THE CHINESE STRUGGLE FOR LITERACY: VILLAGERS AND THE STATE IN GUANGDONG, 1949-1976

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a social and intellectual history of the struggle for literacy in Mao's China from 1949 to 1976. The major objective of the dissertation is to assess the nature and significance of this struggle in one part of China: the southeastern coastal province of Guangdong. In order to achieve this objective, I pursue three central aims.

First, the dissertation seeks to illuminate elite influences which shaped state literacy policy in the PRC. Since we are dealing with literacy ideologies prescribed by the state for various social groups, it is crucial to understand how those ideologies were formed and articulated. Second, the dissertation attempts to uncover popular mentalites toward literacy in order to bring into focus the tension between two educational worlds: the one that existed in the minds and in the organizational blueprints of China's state leaders, and the other that guided village educational thought and practice. In this way I show the struggle for literacy to be a process of continuous, dynamic interaction between villagers and the state.

The third aim of the dissertation is to show how literacy is related to the social structure. I argue that it is insufficient and potentially misleading to assess the history of Chinese literacy in terms of statistical growth.
patterns alone. I demonstrate how changing literacy ideologies for different social groups played a crucial role in the formation and reproduction of social differences after 1949.

In showing how the literacy map is also a map of the class structure, the dissertation involves itself with larger theoretical controversies over the role of literacy in society. In particular, this dissertation adds to a growing body of critical scholarship that challenges established, Enlightenment-derived assumptions about the relationship of literacy and societal progress.
# CONTENTS

Abstract  
List of Tables  
List of Figures  
Acknowledgements  
Introduction  

## 1. The Unstable State of Chinese Literacy Studies  
A Honeycomb Polity and a Cellularized Economy  
Heaven is High and the Emperor Far Away: Guangdong in the Chinese Polity  

## 2. The Stagnation of Early Postrevolutionary Mass Education  
A Fragmented State  
Early Elite Influences on Mass Literacy Policy  
The Elitist Nature of Early Literacy Education Policy  
Influence of Wartime Experience on Illiteracy among Communist Party Members in North China and Guangdong in the 1950s  
Prohibition of Literacy Education in the Early 1950s  
Qi Jianhua and the Accelerated Literacy Method  
Conclusion  

## 2. Minban Schools and the Reaffirmation of Voluntarism in Village Education: The Guangdong Experience  
The School Crisis of the Early 1950s and the Resurgence of the Sishu  
Rise of the Minban Schools  
Limits of State Power and the Reaffirmation of Voluntarism in Village Education  
Later Effects of What Happened in the 1950s
### 3 Changing Literacy Ideologies in Post-1949 China and the Continued Reproduction of Rural-Urban Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Definitions as Elite Prescriptions of Social Order</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Literacy after 1949</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1950s Debate Over Methods of Literacy Instruction</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin Handa and the Ideology of Peasant Literacy</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Village Literacy Education in the Formation of China's Honeycomb Polity</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Education and the Reproduction of Rural-Urban Differences</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4 The Problem of the Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Awkward Image of the Village School Teacher</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real and Potential Subversiveness of Village School Teachers</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts Between Teachers and Village Cadres</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impoverished Social and Material Status of the Village Teacher</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5 The Impact of the Collectivization of Agriculture on the Need for Popular Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and the Effort to Reform People's Customs</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Expansion Targets Under the First Five Year Plan</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Literacy Levels in the Mid-1950s and the Debate Over Collectivization</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6 The National Literacy Campaigns of 1956 and 1958

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 1956 National Literacy Campaign: Aims and Objectives</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems in the Supply and Distribution of Literacy Primers</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Opposition to the Literacy Campaign</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Leap Forward Literacy Campaign</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critics of the Literacy Campaign</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beijing's Language Reform and Guangdong's Resistance

A Brief Historical Overview of Language Reform in China 286
CCPs Support for Dialect Romanization Before 1949 289
The Changed Policy on Alphabetic Writing After 1949 292
Guangdong's Resistance 298

The Agricultural Middle School Experiment, 1958-65 316
Contraction of the Village Under Collectivization 318
Elimination of Traditional Stimuli to Literacy 323
Literacy as a Means of Restricted Social Mobility Within Collectives 325
The Agricultural Middle Schools 330
State Fears of a New Literate Rural Elite Emerging from the Agricultural Middle Schools 338
Popular Attitudes Toward the Agricultural Middle Schools 340

