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Schooling as Lived and Told: Contrasting Impacts of Education Policies for Ethnic Minority Children in Vietnam seen from Young Lives Surveys

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Schooling as Lived and Told: Contrasting Impacts of Education Policies for Ethnic Minority Children in Vietnam seen from Young Lives Surveys

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Truong Huyen Chi carried out a sub-study on ethnic minority education in Vietnam between October to December 2008 for Young Lives, a long-term study of children's lives over 15 years in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam (www.younglives.org.uk). Young Lives is core-funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries, with sub-studies funded by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ethiopia, UNICEF in India, Irish Aid in Vietnam and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The views expressed here are those of the author. They are not necessarily those of the Young Lives project, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.

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Abbreviation

CEM	Committee for Ethnic Minorities (formerly the Committee for Ethnic Minorities in Mountainous Areas)
CSBS	Community Semi-Boarding School
GSO	General Statistics Office
HEPR	Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
DOET	Department of Education and Training (Province)
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs
DOLISA	Department Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (Province)
PC	People's Committee
PEDC	Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children
P135	Program 135
P134	Program 134
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VCP	Vietnam Communist Party
VND	Vietnam Dong

USD (\$) 1= VND 16,814 (as of 20 October 2008)

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Summary

This paper examines the mixed impact of the implementation of education policies aimed at ethnic minorities in Vietnam. It draws on the Young Lives survey in 2005 and a qualitative research on 23 Kinh (the majority), Hmong and H'Roi children from the Young Lives sample in Lao Cai and Phu Yen provinces in 2008. The paper finds that despite a conspicuous expansion in access to basic education for ethnic minority students the majority-minority gap in educational achievement persists. Case studies suggest that an uneven allocation of resources partly accounts for the varying record of performance across regions, i.e., between lowlanders and highlanders, and between those who are the direct beneficiaries of socio-development aid and those who are not. Children's experiences in education and development programs, presented in their own voices, mirror their place in the existing structure of inequality in the society. By situating the children's experience in the local political economy, the paper seeks to highlight the dynamics between education and other sources of marginalisation from which some children continue to suffer.

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to improve the living standards of 53 ethnic minority groups who comprise 13 per cent of the total population and nearly 40 per cent of the poor, the Vietnamese Government has implemented many policies focusing on ethnic minorities. Over the past ten years, a more logical system of national socio-economic programs has been developed, and the incorporation of a number of pre-existing development projects under Program 135 in 2000 has facilitated a greater integration of funding resources and activities aimed at overlapping targets (Nguyen and Baulch 2007).¹

More than a quarter of Vietnam's 84 million citizens are under the age of 15. The Government recognizes that the nation's future depends on how this generation is brought up: Between 2001 and 2006, funds for national targeted programs in education increased five times and the government's annual budget for education trebled.² In 2006, education represented 23 per cent of the state's total expenditure, in comparison with social welfare (14 per cent), state administration (11 per cent), and health care (7 per cent).³ Furthermore, together with a public campaign against corruption in education,⁴ the government appears committed to developing an education system that ensures quality, equitable access, and accountability. One of its intended beneficiary groups are ethnic minority children. In recent years, a number of national socio-economic development programs have

¹ The Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas was established by Decision 135/1998/QĐ-TTg issued in 1998 (For more details on the design of the Program, see Nguyen and Baulch 2007); Lao Cai PC Report for the meeting with Mr. Ksor Phuoc 2006.

² GSO website, The State Expenditure from 2000 to 2006.

'National targeted programs' (*Chuong trinh muc tieu quoc gia*) is an official term used for the state's social development programs with specific targets such as poverty alleviation, clean water and environment in rural area, population and family planning, social evils and epidemics, cultures, and education. Each program contains multiple projects funded by the state and various international donors and is implemented by relevant ministries or equivalents over a period of five years renewable (Decree 71/2001/QĐ-Ttg).

³ GSO website *ibid.*

⁴ Instruction 33/2006/CT-TTg. Policy documents with full citation are listed in References.

channelled scholarship and subsidies to these children who are, on average, poorer than the majority Kinh.

This paper examines the mixed impact of the implementation of education policies toward ethnic minorities, focusing on the teaching and learning of ethnic minority languages and scholarships and financial aid for ethnic minority students. An overview of the implementation of these policies at the national level is followed by accounts of policy impacts experienced by children researched in Young Lives Project.⁵ The paper draws on the second round of Young Lives data collection in 2005 among 2,960 five-year-old and 12-year-old children in the five provinces of Vietnam. This is complemented by qualitative research involving 23 Kinh, Hmong, and H'Roi children from the Young Lives sample in Lao Cai and Phu Yen conducted late 2008. The paper shows that despite a conspicuous expansion in access to basic education for ethnic minority students the majority-minority gap in educational achievement remains. Furthermore, there are signs of increasing inequality among the different minority groups. The distinction is pronounced between those belonging to larger population sub-groups and receiving greater national and local attention and those who do not. Experience of marginalisation in education, as told by the Hmong and H'Roi children in this paper, is largely uneven across different groups. Some of the causes can be found in the design of multiple and overlapping socio-economic development programs and education specific projects as well as the practicality of their implementation in different locales.

The Two Provinces and their Peoples

As one of the six provinces bordering China, Lao Cai forms part of a region that has a distinct geography, ethnicity, and a relatively backward state of socio-economic development. The majority of its population consists of twenty seven non-Kinh ethnic groups.⁶ Lao Cai ranks 55th among 64 provinces and cities in the country.⁷ The average annual per capita income in 2007 was VND 2.3 million; 43 per cent of households live below the national poverty line and 95 per cent of these poor households are ethnic minorities.⁸ Over 100 of the 164 communes are listed as beneficiaries of the second phase of Program 135. The Hmong are the second largest ethnic group, representing over 20 per cent of the provincial population, followed by the Tay (14 per cent), Yao (12 per cent), Thai (9 per cent) and others.⁹

Phu Yen is located in the South-central coast of Vietnam. In contrast with Lao Cai, 95 per cent of Phu Yen's population are Kinh; the remaining five per cent comprise minority groups such as the Ede and Cham, each representing two per cent of the provincial population.¹⁰ With an average monthly per capita income of VND 523,000, Phu Yen stands approximately half way (33rd of 64) in the province-wise ranking.¹¹ One-fifth of the households in the province are poor, 17 per cent of which belong to ethnic minorities. Twenty communes benefit from Program 135, and another 20 are identified as facing extreme hardship.

