

The Rural Ethnic as Political Projects

Development's Storied Edges

The bus threaded through layers of terraced lands. The field was so lush and green that the color seemed to have condensed into liquid drops striving to press a permanent imprint on my body. Outside in the scorching sun, newly planted rice was growing long and strong. With occasional gusts of wind, the tall, thin sprouts were blown toward the roadside, as if gracious hosts craning their necks in anxious anticipation of guests. From time to time, an unwieldy eighteen-wheel truck would honk by in anxious haste, loaded with sand and gravel, churning up dust storms to blur my vision of the summer fields. It was early July of 2009. The construction of an inter-provincial railroad and a highway, which meandered through villages in Qiandongnan toward the coastline, was in full force. Patches of exposed earth were visible at a distance: they used to be farmlands and were now expropriated for the road construction. As the bus wound up and down the mountain road, it was interlaced with passing clusters of wooden abodes, thatched huts, and occasionally, brick houses; bent figures dotted the summer fields and blended into a distance of green.

During my sixteen months of sojourn in Qiandongnan, the Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in Southeast Guizhou Province (see figures 1.1 and 1.2),¹ I shared numerous bus rides (short- or long-distance) with the mountain dwellers. The rides were usually chaotic yet vibrant, full of loud chatter and laughter, cigarette smoke, and blaring techno music. On this humid summer day, passengers were getting restless in the bus. The sticky, subtropical air assailed every inch of skin, leaving trails of perspiration on faces, backs, and palms. Men rolled up their pants and sleeves, women took off headscarves to wipe their faces, kids produced handfuls of sunflower seeds to crack off the boredom. Loaded with passengers who carried bags, buckets, reed-basins, shoulder poles, poultry, and babies, the bus made

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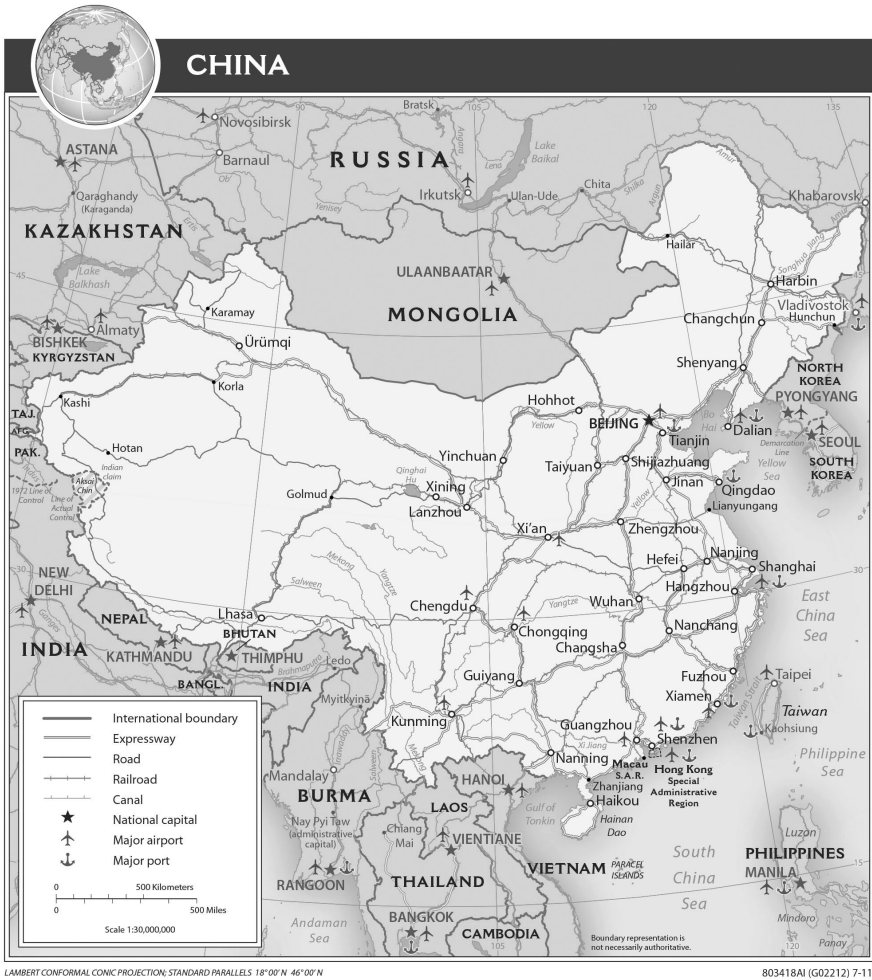
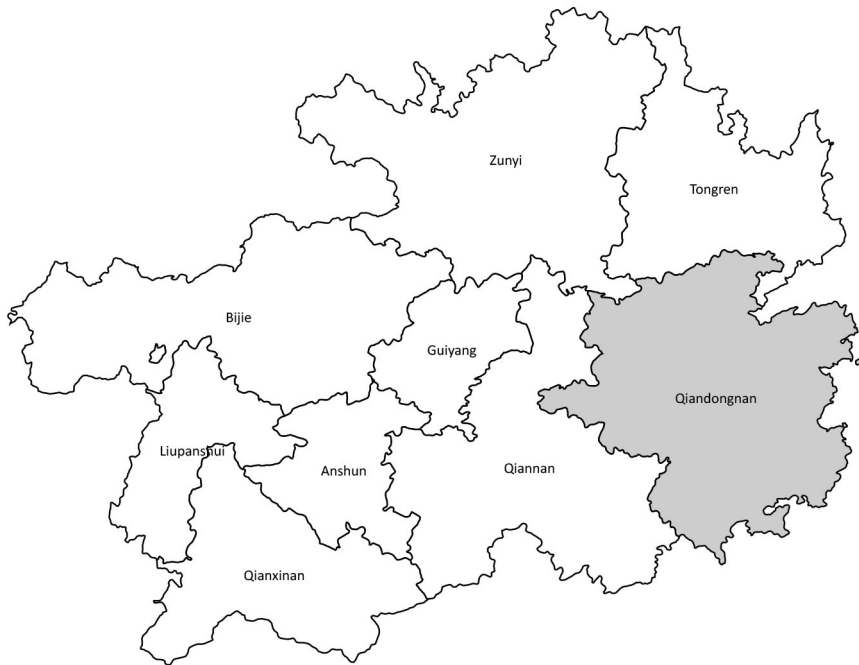


