One part of what we conventionally term social order, such as the division of labor or a class of institutions, is the spontaneous effect of individual actions but not their rationally constructed product (2007, p. 30).

Another example of the paradox of consequences is Max Weber's famous study of the relations between religious doctrine and economic behaviors. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/2001), Weber contended that the inner-worldly asceticism of Protestantism emphasized hard work, discipline, and frugality, which serendipitously opened a way to commerce and made possible the development of capitalism in the West. Individual subscription to Protestant values, particularly Calvinism, led to the accumulation of wealth, as, according to Weber, Protestantism interprets business success as the outcome of a rational life. Thus, Protestantism plays an unintended role of cultivating the spirit of capitalism which is congruent with the Puritan ethic (such as to conduct life and work rationally, to treat work as a vocation, to reject traditionalism and ritualism, etc.) without any intention of either the founders or the carriers of that religion. In addition to the spirit of capitalism, unforeseeable to religious reformers like Luther and Calvin, Puritanism contributed indirectly to the advancement of science through advocating industry and frugality, increasing one's wealth as a sign of salvation, and ultimately promoting the essential role of reason (Cherkaoui, 2007). Religion served to develop natural sciences in such a way that empiricism (rational knowledge) is seen as the means to understand the effect of God's creation in nature. The paradox of consequences here is understood not in a sense of a causal relationship – that Protestantism led to capitalism or natural sciences – but in the intrinsically open and mutually interdependent nature of human behaviors and social systems.

In the sociopolitical sphere, cases of unintended consequences abound. The tough-on-crime policy adopted by state and federal governments in the United States provides one sobering case. Initiated in the 1960s and intensified over the last few decades, the War on Crime has resulted in an alarming increase in the number of

arrests, sentences, and penalties, and produced a disproportional incarceration rate among low-income African Americans. It has led to a new system of surveillance that uses racial profiling as a crime-reducing tactic yet turns many people into fugitives living in the shadow of the criminal justice system (Goffman, 2015; Wacquant, 2009). Similarly, within the urban school setting in the U.S., the policy emphasis on security has inadvertently reinforced the views of working-class masculinity as violence-prone, contributed to men's (especially those racialized as Black and Latino) higher frequency of discipline by school authorities, and forged an unintended school-to-the-prison pipeline (Lopez, 2003). Another familiar tale is that disproportionate numbers of racial minorities are warehoused into low-level curriculum and special education classes in urban schools, making special education a punitive space, a far cry from the original intent of providing individualized services to pupils in need. Additionally, scholars (Fine & Weis, 1998) have lamented about the state-initiated violence in the guise of welfare that inflicts pain and suffering on poor and working-class adults in urban America. Rather than delivering intended outcomes (i.e. addressing social inequality through meaningful programs for the disadvantaged), the welfare system and its functionaries become a mechanism that stigmatizes, humiliates, and demonizes people of color and people in poverty for their own conditions. That social programs ostensibly designed to meet human needs produce unexpected, even ruinous results sheds light on the fraught relation between intentions and outcomes. It is this less-thought-about relation that constitutes an essential paradox of social action.

Education and Rural Development in Southwest China

In the broad media spotlight, images of “ruthlessly dedicated students”¹ and the “study abroad fever” sending the largest number of students overseas² continue to

fuel global interest in China's educational system. In the 2010 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Shanghai students' superb performance in math, reading, and science secured China the top ranking on the global league tables, projecting an image of educational "China Rising." While a flurry of scholarly, policy, and media reports have been produced to understand the unique Confucian or "chopstick culture" (Cheng, 2004) that may offer a key to the ever escalating educational desire (Kipnis, 2011) in China, the belief in "education for social mobility" has not been uniformly embraced by an immensely diverse population. On the flip side of the success story is the vast rural ethnic landscape trapped in educational mediocrity, stagnation, or even crisis. During sixteen months between 2009 and 2010, I observed rural schools in two minority village-towns being turned into besieged workplaces where teachers and students faced daily ordeals of discouraging, disorienting, and even deceitful practices. My ethnographic incursion into the classrooms, school yards, corridors, family dinner tables, rice fields, and village markets afforded ample opportunities to understand what it was like to live, work, go to school, and drop out of school in a socioeconomically marginalized, ethnically-marked, geographically isolated region in Southwest China. Inside as well as outside school, factors abound to shape the deeply distressed contour of rural education despite good policy intentions.

