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Testing the Spaces of Discretion: School Personnel as Implementers of Minority-Language Policy in China

Hans-Christian SCHNACK

Abstract: Following international trends to reform school management, the Chinese government has proposed school-based decision-making as a measure to raise the “quality” of education, but at the same time it has imposed new institutions of accountability for teachers and school administrators. In order to understand how this interplay between accountability and discretion affects Chinese educational reforms, this paper analyses policy implementation through the lens of decision-making by principals and teachers as street-level bureaucrats. In the case of minority-language education in Xishuangbanna, a subject where institutions provide comparatively large spaces for discretionary decisions, I argue that the current institutions on accountability in minority-language education in China trigger processes by which implementers must interpret vague institutions in order to make decisions for their classroom. These purposefully wide spaces of “interpretational discretion” enable the party-state to make good on its promise to support local diversity, without threatening its own authority to prescribe educational goals.

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Keywords: China, Xishuangbanna, bilingual education, implementation, street-level bureaucracy

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Introduction

Reform proponents as diverse as the Chinese government, international scholars, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have suggested increasing school-based decision-making in order to diversify the school curriculum in China, to make school education more receptive to students' interests, and, more generally, to improve the "quality" of education. At least since 2001 this goal has been included in several rounds of reforms of schooling, the curriculum, and school management in China. One argument claims that decentralised decision-making ensures that policies are adjusted to local conditions and leads to greater participation by local populations. Embedded in the discourse of diversifying content and methods of schooling, China's reform agenda aims to shift the locus of decision-making in order to improve educational outcomes.

The literature on Chinese school-management reform reveals that accountability measures such as school evaluations and performance-related pay are the main variables used to determine spaces for school-based decision-making – though accountability varies between administrative regions and even between schools (Lee, Ma, and Du 2011; Tian 2011). Scholars differ, however, in their evaluations of the effects of these spaces on school-based decision-making in China. For instance, Zhong and Tu (2013) argue that school-based decision-making is a contemporary phenomenon in China, whereas others assert that "the autonomy of schools only exists to limited degrees, with schools controlled by quota systems, standardized curricula, and assessment systems" (Wong 2006: 55).

The existing literature suffers from several limitations. First, although it intensively describes the institutional settings of school management in China, it lacks detailed analysis of how individual decisions on instruction depend on specific settings. Second, it analyses spaces for school-based decision-making from a general perspective and, bar a few exceptions (e.g. Law 2011 on maths), thus fails to distinguish between school subjects.

Understood as both the teaching of China's ethnic-minority languages and the use of these as languages of instruction in addition to Chinese-language instruction, minority-language education (民汉双语教育, *Min Han shuangyu jiaoyu*) is by definition one of the most "localised" subjects in China's schools. It is characterised by diversity in

models and outcomes; while some schools teach minority languages as a specific subject without implications for the core subjects, others use minority languages as the language of instruction for all subjects, such as math and even Chinese. How are such differences possible in a country with a seemingly top-down system of educational management? To what extent do differences in accountability between teachers of minority languages account for these outcomes?

The literature on minority-language education in China tends to either (i) examine the ideologies behind language policies and thereby offer an understanding of how China's language policy is nested in ethnic policy goals that seek to "civilise" or "appease" potentially restless ethnic groups (Harrell 1995; Zhou 2003; Postiglione 2007; Postiglione, Jiao, and Goldstein 2011) or (ii) focus on the learning outcomes of individual bilingual projects and thereby provide insights into how such outcomes relate, for instance, to language environments (Qi 2003; Dai and Cheng 2007; Cobbey 2007; Teng and Wang 2011; Zhou 2012).

The above-mentioned bodies of literature offer us considerable knowledge about the policy environment of minority-language education, on the one hand, and learning outcomes, on the other. However, they fail to provide us with insights into the process in between. Building on the literature on the key role of the decisions of cadres in Chinese policy implementation (O'Brien and Li 1999; Heberer and Trappel 2013), in general, and in the field of education (Paine 1992), specifically, this article aims to bridge this gap by exploring the decisions of implementers assigned to "street-level" service agencies – namely, schools.

According to Lipsky's (1980) concept of "street-level bureaucracy," policy implementation is a process that is shaped by the decisions of implementers, who have a comparative knowledge advantage over politicians but also face dilemmas posed by the conflicting interests of their superiors and clients within a context of limited resources. The strategies that "street-level bureaucrats" develop to deal with these dilemmas (e.g. dividing resources, superficially adapting, shifting policy goals, selectively implementing policy, diffusing energy, appealing to higher legislation, or building coalitions with societal actors) lead to outcomes such as policy dilution, appropriation, nullification, or amplification (Malen 2006).

Scholarship on educational governance has identified accountability as a major factor in determining school staff's space for decision-making in policy implementation. Building on an actor-centred institutionalist perspective that sees institutions as "regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (Scott 2008: 48), accountability measures in school governance shape not only the processes of teaching, but also the decisions taken by school staff.

As accountability is not an "all-or-nothing thing" (Evans and Harris 2004: 876), differences in accountability measures can be expected to affect school staff's perspectives of their own decision-making spaces. Accountability that has been divided into vertical accountability (where superiors and governmental control agencies hold school staff in hierarchical relationships accountable) and horizontal accountability (where school staff report through non-hierarchical relationships to colleagues in their school, societal stakeholders such as parents, and students) contains elements of support, control, and provision of information but may differ in its effects on decision-making (Hooge, Burns, and Wilkoszewski 2012). Although recent research argues that horizontal accountability measures are useful in school governance, as are vertical accountability measures (Hooge, Burns, and Wilkoszewski 2012), there is still a need to analyse in depth how changes between both modes affect decision-making at the school level against the backdrop of schooling goals in general and minority-language education goals specifically.