FIGURE 1.1. Map of China. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

frequent stops in designated village-hamlets, or anywhere at the yell of *cāiyǐjiào* (passengers' request to "step on the brake"). Each stop generated a flurry of activities—women scurrying off with crying babies and flapping chickens, men loudly greeting those standing on the roadside, the driver climbing on the bus roof to excavate sacks and boxes, vendors peddling fruits, corn, or stinky tofu to hungry passengers, and eager faces digging for

Map of Qiandongnan Prefecture
Part of Guizhou Province



Note: Map based on Dijishi-level data

FIGURE 1.2. Map of Guizhou, showing Qiandongnan Prefecture (shaded). Map by Yisu Zhou.

packages sent by relatives from other points along the way. Soon, the door would slide closed, and the bus would chug along with the weight of people, luggage, livestock, and delivery packages for the remainder of its journey.

Traveling in Qiandongnan is indeed a sensory-laden experience. The landscape is at once breathtaking and precarious. Roads are roughly paved and full of potholes; landslides are frequent during rainy seasons. Many of the roads' sharp twists and turns are littered with carcasses of wrecked vehicles—buses, trucks, motorcycles—which, for various reasons, had failed to negotiate the steep mountain grades. The sight of such deadly scenes often makes one's heart miss a beat, adding to the popular perception that life in Guizhou, the province known as the "Kingdom of Mountains," is fraught with danger, vertigo, and uncertainty.

Indeed, first-time travelers in Qiandongnan may find their experience colored by a variety of labels—“rugged,” “exotic,” “primitive”—that are associated with classic “out-of-the-way” places (Tsing 1993). Traveling in this region can be a highly unpredictable event, depending on weather, road conditions, and erratic bus schedules. Surrounded by a serene atmosphere, the Miao and Dong villages often exhibit a sense of timelessness to the tourists’ gaze: women sitting on narrow calf-high wooden benches doing embroidery, old men lounging on a roofed bridge smoking pipes to kill time, women beating indigo-dyed cloth with a wooden hammer to even out the color, steaming glutinous rice being beaten with long wooden hammers into fragrant *baba* (粑粑) (see figures 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5). Yet, while urban tourists bounce on the broken seats inside the packed bus along the potholed mountain roads, they are also overwhelmed by the bright, raucous, and pulsating world of everyday life: sensational music videos blaring from the mounted TV in the bus; printed advertisements on seatbacks for spas, massage salons, and nightclubs; satellite dishes sprouting on rooftops; ubiquitous mobile phones on the hands of young and old. As the multi-strand narratives and consumption ethos seep into daily life, a vision of Qiandongnan as bucolic, pristine, and unchanging is no longer (if ever) an accurate depiction.



FIGURE 1.3. Miao women gathered to embroider elaborate patterns on colorful cloth. Photograph by Jinting Wu.



FIGURE 1.4. An elderly woman beating a stack of cloth to even out the indigo dye. Photograph by Jinting Wu.



FIGURE 1.5. Villagers beating glutinous rice in a wooden basin to make a local dessert *baba*. Photograph by Jinting Wu.

On the other hand, Guizhou is depicted in a proverb as a province “without three *li*² of flat land, three days of fine weather, or three cents to rub together.” The language of poverty, isolation, and stagnation prevails in popular narratives and social science reports and forms a set of normative representations through which places like Guizhou and Qiandongnan are imagined. Yet, even though Qiandongnan bears the earmark of “traditional” cultural practices, including subsistence farming, spirit worship, and gift giving; even though such practices have been repeated through generations, each repetition is a difference that haunts the straight line of the developmental ideology. With people, goods, and information traveling along the zigzag country roads, the dense network of communities and kinships in Qiandongnan are imbricated into the modalities of a translocal China.

The countryside symbolizes the society’s deepest aspirations, conundrums, and desires. Traveling in Qiandongnan, one is frequently greeted by roadside bulletin boards printed with enlarged messages, such as “Today’s education is tomorrow’s economy;” “Fewer and superior births bring a lifetime of happiness;” “Developing rural tourism, building a new socialist countryside.” These signs hint at the heightened salience of rural issues—including but not limited to education, birth planning, and tourism promotion—in the reimagining of the countryside and the remaking of the Chinese nation. The salience is bolstered by the popular image of the rural residents as having lower education attainment, greater inclination to have more children, and lacking market entrepreneurialism. Slogans written in such didactic vein are hyper-visible across the countryside, as a literal extension of the rural landscape shaping the materiality of the everyday. They work to incorporate the people in Qiandongnan into an assemblage of governmental discourses and under the virtual roof of the “modern.”