The Decline of Literacy from the Early 1960s until 1976 351
Contraction of Literacy and Mass Education From the End of the Great Forward to the Socialist Education Movement 353
Rise of the Half-Ploughing Half-Study Primary Schools in the Countryside 357
The Socialist Education Movement and the Revival of Literacy Education in Guangdong Villages 362
Collapse of Literacy Education During the Cultural Revolution 369
Destruction of the Two Track Educational System and the Cultural Revolution Model of Mass Education 371
Revival of Literacy Education in 1973 377
The Dawn of the Deng Xiaoping Era 386

Conclusion: The Struggle for Literacy in Guangdong 395

Bibliography 412

Appendix A 513
List of Tables

I  Yellow Bamboo School Teaching Plan  108
List of Figures

| I    | Map of China       | xiii |
| II   | Map of Guangdong   | xiv  |
| II   | Yunfu County Literacy Primer | 166 |
| III  | Guangzhou Workpoint Primer | 167 |
| IV   | Eighteenth Century Character Glossary | 176 |
| V    | 1972 Character Glossary | 177 |
| VI   | Guangdong Cultural Revolution Literacy Primer | 379 |
| VII  | Shandong Cultural Revolution Literacy Primer | 383 |
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Fig. I Map of China
Fig. II Map of Guangdong province
INTRODUCTION

The struggle for literacy in China after 1949 is one of the least well known and barely studied aspects of China's modern history. In the pages that follow I set out to tell this wide-ranging and fascinating story, from the birth of the People's Republic until the death of Mao in 1976. For reasons I will explain, I look at China's struggle for literacy through the prism of Guangdong province, on China's southeastern coast.

What makes the study of literacy in China so interesting and important is that there are still so few firm conclusions that can be drawn about this enormously difficult subject. Moreover, what little we do know is full of controversy and debate.

The Unstable State of Chinese Literacy Studies

In the unstable, topsy-turvy world of Chinese literacy studies, established assumptions and received opinions are being overthrown all the time. Until quite recently, for example, the established scholarly wisdom about literacy in late imperial China was that the non-alphabetic script was an insurmountable barrier for the vast majority of Chinese peasants who had neither money nor time for the long years
of study required to memorize the characters. Fairbank provided the classic appraisal of Chinese literacy from this standpoint. In one of his more often quoted passages, Fairbank claimed that:

The Chinese writing system was not a convenient device lying ready at hand for every schoolboy to pick up and use as he prepared to meet life's problems. It was itself one of life's problems. If little Lao-san could not find time for long-continued study of it, he was forever barred from social advancement. The Chinese written language, rather than an open door through which China's peasants could find truth and light, was a heavy barrier pressing against any upward advance and requiring real effort to overcome--a hindrance, not a help, to learning.1

With the publication of her 1979 book on education and popular literacy in Qing China, Evelyn Rawski exploded this view of traditional Chinese literacy. Rawski revolutionized the established scholarly conception of Chinese literacy by importing the twentieth century notion of "functional" literacy and applying it to the study of Qing society. She used a wide variety of local gazetteer sources to investigate popular demand, costs, availability, and content of popular educational practices in the Qing.

Rawski finds more literacy than we assumed in the Qing period. She estimates that as many as thirty to forty-five percent of Qing males and from two to ten percent of females possessed "some ability to read and write."2 On this basis, Rawski claims there was an average of at least one literate member per family in Qing society.
The key to Rawski's estimates is the definition of functional literacy upon which they were based. By "some ability" to read and write, Rawski included in her definition of the literate everyone from accomplished classical scholars to those who knew only a few hundred characters, enough to "get by" in everyday economic transactions or to master the specialized vocabulary of a particular vocation.