Taking minority-language education as an example of the substantial discretion that school staff have (Menken and García 2010), I ask how the institutional settings of accountability affect the decision-making of school personnel with regard to the implementation of minority-language education policies in schools in China. Specifically, I analyse the decision-making structures concerning the implementation of Dai-language instruction at two schools in Xishuangbanna Prefecture (also spelled "Sipsongpanna") at the southern tip of Yunnan Province, which has one of the most extensive and most diverse minority-language education programmes in China. My study expands upon previous research on minority-language education in Xishuangbanna (Hansen 1999; Luo 2011) by focusing on school-based decision-making. The data for this study derives from nine

months of fieldwork in Xishuangbanna between 2011 and 2013, which consisted of participative classroom observations, evaluations of official school data, and interviews with teachers, principals, parents, and students.

This paper¹ proceeds as follows: After outlining spaces for decisions on policy implementation at schools in China under recent reforms in school-personnel accountability, I provide an overview of Dai-language education policies in Xishuangbanna. I then introduce two Dai-language education programmes from the two schools that serve as my case studies, before examining how school staff interpret and use spaces for school-based decision-making. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of school-based decision-making for our understanding of educational-policy implementation and curriculum reform in China.

Accountability and Spaces for Decision-Making on Policy Implementation at Schools in China

Personnel management at Chinese schools has undergone tremendous changes since the late 1980s. On the one hand, and similar to those in other Asian countries (Townsend and Cheng 2000), these reforms have sought to diversify and localise decision-making and implement school-based decision-making as a tool to raise the quality of educational output (Ministry of Education 2001, 2012). Under the “principal responsibility system,” school principals have gained more autonomy over issues such as hiring teachers, using school funds, and supervising teaching (Zhao 2009). Similarly, the discourse on “quality education” has reaffirmed teachers’ roles in delivering diverse and student-centred instruction through locally adjusted curricula, which require spaces for teachers to make instructional decisions (Zhong and Tu 2013; Dello-Iacovo 2009).

On the other hand, new modes of personnel accountability have seen tight regimes over school staff established in China. As part of the agenda to produce skilled human resources for economic development (Paine and Fang 2007), the Chinese government considers

1 Data for this paper stems from a PhD project within the framework of Research Training Group 1613 “Risk and East Asia,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

school teaching to be in need of standardised personnel management and has taken steps to achieve standardisation since the late 1980s, especially since the 1993 Teachers Law came into effect.

Institutional changes have followed this shift in approach. A new ranking system based on school performance, management capabilities, and “moral integrity” is used to hold principals accountable, while teachers are evaluated through a three-step system that consists of self-evaluation (in accordance with teacher handbooks and school guidelines), peer evaluation (carried out during classes and in teacher group discussions), and external evaluations (conducted by inspection teams). Because promotion to better-equipped schools and up to 30 per cent of teachers’ pay are performance-related, staff evaluations – which are based on student attainment, teaching skills, teaching methods, qualifications, and general work ethic – directly affect teachers’ careers, financial situations, and other benefits (Qian and Walker 2011; Ding and Lehrer 2007; Paine and Fang 2007; Qi 2011; Chu and Cravens 2012). Given that local and school-based curricula must not exceed 16 per cent of overall teaching time and that school management is overwhelmingly focused on exams, these new accountability modes severely restrict school-based decision-making (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Li and Shuai 2010).

In effect, the space for decision-making by street-level bureaucrats at Chinese schools remains limited to a few areas of instruction and often excludes matters of financing (King and Guerra 2005). This lack of school-based decision-making is seen as a major barrier to making curriculum more diversified, localised, and student-oriented. Especially in rural areas and in classes that prepare students for college entrance examinations, teacher-centred methods dominate, new curricula have not yet been implemented, new textbooks are disconnected from students’ reality, teachers are inadequately trained, and examinations determine curriculum-planning (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Wang 2011; Adams and Sargent 2012).

However, there is reason to assume that institutions allow more space for decision-making on minority-language education than on core subjects such as maths and Chinese. As part of its approach to grant autonomy to speakers of specific languages, the central government has permitted local diversification and decentralisation of the curriculum in ethnic “autonomous” areas, which has resulted in interregional diversity. Institutional settings such as the provision to

define curriculum locally have been extended for minority-language education; in some regions up to 100 per cent of instruction is delivered in ethnic-minority languages in grade one of primary schooling, although instruction in later grades often switches to Chinese (Tsung 2009). Furthermore, schools have received non-standardised textbooks on minority-language teaching and have participated in developing local textbooks as part of efforts to increase schooling rates and the educational attainment of students whose mother tongue is not Chinese through minority-language instruction (Ou and Luo 2009). Finally, minority-language education has been excluded from the standardisation that Chinese-language teaching has experienced in recent years (Lam 2005).

Dai-Language Education Policies in Xishuangbanna

In Xishuangbanna, a prefecture in China's southwestern-most province, Yunnan, most of the Dai, the prefecture's largest non-Han ethnic group (comprising 27 per cent of the population, see Xishuangbanna Bureau of Statistics 2011) speak the Dai language in addition to Mandarin Chinese. However, even though the Dai language is still used in many private and some public domains, the preference for Chinese in the media, workplace, and governmental domains, as well as the confusion caused by script reforms, threatens the vitality of the Dai language in both its written and oral forms (Hsieh 1995; Zhou and Fang 2004; Davis 2003).