The alarming dropout rates among China's culturally and linguistically marginalized, impoverished rural minority populations present a stark contrast to the "Shanghai PISA miracle": a survey conducted in 2004 by the Rural Education Research Institute of the Northeast Normal University revealed a disconcerting 40% dropout rate in a sample of 17 middle schools in 14 rural counties across 6 northern

provinces, a percentage significantly higher than the official prediction of 3%.³ Since the early 2000s, policymakers have tightened the Compulsory Basic Education Law that stipulates universal junior secondary education (Grade 1-9) for all school-age children regardless of region, ethnicity, gender, and family socioeconomic status. Compulsory school attendance legislation allows state authorities to mandate a common schooling to all eligible children of age. It yokes public schools across the country to the central administration and mandate of a largely top-down educational system. Schooling is not only underscored as a symbolic work in fostering national culture and prosperity, it is also upheld as a functional means to redress the cycle of poverty among the peripheral populations, however that “peripheral” is defined in geographic (remote, rural), economic (low-income), or cultural (ethnic minority) terms. With a collective anxiety towards the vast disparities between the east coast and the western inland regions, the Chinese state promotes basic education as a catalyst for social mobility and economic wellbeing especially in target regions with high dropout and illiteracy rates. The twin policy goals commonly referred to as the Two Fundamentals/Basics Project (TBP, 两基) are adopted to universalize junior secondary enrollment (Grade 1-9) and eradicate adult illiteracy through increasing public educational expenditure in low-income regions.

Between 2009 and 2010, I spent 16 months conducting intensive fieldwork in a Miao and a Dong minority village-town (pseudonymed Majiang and Longxing respectively) in Qiandongnan Prefecture, Guizhou Province, a resource-stripped mountainous region historically seen as part of China’s southwestern frontiers. By the time I concluded my fieldwork, the good intention of the compulsory education policy (the Two Basics Project, TBP) seemed quickly fading: with one third of the middle school entering cohort dropping out before finishing 9th grade in both villages,

education remained an elusive ideal that increasingly shoveled vulnerable teens into the school-to-the-factory pipeline. Many dropouts took up low-end service work as migrant workers and form a new segment of working class laboring in China's coastal cities. In a recent volume *Fabricating an Educational Miracle* (Wu, 2016a), I have attempted to unpack the complex issue of educational disenchantment in rural minority communities against the increasing pressure of being "a learned individual" in contemporary Chinese society. In this article, I will take a close look at the paradox of consequences when compulsory attendance legislation not only fails to reverse the high attrition rates but also becomes part of the problem it is charged to address. To do so, we must first understand the broader landscape of rural development within which schooling is situated.

While education is upheld as a developmental tool to bring rural minority regions on par with China's rapid economic growth, it is further linked to state rural renewal agendas that involve bureaucrats, policymakers, corporate agents, tourists, and local residents in a conflict-ridden vision of rural modernity. Traveling in Qiandongnan is a sensory-ridden experience with breathtaking mountain scenery, precarious roads, and a ubiquitous public display of political discourse. State slogans written on roadside bulletin boards, such as "Today's education is tomorrow's economy;" "Today's dropout is tomorrow's poverty;" and "Developing tourism, building a new socialist countryside," advertise the strategic importance of promoting education and tourism side by side and become part of the material and symbolic extension of the rural landscape. Indeed, first-time travelers are quick to sense the educational and developmental ethos mobilized to transform a once "rugged" and "out-of-the-way" place. Over many centuries, Guizhou's diverse ethnic groups have been subject to assimilation into and central administration by the Chinese empire,

whether through military confrontation, land encroachment, or the peaceful means of education and ethnological studies (Hostetler, 2001). In recent years, the rhetoric has shifted from depicting ethnic groups as barbarian and backward to eulogizing them as integral to national unity and prosperity. A discourse of incivility has given way to a discourse of empowerment, yet the idea of a linear temporality remains firmly in place to frame the rural and ethnic as not-yet-modern people/groups situated on the primitive end of the developmental hierarchy.