The H'Roi is a local Cham group concentrating in three western districts. They tend to identify their culture as being closer to that of the Central Highlanders than the Hindu- and/or Islam-influenced coastal Cham. Similar to the Kinh, the H'Roi grow cash crops, but keep a larger stock of cattle thanks

⁵ Young Lives is a long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in order to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being and inform the development and implementation of policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty. To this end, the lives of 12,000 children growing up in four developing countries -- Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru and Vietnam -- are tracked over 15 years (www.younglives.org.uk).

⁶ CEM website, Lao Cai province. Lao Cai Statistics Office 2007.

⁷ GSO 2007.

⁸ Lao Cai DOLISA Report 43/BC-LĐTBXH.

Effective 2005, the national poverty line for the countryside is VND 200,000/person/month (Decision 170/QĐ-TTg).

⁹ CEM website *ibid*.

¹⁰ CEM website, "Phu Yen Province".

¹¹ GSO 2007.

to the grassland available in the area. Lao Cai is poorer, and has a bigger ethnic minority population than Phu Yen. This translates into more development aid for Lao Cai; the H’Roi in Phu Yen are not sufficiently numerous to justify the provision of programs that the Hmong receive in Lao Cai.

Table 1. Summary of Comparison between Young Lives Research Sites

Site	Poverty Rate	Proportion of Communes in Program 135	Population of Ethnic Minorities			Population of Ethnic Minorities Studied by Young Lives	
			All groups	Hmong	Cham	Hmong	Cham
			%	%	%	%	%
Whole country	15	21.3	17	1	0.17	5	
Lao Cai province	43	69	67				
Bao Ly commune	28	partially		46			
Phu Yen province	20	22	5				10
Ea Mua commune	29	none	36		34		

Source: GSO website, Lao Cai, Phu Yen, Bao Ly and Ea Mua reports.

II. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATION POLICIES FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES AND ITS IMPACTS

Several current policies on education for ethnic minority students go back a few decades: the nomination of students for higher education dates back to 1989,¹² the teaching of native languages to 1980¹³ and the establishment of boarding schools to 1985.¹⁴ Other policies are part of on-going development programs in mountainous areas, such as the construction of schools and the provision of scholarship and financial aid under Program 135 (Nguyen and Baulch 2007). This has led to a visible expansion of education for the minority over the past ten years. Despite overall progress, the enrolment of students from ethnic minorities remains lower than that of the majority and their drop-out rate higher. There are signs of poor quality of education which affects minority students more. Below we will look briefly at the increase of schools and the number of ethnic minority students in recent years before taking into focus the two areas that attract the most attention of the state policies concerning education for the ethnic minorities: the provision of scholarship and financial aid and the teaching and learning of ethnic minority languages.

II.1. The Construction of New Kindergartens and Schools

Two of the five targets of the first phase of Program 135 (1998-2005) were the development of infrastructure and the construction of communal centres including schools. School projects represented 32.3 per cent of the total of 16,184 projects (Nguyen and Baulch 2007: 6). This clear focus of investment on schools helped to increase the number of pre-schools in the whole country by nearly 31 per cent between 2001 and 2007.¹⁵ Between 1996 and 2007, the number of schools for general education increased by 32.5 per cent.¹⁶

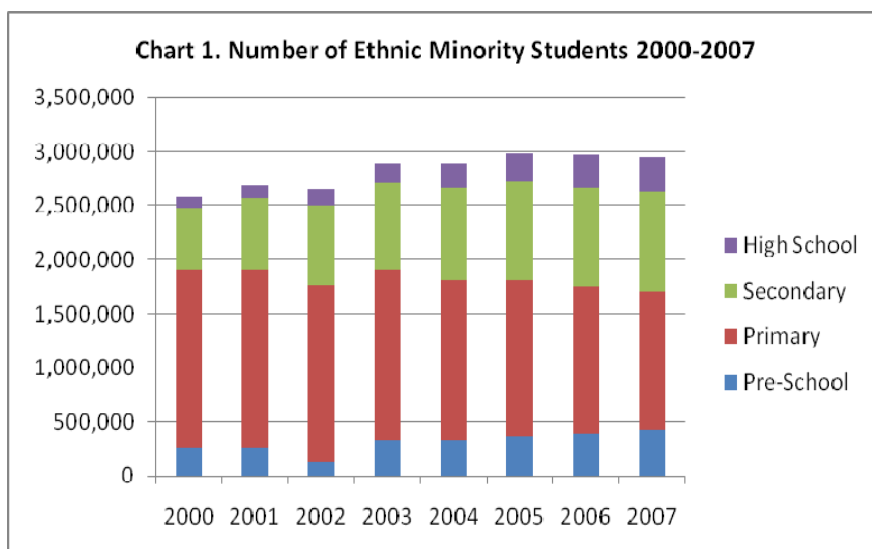
¹² The 6th Congress of the VCP Central Committee emphasised the priority in the enrolment and training of students of ethnic minorities as prospective officials to serve in their own home land (VCP Central Committee Decree 22/NQ-TW). Between 1990 and 2007, 24,972 students of 50 ethnic minorities graduated from 45 universities and national colleges, 20 local pedagogical colleges, and 52 vocational schools. In 12 provinces surveyed in 2005, 80.7 per cent of the graduates returned to work in their home provinces (Nong Thi Quyen 2009).

¹³ Government Council, Decision 53/CP.

¹⁴ MOET Decision 661/QĐ.

¹⁵ GSO 2003 and 2007.

¹⁶ 'General education' (*giao duc pho thong*) is a term used in Vietnam that covers primary, secondary, and high schools.