Although the Dai language is still vital to monastic education (Wang and Mi 1998; Luo 2011), Chinese is overwhelmingly preferred over Dai as medium of instruction in education today. Only a few schools use Dai as medium of instruction or teach Dai as a school subject (Xue 1999; Zhao and Zhao 2010). Consequently, the share of pupils receiving Dai-language education in Xishuangbanna declined sharply from a reported 60 per cent in 1966 to 40.7 per cent in 1984, and then to 7.5 per cent in 2005; though, over the past decade a steady share of between 7 and 10 per cent of students in the prefecture have received Dai-language instruction, mostly in primary schools (Zhou and Fang 2004; Xishuangbanna Bureau of Education 2010).

The trajectory of the development of Dai-language education is closely related to governmental activities. On the one hand, the ups and downs in Dai-language education reflect the national government's shifts between pluralism and monopolism in language policy (Zhou 2003). Instruction in other minority languages has also witnessed similar decreases in China, where a new emphasis on Chinese-language education in exams and the labour market has prompted local governments to limit minority-language education to primary school (Teng and Wang 2011; Tsung 2009). On the other hand, Dai-language education has been able to resist the threat posed by the expansion of Chinese-language education thanks to local policies that favour Dai. Recent policy documents such as the *Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture Outline for Medium-Term and Long-Term Education Reform and Development, 2010–2020* (Xishuangbanna Bureau of Education 2011) demand the provision of education in the mother tongue of ethnic-minority children, in general, and in Dai–Chinese bilingual education, specifically. According to one officer in the Xishuangbanna Prefecture Bureau of Education, minority-language education has three goals:

- “to train the learning interests of ethnic children, to make them interested in learning,”
- “to raise the quality of their education, including Chinese learning and civilisational qualities,” and
- “to propagate ethnic culture” (Anonymous 1 2011).

Partly in cooperation with social organisations like the US-based NGO SIL or the Yunnan Educational Association, the governments of Yunnan Province, Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Jinghong City, Menghai County, and Mengla County have developed policy instruments to support minority-language education, such as publishing bilingual textbooks, funding pre-service and in-service bilingual teacher-training college courses, providing teaching material to designated “experimental schools,” staging public events to promote bilingual instruction (e.g. village festivals), and organising research and conferences on bilingual education (Xishuangbanna Bureau of Education 2010; Ai 2001; SIL – East Asia Group 2010).

These instruments, however, favour the Dai language over Xishuangbanna's other non-Chinese languages. For instance, both province-level and county-level bureaus of education regularly organ-

ise teacher-training courses on Dai-language instruction. In contrast, there has been only one such course offered for Hani-language instruction despite Hani being Xishuangbanna's second-most widely spoken non-Chinese language. Similarly, there are five editions of Dai-script school textbooks, but none in Hani. In addition to the historical role of Dai as the *lingua franca* in Xishuangbanna (Cai 1997), the continuous preferential treatment of the Dai language reveals that the approach of China's "autonomous regions" to ethnic-language policy is restricted to leading local ethnic groups, which have developed educational tools in their own native languages but not necessarily in all respective regional languages. Accordingly, Xishuangbanna's bilingual programmes have been tailored to Dai children but not so much to Hani, Yao, or Yi children, who face similar linguistic barriers in Chinese-language instruction.

Dai-Language Education and Accountability at Two Schools

In order to define the effects of accountability and discretion on school-based decisions within one region and one language, this paper analyses two schools in two different counties in Xishuangbanna. In the interests of privacy, the pseudonyms "Mengyi" and "Menger" are used. Each with a student population of approximately 400, Mengyi and Menger are of average size, based on the national and Xishuangbanna averages (see Table 1). Each school offers Dai-language education, but they differ with regard to teacher accountability for this subject. Both schools are located in villages in townships that are surrounded by farmland. The majority of the students have parents who work in agriculture and come from households registered as "rural" (according to the *hukou* (户口) system). Dai students represent the largest ethnic group at both schools, followed by Han and Hani. Han immigration and the merger of schools with student populations of different ethnicities made both schools more diverse in terms of their students' ethnic and language backgrounds. Today, both schools are visited by students who speak Chinese, Dai, Hani, Yao, or Yi as their mother tongue.

Ethnic Dai students at both schools suffer from language-related barriers. According to the schools' teachers and principals, students who speak Dai as their first language enter school with a low profi-

ciency in Chinese. In fact, the language-related barriers faced by ethnic-language speakers in the overwhelmingly Chinese-language classes are a contributing factor to the schools' below-average student exam results. In the 2010 Primary Student Graduation Examinations and the 2011 Educational Quality Examinations, for instance, students from both schools scored on average 10 points fewer than township students and 20 points fewer than urban students.

As pilot schools in Dai–Chinese bilingual education experimental programmes, Mengyi and Menger offer Dai-language instruction. However, their policy instruments and the programmes they are enrolled in differ. Dai-language education at Mengyi comprises an intensive phase of bilingual instruction at the preschool level, where students are initially taught entirely in Dai and then gradually in Chinese. From grade two, virtually all instruction is carried out in Chinese, with instruction in Dai reduced to two hours per week. Since Mengyi segregates students from preschool onwards into a Chinese-only stream and a Dai–Chinese bilingual stream, only half of its students receive Dai-language education during primary school. As a pilot school of the Dai–Chinese Bilingual Education Experimental Programme (傣汉双语教学实验项目, *Dai Han shuangyu jiaoxue shiyan xiangmu*), which is organised and funded by the Yunnan Province Bureau of Education, the Jinghong City Bureau of Education, the Yunnan Education Association, and SIL (SIL – East Asia Group 2010; Cobbey 2007), Mengyi has received specific textbooks, has been regularly visited by external researchers and other experts, and has had its teachers undergo training on student-centred methods.