During the time of this research, rural life in Qiandongnan had been in a constant state of flux. Urbanization had diminished the traditional role of agricultural production and triggered a massive rural-to-urban migration involving hundreds of thousands of peasants in search of economic opportunities. Many rural communities in Qiandongnan were left empty by the massive absence of youth and young adults who migrated to the cities to eke out a living. While state agencies saw tourism as an opportunity to increase revenue, local residents also consciously looked to tourism as a practical means to “make it” without leaving home.

In recent years, ethnic tourism has ridden the high tide of a theme-park-style construction where signature landmarks are highlighted, travel amenities installed, performance facilities built, and everyday life dressed up in artificial manners. The display of physical landscape and cultural heritage is often outsourced to commercial companies, featuring an agenda of experts, officials, and merchants. The refurbishing of minority culture, lifeways, and vernacular architecture into prime tourist attractions forms a key part of the master development plan endorsed by the National Tourism Administration and the Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau. This master plan represents the latest attempts to deliberately capitalize on the “Chinese style tourism”

where performance, architecture, and landscape in ethnic theme parks invite the visitors “not only to inspect but to enter the theatrical sense of the occasion” (Stanley, 1998, p. 65). This master plan also echoes a “regime of images” that offers stylized presentations of a place to both feature some sense of the ethnic-ness and the modern standard of aesthetic satisfaction.

To construct ethnic theme parks in both Majiang and Longxing villages, many aspects of rural life were circumscribed and strictly controlled. The state and commercial planners, vested in institutional and financial power, sought to remake the vernacular landscape by retouching, highlighting, preserving, or concealing aspects of the lived environment in order to present the exotic ethnic identities and experience (Wu, 2016b). The attempts of the villagers to renovate or rebuild their own houses could lead to fines, demolition, and even eviction, if the houses were judged incompatible with a traditional architectural idiom that tourism planners aimed to preserve. Community public spaces, such as the drum towers, wind-and-rain bridges, and opera stages, were garnished with artificial décor to present a set of cultural stereotypes. Their roles as the ancestral heirlooms and cultural landmarks were glossed over in a speedy wave of visual production and place-making. To harmonize with the visual effect of “a community of wooden houses,” villagers’ desires to upgrade their homes into brick structures were sacrificed. For the same reason, schools in both villages were forced to evacuate from the village centers, along with other public facilities such as medical clinics and government offices, to make room for commercial ventures. The officials justified the public facilities’ removal as a necessary concession to expanding tourism success, as their brick-and-concrete structures were too “modern” and thus at odds with the durable symbol of “tradition” that official and commercial planners tried to promote. Public facilities collapsed into

a striking irrelevance against the backdrop of commercial tourism success. Villagers frowned upon the notion of beautification the planners wished to engineer and worried that in remaking the villages into “tourable” spaces, state bureaucrats and commercial developers largely rendered their communities “unlivable.”

Through enforcing compulsory education and promoting rural tourism, the Chinese state joined hand with the market in an effort to transform the rural ethnic population into self-entrepreneurial individuals responsible for pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. Education and tourism in Qiandongnan are contextually bound. Just as village teachers were increasingly drawn to moonlighting opportunities on the tourism market at the expense of their teaching duties, tourism also attracted a higher number of officials, to the burden of local schools, who came to conduct school inspections so that they could also enjoy free-ride tourism. Meanwhile, school sites were coveted for their property values and came under siege by commercial encroachment. Dropout students were lured by jobs on the tourism market and made a living as souvenir vendors, hotel janitors, and restaurant workers. Tourism became a distinct background where pedagogical goals encountered individual aspirations, bureaucratic agendas, and commercial interests to form an idiosyncratic nexus of unintended consequences. The theatrical aspect of appearance management in tourism was also present in rural teachers’ work to which I will now turn.