Source: MOET website, 2009.¹⁷

Since the construction of new schools during this period was concentrated in mountainous areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, more of their children have been tempted to go to school. The total number of ethnic minority students in the country increased from nearly 2.6 million to about 3 million between 2000 and 2007. A notable growth occurred at the pre-school level where the number of students increased by almost 67 per cent during the same period. The most impressive development, however, is that the number of ethnic minority high school students trebled over less than a decade (Chart 1). This expansion owes itself to the increased availability of local options as more schools at communes and districts started to offer semi-boarding facilities (Box 1).

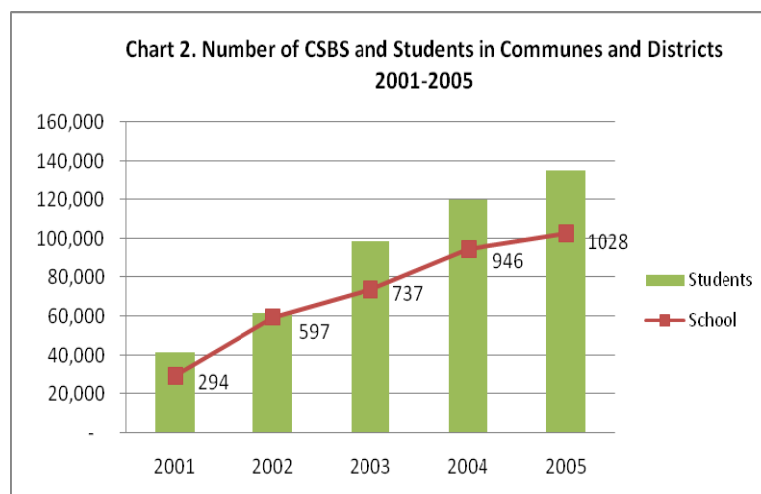
Box 1. The Proliferation of Community Semi-Boarding Schools (CSBS)

'Schools nurtured by the people' came into being in the late 1950s in the remote areas where government subsidies could hardly reach. Unlike state boarding schools where students board throughout the entire school year with one home visit every semester and are entitled of full state scholarship, students in semi-boarding schools stay overnight at school or nearby, financed by their own family or by the local people, and go home for the weekend. During the 1990s, this spontaneous civil arrangement had been institutionalised, drawing in support from local authorities. Since the late 1990s given MOET's sanctioned, more state day-schools turned themselves to CSBS. The support from MOET and local authorities come in the forms of funding for the expansion and improvement of the school buildings and facilities, financial support for boarders, and additional incentives for teachers and managers.

While it is acknowledged that CSBS responds to the increased demand for education for ethnic minority students, it is also observed that it offers little substantial input to improve students' learning. In other words, teaching and learning in CSBS during the school hours do not differ from those in day schools. The only difference is that students would work on their home assignments under the supervision of a teacher in the off-hours. There have been efforts to introduce more active programs and activities to enrich CSBS.

The number of students attending CSBS schools increased 20 fold from 2001 to 2005. As CSBS has evolved from an active engagement between students' family, school community, and local authorities, its proliferation in the early 2000s provides an example of the so-called 'socialisation of education in Vietnam', i.e. a distinct form of decentralisation that enhances private, non-state, and state partnership in making a public good.

¹⁷ MOET website, General Education Statistics, <http://www.moet.gov.vn/?page=11.2&view=9264> , retrieved 19 April 2009.



Source: Vi Van Dieu 2007; Bui Thi Ngoc Diep 2008.

II.2. Scholarships and Financial Aid

In accordance with the 1991 Education Law, primary school students do not pay tuition fees. Depending on the socio-economic status, an ethnic minority student would receive additional financial support from various sources. As of July 2007, a child attending a CSBS who lives in Program 135 villages would receive VND 140,000/month during term time. Each kindergarten pupil under this scheme would receive VND 70,000/ month. Those who do not live in P135 communes but come from a poor household or commune with extreme difficulties receive a more modest allowance.¹⁸ Regardless of household or village status, ethnic minority students continue to receive school supplies in the form of free text books and notebooks. Ethnic minority students in state boarding schools and colleges and universities continue to receive a scholarship equivalent to 80 per cent of the current minimum wage.¹⁹ In a survey of 162 schools by MOET Department of students and pupils in 2006, scholarship receiving students from ethnic minorities (10,884) represented 2 per cent of the total number of students (574,441).

Table 2. Scholarship and financial aid for ethnic minority students

	Monthly allowance per person	Notes and other benefits
Minimum wage	VND540,000	Applied from 01 January 2006 to date ²⁰
Poverty line	VND200,000	Effective 2005
Average monthly income	VND636,000	

¹⁸ The allowance varies across provinces: VND 20,000/month for Lao Cai and VND 30,000/month for Phu Yen (Lao Cai Department of Finance and DOET, Joint Circulation 341/LN:STC-SGD&ĐT; Phu Yen PC, Decision 1289/2002/QĐ-UB).

¹⁹ Between 2001 and 2007, the monthly scholarship was adjusted twice from VND 160,000 to VND 280,000 and VND 360,000.

²⁰ Effective 1 May 2009, the minimum wage is VND650,000/month (Decree 33/2009/ND-CP).

Students who come from poor family and live in Program 135 communes or communes with extreme difficulty		
Kindergarten	VND70,000	9 school months
SBCS	VND140,000	9 school months; free school supplies such as text books and notebooks
Ethnic minority students in state boarding schools	VND432,000	or equivalent of 80 per cent of the minimum wage; free school supplies; ²¹ full exemption from tuition and other fees.
Ethnic minority students in higher education	VND432,000	or equivalent of 80 per cent of the minimum wage; full exemption from tuition and other fees.

Source: MOET Department of Students and Pupils, GSO website.

Students who are qualified for state boarding school but choose a day school instead receive 50 per cent of the full-time boarder's scholarship in Lao Cai and VND 100,000/month in Phu Yen.²² In 2008, there were 1,009 students who received state scholarship totalling VND 3 billion and another 818 students received other forms of support such as transportation fees worth VND 317 million.²³ The provision of scholarship and financial aid target ethnic minority students in three different ways: based on ethnic minority membership, location, and socio-economic status.²⁴ Government financial aid for poor minority children in Vietnam is meant to be inclusive: a school-attending child of schooling age who comes from an ethnic minority background and a poor family is entitled to at least one form of financial aid and exempted from tuition and non-tuition fees.