By contrast, Dai-language education at Menger is merely a subject taught for two hours per week in selected preschool classes and in grades four and five. Although all of the school's students, irrespective of their mother tongue, receive training in Dai writing in these courses, Dai is not used as medium of instruction for any of the school's other subjects. Dai-language education is based on the Dai textbooks developed by the prefecture and taught by teachers who are required to attend only the regular bilingual teacher-training courses organised by the prefecture and the provincial bureaus of education. Through the Yunnan Provincial Bilingual Experimentation Schools Programme (云南双语教学试点项目, *Yunnan shuangyu jiaoxue shi dian xiangmu*), which is run by the Yunnan Province Bureau of Education in cooperation with the Yunnan Provincial Committee of

Guidance Work for Minority Languages and Literature, Menger has received various materials, including media devices.

Both schools have a considerable number of teachers who are active in Dai-language instruction (11 per cent of the school staff at Menger and 17 per cent at Mengyi) (see Table 1). The principal of Mengyi is an ethnic Dai and also teaches the Dai language, whereas Menger's Hani principal is not involved in teaching minority languages. Dai-language teachers at both schools are of both sexes and range from recent graduates to teachers close to retirement. They are all ethnic Dai from Xishuangbanna and learned Dai writing at home, at temples, at school, or at college. Most have also graduated from Xishuangbanna College in Dai–Chinese bilingual teaching studies. They are employed as regular teachers and teach Dai alongside other subjects.

Table 1. Students and Teachers at Two Case Study Schools, 2012

	Mengyi	Menger	Primary school average in Xishuangbanna
Students	389	443	388 (national 386)
Ethnic Dai students	62%	52%	27% (in 2005)
Teachers	24	27	9 (in 2005)
Dai-language teachers	4 (17%)	3 (11%)	Total: 87 (1%) (in 2005)

Sources: School statistics obtained during interviews, from the Xishuangbanna Bureau of Education 2010, the Editorial Committee of Xishuangbanna Yearbook 2013, and the Editorial Board of China Educational Statistics Yearbook 2013.

Teachers' accountability in the regular school inspections is comparatively low for Dai-language education at both schools as evaluation mechanisms are less developed for Dai-language education than for core school subjects. First, regular external top-down evaluations often exclude Dai education; as there is a lack of standardised criteria for evaluating Dai language education, inspections focus merely on the core subjects, and the school inspectors do not necessarily speak Dai themselves. Second, even when evaluations include Dai-language education, they are based on non-standardised criteria and thus lack the ability to be compared to the standardised evaluations of core school subjects.

Additionally, both schools lack institutionalised accountability modes which would allow parents to question the application of Dai-

language education at schools in general or the individual class content and teaching methods specifically. First, due to the scarcity of schools in rural areas, parents are generally unable to use choice of school as a means to pressure schools into either introducing or ceasing Dai-language instruction. Second, due to a lack of institutions of parent representation, parents are also often unable to express their preferences on specific modes of language education at their children's schools. Neither Mengyi nor Menger feature parent organisations. The regular parent class meetings held at the schools twice per semester serve only to inform parents about their children's educational achievements or problems, rather than as a platform to discuss teaching content and methods.

There are, however, specific measures with which to assess teacher performance in the area of Dai-language teaching. But the manner in which these specific modes of evaluation have been translated into internal evaluation regimes differs between the two schools.

At Mengyi, Dai-language teachers are evaluated by their peers in accordance with self-defined standards. Not only does the principal of Mengyi often visit Dai-language classes, according to one teacher (Anonymous 2 2013), Dai-language teachers also often discuss their teaching methods and visit each other's classes. The teachers also participated in workshops organised for the pilot schools of the Dai-Chinese Bilingual Education Experimental Programme, where they wrote textbooks, chose the content of individual lessons, developed teaching methods, and formulated evaluation criteria, which now form the basis for peer evaluations. Additionally, NGOs and the local bureaux of education regularly advise teachers on method development.

By contrast, evaluations at Menger focus less on internal and horizontal accountability measures and more on external and vertical forms. According to the teachers here, neither the principal nor other administrative staff regularly supervise Dai-language instruction, Dai-language teachers seldom observe their colleagues' lessons or engage in institutionalised discussions with their colleagues, and the school has not developed a standardised procedure for evaluating Dai-language instruction. Instead, since 2011 Dai-language teachers at Menger have been rigidly evaluated by an external top-down approach: compulsory student exam results. These exams are conducted once per term, and students' results are recorded not only on their report cards but also in their teachers' evaluation files.

Interpreting Policies and Institutions

Staff at both schools engage as street-level bureaucrats by constantly interpreting policies and institutions that concern Dai-language education. The interviews I conducted brought three subprocesses to light: the interpretation of policy goals, instruments, and accountability. Based on these interpretations, teachers and principals construct spaces for their decision-making.