More than three decades after the implementation of the reform and open-door policy, China has transformed from an agricultural country to a primarily urban and industrial society. In 2014, almost 53.7 percent of Chinese are living in cities, a fast growing percentage compared to 9 percent at the beginning of the 1980s (see Roberts 2014; Deng et al. 2009). Rapid urbanization³ and urban-centered development churn up massive flows of rural-to-urban migration, turning the countryside into a backyard of surplus labor for China’s manufacturing boom. At the same time, ethnic and rural identities are continually (re)appropriated for economic imperatives such as tourism. The “rural” is, to borrow Phillips’s insight (2009, 17–18), not simply a marginality situated at the edge, but at the very heart of the national imaginary.

It is against such a background that this book sets out to examine the dilemmas of education at a crossroads of development and “emaciation

of the rural” (Yan 2008, 25–52). In particular, the book seeks to situate rural education—upheld as the ticket out of poverty—at the center of the analysis and unravel its polemic relationships with state rural revitalization agendas, audit culture, tourism, and translocal labor migration in two village-towns of Qiandongnan. It illustrates how schooling is lived in everyday predicaments and maneuvers and is deeply entangled with other rural governing strategies. I explore the fraught experiences of village students, teachers, and residents as they juggle amorphous, disjointed, and contradictory processes that constitute the broader ecology of rural China.

The escalating educational obstacles, especially among rural population, have been widely recognized as a chief challenge facing the reform-era Chinese state (Lou 2010; Wang 2013; Maslak et al. 2010; Hannum and Park 2002; Davison and Adams 2013; Ross and Lou 2014). Education in tandem with other state modernization agendas constitutes a significant nexus of power that orchestrates social changes while engendering pedagogical, economic, and cultural debates in rural China. As China becomes the success story of education in the global arena, its rural education provides a physical and symbolic lens to examine the complex pedagogical struggles at the margin, and the making of new postsocialist rural subjects.

The central puzzle I seek to address is this: how do we understand the profound disenchantment and high attrition rates among rural ethnic youth, despite the nationwide educational desire for success, despite the state’s relentless efforts to enforce compulsory basic education, and despite the century-old folk belief in “jumping out of the village gate and into scholar-officialdom through academic success”? My study approaches this puzzle with a series of related questions: (1) What kinds of pedagogical battles are being waged on the site of the school, where the cultivation of the rural ethnic child is purported to take place? (2) How do government schools in rural ethnic settings continually fail to achieve their *raison d’être* yet maintain cultural legitimacy, despite the contradictions in their daily practices? (3) What overlapping processes coexist with the struggles within the schools and how disenchantment inside and outside the schools reflect and reinforce each other? (4) What are students’ life trajectories after they graduate or drop out, when the school walls crumble, to speak metaphorically?

Conceptual Issues: Theorizing Modernity, Subalternity, and Nation-State

The intersection of three major conceptual issues forms the basis of my inquiry: modernity, subalternity,⁴ and nation-state. Education, state-ordered

schooling more precisely, sits at a crossroads of such conceptual matrix: it is often deployed by the nation-state as the impetus of modernity and the remover of subalternity (be it economic, social, or cultural), while simultaneously producing new forms of exclusion and marginality. The major analytical onus of this project is to tease out schooling's entanglement in China's modernist projects that bear upon its subaltern rural ethnic "other," through which new forms of othering and alterity arise.

Modernity is a vague and tirelessly debated concept. Many scholars have grappled with its (dis)enchantment, challenged it for being static, ahistorical, and teleological (Gaonkar 2001; Schein 1999, Rofel 1999; Abu-Lughod 2005; Hirschkind 2006), and as the spurious child of Western capitalist domination. Regarded as a lure rather than a threat, modernity is said to have spread across the globe over the *longue durée* of transcontinental contacts, "transported through commerce, administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions, propelled by nationalism, and now increasingly steered by global media, migration, and capital" (Gaonkar 2001, 1). This echoes Ong's indictment of the academic assumption that "the West invented modernity and other modernities are derivative and second-hand" (1996, 61).

Criticized as a crippled term, the concept of modernity is charged with reducing the differentiated, relational, and dynamic sociohistorical processes to pure instrumentality, for flattening multiplicities to a linear, historicist development trajectory. Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), for instance, in his study of Hindu Bengalese in northern India, provokes an intriguing sense of conundrum in the formation of Bengali modernity. On the one hand, he invites a reconsidering of whether it is possible to write any kind of history that does not index back to European modernity as the birthplace. On the other hand, Chakrabarty argues that the homogenizing claim of modernity is as much a yet-to-come as already embedded in local everyday experiences that both advance modernist values and perpetuate its antithesis.⁵

Similarly, the unidirectional and univocal narrative of modernity is hardly sustainable in China, which has oscillated between the periphery and the center in its global influence and undergone multiple centers and peripheries within.⁶ The meaning of modernity in the Chinese context is intertwined with China as a geopolitical concept and a changing socio-cultural landscape. From China's first convulsive encounters with Western powers during the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860) to the May Fourth Movement (1919)'s campaign for "science" and "democracy," from the devastating years of the Great Leap Forward (1956–1958) and the Cultural

Revolution (1966–1976) to almost four decades of post-reform economic boom, the Chinese nation has always positioned itself within ongoing debates regarding tradition, reform, development, and modernization.