Lao Cai and Phu Yen differ significantly in the size of budget for education for the minorities. Between 2003 and 2006, the former spent VND 22.7 billion to subsidise the tuition fees of 93,477 students,²⁵ while the latter spent only VND 3 billion in 2008 on approximately 1,000 students.²⁶ For school supply subsidy, Lao Cai spent VND 21 billion for three years 2003-06 while Phu Yen spent only about VND 1 billion a year.²⁷

Box 2 provides a glimpse of education projects and programs in the two provinces. A comparison suggests that the H'Roï children and their families in Ea Mua (Phu Yen) are likely to benefit less from government support than their Bao Ly (Lao Cai) Hmong counterparts due to the limited availability of these programs in their locale.²⁸

²¹ For details of school supplies, see Nguyen and Baulch 2007.

²² Lao Cai Joint Circulation 341/LN:STC-SGD&ĐT, *ibid*.

This only applies to 10 graders in a day school in Dong Xuan district (Phu Yen DOET Report 731/GD-ĐT).

²³ Phu Yen PC, Report 145

²⁴ See note 8 for the national poverty line.

²⁵ Lao Cai PC, Circulation 2082/UBND-TM.

²⁶ Phu Yen PC, Report 145, *ibid*.

²⁷ Lao Cai DOLISA, Report 43/BC-LĐTĐBXH, *ibid*.

²⁸ All names of communes, schools and persons are pseudonyms.

Box 2. Education-Related Programs and Projects Implemented in Lao Cai and Phu Yen in 2008

Programs	Lao Cai		Phu Yen	
	Province	YL Commune	Province	YL Commune
<i>Government Programs</i>				
Program 135, Phase 2 (2006-2010)	x	x	x	
- construction of commune centre, including schools	x	x	x	
- Program to Support Ethnic Minority Households in Extremely Difficult Circumstances (Program 826, joins P135 since 2000)	x	x	x	
- The Resettlement and Sedentarisation Program (joins P135 since 2000)	x	x	x	x
Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction and Employment Creation Program (Program 143, 2001-05)	x	x	x	
Program of Support for Production land, Residential Land, Housing and Water for Disadvantaged Ethnic Minority Households (Program 134, since 2004)	x	x	x	x
Community Based Rural Infrastructure Project (since 2001)			x	x
<i>MOET Projects</i>				
Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children (2003-2009)	x	x	x	x
Secondary Education Development Project	x		x	x
Child-Friendly Education Project (UNICEF, since 2001)	x	x		
- Bilingual Education (since 2007)	x			
Intensification of Vietnamese for Pre-School Children in the Mountainous and Ethnic Areas (since 2002)	x			
Teaching Technology for Vietnamese for Grade One (since 2007)	x			
<i>Others</i>				
JICA Pilot Toilet Program			x	x

Source: Lao Cai and Phu Yen People's Committee and DOETs; People's Committees and Schools in Young Lives Sites; Nguyen and Baulch 2007.

II.3. The Teaching and Studying of Ethnic Minority Languages

As early as 1961, the first sets of written characters for Tay-Nung, Hmong, and Thai languages were approved to be used in education and public media,²⁹ followed by those of the Jrai, Banar and Sedang

²⁹ Decree 206/CP on the Approval of Tay-Nung, Meo (Hmong) and Thai Written Languages, 27 November 1961.

in 1981, Co Ho in 1983, Pa Co and Bru-Van Kieu in 1986.³⁰ From 1955 to 1979, ten different languages were taught in general education, mostly at the primary level and most of the initiatives were taken up by provinces. In 1980, seven languages were taught, the selection of which was based on the availability of the written characters as well as local resources. The following ten or fifteen years saw a decline of ethnic minority language education in many provinces due to shortage of resources.³¹ From the mid-1990s onward, minority language education experienced an upsurge at the national level.³²

In the school year 2007-08, Chinese, Hmong, Cham, Khmer, Ede, Banar, and Jrai languages were offered in 17 provinces and cities, covering 107,905 students. Over 1,400 primary school students from the two provinces of Yen Bai and Lao Cai study Hmong between Grade Three and Five. The scope of Hmong language education almost doubled from 730 students (10 schools) in 2005-06 to 1,402 students in 2007-08 (17 schools). The number of teachers, however, decreased by half, from 135 to 68.³³ In 2008, there are only two teachers of Hmong language working with 69 students in three primary schools in the province. This reflects an unstable general trend: in 2007-08, the number of schools offering ethnic minority languages in the whole country decreased by 11.4 per cent and student numbers declined by 14.2 per cent.³⁴ Given the shortage of teachers and its small ethnic minority population, Phu Yen does not offer any local language. For those provinces that have a multi-ethnic population, the provincial people's committee decides whether minority language(s) are provided according to the proportion of population speaking the languages, the availability of curriculum and textbooks and resources.

For primary education, a number of minority languages using logographic or non-Latinized alphabetic systems such as Chinese, Cham, and Khmer, are taught as a subject from Grade 1 to 5, whereas languages with Latinized letters such as Ede, Banar, Jrai and Hmong are taught from Grade 3 to prevent the confusion with Vietnamese. In principle, where native teachers are available and given that the writing is Latinized, local language is used as the language of instruction from Grade 1 through 3 while Vietnamese is taught as a subject. Gia Lai is the only province that experiments a Jrai-Viet bilingual education in practice.³⁵

At the pre-school level and where kindergarten is not available, Vietnamese language is taught to ethnic minority children for two months before entering Grade 1, with an emphasis on speaking. Since 1998, the kindergarten curriculum has reserved some room for local content to facilitate school preparation.³⁶

In the school year 2007-08, curricula and textbooks of the above seven languages were released by the MOET. These curricula had been experimented since 1999, revised and approved by the Ministry. A number of provinces take initiative in designing their own teaching manuals for secondary and high schools. Official textbooks of minority languages are updated in a rolling fashion.

The evaluation of the learning of minority language is done either regularly or periodically, varied across provinces. Some provinces provide incentives such as bonus points for enrolment in upper levels of education.