Although the two principals generally placed more emphasis on the value of bilingual education for their schools as a whole and teachers focused more on its value for instruction, staff members at both schools interpreted policy goals in terms similar to those used in policy documents. Both teachers and principals argued that education in the Dai language can support students' learning of Chinese. Mengyi's principal, for instance, said that since preschool students lack Chinese-language skills, they should begin their schooling in their minority language and slowly change afterwards (Anonymous 3 2011). Menger's principal similarly said,

Bilingual education is to support Dai students to better master Chinese [...]. First learn through Dai, after that advance to understand and experience the national language, Chinese. (Anonymous 4 2012)

School staff also argued that teaching minority languages serves to protect cultural heritage – something Menger's principal described as the state's responsibility given that “it is a question of ethnic unity” (Anonymous 4 2012). Moreover, school staff contend that education in minority languages attracts students to schools in regions with high dropout rates. One teacher explicated:

Dai students come to [...] school anyway, but some of them [...] cannot learn. They just play from morning till evening. Although these students are at school, they just don't internalise other subjects, Chinese and maths. They know nothing. So, I think when they are not learning, we can bring their own ethnic language here. (Anonymous 5 2013)

School staff also evaluate the suitability of policy instruments for Dai-language education against the backdrop of their own understanding of the goals of school education, in general, and of Dai-language education, specifically. At Mengyi, both the teachers and the principal viewed current policy instruments as beneficial. They said that the

current programmes support the school sufficiently with educational material, that teachers have enough time to teach both Dai and Chinese, and that its model of starting entirely in Dai before slowly transitioning to Chinese produces positive student-learning outcomes. However, at Menger the principal and the teachers differed strongly in their assessments of the policy instruments. While the principal presented the Dai–Chinese programme as a success for his school, the teachers were less satisfied with the current situation. One teacher criticised Menger’s model of compulsory Dai instruction for placing an additional burden on non-Dai students:

These children are especially pitiful. When they write [Dai], some can’t even write their own name after completing preschool. But they will still have to take Dai language tests. (Anonymous 6 2012)

School staff generally perceive accountability with respect to Dai-language education to be more flexible than it is with regard to core subjects. While underperformance or high dropout rates in core subjects can have serious repercussions for principals, such negative indicators in Dai-language education do not bring about severe consequences. As one principal explained, “They tell you that your management is not good and they give you time to change” (Anonymous 7 2013). Teachers also found evaluations of Dai-language courses to be rather lenient. For example, evaluators reportedly do not check the notorious, time-consuming “after-class thoughts” since they cannot read them when they are written in Dai. As a result, Dai-language teachers – unlike teachers of other subjects – claim that evaluations are of no great importance to their professional and material well-being. One teacher explained her view:

When they come to observe teaching, you can say the leaders come down to check the level of our Dai teaching. They say that they wanted to establish Dai education, and they want to see how the students achieve that. In Chinese courses they come to evaluate the teachers. This evaluation is closely connected with our pay, so there is some pressure, [...] but in Dai courses there is no pressure. Whether they come to listen or not makes no difference to us. (Anonymous 8 2013)

By combining these three subprocesses of interpretation, school staff are able to construct spaces for decision-making. On the one hand, the teachers and principals at both schools revealed that institutionalised rules, regulations, and hierarchies guide their teaching (with state-

ments such as “we do everything according to standards,” “we teach according to the curriculum,” or “[we] conduct classes mainly according to the textbooks”). On the other hand, school staff also reported that they interpret and adjust policies according to the classroom and school situation (with statements such as “we organise classes according to the real situation,” “we consider the students’ situation,” or “we need to use textbooks flexibly”).

With these interpretations, school staff are reacting to official discourse. While principals and teachers generally situate their arguments regarding bilingual education in line with government discourse on ethnic harmony and even use similar language to the government, their views also reflect the incongruence of policy goals. For instance, although all interviewed staff reaffirmed official connotations of ethnic diversity under national unity, they have different interpretations, ranging from the promotion of minority-language rights to the “civilisational project” approach, the latter of which devalues minority cultures and languages in favour of the Chinese language and Han culture.

Against this backdrop of conflicting interpretations, staff at Mengyi and Menger had varying opinions about the suitability of accountability with regard to Dai-language instruction. The staff at Mengyi were largely satisfied with the particular ways that accountability is institutionalised in terms of Dai-language education and explained that they benefit from the assessments conducted by their colleagues and external experts. The teachers at Menger, by contrast, were more critical of their school’s accountability measures. They wished for more support from their peers, from the school’s teaching supervisors, and from the school principal. Additionally, teachers at Menger were unhappy with being assessed via student exam results, especially via exam results that they found unsuitable to assess what they actually taught. Criticising the focus of these exams, one teacher drew a connection between the prevalence of exams and the content of her lessons:

I think that Dai-language education in preschool should not be for tests. Even less should it be for scoring in the league table. It should be for learning the basics of our Dai ethnicity – for example, customs of daily life. (Anonymous 6 2012)

The dilemmas faced by Mengyi and Menger staff as street-level bureaucrats were influenced more by their spaces for decision-making at

their respective schools than by their ethnicity. While all ethnic Dai teachers at both schools agreed on the need for Dai-language instruction, only those at Mengyi found the current models useful for students. The staff at Menger were very anxious about teaching in the Dai language because it had failed to raise the school's low Chinese and maths scores in its current format.

For the teachers, this translates into teaching dilemmas. Menger's teachers must teach the Dai language in preparation for tests that they disagree with. Vertical exam accountability and the school's role as an externally chosen project base have presented these teachers with the dilemma of either fulfilling external requirements by teaching, in their eyes, useless Dai graphemes or spending more much-needed time on Chinese-language education. Even a teacher whose students received the highest scores in the Dai language in the county described the tests as misleading and a waste of time. Teachers at Mengyi, by contrast, face fewer dilemmas as they have greater freedom to select the methods and content they feel will best support their students. As one Mengyi teacher said, "Normally [the teachers] just teach their lessons with a very peaceful and quiet heart. Anyway, it's all for the children" (Anonymous 2 2013).