Specifically, the dramatic social changes over China's long twentieth century have made modernity a recurring yet elusive figure. From isolationism to open-door policy, from communism to socialist-capitalism, from planned economy to market liberalization, China rehearses its idiosyncratic linear narrative of "backwardness" to "progress," with each subsequent era approaching, but never quite arriving at what Lisa Rofel (1999) describes as a modernity perpetually deferred. If China's embrace of modernization indicates reflexivity over its off-centered positioning on the global stage, its "holdout" population—the rural ethnic "other"—provides an internal anchor for its modernist aspiration.

The desire to uplift the "holdout" population on par with the putatively more modernized Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese, who are simultaneously looking toward the West as standard-bearers of the modern, produces a double current of Chinese modernization. This double current is mediated by wider forms of geo- and cultural politics both inside and outside China, and further complicated by China's endeavor to steer clear of an "undifferentiated global modernity"⁷ by claiming unique Chinese characteristics, yet at times remain virtually unintelligible outside the China–West binary.

I arrived in Guizhou in early 2009 to begin my sixteen-month-long fieldwork. The worldwide financial crisis begun the previous year had damaged many national economies, but not the confidence of the Chinese lawmakers. The rest of the world, once again, watched China in its soft-landing and relatively speedy recovery from the global financial downturn. In both interviews and casual conversations, the Guizhouese seemed less bothered by the financial crisis but exhibited a decidedly future-oriented momentum of "getting ahead." Development became a ubiquitous descriptor across the social landscape of Qiandongnan at the time of my stay, dehistoricizing and mystifying the uncertainties of local life by implying a condition of normalcy and predictability. Tourism programs were swiftly underway in many villages, executed under the auspices of the provincial tourism bureau and its local offices. Likewise, the compulsory education policy termed the Two Basics Project (TBP) and aimed to universalize junior secondary schooling was in full swing, often broadcast on bulletin boards side-by-side with tourism promotion commercials. Tourism- and TBP-related anecdotes, complaints, aspirations became frequent conversation topics I had with the people in Qiandongnan, integral to villagers' imagination and appropriation of the "modern."

What struck me were the myriad ways the “slippery” modernization strategies were calibrated on images of Qiandongnan—picturesque landscape, quaint customary rituals, exotic lifeways, low levels of schooling, deficient population “quality,” and socioeconomic stagnation. Qiandongnan’s drive for modernity is articulated in a long-standing narrative of “lack,” which is further juxtaposed with the image of the subaltern. On the one hand, subalternity points to social, cultural, and economic subordination of certain groups to the mainstream Han. On the other hand, it is closely linked to the so-called civilizing mission of the Chinese state and its essentialist, evolutionary depictions of the Han as the “modern” and “advanced,” and the rural minorities as “backward” and “uncivilized” (Harrell 1996). The formation of the exclusionary matrix along the rural/urban and ethnic lines is repeatedly instantiated in the modernist policies and discourses of the Chinese state.

Yet the modernist dichotomies do not simply superimpose on the messy social terrain and become static, even if people do not dismantle the categorical differences (rural versus urban, minority versus majority, deficiency versus quality) that type them as the subaltern. As Schein contends, “the modern is usefully thought of not only . . . as a discursive regime that shapes subjectivity, but also as powerfully constituted and negotiated through performance” (1999, 361). Therefore, a fruitful question to ask is whether subalternity merely takes the form of people positioning themselves vis-à-vis state-authorized modernity, or perhaps also a repositioning through deploying the very codes that type them as modernity’s outside. Notably, several key works challenge us to consider subalternity not as a categorical outside, but rather: as dual processes of subject-making—both being made and self-making (Ong 1996); as the populace’s performative practices vis-à-vis the state’s pedagogical dictation (Bhabha 1990); as creating “double consciousness” (Gilroy 1993) of being in and out of particular notion of “civility”; and as the ways people inhabit and consume, rather than ostensibly subvert, sanctioned social norms (Mahmood 2005).

Building on the insights in this study, I’m interested in the particular cultural historical moment when the regime of modernity and the governing apparatus of the Chinese state bear upon the subaltern subjects in Qiandongnan, and how village teachers, students, and residents engage in performative practices that both conform to and displace the state’s pedagogical/developmental dictum. Whether through the Miao and Dong people’s own notions of “the educated” person (juxtaposed with and contesting the state’s *suzhi*/quality curriculum campaign), through village

teachers' appropriation of the market in their entrepreneurial moonlighting, through the schools' conscious manipulation of enrollment statistics to meet the audit demands, or through the dropout students' haphazard "making it" in sweatshops, schooling is entangled with other modernizing strategies and lived in everyday (dis)enchantment, performances (both on- and off-stage), and pursuit of the good life.