The Shadow Work of Teachers: Unintended Consequences of Audit Culture

School inspection, we are told by politicians and educational officials, is essential for improving the transparency and accountability of educational institutions. Audit, thus considered, subjects school operation to expert scrutiny and, at first glance, seems to promote public good. Focused ethnographic inquiry shows,

however, that the process of monitoring and auditing illuminates selected procedures while obscuring others and produces certain kinds of carefully choreographed information for intended audiences (Koyama and Kania, 2014; Kipnis, 2008). The information, if unexamined, further misdirects policy formation to exacerbate existing inequity and marginality. The episode described below illustrates the on-stage and off-stage work of school actors in coping with an intense audit culture, and the ironic consequences thus produced by the regime of accountability.

It was early May 2009, only a few days before the impending inspection by the provincial delegate. The Dong village of Longxing had been selected as one of the sites on the delegate's itinerary, an "unfortunate" event according to the teachers who had grown weary of frequent school audits by different levels of government officials all year long. As much as students faced numerous (weekly, monthly, mid-term, final, county-level, district-level, provincial, national, etc.) exams, rural teachers were subject to various performance audits designed to gauge their content knowledge, pedagogical competency, and ideological correctness. Among these evaluative schemes, school inspections had the highest stake. As the delegate's grand tour in the region would determine whether universal basic education had been achieved, both the primary school and middle school (the only two schools in the village) in Longxing had spent weeks and months preparing for this significant event. In my observation, the preparation entailed several interlinked aspects involving school administrators, teachers, and students. Firstly, numerous forms regarding enrollment data needed to be carefully doctored, as a 30% dropout rate would undoubtedly invite official sanction and jeopardize the teachers' and the schools' futures. Secondly, the dilapidated school compounds – in part due to the capricious tourism planning that threatened to take over the schoolyards for commercial purposes thus perpetually

delayed the much needed renovation— were to be carefully groomed to conceal the disrepair. Thirdly, the physical absence of dropout students needed to be covered by substitutes to match the now close to 100% enrollment data on the paperwork. Village schools assigned full-time data administrators to prepare various forms and rosters and employed the strategies of borrowing students from each other or turning returned migrant workers into one-time students for the inspection. The names of students who had long since dropped out were kept on the official rolls as a means for the school to continue collecting educational expenditure from the government.

On the morning before the delegate arrived, both schools in Longxing cancelled classes to enlist students' labor in the final round of cleaning, mopping, and decorating. Red banners inscribed with welcome messages were hung up on the school walls. Science labs and libraries, rarely used and covered in dust, were wiped spotless. The usually dreary and congested teachers' offices were freshened with flower bouquets. A steady stream of youngsters arrived to report their attendance; they were either summoned from nearby villages or sent by parents or guardians of dropout students to sit in for the day. A student performance team undertook one last round of dress rehearsal to get ready for staging their welcome in the evening. Dinner banquets with ethnic specialty dishes and locally brewed rice wine were meticulously arranged, and teachers explained that these days they had to focus more on dinner tables than classrooms (*zhizhua jiuzhuo buzhuo jiaoshi* 只抓酒桌不抓教室). That the dorms were battered and crumbling, that the playground was dug through and at risk of becoming a tourist parking lot, that the students were alarmingly disengaged, that the teachers were demoralized and attended to their job only half-heartedly were inconvenient truths quickly swept underneath the carpet. What was immediately at stake was the need to fulfill the planned quota (100% grade promotion and zero

attrition) as set in the national policy agendas. This form of performance audit has its historical antecedent during the Maoist era when pre-set production quotas dictated local self-reporting and drove widespread statistical fabrication. As a legacy of the centralized planning, the audit rituals function to demonstrate accountability yet conceal the painstaking work involved in staging a political spectacle (Smith et al. 2004).

As Goffman (1959) argues, the conducts of social actors are similar to dramaturgical performances with an aim to project desirable impressions and keep dirty laundries out of sight. The schoolteachers oriented their actions on the basis of their evaluation of the bureaucratic demands, often in exchange for professional legitimacy and career security. They practiced concerted silence in a socio-political milieu where direct confrontation was to be avoided, and sought to turn the bureaucratic constraint into a resource by cultivating favors and relations with official gatekeepers. In private conversations, village teachers blamed the audit culture and state surveillance for their own unmet obligations, such as cutting classes, making up numbers, running sideline businesses in negligence of job duties, and tending only half-heartedly to an unsatisfying work life. These hidden aspects of teachers' lives constitute a morally ambiguous domain of compulsory education that is often left out of policy discussions or evidence-based studies in search of best practices. For these “mountain teachers” (*shanqu jiaoshi*, a nomenclature used by the teachers themselves), the best practices may not mean a reduction of class size or an improvement of instructional facilities, though additional resources are always a welcome relief to financial difficulties. The need to repair the damage to their professional conscience, to be free from the overreach of the bureaucratic restrictions, to reset priorities, and to gather grassroots support for their work – all these point to