³⁰ MOET, Report 7752/BC-BGDĐT on the Teaching and Learning of Ethnic Minority Languages in General and Regular Education Institution and the Research and Training for the Study, Usage, and Presentation of Culture, Literature and Arts of Ethnic groups, 25 August 2006.

³¹ For example, Hmong language was discontinued in Lao Cai from 1980 to 1999 (Lao Cai People's Committee Report 1649/UBND-VX on the Implementation of Decree 53/CP on the Preservation of Languages and Writings of Ethnic Minorities in Lao Cai, 4 August 2006).

³² MOET, Report 7752/BC-BGDĐT, *ibid.*

³³ MOET, Report on the Teaching of Ethnic Minority Languages 2008 *ibid.*

³⁴ MOET, Report on the Teaching of Ethnic Minority Languages 2008 *ibid.*

³⁵ For details on four models of bilingual education in Vietnam through the second half of the 20th century, see Kosonen, *Language in Education*, 2004, p. 20-21.

³⁶ Kosonen, *Language in Education*, *ibid.*

There were above 1000 teachers of minority languages in the country in 2007-08, almost all of whom were native speakers and 66 per cent of them only teach language. Teachers of minority languages are entitled to an extra 50 per cent of their current salary; the actual remuneration varies across provinces. Most of these teachers did not receive formal training in language and pedagogy.³⁷

No review of social policies concerning ethnic minorities would be complete without a consideration of the policies on cultures and religions, toward which the Vietnamese government adopts a plural approach (Brown and Ganguly 1997).³⁸ Diverse cultural heritage of the 54 ethnic groups is to be preserved and promoted.³⁹ This preservation can be best described, however, as selective and the decision as to what ought to be preserved is often taken in a top-down fashion (Salemink 2001). In the same vein, while some religions are unambiguously celebrated such as Buddhism,⁴⁰ others are placed under watchful eyes.⁴¹

In a multi-ethnic setting, this ideological and policy framework is translated into a modernist and progressive outlook among local officials and educators and a preserved attitude among local parents and students. With little dialogue with the community, the school remains an alien institution that promotes, among other things, hygiene, science, and modern education, in direct contrast with local practices deemed backward enough to be eliminated (Aikman and Pridmore 2001:534; Truong forthcoming). For instance, the practices of the minority ethnic groups in Lao Cai are divided into three bureaucratic categories, namely customs, neutral elements, and backward negative elements. The latter are to be eventually rectified.

III. POLICY IMPACTS AS EXPERIENCED BY YOUNG LIVES CHILDREN

Bao Ly commune is located in Bac Ha, a middle range district in terms of both geography and socio-economic development in Lao Cai, where the Hmong represent 46 per cent of the population.⁴² Nearly 30 per cent of the households in the commune live below the national poverty line, almost all of them are ethnic minorities. There are four schools -- a kindergarten, two primary, a secondary and a high school -- hosting more than 11,000 students in 2008.

Ea Mua is one of the poorest communes of Son Hoa district in the western highlands of Phu Yen. Similarly to Bao Ly, nearly 30 per cent of Ea Mua's households are poor. The Cham H'Roi people represent 34 per cent, concentrating in two hamlets. In 2008 there were 1,100 students studying from pre-school to secondary school in the commune, one third of whom were ethnic minorities.

III.1. The First Glance: School Enrolment and Drop-outs

In the second round of Young Lives survey conducted in 2005, 14.3 per cent of five-year-old children ($n=1,970$) and 12.8 per cent of 12-year-old children ($n=990$) come from ethnic minorities. The Hmong represent the largest minority group: 5.6 per cent of the younger cohort and 4.2 per cent of the older cohort. There are a total of 41 (10.6 per cent) younger and 18 older (9.1 per cent) H'Roi children in the Young Lives sample in Phu Yen province. Table 1 provides the national context of the ethnic minorities discussed in this paper.

³⁷ MOET, Report on the Teaching of Ethnic Minority Languages 2008 *ibid*.

³⁸ Constitutions 1946 and 1995, cited in Ngo Huu Thao 2005.

³⁹ VCP Central Committee, Decision of the Fifth Congress.

⁴⁰ VOV News, 2009.

⁴¹ Instruction 01/CT-TTg.

⁴² Bac Ha District PC Report 2007.

Young Lives data show a significant discrepancy in the enrolment rate between the Kinh and minority groups and among minorities. While nearly 91 per cent of Kinh children attended kindergarten in 2005, only 76.5 per cent of children from the ethnic minority did. Among the minorities living in the north, more lowlanders (90 per cent of Nung and 88.6 per cent Tay) attended pre-school than their uphill counterparts (63 per cent Hmong). The enrolment rate among the H'Roi is higher than that of the Hmong and above average for the minorities (78 per cent) (Table 3).

A similar pattern is found for the older cohort: the enrolment rate of the Kinh is 13 percentage points higher than that of the minorities. Only 77 per cent of Hmong children and 72 per cent of the H'Roi are enrolled. It is worth noting that among the Hmong at this age, fewer girls (72 per cent) went to school than boys (81 per cent). The gender gap is even larger for the H'Roi: boys' enrolment exceeds girls by 25 percentage points.

A closer look at the drop-out rate in the Young Lives sample reveals a widening majority-minority gap as ethnic minority students are 7.6 times more likely to drop-out than Kinh students. The drop-out rate is high among the Hmong (23), where more than a quarter of girls quit school, but is higher for the H'Roi (27.8). The gender difference is striking: less than one fifth of H'Roi boys left school while more than forty per cent of girls did (Table 3).⁴³

Despite significant efforts by the government and local authorities, there has not been a fundamental transformation in the ethnic divide in school attendance and attrition. The total number of ethnic minority students in both Lao Cai and Phu Yen decreased over 8 per cent from 2005 to 2008.⁴⁴ Local officials tend to associate this with the decline in the number of school age children.⁴⁵ Informal conversations attribute the cause to the anti-corruption campaign since 2006 in which qualification exams have been tightened. They have forced a vast number of students to drop-out before sitting the final exam.⁴⁶

A critical look at the school drop-out statistics reveals a disturbing fact. In the school year 2007-08 in Phu Yen, while ethnic minorities represented only one-twentieth of the total students, they comprised nearly 20 per cent of the drop-outs. In Ea Mua in 2008, half of the six students who dropped from secondary school were H'Roi, another six H'Roi discontinued primary school.⁴⁷ Even if it is true that a genuine embrace of the anti-corruption campaign creates institutional and moral conditions for unqualified students to leave school, the fact that the drop-outs are overwhelmingly from ethnic minorities poses a serious question on the quality of education and its governance.

