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## Analysis of the Reasons for Orphans' Low Enrollment in Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group, China

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper analyses reasons contributing to Yi orphans' low school enrollment in Liangshan, an ethnic minority area in mainland China. It reveals that Yi orphans' high uneducated rate is not solely a social problem but mostly a problem of ethnic minority education. Data was collected by means of field observation of household survey records and in-depth interviews. Findings suggest that, though reasons like the morbidity of current China's orphan protection system, poverty arisen from abominable natural surroundings, drug business, migrant worker problems and traditional culture do have something with Yi orphans' disadvantaged educational status, incompatible school education in the Liangshan Yi area should take the most blame.*

**Keywords:** Yi ethnic group, orphan, low enrollment, drop-out of school

### **1. Introduction**

According to the 2005 national census of orphans, there are 573,000 orphans in China and 86.3% of the total is in rural areas (Shang et al. 2008). HIV/AIDS-induced orphanhood in Henan province has already been largely soothed as a result of high government attention, while thousands of orphans in minority areas of China are still out of people's sight. NGOs' action in Liangshan Yi areas has highlighted that orphans there are living under extremely difficult circumstances and most of them are not in school. A survey has been conducted to map out their disadvantaged educational status, and reasons contributing to high uneducated rate have been discussed.

Though since 2005 NGOs have put more attention on Yi orphans' teaching assistance, the lack of statistics on the out-of-school orphans and in-depth survey research of the reasons why Yi orphans are more likely to drop out of school is still a fact overlooked by many education researchers. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

For the past ten years (2000-2010) and in the coming ten years (2010-2020), educational equity and ethnic minority education have been and continue to be given priority by the Chinese government. Yi orphans' disadvantaged education status embodies the problems existing in both of the above. This research aims at making clear how seriously the Yi orphans are disadvantaged in schooling and what the main reasons are for orphans' not attending school so that future orphanhood intervention programmes can better meet the educational needs of the orphans in ethnic minority areas.

Data used in this study was collected by field observation of the household survey results offered by the Liangshan Yi Women and Children Development Center (hereafter LYWCDC) and author's field work. Another source of evidence came from the author's in-depth interviews with orphans, orphans' families, teachers, government officers, employees from the LYWCDC and other Yi people in Liangshan Yi areas. Interviews with the Yi people who cannot understand and speak Mandarin Chinese were all conducted under the help of interpreters.

### **2. The Status Quo of Yi Orphans' Education**

Figure I summarises the school enrollment profile of 1115 school-aged orphans (aged 7 to 18) from Butuo, a south-eastern county of Liangshan Yi area. It suggests that the majority of Yi orphans (660) were out of school (66% in total), among them, 439 had never gone to school, including 190 boys (around 29.6% of the total 642 male orphans) and 249 girls (approximately 52.64% of the total 473 female orphans) (Yang et al.2007).

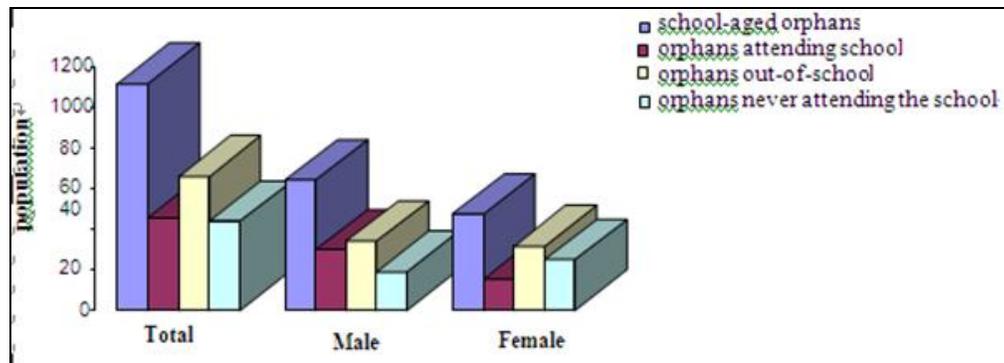


Figure 1: Orphans' school attendance status, by sex

Sources: Statistical information bases on household survey, 2005, conducted in Butuo, Liangshan by undergraduate and graduate students from the Central University for Nationalities, Beijing

Attendance status by sex, presented in figure 1, indicates clearly the low school attendance of Yi orphans. Furthermore, female orphans are less likely to attend the school than the male ones.

It is said that since 2007, all schools in Liangshan have been covered by the free compulsory education policy. While compared to the attendance rate in 2005, table 1 convinces us that there was no evident improvement for the Yi orphans' schooling in 2009 and 2010. Orphans in table 1 are now students of the Suo Mahua Orphan School in Meigu, the only orphan school in Liangshan which was opened in August 2010. The 2nd grade students are orphans helped by the LYWCDC in 2009 and the 1st grade students are the ones entering the school in 2010. Table 1 describes us their schooling situation before they were helped by the LYWCDC.