larger structural issues and barriers to rural educational equity, issues and barriers often neglected in governmental policies with ample rhetoric but little political will to achieve the goals.

Rural teachers were not simply unwilling pawns of oppressive authorities; collectively they managed to get by through devising moves and countermoves, concealing the schools' dilapidation and soaring dropout rates, practicing concerted silence, and greasing the social wheels so as to circumvent the bureaucratic restrictions. As street-level bureaucrats deeply entangled with the materiality of educational policy, village teachers adapted to the regulations from above and engaged in daily negotiations when laws clashed with local realities. The audit episode showed how policy demands could turn into "social dramas" to wear down teachers' pedagogical energies and render them inherently incompetent in the classrooms. The overworked and underpaid teachers in turn "framed" rural students as problematic and uncooperative, who gave the school a bad record and caused so much trouble when it came to state inspection. Less mentioned by the teachers who lamented student absenteeism is the issue of teacher absenteeism. Due to the constant demands of state inspection, teachers had to cut class time to work on paperwork or simply cancel a class by turning it into a self-study (*zixi*) period. Rural teachers engaged in shadow work beyond the domain of formal curriculum as the result of the structural overburdening. Without sustained community engagement (an ethnographic effort of some kind) beyond a hasty inspection, the bureaucratic regime makes invisible what teachers and students really need in marginalized village schools and ends up doing more harm than good.

Despite the good intention to ensure progress and accountability, school inspection becomes a bureaucratic ritual that leaves the teachers with a diminishing sense of control over their work life and fails to comprehend the larger forces pushing many students out of the system in the first place. Moreover, such occasions mark tensions and moral ambiguity, involve practices of trickery and misinformation, and cause personal anguish and institutional burdens, which exacerbates the already difficult conditions rural schools face. With a sense of powerlessness mixed with shame and anger, rural teachers found themselves unwilling accomplices of the authorities, and their complicity disruptive to their professional duties. Yet, as Weber (1904/2001) argues, the irony of bureaucracies is self-perpetuation. State agents charged with school inspection justify their work with the government mandates for accountability. Yet, the alleged accountability mechanism becomes the problem rather than the solution to what it is charged to address. Despite the good intention, the state bureaucracy not only helps to fabricate a success story that justifies its own legitimacy, but also reinforces a vicious cycle of concealing and silencing the real conversations that need to take place in order to deal more intelligibly with the educational dilemmas in rural ethnic regions. The issues of poverty, urbanization, labor migration, rising unemployment, and rural-urban inequality are educational problems as much as they are social ones. Without an honest reappraisal of these mechanisms that have eroded the educational-social mobility among the rural poor, education policy research will remain ineffective. A research agenda with keen sensibility of the paradox of consequences requires a critical bifocal lens (Weis & Fine, 2012) to examine both structural conditions and local lives, and how economic, social, and institutional arrangements constitute circuits of dispossessions stripping

away resources, opportunities, and sense of cultural competency among rural ethnic minorities.

Constructing Meaning, Recasting Agency: Good Intentions of Compulsory Schooling Resisted?

The carefully fabricated school inspection covered up what actually went on in overwhelmed rural educational settings. Children suffered the greatest when classes were canceled and teachers were preoccupied with preparing paperwork and entertaining audit-conducting officials. If the teachers' distorted engagement with bureaucracy points to one facet of the controversies of good policy intentions, the students' and families' meaning making reveals yet another rich domain that explains why compulsory schooling has lost its purchase when encountering other forms of values and rationalization. In this session, I explore the co-presence of multiple moral claims as they play out in the understanding of state compulsory education scheme.