Since the theme of (dis)enchantment is a productive thread weaving the ethnographic narrative, it begs for some elaboration. In his seminal work *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (2002) describes the "disenchantment of the world" as the consequence of the Protestant Reformation and the rise of scientific rationality in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. The intersection of the Reformation and scientific revolutions enabled a paradigm shift, precipitating the decline of magic, religion, and myth which used to "enchant" the populace as the way to truth, and facilitating the rise of modern, rational, and bureaucratic societies. The Protestant work ethics (good work for God's glory) together with the new paradigm of secularized reason, as Weber observes, spurred the rapid formation of capitalist economic systems globally. The emancipation from a world of gods and mysticism, at a face value, may seem to provide an explanation of the soaring status of science, technology, education, market, and the state. However, beyond the façade of disenchantment lies a renewed faith, or re-enchantment, in the salvatory power of technocracy, rationality, and secularism. The faith in school and its modernizing potentials expounds a secular religiosity and fuels the worldwide investment in human capital expansion. As Kuhn (1962) argues, paradigms not only provide solutions to the problem but also actively construe the problem. In a sense, the school-to-the-social-rescue paradigm construes social problems in educational terms, effectively "educationalizing" the social realm so to speak, filling the pedagogical space with logics of social transcendence and salvation.

If this narrative of faith in schooling sounds all too familiar by now (see Stambach 2000, 2010; Tyack and Cuban 1997; Vavrus 2003; Kipnis 2011), education-as-social-rescue is far from a singularizing claim. In this work, it is transfigured into a complex interplay between pedagogical actors and China's economic, social, and cultural changes, producing frictions to further render the Janus's face of enchantment-disenchantment indistinguishable. My project thus traces enchantment-disenchantment as mutually constitutive economies of sentiments—of the unmistakable desire for educated elitism alongside profound cynicism; of the anticipation for a better future amidst insurmountable financial stress; of the image of success

produced by school audits alongside everyday whispered plights of teachers, students, and villagers; of the balm of tourism modernity dissipated by commercial penetration and spatial politics. The site of school is a contingent assemblage that both animates and destabilizes the enchantment-disenchantment complex; and the value of schools is put to a practiced and embodied horizon rather than a homogenizing appeal.

In this introductory chapter, I contextualize the study by laying out a series of development policies in Qiandongnan, and in rural China more broadly. I problematize the rural/urban divide and the accompanying binaries (developed/underdeveloped, core/periphery, modern/traditional) that routinely frame social policies. I discuss the shifting discourses of the rural as political projects and historicize Guizhou's lengthy incorporation into the central administration. This, I hope, will provide the discursive context of postsocialist rural China to understand the contested processes of schooling and its entanglement with social changes, market forces, and state discipline.

The Vicissitude of the Rural as Political Projects

In China as elsewhere,⁸ the “rural” has become a locus laden with mixed emotions—hope, empathy, nostalgia—and invoking development rhetoric. The problematization of the “rural” mentality (*nongcun yishi*) as malady and backwardness is often sutured with the nostalgia for the communal bond and social amicability in the countryside. Sometimes experienced as an exotic out-of-the-way place, sometimes emotionalized as “a last base for retreat for bodies injured, souls trampled, and hopes lost in the city” (Yan 2008, 227), and sometimes pathologized as breeding ground for social diseases (such as gambling, lethargy, and corruption), the vast social space of the rural is anything but easily characterizable. In their own narration, villagers in Qiandongnan often express ambivalence toward the place called home. “We don’t belong to the city, but there is no way out in the countryside,” as many of them would say. There is an acute sense of self-marginalization among the rural residents and an intense desire to improve their livelihood through “jumping” the rural scale and “floating” toward the urban manufacturing centers. Rural-to-urban labor flows challenge the notion of the village as a self-contained unit, and direct ethnographic attention to the contested spatial distinctions in shaping the decisions, movements, and materiality of the everyday.

Desire, Fear, and Emaciation of the Rural

The discursive context of rural China where this ethnography is situated has undergone drastic epistemic shift; and a historicizing of the concept of “rurality” in the Chinese imagination is necessary. *Nongye* (“agriculture” 农业), *nongmin* (“agrarian folks” 农民), and *nongcun* (“agrarian village” 农村) are three immediate words that describe the vast foundation of the Chinese society. According to the 2010 Population Census, about 674 million Chinese, over half of the population, are of rural residential status, even after recent demographic change induced by massive urban-bound labor migration. “Chinese society is fundamentally rural,” said the eminent scholar Fei Xiaotong (1992/1947) almost seven decades ago, suggesting not only the predominantly agrarian population makeup, but also a collective tie to the land and an inseparability from the “earthbound” livelihood. Indeed, rural earthboundness has been a central denominator of Chinese cosmology.

Yet, the narratives of the rural continue to be a moving target, linked to the ever-changing social, economic, and spatial politics in Chinese historiography (Huang 1998, 1–4). In the past century, the countryside has shifted from the cradle of Communist victory (1930s) to the experimental site in China’s structural reforms (1980s), from the surplus labor reserve (1990s) to the escapist pleasure of urban tourists (2000s), occupying a fascinating terrain through which to examine the changing hues of China’s post-reform palette.