In addition to revising the established scholarly assumption that the Chinese peasantry was abjectly and hopelessly mired in illiteracy, Rawski made another important claim. She argued that, far from being an impediment to modernization as previous scholars supposed, widespread functional literacy made Qing China an "advanced society" comparable to preindustrial Europe and "helped ease its transition to modernity in the twentieth century."3

Rightly or wrongly, many scholars now consider widespread popular literacy in Qing China as one of the "precociously modern features" of late imperial Chinese society. The jointly authored work edited by Gilbert Rozman on the modernization of China describes late imperial China as having possessed "exceptional local literacy"; its schools "flourished in all but the most sparsely populated and poverty-stricken rural areas." Moreover say the authors of this volume, "if a line (was) drawn in history at the seventeenth century or at practically any time during the
previous millennium, the case could be argued...that no peoples can lay claim to...higher levels of literacy..."4

Whether or not functional literacy of the kind described by Rawski for the Qing period really did "ease China's transition to modernity" in the twentieth century is open to debate.5 One certainty, however, emerged from Rawski's work. The publication of Rawski's book introduced to the field of Chinese literacy studies in a lively and provocative fashion the elementary but vital understanding that "literacy" is not a simple yes-no condition, something that one either possesses or does not.

Rawski's revisionist scholarship underscored the fact that "literacy" is not an absolute condition but an abstraction, a concept whose definition is constructed by those who seek to explain its significance. In short, literacy lies to a large extent in the eyes of the beholder; it is whatever it is defined to be.

When we come to the People's Republic of China (PRC), a similar revolution in received opinions about popular literacy is presently underway. Where Rawski finds more literacy than we thought in the Qing period, recent scholarship has unearthed much less of a success story than we assumed for literacy inculcation after 1949.

In the past, even the most chastened and cynical observers of the communist government generally assumed genuine commitment and achievement on the popular literacy front. There was little to argue about, except the extent
to which the literacy that was inculcated was mere political indoctrination for social control. That the communist state had succeeded in bringing literacy to the masses was never in question.

Sympathetic observers of the Chinese Revolution had effusive praise for PRC literacy accomplishments. In the words of one such Western observer, "Eradicating illiteracy has been one of the success stories of Chinese educational policy since 1949. Despite far-reaching fluctuations in policy...the proportion of illiterate Chinese has fallen from over 80% before 1949 to 20.6% in 1987."6

Modernization theorists have also detected great strides in mass education since 1949. According to the previously mentioned work edited by Rozman, universal literacy was "virtually achieved" in the PRC.7 Andrew Nathan in China's Crisis cites the 1964 census figure of thirty eight percent illiteracy as evidence that the PRC had developed early on an educational capacity for meaningful political democracy.8

Comparative specialists also lauded China's commitment and achievement in literacy education. Jay Taylor, author of a recent comparative study of India and China, has written that "one of China's great achievements has been an increase in adult literacy from 26% in 1951 to 77% in 1982...within a generation, China's literacy rate should be over 90%, as close to 93% of primary school-aged children today are enrolled in school."9
Finally, the international community also praised China's literacy accomplishments after 1949. On World Literacy Day in 1984 UNESCO awarded the Noma Literacy Prize to rural Baozhong county in Sichuan for its reduction of illiteracy from 80% in 1949 to under 10% in the 1980s. This followed the publication of a 1982 report in which a leading spokesperson for UNESCO praised China's anti-illiteracy drive as nothing less than "clearly the greatest experiment in mass education in the history of the world" which had enabled a nation of one billion to "become a nearly literate society in the space of just over thirty years." 10

What Evelyn Rawski did for established assumptions about literacy in Qing China, Vilma Seeberg has recently done for received opinions about the struggle for literacy in the PRC.11 Using the PRC official definition of minimal literacy as constituting knowledge of 1500 characters for peasants and 2000 characters for workers, Vilma Seeberg finds less of a success story in literacy inculcation than we assumed after 1949. Seeberg's startling conclusion for the 1949-1979 period is one of "great swings in school-age literacy, but very little improvement in both school-age and adult literacy over time. Over the thirty years investigated, school-age and adult literacy averaged 32 percent, and total population "functional" literacy improved only by 8 percentage points to 30 percent in 1979." It is clear, insists Seeberg, "that despite much effort in education, literacy increased by little" over the thirty
years covered by her study. The basic reason, says Seeberg, was that rural basic education, in both its school-age and adult literacy settings, was "terminal", especially in periods when Maoist "Radical Policy" dominated. Terminal basic education offered little incentive to attend school, to see schooling to completion, or to retain what was learned afterwards. For these reasons, Seeberg maintains that the greatest advances against illiteracy after 1949 were made by the regular full time primary schools, located mainly in urban environments. Furthermore, says Seeberg, most of the improvement occurred during the first eight years after 1949. Literacy education experienced declining expectations thereafter, as 'Maoist Radical Policy' held sway for most of the years between 1958 and the late 1970s.