Grade	Total	School-aged orphans	Orphans out-of-school	Orphans at school
2nd grade	43	43	29	14
1st grade	208	143	108	35
Total	251	186	137	49
Percentage in all school-aged orphans			73.7%	26.3%

Table 1: Orphans' school attendance status before assistance, by grade

As we can understand clearly from table 1, the free compulsory education policy has provided little targeted support for Yi orphans. It also, from the other aspect, reveals that the under-enrollment of Yi orphans is far more than the result of a financial issue. Ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with orphans, orphans' families, teachers, government officers, employees from the LYWCDC and other Yi people in Liangshan Yi areas map out a comprehensive net with factors such as incompatible school education, the morbidity of China's current orphan protection system, poverty caused by abominable natural surroundings, drug business, migrant worker problem and traditional culture in it. Incompatible school education in Liangshan Yi area, however, is found to be the key reason.

### 3. School Education and Yi Orphans' low School Enrollment

Yi orphans' low school enrollment embodies problems existing in China's current ethnic minority education; that is, school education's deviation from the specific situation of Liangshan Yi area, which can be further explained by following two aspects.

#### 3.1. Bilingual education becomes a mere formality

Regarding the bilingual education in Liangshan Yi area, Prof. Teng Xing once suggested two models based on his in-depth and comprehensive research. In the first model, Yi language textbooks and Yi teaching language are used and a Chinese course will be demanded. As for the second model, unified national textbooks and Mandarin are used for teaching and a Yi Language course is compulsory (Tengxing 2000). The research site, Meigu, as an Yi habitation with more than 210,000 Yi people, accounting for 98% of the total population, has been practicing these two models since 1986 (Tengxing 2001). However, at the time of author's investigation, the first model in Meigu was found to exist in name only. 3 of 206 schools were said to keep the first model of bilingual education, but "they won't be practiced until higher authorities' inspections, once the inspection comes to end, these three schools will no longer practice the first model bilingual education." (Shi, an ex-headmaster in Meigu)

Many schools in Meigu are said to keep the second model of bilingual education. The Suo Mahua orphan school is one of them. As a school sojourning in Bapu Junior Secondary School, the latter is in charge of the management of orphan school's teachers and teaching affairs. Three grades' students are enrolled: the 1st grade, the 2nd grade and the 5th grade. Courses for the 1st grade

and the 2nd grade are the same as follows: Chinese, Math, Writing, Art, Labor Skills, Morality, Physical Education, Conversation Class and Music, with Yi Language class excluded.

10 courses are opened in the 5th grade, including Chinese, Math, Yi Language, English, Music, Art, PE, Science, Life Lesson and Morality. The 5th grade orphans once studied in Daqiao Primary School before they came to gather with other orphans in August 2010, and it is said that they had studied Yi Language for four years before they became the 5th grade students of the orphan school.

With the belief that the 5th grade orphans could read and understand Yi Language well, the author once tried to conduct a questionnaire survey between the 5th grade orphans and non-orphans. However, the fact that both orphans and non-orphans couldn't read and understand the Yi Language on the questionnaire proved that the Yi Language education of the existing second model of bilingual education had become only a formality, which was affirmed again by the exclusion of Yi Language course from the 5th grade orphans' final tests for the autumn term of 2010.

As the most direct consequence of giving up bilingual education in Yi habitations like Meigu, children cannot understand what teachers teach and what textbooks convey. Orphans, a group with less family education and social resources, are more likely to fail in school, which can be explained well from the following figures (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

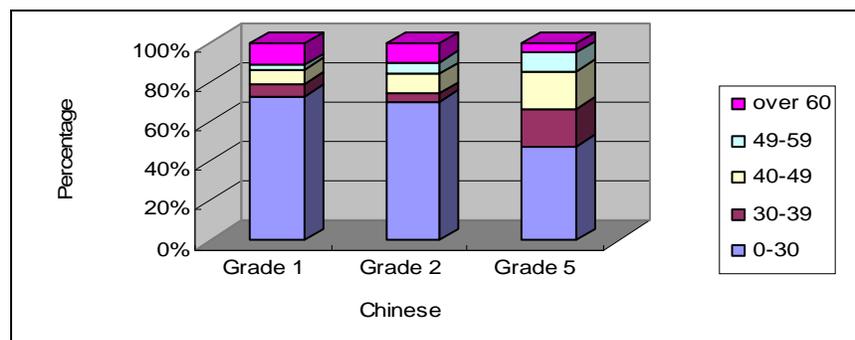


Figure 2. Orphans' grades for the autumn term Chinese finals of 2010, by grade  
Notes: All grades are presented on the base of a hundred-point scale.