During the Mao era, peasants were depicted as the oppressed social group living in the shackles of the “three big mountains,” namely imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. In the 1930s and 1940s, Mao advanced his mass mobilization theory of “encircling the city with the countryside,” positioning the rural as the *da houfang* (support base) for the Communist Party’s eventual take-over of the cities. The countryside was fortified as the wellspring of communist consciousness and revolutionary fervor. The status of the peasants changed from the invisible underdog to the hyper-visible political mass in the Communist quest. During the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the rural was further turned into a moral high ground where urban literati received “re-education” from the peasants in order to purify their capitalism-contaminated minds. Collections of propaganda posters during the Mao era showed notable absence of the school scenes yet abundance of production activities in farmlands (Wolf 2011). The vast rural landmass was extolled as the more powerful educative ground, and knowledge from the soils was valorized over book learning in schools.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, in China's global competition for power and wealth, the rural is once again depicted as *da houfang*, a support base that, this time around, provides abundant surplus labor for the growth of the manufacturing industry. On the other hand, China's rising Gini coefficient (0.55 in 2014 compared to 0.496 in 2006)⁹ is attributed to the stubborn rural problems such as peasants' high illiteracy rate, low skills, and lack of market entrepreneurship. The post-reform (post-1978) era envisions the city as the hallmark of progress and modernity, and pathologizes the rural and minority areas as backward and unenlightened. The visibility of the rural as both excess and lack is amplified in the social reception of peasants-turned-labor-migrants as massive in number yet lacking in "quality." In the work of Michel Foucault, such "surplus visibility" governs the rural through the disciplining apparatuses of national statistics, market, educational, and social programming (1975/1977, 200–208; also see Patai 1992). The rural is visible only as something outside of, and morally, culturally lower than, the norms.

What constitutes the rural is the convergence of discursive historical and social practices. One important policy that legitimized the hierarchical urban and rural status is the household registration known as the *hukou* system, implemented in the mid-1950s by the newly founded PRC to control population mobility. Households were categorized as either agricultural-rural *hukou* or township-urban *hukou* by their residential location and occupation. While the urban *hukou* holders could access welfare benefits such as subsidized housing, education, health care, and transportation, rural *hukou* holders did not enjoy such privileges. Whenever possible, rural residents sought to overcome institutional hurdles to obtain urban *hukou* status (Wu and Treiman 2004). Today, the stringent place-based *hukou* system has been considerably relaxed with the state's preferential rural policies (including agricultural subsidies, a cooperative medicare scheme, and abolition of agricultural taxes) and the recent flux of urban-bound labor migration. Although Fei Xiaotong's famous characterization of rural China as "earthbound" (1992/1947) still holds considerable sway to this day, a more accurate depiction of the rural is perhaps translocality of various modes (Schein and Oakes 2006). As villagers swarm urban centers to perform manual labor as factory workers, domestic maids, gardeners, repairmen, interior remodeling workers, security guards, and restaurant waitresses, and as urban travelers set foot on the countryside for the escapist pleasure offered by cultural-eco-tourism, the rural/urban binary is rendered ever more tenuous and negotiated. It is within such shifting positionings of rural China that this ethnography is situated.

History of Participation in Nation-Building: Geopolitics of Guizhou and Qiandongnan

Primarily resided by agrarian populations who identify themselves, culturally and linguistically, as the Miao and the Dong, Qiandongnan is located in one of China's least developed regions, Guizhou, a province of ethnic mosaics, plagued for centuries by material scarcity, and yet, perplexingly, termed the "precious land." Guizhou boasts the presence of forty-nine of the fifty-six ethnic groups in China, with ethnic residents accounting for 37 percent of its total population.¹⁰ Guizhou's variegated ethnic, cultural, and linguistic composition is the result of centuries of migration, trade, and tributary mission throughout China's imperial expansion, regional exchange, and global positioning (Naquin and Rawski 1987, 199; Moseley 1973, 25–26; Schein 2000, 5–6). In the mid-nineteenth century (during the reign of the Qing dynasty), Guizhou started to be heavily populated by Han Chinese (primarily merchants), and gained increasing visibility in the imperial administrative order (Hostetler 2001). Cultural encounters, intermarriage, and most importantly, state schooling contributed to the improved relationship between the ethnic minorities and the Han, especially through the educated indigenous elites who spread and popularized the Han culture (Litzinger 2000).

The Miao and the Dong are two groups of ethnic minorities conventionally known for their remoteness (*pianpi* 偏僻) as the peasants and herders of China's "interior," a remoteness that signifies both geographic and moral distance in the Chinese imagination. As Litzinger notes (1994, 206), *pianpi* denotes both physical inaccessibility and developmental chasm between the stigmatized sites and the metropolitan hubs. The etymological vulgarization of *pianpi* does not fully capture the complex historical trajectory of the region and its people. Historically the outer reaches of the empires, and inhabited by a multitude of ethnic groups, Guizhou has been constructed as a frontier with an unevenly governed populace where borders and orders are regularly contested. Known as the "Kingdom of Mountains" and comprised of hilly terrains (92.5%) and karst topography (73.6%), Guizhou is endowed with rich mineral, archeological, and tourist resources.¹¹ Yet, due to its inhospitable landscape, unpacified non-Han ethnic residents, mystifying indigenous lifeways, and harsh climate and living conditions, Guizhou was named as a province only during the Ming dynasty (the second to last dynasty in Chinese history) in 1413. Its incorporation into the empire had been a lengthy process.

“Minority Work” and State Discipline

Situated closely above the southwest border of China, Guizhou lies on the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, adjacent to Yunnan Province to the west, Sichuan Province to the north, Hunan Province to the northeast, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region to the south, and is considered to be China’s “inside” or “hinterlands.” In the eighteenth century, Guizhou came under the imperial jurisdiction of the Qing rulers due to its strategic position en route to resource-rich Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangxi Provinces, its burgeoning mining and timber industries, as well as the influx of Han Chinese settlers into the region.¹² Efforts to assimilate Guizhou’s minority groups into the empire were ceaseless, yet not without ruffles.