Seeberg's startling re-appraisal of PRC literacy is all the more important because it resembles and ratifies a revisionism that is presently taking shape inside China. Since 1978 and especially since the early nineteen eighties, PRC scholars have been re-evaluating and re-defining the history of Chinese literacy education since 1949, often with devastating results. Few of these scholars have been willing to go as far as the Chinese astrophysicist Fang Lizhi's assertion to Western journalists in 1989 that Mao wanted to keep the Chinese peasantry illiterate-- the better to control them. But the return since 1978 in China of the possibility of a more complex-- and therefore more mixed--
view of the past has meant that Chinese scholars have been willing to turn a harsh spotlight on the educational failings of the previous four decades.

As a prominent example of this recent criticism, Xia Yan, China's famous eighty eight year old writer, dramatist and former Vice-Minister of Culture, publicly proclaimed in 1988 that neglect of basic education was one of the three most serious mistakes (sanda cuowu) committed by the government since the founding of the People's Republic. The other two mistakes identified by Xia Yan were the government's failure to create a proper legal system and its failure to control population growth.

Xia Yan's criticisms and the many others like it were generated by the stark revelations of illiteracy contained in the 1982 national census in China. The census, the first since 1964 and the first ever in China using modern computing methods, recorded over 235 million illiterates in China, equivalent to thirty two percent of persons over twelve years of age. Among the rural population the illiteracy rate was far higher, forty four percent; while in some localities illiteracy reached astounding levels of seventy five percent and greater.

Every dimension of popular education measured by the census seemed clotted with depressing indicators of the failure of past policies. Many previously cherished notions were revealed to be cruel myths, none more so than the myth of a revolution in female education. Female illiteracy, for
example, which was especially prevalent in the countryside, was revealed to account for seventy percent of all illiteracy. The female illiteracy rate was forty-five compared to only nineteen percent for males. Forty to forty-five million school-age children were not in school, and ninety percent of the Chinese population had less than a secondary school education. As one Chinese newspaper writer exclaimed, "What appalling figures these are when you think of a world that has sent men into outer space and is on the threshold of the computerized age." 15

Compounding the entire debate over Chinese literacy education is the vexed issue of how "unique" China must be from the standpoint of literacy education. The PRC scholar Zhang Zhigong argues that because China had no alphabet to facilitate word and phrase recognition, there had to be more rote memorization and less of a Western "liberal" pedagogical approach to the inculcation of literacy. 16 Hu Yaobang seems to have been saying the same thing when in 1955 he explained that China would have to diverge from the Soviet experience in literacy education because of the non-alphabetic nature of the Chinese language and the length of time it took to memorize the characters. 17 Other Chinese, however, disagree, and Charles Hayford shows how a "trans-Pacific liberal" like James Yen was hardly daunted by China's "uniqueness" when it came to literacy education. 18

Then there is the whole vexed issue of how "autonomous" the cultivation of literacy is or can be, how free of
politics and social conventions which change. There is a broad school of thought which argues that the historical significance of literacy lies primarily in its role in triggering a sequence of changes at the personal and societal level which underlie the modernization process.

According to this view, by giving individuals "access to the world of vicarious experience" literacy induces a whole range of previously undeveloped cognitive skills, including empathy, ability to understand abstract concepts and logical processes, and rationality. At the societal level, literacy performs an important integrative function. Literacy facilitates bureaucratic organization and equips persons with the interdependent skills that produce what Durkheim described as the "organic solidarity" of modern industrial society.

Harvey Graff calls this view the "literacy myth." Brian Street refers to it as the "autonomous" model. Both criticize the reification of literacy as a neutral skill or technology of the intellect which may be studied in detachment from its social context.