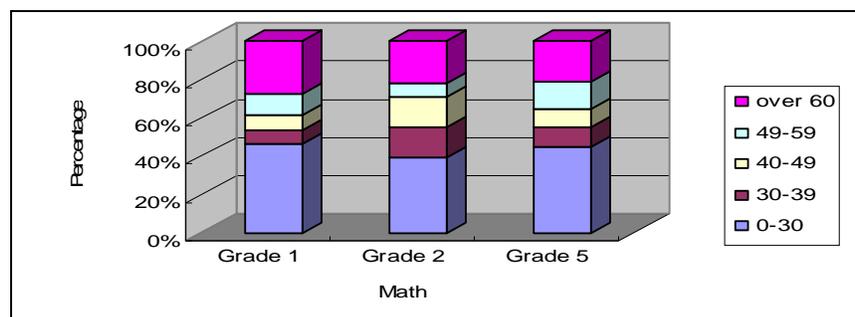


Figure 3. Orphans' grades for the autumn term Math finals of 2010, by grade  
Notes: All grades are presented on the base of a hundred-point scale.

Problems existing in current Yi bilingual education have resulted in a serious impact on Yi area's teaching. Consequently, the entire elementary education system in Liangshan Yi area is in low performance and Yi children are without competitiveness in the modern education assessment system.. During the past ten years, no students in Meigu got access to a university. And "In Liangshan, no more than 3000 students are able to go to college every year, among which Yi students are fewer than 1500, a drop in the ocean compared with the over 100,000 Yi school-aged children..." (Jazzmuji, 2008).

Being so aware of the hopelessness of getting into college is one of the main reasons why so many Yi children, especially orphans who are in more disadvantaged situation, are out of school.

### 3.2. Unified national curriculum excludes Yi's unique culture and keeps detachment from Yi children's daily life

Suo Mahua orphan school, like any other schools in Liangshan Yi area, uses the unified national textbooks. Complaints from orphans' Chinese teachers might be helpful for us to understand the barriers on the orphans' schooling method. According to these teachers, many things in the textbooks don't exist in Meigu. Take the 1st grade's Chinese book as an example. In the second Literacy section, there is a part in which 9 kinds of vegetables are introduced: cucumbers, pumpkins, eggplants, tomatoes, cowpeas, chili peppers, radishes, Chinese cabbages, and cabbages. Unfortunately, 5 of these 9 vegetables (cucumbers, pumpkins, eggplants, tomatoes and cowpeas) can't be planted in Meigu because of weather and soil factors. Without any other teaching facilities except a textbook and a piece of chalk, teachers tried their best but still failed to make students understand what these

vegetables are only because they had never seen or heard about these things. They are familiar with potatoes, Yuankan, oats and buckwheat, but they will never learn how to write these words if they keep using the unified national textbooks.

Furthermore, on the one hand, the unified national curriculum focuses on general knowledge instead of practical skills, especially skills needed for surviving in minority areas; on the other hand, all five junior secondary schools and one senior secondary school in Meigu are located at the center area or the capital of the county, isolating school education from Yi children's family education and community education. As mentioned above, few Yi children have the opportunity to go to college, which means a vast number of Yi students would have to go back to their community at their senior stage of primary school or during their secondary school period. Lack of practical skills education and isolation from family and community education make many Yi students unable to deal with ploughing and herding after their return to the community. Some are even addicted to alcohol abuse, gambling, etc.

Education is needed for better life and effective survival skills. School education existing in Yi areas, obviously, has failed to meet the Yi people's needs. According to economics, no matter what people do, only when expected benefit is bigger than expected cost will people manage to accomplish the activity. For this reason, to caregivers of orphans in Liangshan Yi areas, keeping orphans home for domestic chores, agricultural or income-generating activities and childcare duties seems like a more sensible decision than sending orphans to school.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study attempts to shed light on Yi orphans' school attendance status and reasons leading to low enrollment, as part of a broader effort to guide NGOs in providing more appropriate education assistance for Yi orphans. It also indicates that governments need to improve the free compulsory education policy, both by targeting orphans specifically, and by designing the ethnic minority education policy with the specific ethnic group situation in mind.

Given the data and research conducted in this study, it is clear that the Yi culture deserves equal respect, especially in the realm of education. By making education in Yi areas the carrier of its culture, the Yi people will be able to implement a transformation from a traditional culture to a modern one on the base of development, enabling even their orphaned youth to become a successful part of today's society.

#### 5. References

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