One of the means was via Confucian classic education. Scores of public schools (called “*yixue*” 义学) were established to primarily cater to non-Han children in order to sensitize them to Confucian values held indispensable for a smooth-functioning society (Rawski 1979, 57–58). In the village of Longxing, one of my field sites, one sees such early form of acculturation in the naming of the communal drum towers after the five Confucian virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin* (i.e., benevolence, justice, rituals, wisdom, and trust 仁义礼智信). These names were given by clan elders who had been educated in classic Confucianism through *yixue*. An excerpt from one Miao album—a genre popular in eighteenth-century imperial China that used prose, poetry, and illustrations to represent ethnic minority peoples—also powerfully reveals the logic of pacification through education adopted by the Qing court: “If we distribute education and thus transform the frontier, first the Miao will change into ordinary subjects, and then those people will forget that they were once Miao. Then will there be a need to be assiduously on our guard [for rebellions]” (Ibid., 186)? Efforts to avoid military confrontation and tame minorities through education were apparent.

As the Qing court expanded its administrative reach and territorial boundaries, techniques of cartography and ethnography were employed to directly observe and gather information about indigenous customs and life-ways. This led to rapid growth of taxonomies and categories¹³ in ways not dissimilar to the Orientalist discourse pointed out by Said (1979) and its epistemic violence of translating living complexities into textual abstraction. The number of identified ethnic groups increased from thirteen to eighty-two in a period of two centuries during the Qing reign (Hostetler 2001, 136). Colorfully illustrated gazetteers, manuscripts, and albums were compiled by commissioners of the Qing court to educate the officialdom

about the customs and rituals of the ethnic people for more effective imperial rule. This culminated in the compilation of the famous Miao Albums during the Qing rule. The Miao Albums are commonly referred to in Chinese as the *Miao man tu* (namely, *Illustration of Miao Barbarians*), or *Bai Miao tu* (*Illustrations of the Hundred Miao*), with the appellation Miao indicating all indigenous people, not specific to the present-day Miao ethnic group. Thus, direct and confrontational mode of population control gradually gave way to a more benign mode of population governance through classification of peoples. This was enabled by a rhetorical shift from depicting ethnic groups as belligerents to subjects of the benevolent empire. Whether through peaceful means of education, brutal measures of land encroachment and military occupation, or symbolic technique of ethnographic depiction, the indigenous people in Guizhou have been linked to the central administration over many centuries in various ways.

Similar to the Qing ethnographic projects, under the aegis of the newly founded PRC, an ethnic identification campaign was launched in 1956. Along with the rest of rural China, villages in Qiandongnan underwent intense governmental campaigns in the late 1950s. To incorporate ethnic minorities into the statecraft, Chairman Mao urged intellectuals and officials to go to minority areas to do “minority work.”¹⁴ Ethnologists were called upon to study, describe, and classify ethnic groups and garner “accurate,” “scientific” knowledge of the indigenous peoples. The classification campaign produced fifty-six officially recognized ethnic nationalities, including the Han majority and the fifty-five minority ethnic groups.¹⁵ As Bourdieu (1977, 164) contends, “every established order tends to produce . . . the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.” The campaign naturalized ethnic differences for population control yet also produced messy politics of naming and identify confusion. At one phase of the campaign, as many as one thousand groups self-identified as ethnic minorities in order to claim preferential policies from the state,¹⁶ and the number was later tamed to the present-day fifty-five (see Gladney 1998). Previously little used, the term *minzu* (民族 ethnicity) thus became fused to modernist discourses and practices pertaining to China’s population governing and nation-building.

By bringing diverse people under close scrutiny, both the Qing ethnographies and the Maoist ethnic identification campaign provoked a historicist style of reasoning to define “ethnicity” as a marker of otherness in population reasoning. Ethnic minorities are viewed as latecomers in the waiting room of modernity (Gaonkar 2001), as alterity around the norm, and as symbols of cultural quiddity. From the barbarian frontiers to the bastions of military strongholds, from resource-rich areas to ethnic cultural

Disneylands, from the mystery-shrouded domiciles of shamanistic masses to capitalist reserves of itinerant laborers, the narratives of Guizhou and its ethnic mosaics continue to change, yet never quite in sync with the standards of the state (Schein 2000; Oaks 1998; Hostetler 2001).

Contemporary Guizhou and Its Meandering Path to Modernity

Today, a “mystique-shrouded” mountain province, Guizhou is not particularly well known even among many Chinese natives. Statistically and econometrically speaking, Guizhou is portrayed in numbers that fetishize rural poverty and underdevelopment. In 2001, per capita annual income for farmers in Guizhou was RMB 1412 (USD 200), 62.3 percent of the national average. Middle school and high school enrollment rates in the province, 65.4 percent and 57.6 percent, respectively, were also among the lowest in China (Zou 2009, 25). In 2009, national statistics ranked the province the lowest in the country in terms of socioeconomic development measured by annual per capita GDP (Hu et al. 2011). In January 2012, the State Council released a guideline to assist the development of Guizhou through tax breaks, increased fiscal investment, and East-to-West technology transfer. Since the beginning of the 2010s, Guizhou has shown a rapid GDP growth rate—12.6 percent in 2013, 4.9 percent higher than the national growth in the same period—due to increasing support from the central government and a relatively low base of comparison. Nevertheless, Guizhou’s GDP is still low, with \$12.8 billion in 2013, equivalent to only 6.3 percent of the top-performing coastal province Guangdong where most of Guizhou’s rural migrants (including drop-out students) are headed for work.¹⁷ In addition, landlocked Guizhou also suffers from environmental degradation, including desertification and water shortage due to overexploitation of timber and mining industries. The language of the social science provides a set of normative parameters in the portrait of Guizhou and brings an urgency to change.