What we found in the Young Lives qualitative sample largely confirms the above observations. All eight Kinh of both age ranges currently attend school, while only half of Hmong and H'roi children do. None of the older Hmong or H'Roi girls made it to secondary school. A six year old H'Roi boy and a Hmong boy did not enrol in Grade One.

When asked about the reason for leaving school, the most common answer was family hardship, "my family is so poor, I must stay home to help my parents".⁴⁸ Apart from the need for domestic labour, boredom and underachievement at school was articulated: "I couldn't read. I couldn't count. I did terrible, so bad that I did not care [to go on]"⁴⁹

⁴³ The outcomes of the Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth are convergent with these observations. More than half of ethnic minority drop-outs left school after completing primary school, while three quarters of Kinh continued longer until they dropped out. (SAVY 2003:28).

⁴⁴ Lao Cai DOET, Report 184/BC-SGD&ĐT *ibid.*; Lao Cai DOET, Report 92/BC-SGD&ĐT on the School Year 2005-2006, 20 June 2006; Phu Yen DOET, Report 795/GD-ĐT and Report on the School Year 2007-2008 *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Phu Yen DOET Report on the School Year 2007-08 *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Vietbao 2007; Vietime 2007.

⁴⁷ Ea Mua Secondary School, Report on the School Year 2007-08.

⁴⁸ Conversations with H'Mai, 24 October 2008.

⁴⁹ Conversations with Vu, 21 November 2008.

Table 3. Enrolment and Drop-Out Rates by Ethnic Groups within Young Lives Sample in Lao Cai and Phu Yen

	Whole Sample												Minority											
	Majority (the Kinh)						Minority						Hmong in Lao Cai						H'Roi in Phu Yen					
	Total		Boys		Girls		Total		Boys		Girls		Total		Boys		Girls		Total		Boys		Girls	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Enrolment</i>																								
5-year-old	1,735	91	892	91.5	843	90	213	76.5	111	74.8	102	78	67	62.6	38	64.4	29	60	32	78	13	72	19	82
12-year-old	966	98	483	98.1	483	98.3	106	85	56	87.3	50	83	30	77	17	81	13	72	13	72	9	82	4	57
<i>Drop-Out</i>																								
12-year-old	17	1.7	9	1.9	8	1.6	16	12.9	7	11.3	9	15	9	23	4	19	5	27.8	5	27.8	2	18.2	3	42.9

Table 4. Vietnamese Literacy and Math Competence within Young Lives Sample by Ethnic Groups

Area of Competence	Whole Sample												Minority											
	Majority (the Kinh)						Minority						Hmong in Lao Cai						H'Roi in Phu Yen					
	Total		Boys		Girls		Total		Boys		Girls		Total		Boys		Girls		Total		Boys		Girls	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sentence reading in Vietnamese	976	98.7	488	98.6	488	98.8	105	81.7	54	82.5	51	81	22	53.7	12	57	10	50	17	94.4	10	91	7	100
Writing in Vietnamese without difficulty	950	96.1	470	95	480	97	98	77	49	76	49	78	25	65	13	57	12	55	16	89	9	82	7	100
Average math score (scale of 10)	981	8.4	489	8.4	492	8.5	127	5.7	64	5.3	63	6	41	3.6	21	3.5	20	3.6	18	4.4	11	3.5	7	5.9

III.2. Schooling as Lived and Told

In 2008, the implementation of the education policies or education-relevant components of development programs is in full swing in both Lao Cai and Phu Yen. What is presented below are children's accounts of their experiences of schooling and recent changes.

III.2.1. School Access: "Now We Can Go To School Everyday"

Three years ago, a satellite primary school and a kindergarten with bright classrooms were built in Ea Mua. Today it takes at most forty minutes for a child from the furthest point of the village to walk to the school. Phong, a primary school teacher, remarked that H'Roi students recently attained a better school readiness thanks to their pre-school preparation available in their village.⁵⁰

For those who go to the main school at the commune centre, the road has become a pleasant bike ride since a concrete bridge was built. A Six Grader recalled, "before, my elder brother had to stay overnight at his friend's when it rained hard. Nowadays we can bicycle to school and come back every day."⁵¹

In 'my village landscape' drawn by Hmong primary students in Bao Ly, the school was painted in bright colours and placed at a prominent spot. In practice, not all children are happy about the move of the school to the new site down by the river: it becomes distant for those whose family does not join the resettlement program. The latter aims at bringing Hmong households from a high to a lower altitude and in a more densely populated area, the proximity to which served as the base for the selection of location for the new school. Furthermore, households that take part in the program are entitled for a range of material benefits.⁵²

For school dropped out students who wish to continue to study, outreach literacy classes are offered in Ea Mua (Box 3).

Box 3. Outreach Literacy Classes in Ea Mua

As the illiteracy for children in the primary school age was eliminated, Phu Yen claimed its achievement of universal education at this level in 1998. To sustain this achievement, a committee for outreach education is established, headed by the vice chairman of the commune's People Committee. A staff in each primary school is responsible for enrolment promotion at the grassroots in the school area. At the secondary education level, free evening classes are offered in the village. Many Ea Mua youths like H'Mai enjoy these classes because "it is fun to see friends at school".⁵³ She completed the outreach literacy program last year but did not care about obtaining the diploma. The state budget for a student like H'Mai is VND 600,000/year, sixty per cent of which covers teacher's remuneration.

Source: Phu Yen PC Decision 1146/2005/QĐ-UB

III.2.2. School Fees: "It's Free; You Can Even Get Money"

⁵⁰ Interview, Phu Yen, 4 November 2008.

⁵¹ A community tour led by Nga, 26 October 2008.

⁵² Lao Cai PC Decision 2008.