Using Spaces for Decision-Making

A preliminary look at the "locus of decision-making" (King and Guerra 2005) between the government level and the school level at Mengyi and Menger shows that the area of instructional matters has the largest space for decision-making on Dai-language education at the two schools, whereas resource allocation and personnel management primarily fall within the remit of the government (see Table 2); this, incidentally, mirrors the pattern for core subjects (King and Guerra 2005; Wong 2006). In terms of resource allocation, schools depend heavily on the government, which assigns programmes, pilot-school status, and resources. With regard to personnel management, government agencies hire, train, and promote school staff – though schools assign staff to courses and define the modes of internal evaluation. In instructional matters, by contrast, school personnel in Xi-shuangbanna have much more discretion. For example, they regularly decide on the content of individual lessons, on student placement, and on timetabling of Dai-language lessons.

Table 2. Locus of Selected Key Decisions in Dai-Language Education in Xishuangbanna

Area	Decisions	Government	School level	
			Mengyi	Menger
Resource allocation				
Application	applying for resources	X		X
	approaching external donors	X		
Allocation	selecting pilot schools	X		
	allocating funds to schools	X		
Budget	spending resources	X	X	X
Personnel management				
Assignments	assigning staff to courses		X	X
Employment	hiring staff	X		
Evaluations	evaluating staff internally		X	
	evaluating staff externally	X		
Rewards	defining salaries and rewards	X	X	X
	announcing teaching-competition results at schools		X	X
Training	organising teacher competitions	X		
	sending teachers to competitions and for training		X	X
	undertaking research projects	X	X	X
Instructional matters				
Course content	defining class content	X	X	X
Instruction time	assigning timetables		X	X
Languages	choosing language in class and on school grounds	X	X	X
Students	assigning classrooms		X	X
	assigning students to classes and dorms		X	X
Methods	preparing lessons	X	X	X
	assigning homework		X	X

Area	Decisions	Government	School level	
			Mengyi	Menger
Exams	defining class requirements		X	
	assigning and evaluating exams	X	X	
	defining student rewards		X	X
Support activities	decorating school buildings and classrooms		X	X
	organising student excursions		X	X
	inviting external experts to lecture		X	X
Teaching materials	writing textbooks	X	X	
	publishing textbooks and teacher handbooks	X		
	using textbooks and teacher handbooks		X	X

Note: "Government" refers to decisions made by bureaus of education, the Bureau of Human Resources, or ethnic affairs commissions at the national, province, prefecture, or city/county level. "School level" refers to decisions made by administrative or teaching school staff.

It is in the area of instruction that the two schools' decisions differ most. Mengyi's Dai-language teachers select content and methods in accordance with their view that minority-language instruction can be used to enhance students' communicative skills, to teach about local heritage and culture, and to prepare students for Chinese-language classes. Whether designing textbooks at a workshop or teaching in the classroom, Mengyi's Dai-language teachers centre their lessons on local folk tales or village life in order to connect lessons with students' experiences. In contrast, teachers at Menger face greater difficulties in achieving the (possibly contradictory) goals of enabling students to write Dai script and meeting Chinese-language targets. Their decisions are based on the notion that minority-language education is an issue separate from Chinese-language education. Dai-language instruction throughout all grades is textbook-based and focuses on written-language knowledge, while communicative skills are barely taught.

The schools also differ in how much time and energy teachers invest in preparing Dai-language classes. Teachers at Mengyi had already invested a lot of time by participating in workshops, developing textbooks, and collecting additional materials for class. Seeing the impact Dai-language lessons have on students' progress in both Dai and Chinese, they try to prepare Dai-language classes especially carefully, although detailed class preparations for Dai are even more time-consuming than those for Chinese. One teacher said, "I spend most of my time on preparing Dai. Teaching guides can be downloaded for Chinese, but not for Dai" (Anonymous 2 2013). Teachers at Menger also face a time dilemma, but they are influenced by their view that teaching the Dai language does not contribute to higher student exam marks in Chinese or maths. Therefore, they rarely prepare anything for Dai-language classes and often simply make students copy Dai graphemes from the blackboard. One teacher explained:

Last year our [preschool] class was ranked first [in the county]. This year we did not achieve that much, because I invested more time in the sixth grade. The sixth graders will graduate. This is very important for them, so I spent more time guiding them. (Anonymous 6 2012)

The schools further differ in terms of timetabling Dai-language courses. At Mengyi, Dai-language courses are scheduled throughout the day and thus considered an integral part of regular education. At Menger, however, such courses are scheduled for the late afternoon, when students are more tired and when ad-hoc activities often replace regular instruction, thus reflecting the low importance given to Dai-language education compared to other subjects.