Local Guizhounese, for decades, have put a high premium on development in order to catch up with the rest of China. In the broader national scheme of the Grand Development of the West,¹⁸ the importance of rural development has also been promoted to an unprecedented height. The local Guizhou government endeavors to address poverty by three principal measures: infrastructural development such as road and railway construction to improve accessibility of remote villages, promoting minority cultures as tourist attractions, and enforcing a nine-year compulsory education. All three measures, in addition to the popularization of TVs and cell phones

in rural households, contribute to the rapid translocal flows of people, commodities, sights, and sounds that, since the late 2000s, have turned the landscape of Qiandongnan into an ensemble of desire and despair, leaving great impacts on village students' livelihood.

Under the aegis of Open Up the West, Guizhou has experienced a burst of infrastructural improvement, new economic opportunities, increased education and investment, and expansion of state capacity. The infusion of capital targeting at the under-exploited resources and the speedy construction of highways, railroads, power plants, airports, and dams have yoked Guizhou, the once "dormant" southwest region noted as China's "internal colony" (see Spencer 1940; Goodman 1983; Oakes 2004), into a long-desired path of modernization. Besides, in recent decades, Guizhou is frequently featured in mass media as "harmonious coexistence of various ethnic groups" where "the quiet environment, quaint buildings, exquisite fashions, unsophisticated folk customs and hospitality of the local people hold a great appeal to visitors from afar."¹⁹ From the Maoist Long March that established military buildups in the mountainous Guizhou to the post-liberation land reform and collectivization, from the Dengist economic liberalization to the present-day tourism boom, the Miao and the Dong and other minority people changed from "being savage and insurgent to being backward and culturally exotic" (Schein 2000, 10–11).

Rural Development in Qiandongnan

If Guizhou is often considered a marginal member of the prospering China, Qiandongnan Prefecture in southeastern Guizhou (see figure 1.2) is more decidedly constructed as a remote agrarian enclave lagging behind its metropolitan capital Guiyang, behind China's coastal economic zones, and behind the Western geopolitical centers. The triple sense of lateness and the poignant anxiety to catch up has shaped its pro-growth developmental strategies based on particular conceptualization of the rural and the ethnic as visible social categories and problems, both to be preserved/revived and to be transformed/assimilated.

Rural development has become the primary mandate and the source of legitimacy of the Chinese state. In 2003, the strategic import of the "three rural issues"—namely the issues of agriculture, peasants, and rural communities—was highlighted in the central government's Eleventh Five-Year Plan.²⁰ In 2006, the three rural issues were further highlighted in the policy directive of "Constructing New Socialist Countryside." Both policymakers and researchers have come to see the thorny and multidimensional rural

issues as a hindrance to the country's modernization, and generated heated debates with regard to the solutions. With urbanization identified as key to rural progress (Deng et al. 2009), on the national level, a number of measures have been implemented for revitalizing the countryside: enforcing compulsory basic education, promoting rural tourism, building roads, and granting preferential rural policies (including the abolition of agricultural taxes, the provision of agricultural subsidies, and the establishment of rural cooperative medicare system).²¹

Firstly, China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) declared 2006 as the Year of Rural Tourism, with the dual goals of attracting tourists and external investors to revive the countryside, benefit urban leisure, and prevent the loss of "extant tradition" in the process of modernization (CNTA 2007, 93). Similarly, in a 2000 speech, the director of Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau noted tourism as key to "solving the problems relating to agriculture, the countryside, and the farmers" (Cornet 2009, 197). Thanks to its diverse ethnic composition, picturesque landscape, and rich lifeways, Qiandongnan is marketed as a destination for cultural tourism. In the late '80s and early '90s, Qiandongnan primarily attracted Western (including the Japanese) travelers. The 1990s witnessed the steady rise of domestic tourism in Guizhou (Oakes 1998, 169).

Under the auspices of the National Tourism Administration and the Guizhou Provincial Tourism Bureau, funds were allocated for village make-over. Both of my field sites were recipients of such funds and underwent aesthetic renovation and a "facelift." In this context, a new rural-ethnicscape emerges as crucial to the making of a forward-moving Qiandongnan, also producing particular implications for the local livelihood. Cut along mountain ridges or on steep inclines, layered rice terraces are spectacular to the tourists' eyes yet present hardship for the cultivators. For generations, mountain dwellers subsisted on few patches of arable lands scattered far and wide over the hilly terrains.²² Rather than an aesthetic quaint visuality, villagers' livelihoods depend on a *working* landscape and the physical labor of climbing, digging, and tilling (see figure 1.6). The picturesque terraced fields are not things "static" and "natural," but require constant human efforts for their cultivation and upkeep, indicating the different meanings granted to "place" by dwellers and visitors. Besides, tourism is daily experienced in villagers' passing through the cobblestoned street filled with the dins of tourist footsteps, and living with the visual- and sound-scape of staged ethnic performances. In my research, I am particularly intrigued by how the cultural politics of tourism plays a pedagogical role in shaping the contour of rural schooling, and how the Miao and Dong teachers and