⁵³ Conversation with H'Mai, 24 November 2008.

Starting from 2005, H'Roi students in Ea Mua are exempted from non-tuition contribution, which makes their schooling free. Kindergarten goes do pay a fee of VND 80,000/year as the school is non-state. As the commune is not under Program 135, its children do not receive financial support. Subsidy comes in the form of school supply through the Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children project.⁵⁴

Hmong students in Bao Ly, in contrast, enjoy financial aid from many more sources. An allowance of VND 140,000/month is an instant incentive that urges families to send their children to school. However, not all students receive the same allowance. It depends on the location of the ethnic minority student and the socio-economic status of his or her family. As students come from different villages with different status, a wide range of subsidy implies discrepancies among recipients. A primary school headmistress pointed out the 7-times gap in students' allowances and described her school's strategy as budgeting students' meal according to the lowest reimbursement.⁵⁵ These discrepancies may create discontent among the recipients or their parents because those at the lower end may think they would be qualified for a larger subsidy. As students board together they are aware of the differences. The extra money from the scholarship is returned to the entitled students by the end of each month or semester when they visit home.

Even in the case children are entitled to financial aid, not all of them receive it:

My sister goes to kindergarten but she does not receive the seventy thousand *dong* they are talking about. [...] I know why: it's because my father was not there when the list maker came; only he can sign. Sometimes they don't even bother to climb up [to reach us]. As long as we live up here we're always late in this kind of registration.⁵⁶

III.2.3. *Language: "I Can't Read, but I Can Karaoke"*

While Hmong language is taught in three primary schools in Lao Cai, none of the indigenous languages is taught in schools in Phu Yen. However, a native teacher started in Ea Mua kindergarten three years ago; and four natives were hired as teaching assistants under the scheme of PEDC. Despite genuine efforts on the part of some teachers in using native language in classroom interaction, the students' ability to communicate in national language varies depending on gender, geographical proximity, the prevalence of popular media, and other factors.

Virtually all teenagers in Ea Mua converse in Vietnamese without difficulty. So do young Hmong men in Bao Ly, but not women. As the village school has always been exclusively Hmong, it is the preferred language of interaction among pupils. Girls who did not pursue further education would eventually retreat to their mother tongue in the daily life far from the Vietnamese speaking world. Not being able to speak Vietnamese may prevent them from having access to a number of socio-economic development programs such as credit, family planning, and agricultural extension, let alone daily communication in the marketplaces.

The most salient feature of popular media in Bao Ly is that it is available in Hmong language through CDs and DVDs imported from China and Laos. Hmong viewers watch entertainment programs of their ethnic counterparts living on the other side of the border. Karaoke texts are in the Hmong Latinised characters, which, according to Lan, look similar to the "letters in the Bible", so she can recognise them easily, and thus she said, "I can't read, but I can karaoke."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ea Mua Primary School Report 2007-08.

⁵⁵ Conversation with Mrs. Vice Principal, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Conversation with Hoa, 24 November 2008.

⁵⁷ Interview with Lan, 23 November 2008.

The scope of the Hmong language education in Lao Cai appears too small to meet this cry for an alternative source of literacy of the Hmong youth. The H'Roi seem to be, on the other hand, too few in number to justify a language program for them. While the local government cites the shortage of teachers and resources to provide local language programs,⁵⁸ none of the alternative means are available in the locale.

III.2.4. *High Dreams: Achieved and Disillusioned*

It seems to be all-too easy for local officials and educators to state the lack of motivation for upward mobility among ethnic minority parents and children (Truong forthcoming). An educated person in a modern sense would be set as a role model by the youth themselves. Lan talked highly about a young couple in her village in Bao Ly because the wife "has a high education [and] they talk to each other in Vietnamese and treat each other like friends. She is very active and goes everywhere and [the husband] even likes it."⁵⁹ However, having completed the secondary school herself, Lan retreated to marriage a year after she discontinued her education. She did not envision for herself any possibility of an occupation other than farming.

The first and only H'Roi teacher in Ea Mua talked of her efforts to break the barrier to achievements posed by ethnic stereotyping.⁶⁰ Successful stories like hers, however, are too few. Apart from few boarding school graduates who take up posts in the local administration, the majority end up farming alongside their peers, which in turn is seen by children as waste. Ethnic minority youths are aware of alternative options such as working in a factory or tourism as well as the factors that constrain them, i.e. the material and social resources of their family and their own (lack of) schooling qualification.

III.3. Looking beyond the Visible: Obstructions for Quality of Education

The majority-minority gap is further widened when it comes to the quality of teaching and learning; so is the gap among minority groups. Records of literacy and math competence of Young Lives children attest to this observation and point to the role played by language (Table 4). As the degree of exposure to spoken Vietnamese for the H'Roi children is much greater than that among the Hmong, over 90 per cent of the former can read and write without difficulty, while this is the case for only around 50 per cent of the latter. A comparatively better command of the national language helps the H'Roi students keep their math score slightly higher (4.4) than that of their Hmong counterparts (3.6), yet much lower than that of the Kinh (8.4).