Street in particular argues for what he terms an "ideological" model of literacy that sees reading and writing not as technical skills but as social practices "embedded" in specific social formations. Literacy in this view can never be understood in isolation from the social, economic and political contexts in which it is practiced.
A Honeycomb Polity and a Cellularized Economy

The Street view that literacy education cannot be extricated from its local social context is particularly crucial to Chinese history given Vivienne Shue's recent argument that economically, at least, the post-1949 Chinese state was characterized by what she terms a "honeycomb polity." Shue argues that Mao's restructuring of Chinese rural society in the 1950s into thousands of "cell-like" collectivized communities and bureaucratic units ironically reinforced and strengthened the autarkic nature of local communities which had characterized the premodern Chinese polity for centuries in the absence of modern industrial capitalism. Legitimated after 1949 by a state ideology of local self-sufficiency, the revitalized "honeycomb" structure of politics made it relatively easy for local peasant cadres to foment "defensive and dissembling strategies" for the protection of themselves and their "cellular" domains against state economic demands. Thus, says Shue, "the Chinese state center through the 1970s remained full of force and loud intention, but was nonetheless deeply frustrated in execution by thousands upon thousands of practically invisible localist restraints." 

Shue's argument concerns state economic demands. When one moves from economics to literacy campaigns (bearing in
mind Street's injunction that the two are inseparable) are
Shue's arguments borne out? My data from Guangdong suggests
that state literacy demands were also frustrated by localist
restraints. Shue believes that the "insidious adaptation of
primordial peasant localism to the honeycomb structure of
the state-socialist polity," was legitimated and stiffened
by a "popular morality of community protectionism."23
Richard Madsen, using Guangdong data, confirms Shue-- making
Guangdong a crucial prop for Shue's argument. Generalizing
from his Guangdong data, Madsen concluded that "members of a
poor isolated farming village are not likely to extend their
conception of public responsibilities much beyond the
boundaries of their village." As if to confirm that this
applied to state literacy demands, the two peasant leaders
who dominated the political life of Madsen's Guangdong
village throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Chen Longyong and
Chen Qingfa, both "had no formal education and (were) almost
completely illiterate."24

Heaven is High and the Emperor Far Away: The Significance of
Guangdong in the Chinese Polity

I chose Guangdong as the focus of this thesis because
it exemplifies the kinds of tensions in state-society
relations that I wish to emphasize in this study. For some
years I have had an interest in the ways in which political
and economic Cantoneseness have co-existed in dynamic tension with state power since the revolution.

The efforts of the PRC state to create a unified polity took particular aim at the recalcitrant local peasant cultures of Southern China. Sometimes this took the form of overt political conflict as in the case, described so well by Ezra Vogel, of central efforts to conquer Cantonese 'localism' when it threatened to subvert the centre's land reform policy in the early 1950s.25

In a previous study I explored the tension between state economic policy and political and economic Cantoneseness as embodied in the Overseas Chinese 'problem' after 1949.26 This study of literacy education in Guangdong deals with the effort to create in Guangdong an educational China capable of effacing Cantonese cultural-linguistic particularism.

Guangdong, China's southeastern most province, straddles the Lingnan and Southeast Coast macroregions as defined by Skinner.27 It occupies just 2.21% of China's total land area but it contains 5.75% of the Chinese population. Guangdong is the fifth most populous province in China after Sichuan, Henan, Shandong and Jiangsu. The present population of sixty four million has more than doubled since 1949. Guangdong is also an overwhelmingly agricultural province. In 1982 the agricultural population still represented 81.4% of the total. Guangdong's
proportion of urban dwellers at 18.6% was less than the national average of 20.8%.28

Popularly known as the land of "seven parts mountain one part water" (qishan yishui liang fendi), almost 77% of Guangdong consists of mountains, hills and plateaus. Since ancient times population has congregated in the major river valleys of the Pearl, East and West rivers, and along Guangdong's fifteen hundred mile coast line. In these areas a fertile agriculture developed, sustained by plentiful monsoon rains, a long growing season, and convenient natural waterways which facilitated the early development of commerce.

The most prosperous and densely populated part of Guangdong is the Pearl River delta region. Along with the coastal areas of Shantou and Zhanjiang, the commercial hub which is centred around Guangzhou and Foshan accounts for nearly 60% of the population. Outside of the delta areas and river valleys, where terrain is uneven and soil poor, population is sparse by comparison. Principal crops in Guangdong include paddy rice, soybeans, fruits and vegetables, and, in more recent times, potatoes, peanuts, sugarcane, cotton, and rubber.