Although more long-term quantitative analysis is needed, initial insights indicate that school-based decision-making has an impact on student attainment in Dai-language education and Chinese-language education. The decisions made by Mengyi staff to adjust content to their students' learning pace, to focus on communicative approaches, and to combine Dai-language and Chinese-language teaching boosted student achievement in both Dai and Chinese. Students whose mother tongue is Dai and who completed one year of bilingual instruction were able to write stories in Dai and achieved Chinese-language exam scores similar to those of their Han peers. According to the teachers at Mengyi, bilingual instruction enabled these students to later follow classes taught in Chinese, whereas the regular all-Chinese head start

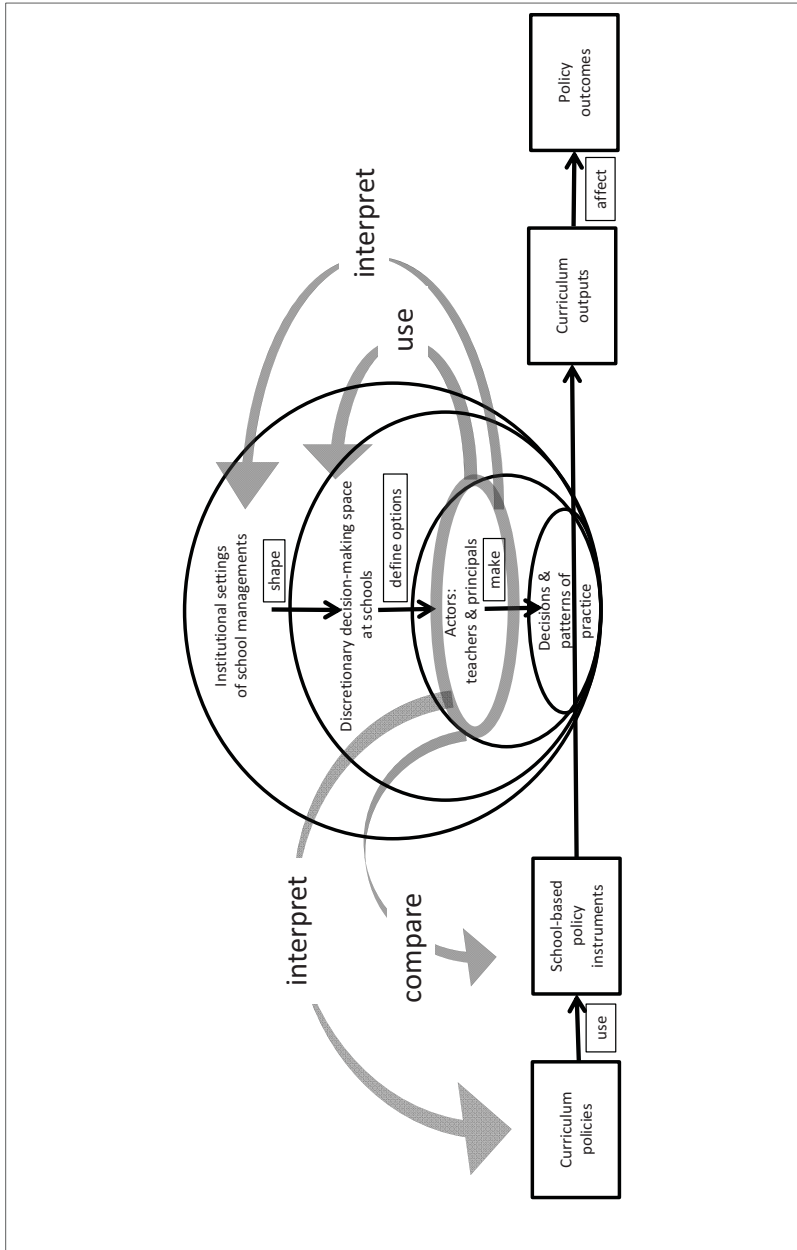
practised in non-project classes typically resulted in students struggling to keep up.

By contrast, the decisions taken on Dai-language education at Menger – such as teaching Dai to students of all linguistic backgrounds, scheduling Dai instruction in the afternoon, not teaching Dai between preschool and grade four, only teaching Dai as a subject instead of using it as a medium of instruction in core subjects – all proved detrimental with regard to students' Dai-language acquisition and their overall educational attainment. After one year of script instruction, students were still mostly unable to write complete Dai sentences, with some even struggling with basic graphemes. Because Dai was only taught as a subject, it did not help Menger students to learn Chinese; instead, it established additional burdens for Han, Miao, and Hani students, who were already struggling to keep pace with the regular curriculum.

The relaxed nature of the evaluation of Dai-language instruction compared to that of core subjects such as Chinese and maths allows principals and teachers at both schools to adjust policy during implementation as a strategy to deal with contrasting and vague policy goals, to make Dai-language education useful for students, and to reduce staff workloads. However, the strategies employed by staff at the two schools differ. Mengyi's system of internal accountability coupled with the absence of county-wide standardised student exams for Dai-language education allows teachers to adjust content and methods to their students' needs, to engage students deeply with the Dai language, and to slowly shift the language of instruction to Chinese. Menger's system of low internal staff accountability and use of regular Dai-language student exams, by contrast, drives teachers to prioritise Chinese-language education, to husband resources allocated to Dai-language courses for Chinese-language education, and to teach the Dai language merely as a means to fulfil the requirements of exams.

The above-mentioned strategies indicate that institutions affect street-level bureaucrats' implementation of policy. However, as mechanisms for Dai-language evaluation are less standardised than evaluation mechanisms for core subjects (due to a lack of evaluation criteria, and because accountability measures differ greatly between schools), institutions for accountability are often vague and require interpretation by the school personnel. School personnel at Mengyi,

Figure 1. Analytical Framework of School-Based Decision-Making in Curriculum-Policy Implementation



for instance, viewed the advice given by external experts and peers – although this has never been formalised and does not include sanctions – as the strongest guidance for their own teaching. School personnel at Menger, by contrast, saw the more formal teacher evaluations based on regular student exams in the Dai language as the guidelines for their teaching.