The sustained encounter with state bureaucracy is an undeniable aspect of the school's hidden curriculum. The students knew officials were coming when their teachers cancelled classes and ordered them to clean up the campus. They were also frequently enlisted to stage an ethnic singing or dance show to demonstrate hospitality and entertain the visitors. They learned to be quiet and cooperative on the day of school audit when dropout substitutes "borrowed" from other villages went undetected under the inspectorate's gaze. They grew immune to the listless pedagogies and periodic absence of their teachers who were spread thin under stressful bureaucratic transactions. Many lived with boredom and uncertainty of their future beyond the school walls. As much as their teachers, students learned to perform

to choreographed scripts when called upon, and were thoroughly socialized with a state of mind to get ready to stage a show for audit-conducting officials.

With the uptake of tourism in the communities, mass consumerism had taken a stronghold in students' daily life. Despite the teachers' reprimands, whenever an opportunity arose, they took to the street to seek fun and temporary respite from the dreary classrooms – what they sometimes referred to as the prison. From time to time, students would be caught surfing online in the internet café, drinking, smoking, and loitering on the street. The street was considered as a morally ambiguous zone where consumptive temptations and the influx of people brought mixed bags of good and vice. Since the promotion of tourism, teachers in both villages took up night shifts to patrol the school compounds after evening study hall, to make sure no students were out on the street and no tourists were still at large on the school property. For the teachers, the street was a nuisance to school safety and symbolized the danger of the outside world, a danger made particularly salient in the context of tourism. And yet, students were also quick to complain: “Why do teachers forbid us from seeking fun when they themselves do?” Students were acutely aware of the teachers' frequent banqueting with inspectors, entertaining officials more than fulfilling teaching duties, indulging in mahjong (a tile game involving various degrees of gambling) in their spare time, and moonlighting on the tourism market to reap financial benefits from commercial activities. Ironically, to the students, the school more than the street had become a space of hypocrisy. Schooling's discipline and authority was contradicted by encroaching commercial motives, prevailing bureaucratic surveillance, diluted professional ethos (of teachers), and the declining value of credentials over all.

In home visits to persuade dropouts to return to schools, I had seen teachers and parents getting into heated debates. The teachers often harnessed legal discourse to remind the parents of their duties to see to the children's completion of junior middle school: "Don't you know it's against the law if you don't send your child to school?" The parents, on the other hand, invoked the immediate family poverty and schooling's extremely unproductive outcome to question the law's legitimacy. Over and over again, I heard them hurling the rhetorical question back to teachers: "If college graduates have a hard time finding jobs, what chances are left to our kids who only finish 9th grade? Look at our conditions here: tourism is taking over and you teachers are minding your own business. The schools are soon to be bulldozed and replaced by hotels. What chances do we have? We'd rather our kids start working now." And work usually meant eking out a living as migrant workers on factory assembly-lines or construction sites. What we see in the exchange is a kind of moral incommensurability. The teachers spoke from a position of the state bureaucrats and reiterated the authoritative discourse linking individual academic achievement to legal duties, in a similar fashion as the slogans "Today's education is tomorrow's economy; today's dropout is tomorrow's poverty" displayed on roadside bulletin boards. The parents, however, manifested a different position grounded not in the abstract language of law and economy but in labor market outcomes and making ends meet in the day to day. They were social critics in a very real sense, who understood their dilemmas as more broadly situated in a system of economics, rural-urban structural inequality, authoritarian developmental agendas, and the erosion of educational and social mobility on the whole.

Students were also astute critics of the pedagogical regime and the existential lethargy it produced. Especially for those labeled as behaviorally problematic and

educationally low-achieving (*chasheng*), schooling stood as an unjust and dehumanizing process that yielded stigma and hierarchy yet little individual fulfillment. On numerous occasions, I had seen students resort to popular culture, misbehaviors, or even subversive acts (such as smashing the windows of a teacher's home) to flout school rules and voice their discontent. While the schools had fallen prey to commercial *raison d'être* with their physical sites subject to takeover by businesses, spatial battles became pedagogical battles to "teach" students of the educational decline in the communities. Villagers complained that tourism and commercial penetration had increasingly marginalized schooling and strangled the cultivation of local talents.