Populated originally by a branch of the non-Sinitic Tai people whom Chinese rulers referred to as the Yue (meaning 'beyond the frontier'), Guangdong was incorporated into the Chinese empire in the first century B.C.E. Successive later waves of Han migration absorbed or displaced the aboriginal
inhabitants of Guangdong into the hilly and remote northern and western parts of the province. The last major group of Han migrants were given the name Hakka ('guest people') by local inhabitants. Hakka settled in the remote and mountainous parts of the province, especially eastern Guangdong, where their numbers remain greatest. Today over 98% of the population of Guangdong is considered Han. But the other 2% includes no less than forty six different minority peoples, of whom the major ones are the Li, Zhuang, Yao, Miao and Hui.

Extreme linguistic variation added to the complexity of Guangdong's social landscape. Excluding the minority peoples' languages, three major 'sublanguages' or regional dialects evolved in Guangdong: Yue (Cantonese), Min (the dialect of southern Fujian and northeastern Guangdong, a variant of which is also spoken on Hainan), and the Hakka dialect.

Within these broad regional dialects there is almost infinite variation. Geographic barriers to communication and ethnic and lineage feuding entrenched local sub-dialects, which often began across the river or over the next hill. As an example, besides the Cantonese spoken in the vicinity of Guangzhou there is also the Gao-Lei version of Cantonese (named after the cities of Gaozhou and Leizhou) spoken along the Leizhou peninsula; the numerous sub-varieties of Cantonese spoken in the siyi (four counties)
area southwest of Canton; plus numerous other sub-dialects spoken in the border lands and in neighbouring Guangxi.

Guangdong's linguistic complexity mirrors the complexity of its local society. As Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski put it, "The society of Lingnan was thick with highly structured and complex social organizations."30 Frontier settlement by successive groups of migrants and the emergence of Guangdong in the late imperial period as one of the most commercially developed regions of the empire produced a complicated social landscape punctuated by powerful, fiercely competitive lineages. Especially powerful in the delta region, lineages contested one another for control of territory, markets, and for imperial academic honours by establishing private academies to train lineage sons for the examinations.31

Notwithstanding the hegemonic power of the examination system, however, Lingnan culture was renowned for its powerfully distinct qualities. Books have been written to explicate the relationship between Lingnan culture (Lingnan wenhua) and the wider Chinese culture (Zhongquo wenhua).32

Celebrated by some, lamented by others, the heart of Lingnan's distinctiveness lies in the region's historically troubled relationship with the Chinese state centre. Guangdong has had a remarkable history of tension/opposition to states in Beijing: the anti-Manchu Ming loyalists of the 1640s; the anti-Manchu triads; the Taipings and their Heavenly king (a Hakka schoolteacher from Guangdong). Kang
Youwei and Liang Qichao, the Cantonese reformers who wanted to change the dynastic state; Sun Yatsen who wanted to end it.

Guangdong's long tradition of greater openness to the outside world also made its relations with the central state problematic. Guangdong had the thirteen hongs and the only port open to foreigners in the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century down to 1842. It was influenced by Hong Kong after 1842. Guangdong absorbed two thirds of all the foreign capital invested in the Chinese economy between 1949 and 1986, and was in first place in China in value of exports in the 1980s. And, Guangdong is the ancestral home of three quarters of the over twenty million overseas Chinese. As a group, the overseas Chinese play a critical and (as their reaction to the Beijing massacre of 1989 demonstrated) problematic role in the present open door economic policy.

We can sense some of the ambivalence that modern Chinese intellectuals have felt towards this heritage by glimpsing it through the eyes of a major left wing Cantonese cultural figure writing in the early 1950s. In one of the most important articles written in Guangdong immediately after the founding of the PRC, Qin Mu, one of Guangdong's most esteemed twentieth century writers, spoke at length on the doomed "feudal" characteristics of Lingnan society and culture.
Qin Mu was unsure whether there were enough positive features in Guangdong's cultural inheritance that could serve as a basis for building a modern uniform socialist culture. Guangdong people lacked a uniform language, literature, theatre or music. Besides the nineteen million Cantonese speakers in 1950 there were five million Hakka speakers, four million Chaozhou dialect speakers, and another two million Hainan dialect speakers, each with their own traditions. Dialect and sub-dialect differences frustrated all efforts at fashioning a unified culture from the disparate "little traditions" of rural Guangdong.