As a result, these spaces of interpretation of institutional settings affect the teaching of the Dai language at both of the case study schools. While school staff at Mengyi used their discretion to focus on improving communication skills and to teach Dai only to Dai native speakers, staff at Menger decided to teach Dai to all students irrespective of students' mother tongue and to focus on teaching knowledge in written Dai. As formal regulations on Dai-language education from Xishuangbanna Prefecture and the counties in their vagueness have allowed for a variety of Dai-language education models, school staff resorted to their own interpretation of institutions to make decisions on how to fill the space of discretion. In sum, personnel at the two case study schools engaged in several modes of interpretation of institutions and policies during their implementation of Dai education policies. First, they interpreted policies in order to understand their meaning and goals. Second, they compared policy instruments with their own interests. Third, they interpreted the institutional settings of policies. Fourth, they utilised the spaces for discretionary decision-making provided by their institutions (see Figure 1). These interactions illustrate that the interplay of actors and institutions affects decision-making on policy implementation by shaping the scope of discretionary decisions at the street level. The proposed framework is an approach to consider the effects of these interactions on the process of policy implementation.

Conclusion: Street-Level Implementation in China Revisited

This paper has analysed school-based decision-making by street-level bureaucrats on Dai-language curriculum at two schools in Xishuangbanna. By selecting two schools that teach the Dai language, have similar student backgrounds (ethnic Dai majorities with poor Chinese-language skills compared to their Han peers), and are in close geographic proximity to one another (two counties in Xishuangbanna

Prefecture), I was able to use institutional settings of accountability to explain the differences between the observed schools in terms of policy implementation.

The implementation strategies employed by school staff – such as defining their own instructional goals, diffusing energy, husbanding resources, and superficially implementing – have all been observed elsewhere. Although the staff at Mengyi and Menger adopted strategies that are consistent with those identified in the literature on school-based policy implementation (e.g. Malen 2006), they actually use severely limited implementation strategies. For instance, they do not appeal to higher legislation, build coalitions with societal actors, approach external experts of their own accord, or engage parents to make political demands for or against education in minority languages. These schools' decisions on implementing minority-language policy have regularly resulted in policy appropriation or amplification, but not in policy nullification.

Mengyi's and Menger's specific strategies and the resulting outcomes reveal the effects of institutional settings, especially those concerning accountability, on decision-making regarding policy implementation at schools. School staff in Xishuangbanna have greater decision-making discretion in Dai-language education than in core subjects. The comparatively low importance of regular accountability measures in Dai-language instruction opens up space for school-based decision-making. Within these vague limits, school staff make implementation decisions based on their understanding of education goals, in general, and of minority-language education, specifically. Although their understandings reflect China's official preference for Chinese (the language of exams and the labour market), some staff at Mengyi and Menger are able to make decisions according to their own understandings of the value of minority languages for preserving cultural identity.

A comparison of the two cases not only reaffirms the elsewhere-observed role that ethnicity plays in administrators, principals, and teachers perceiving the need for cultural protection (Hansen 1999), but it also indicates that institutions of school management play a significant role in defining the spaces school staff use for decision-making, and that these institutions may be even more important than the ethnicity of the school staff. Only institutional spaces allowed teachers to draw upon their own understandings of instructional

goals. While ethnic Dai teachers at Mengyi made decisions in favour of Dai-language instruction, ethnic Dai teachers at Menger decided otherwise. This shows that local diversity in the area of minority-language instruction offers staff greater diversity in spaces for discretionary decision-making.

Nevertheless, even Dai-language staff are subject to accountability – either directly connected to their teaching in Dai or as a side effect of overall personnel evaluations. Of interest here is how different modes of accountability result in different strategies and choices. As far as the two case study schools are concerned, vertical accountability through teacher assessment based on student exam results led to pro forma policy implementation, which resulted in students' underperformance in Dai-language education and presented implementers with dilemmas. Horizontal accountability based on self-defined standards, however, led to teachers and students being deeply engaged with the goals of minority-language education and reduced decision-making dilemmas.

Analyses of decision-making on instruction in Dai–Chinese bilingual models depict accountability as a major factor in determining the outcomes of curriculum decisions, which might also explain the puzzle of why so few teachers and principals push for minority-language instruction despite often agreeing on the need to protect minority languages. Going beyond the established finding that a state ideology of language hierarchy is reflected in China's classrooms (Harrell 2001; Postiglione 2007), evidence from the case study schools shows that in instances where official state ideology equally emphasises the value of Chinese and minority languages, school staff must refer to their understanding of accountability modes that are often not spelled out for minority-language teaching in order to make decisions.

With regard to discretionary decision-making on bilingual education, differences in accountability modes explain differences in both decisions and students' learning outcomes. While indeed “language-related factors deserve greater attention than they are currently accorded both in policy and practice as well as in research and innovative planning” (Wang and Postiglione 2008: 186–187), the same could be said for factors related to school management. As this study has shown, policy formulations concerning the value of instruction in specific languages are only expressed in school-based decisions that

are filtered through staff's interpretation of the modes of school personnel management and curriculum implementation.

On a broader scale, this finding also points to factors that shape the outcome of reforms in school management and minority-language education in China. In addition to a lack of resources and political will, the oft-bemoaned lack of success in localising the Chinese curriculum relates to an asymmetry between increased discretion regarding specific subjects, on the one hand, and a still overwhelmingly top-down personnel management structure in Chinese schools, on the other. Against the backdrop of calls to diversify the Chinese school curriculum, this study has shown that successful diversification requires more than the introduction of one or two "localised" school subjects.

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