While parents with dropout children were singled out for being morally lacking, what went on inside and outside the school walls fueled moral contestation of the pedagogical efficacy of compulsory education. To students and their families, the good promised in the Two Basics Project was remote and abstract; it was incapable of accounting for economic destitution, paucity of resources, an ever narrowing channel of upward mobility, not to mention the boredom and irony associated with everyday schooling experience. After all, continuing beyond junior secondary education was out of reach for most students, because high school was not free and many could not afford it or did not score enough to qualify for admission. For the few who did manage to continue with postsecondary education and receive a college degree, life chances were often not significantly better to justify family investment and sacrifice. A father in Majiang narrated the story of a neighbor spending all family savings on the son's college degree, only to have him land a mediocre job after graduation with low income comparable to those of migrant workers. The family became a

laughingstock in the eyes of the locals for making an unwise investment, which contests, yet again, the official narrative of schooling-to-social-mobility.

Students and families widely exhibited an informed hesitancy towards compulsory education under the strains of economic changes and social transformation in rural China. They adopted alternative routes, often by way of dropping out and apprenticing themselves on the factory assembly-lines, to achieve social mobility and economic independence that schooling had failed to bring. While the mainstream Chinese society features an intense desire for educational success (Kipnis, 2011), economically deprived rural families do not abandon the educational goals altogether. In the Miao and Dong local lexicon, the ones who gain social mobility through academic success are portrayed as golden phoenix flying out of the constraints of the mountain valleys. Nevertheless, the educational goals are often circumscribed by resource shortage, lackluster teaching, a middle-school diploma of little use, poor job prospects, and the practical necessity of survival and getting by.

Instead, rural students and parents embody “a shift in the locus of efficacy,” to borrow a concept used by Fernandez-Kelly (2015, p. 199), to redefine the meaning of efficacy when the mainstream goals are elusive and out of reach in their social and material conditions. Their response through dropping out appears to be a shunning of education, yet it may as well be a reorientation of efforts to avoid defeat and to relocate adequacy elsewhere - landing a factory job and starting to make income, however scanty. The ways educational decisions are made reflect people’s understanding of social and economic realities and their strategies of getting ahead in an unfavorable opportunity structure, which echoes Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) now-classic cultural-ecological understanding of academic performance among ethnoracial

minorities. While students drop out and take up factory jobs, they are left to fend for themselves against insurmountable odds in the global structural changes in economy when fewer and fewer jobs are available to people with moderate schooling and credentials.

Rethinking the Paradox of Consequences in Educational Research

Schooling, an institution that an average child typically associates with coming of age, becomes a fractured domain where impoverished rural students and families encounter agents of the state and become recast as social burdens. Public education is riven with social injustice found inside and outside schools. As Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (2015) argued, the American welfare state practices a form of *ambivalent benevolence* through overwhelming intrusion, surveillance, and penalization of economically deprived and racially segregated populations, and by doing so, paradoxically contributes to the perpetuation of urban poverty and marginalization. The ambivalent benevolence that Fernandez-Kelly (2015) described of the American welfare state, that is, “a tendency to treat claimants with a mixture of compassion and hostility” (p. 91) and an intertwinement of the “politics of kindness” with the “gross disregard for social realities” (p. 171), is also at work in the sustained contact individual teachers, students, and villagers have with state agents in rural China. Bureaucratic intervention in China is often morally contested in not only failing to serve marginalized groups but also becoming part of the structurally imposed obstacles for those very constituencies.

The poverty in China’s rural ethnic margins entails not only materials scarcity, but a systematic interchange between a totalizing state presence and vulnerable people, through two dominant forces of compulsory education and rural development

with allegedly good intentions. Both programs target rural poverty and view the government and the market as parts of the solution to plugging the vast rural base into China's speedy economic engine. However, these policies infantilize the disadvantaged populations by constructing students and villagers as ever too provincial, earthbound, uneducated, culturally misfit, and lacking market consciousness. These policies fail to see ordinary people's lives in terms of a fluid circuit of responses between contingent choices and decisions on the one hand, and structural location on the other. Instead, education and development policies contribute to a discourse of entrapment in which the fundamental mission of empowerment is sidetracked by bureaucratic and neoliberal agendas. The agents of the state blame individual choices and target punitive behavior change (such as imposing fines or confiscating properties when a child in a family drops out), yet fail to comprehend the circumstances that continue to fuel the high attrition/dropout rates in the first place.