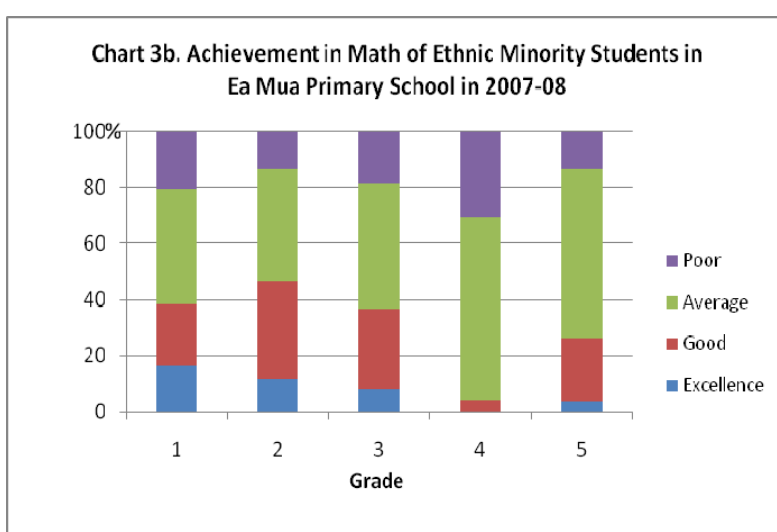
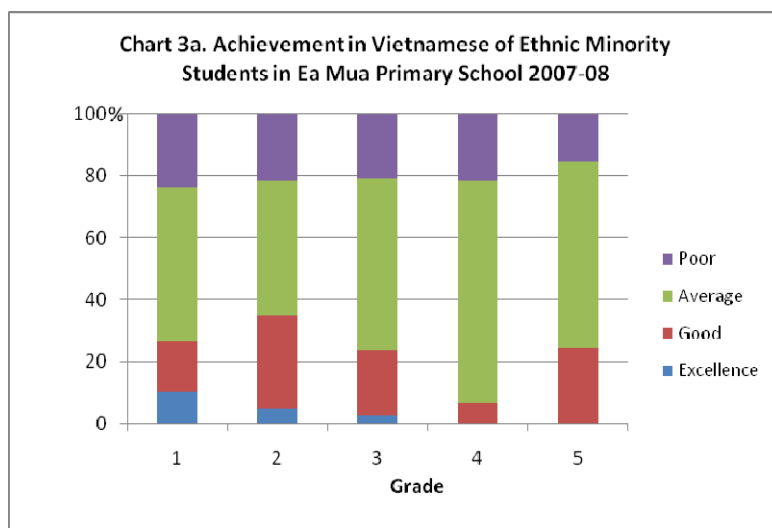
School statistics available for Vietnamese and Math reveal more troubling signs. In 2007-08, the percentage of H'Roi students in Ea Mua primary school who excelled in these subjects decreased sharply as the grade progressed: from ten per cent (7 students) for Grade One to three per cent for Grade Three (1 student) for Vietnamese (Chart 3a), and from 16 per cent (11 students) to under four per cent (2 students) for Math (Chart 3b). The higher the grade a H'Roi student attends, the less likely it is that s/he does well in these two major subjects of study. This Kinh-minority discrepancy is confirmed by another study on the quality of teaching of ethnic minority primary school students in northern provinces.⁶¹ It also suggests that one reason affecting the math outcomes is the language difficulty in verbal assignments.

⁵⁸ Phu Yen DOET, Report 731/GD-ĐT

⁵⁹ Interview, 23 November 2008, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Interview with H'Duyen, 31 October 2008.

⁶¹ Nguyen Thanh Thuy 2008, p. 40-42.



Source: Ea Mua Primary School report 2007-2008.

A H'Roi parent described the language problem for his Third Grade daughter as follows: "Kieu solves numeric calculations instantly. But when the teacher starts putting [math] in words, something like 'Hoa has five nectarines...', she gets confused. She did not know that a nectarine is similar to a peach, anyway."⁶²

A further threat to education quality is the verbal and physical abuse reported by children across ethnic backgrounds, genders, and age. Abuse in the classroom is one of the most common experiences of schooling and ranges from mild scolding to stick beating and humiliation in public. Fear and shame perhaps contribute to class absenteeism and eventual school drop-out (see also Truong forthcoming).

The lack of a monitoring mechanism and parental involvement only exacerbate these problems. Some children even condone teachers' abuse; in Dieu's words, "If we are stupid and unruly, it is right for the teachers to curse and beat us."⁶³ Others quietly disapprove but remain sceptical of a possibility for

⁶² Conversations with Ma Hung, 24 November 2008. The author deliberately chooses the nectarine/peach analogy to facilitate English speaking readers.

⁶³ Interview with Nga and Dieu, 01 November 2008.

change: "If we tell our parents [about the beating], what can they do? What do you think they can do?"⁶⁴

Furthermore, teachers' lack of knowledge of cultural practice of their students reflects the selective preservation framework imbued by the Vietnamese state. A stereotypic observation claiming that Kinh students have a better ability to absorb the teaching than their minority counterparts is common among teachers in both research sites. Moreover, teachers tend to attribute the poor performance of ethnic minority students to the lack of support from their parents and their poverty. While teachers in Bao Ly seem to be relatively familiar with Hmong culture, their colleagues in Ea Mua cannot elaborate in details what H'Roi local culture and customs involve. Teachers in both sites seem to converge in describing local cultures as backward.

IV. CONCLUSION

The impacts of education policies toward ethnic minorities are mixed, and often conflicting. The numerous education-related projects and development programs have brought significant improvements. Access to school by ethnic minority children has been improved, with increase in funding for teaching facilities as well as individual aid, availability of native language programs, and opportunities to pursue higher education. Still, in-depth surveys and qualitative research show that gaps remain in educational attainment not only between majority and minority students, but among minority groups as well. Case studies from Lao Cai and Phu Yen suggest that an uneven allocation of resources partly accounts for the varying record of performance across regions, i.e., between lowlanders and highlanders, and between those who are the direct beneficiaries of socio-development aid and those who are not. As a local group living in the highland of a coastal province where ethnic minorities are not dominant, the H'Roi in Phu Yen receive fewer benefits from government policies. Their experience of marginalisation in education is significantly different from that of their Hmong counterparts.

The sources of marginalisation in education for the ethnic minorities transcend education-specific policies. They touch on income inequality, administrative dysfunction, and the burden of geography, among others, and the way they mesh with the local political economy to produce vastly different outcomes for different groups. Policymakers need to be aware of these overlapping influences. Contrasting experience of Hmong and H'Roi children in the two provinces and among children of the same ethnic group as told in this paper attests this uneven marginalisation. Education outcomes are heavily influenced by factors that may have little to do with education-specific policies.

As intended beneficiaries, children are not only aware, but are also critical evaluators of programs run in their name. An honest effort to understand their views and the sources of their discontent would go a long way in redressing some of the implementation challenges. Longitudinal studies that catalogue children's experiences, and their state of poverty and marginalisation, are needed. But to effect change, they must find their way to an eager audience of policymakers, local authorities, and other stakeholders who find the message compelling enough to act upon.

⁶⁴ Conversations with H'Mai and H'Lien, 24 October 2008.

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