The specific relationships between the Chinese state and the rural poor shed light on the bureaucratic dilemmas and the market dilemmas generated by the simultaneous demands for neoliberal self-development and submission to authoritarian control and surveillance. Rural development programs, despite good intentions, work to diminish the autonomy of residents and trump the communities' own development envisioning. In a restructured agrarian economy, rural ethnic minorities express worried outlooks regarding economic gains and social mobility. Villagers are also acutely aware of the narrow upward opportunities that schooling affords them. Persistent social and economic inequalities between rural and urban China, punitive government programs, rising unemployment, public and policy discourses stigmatizing rural ethnic people as social problems, and heavy-handed

commercial encroachment in the name of development are all intersecting dynamics shaping the collective marginalization of rural ethnic communities that yet remain out of focus in the current education and development programming.

Evidence-based education policy thus elevates technologies of accountability as a stand-in for meaningful conversations of persistent social inequality within educational practices. When accountability produces its own rationality through staged political shows, it drives the manipulation of numbers and actors offstage and reinforces the illusion that bureaucratic monitoring is desirable and necessary. The staged shows present strategically fabricated data yet pass as “evidence” that the schools are meeting the accountability responsibilities set forth in the Two Basics Project. As Luke (2003) argued in the U.S. context, “What has come to count as evidence-based educational policy... is nothing short of a legislative codification of new definitions and interventions for what counts as success and risk” (p. 95). Policy-directed actions, as shown in this article, never get at the “complete picture” and often displace important discussions about the ways in which the evidence comes to be in the first place. In an audit culture obsessed with carefully packaged “data,” practitioners may choose to collude in obscuring what actually goes on for the sake of getting by. The acts of fabrication, as should be clear by now, are less matters of morality than of legal and bureaucratic technicality. While the teachers struggle with maintaining the legitimacy of the school, the state accountability measures undermine authentic assessments and reforms needed to address the pernicious inequalities facing linguistic, ethnic, and cultural minority youth.

The “common sense” policy solutions raise serious questions as to what evidence actually tells and what unintended consequences are triggered to do more

harm than good. Perhaps a radical critique of evidence-based education policy and research is to develop “new forms of representation, new types of knowledge and epistemological criteria” (Grosz, 2005, p. 179). Rather than orienting toward reduction and closure in educational research, as we have amply seen in correlational and experimental designs, what would a research agenda look like that opens up different interpretive spaces while being attentive to the paradox of consequences? First and foremost, it embraces gaps, interruptions, and disconnections and emphasizes “hesitation” more than “determination” in our thinking of what is educationally desirable and what counts as “evidence.” In a thought-provoking article, Gert Biesta (2012) advanced an unusual argument that there is no education without hesitation. He defines hesitation as “the subtle moments...where we leave space for something to happen that is fundamentally beyond our intentions and control” (p. 1). This hesitation challenges taken-for-granted correlations and highlights aspects of educational processes that yield unanticipated consequences and are often concealed (rather than illuminated) by existing categories and parameters of analysis. Secondly, as John G. Richardson brilliantly pointed out in his introduction to this Special Issue, unintended consequence might well be a misnomer, as it may be more the rule than exception if we regard the social world as dynamic rather than linear. By inviting disruptions and disconnections back to educational processes, we also enable a different ontology and ethics that recognizes social and educational worlds as complex, unrepresentable, and unpredictable and that allows plurality (and even strangeness) of meanings and values to emerge. Only by doing so, can we begin to move beyond commonly understood “evidence” and “best practices,” and think outside the box regarding what works, what doesn’t work, and why.

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¹ Osnos, E. (2014). *Age of ambition: Chasing fortune, truth, and faith in the new China*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

² In 2014, approximately 459,800 students departed China to study abroad according to the statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education: <http://www.iie.org/Services/Project-Atlas/China/Chinas-Students-Overseas#.V-5xvWUTJYN>

³ See http://zqb.cyol.com/gb/zqb/2004-06/14/content_887770.htm