Guangdong's cultural heritage was double-edged: in the past century Guangdong had developed a rich revolutionary tradition; but on the other hand, Guangdong still manifested persistent "feudal" traditions. Cantonese were possessed of a "parochial clan outlook" (difang zongzu quannian) reflected in their disdainful attitudes towards the Danjia (Tanka) boat people, and in the Cantonese love of stories about "brilliant" Cantonese personages. They engaged in abhorrent customs like the buying and selling of female bondservants. And Guangdong had become the locus of much social decadence in the modern period. Many revolutions began in Guangdong, Qin Mu said, only to reach fruition elsewhere.

Qin Mu also singled out for criticism what he considered to be Cantonese selfish individualism. Cantonese selfishness was summed up according to Qin Mu in the
qualities represented by the character lao ( ) which Qin Mu said represented the "spiritual marrow" of Cantonese urban culture. The character lao has two basic meanings, one 'to dig or dredge up,' and the other 'to get by illicit or improper means.' A laojia was one who "uses one's smarts to trick people in order to obtain personal gain at the other's expense." Such laojia, said Qin Mu, regrettably were the heroes of Cantonese popular culture, their values the foundation of Cantonese social and economic life.

As for Guangdong's heritage of involvement with the West, it was also contradictory. When Shanghai was still a swamp, said Qin Mu, Canton was already a thriving international trading city. Guangdong's exposure to the West meant there was an openness to change in Guangdong society that was absent in other parts of the country. There was also a tradition of resistance to foreign imperialism in Guangdong.

But Guangdong had also bequeathed to modern Chinese history compradores and labour contractors. The heritage of Western colonialism ran older and deeper in Guangdong than anywhere else in China. And unlike other parts of China, Guangdong still could not be completely insulated from Western colonial influences, because of the proximity of Hong Kong. There on Guangdong's doorstep, Qin Mu pointed out in the early nineteen fifties, young Chinese still took English first names and "think that this is glorious."
Yet, for all these supposedly blighting influences on Cantonese culture and despite Guangdong's tense history of relations with states in Beijing, literacy education in Guangdong after 1949 is supposed to be a success story. A 1990 article by Fudan University demographer Dai Xingyi says that China can be divided into three model zones in terms of literacy success: Zone A, where illiteracy is minimal, which includes Beijing-Shanghai-Tianjin and Liaoning, and Jilin, Heilongjiang, Guangdong, Hunan; Zone B, the middling or relatively average zone of lesser literacy but considerable cultural richness (Jiangsu, Henan, Shandong, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Shaanxi, Guangxi, Shanxi, Hubei, Anhui, etc.); and Zone C, the western border provinces where literacy education has floundered (Gansu, Qinghai, Tibet, etc.).

Recent Chinese government statistics support Dai Xingyi's claim. In 1988 the Guangdong Yearbook claimed that only 539,311 persons between the ages of twelve and forty remained illiterate in Guangdong. This number works out to 2.15%, one of the lowest percentages of illiterates in all of China. If Dai Xingyi is right about Guangdong being a first zone province in literacy, how did this happen? The chapters that follow propose to examine these claims and their historical background.

When I began the research for this study there was not a single English language book written on literacy in the PRC. In fact there was only one Western language work at all on the subject, and it was in German. Klaus Belde's
Saomang: Kommunistische Alphabetisierungsarbeit was published in 1982. While valuable, Belde's book dealt almost exclusively with the literacy campaigns of the 1950s. Since then one other study has appeared, Vilma Seeberg's aforementioned book on literacy attainment between 1949-1979. Seeberg's book introduced new data and an expanded time frame, but I still felt that the subject cried out for the attention of the historian, who would provide the subject with a badly needed infusion of social and intellectual history.

Up until now, the whole subject of literacy in Guangdong has been virtually uncharted terrain. This is the first study ever to look at literacy in China from the perspective of how national policies were received and implemented within a single province and socio-cultural area. As such, my project follows an important trend toward regional and local history in recent years. Most scholars would agree that this represents the most meaningful way of approaching questions of social change in China.

This study is intended as a contribution to a growing literature on state-peasant relations in China. Like recent books by Jean Oi, Helen Siu, and Vivienne Shue, I am concerned with the problem of state power and its impact on peasant communities in Mao's China. To their credit, these authors do not approach state and society as if they were two different things. Instead of casting state and society as the antithesis of one another, scholars like Oi
and Siu have emphasized their interpenetration. In this thesis I attempt to construct a picture of how and to what extent peasant literacy became embedded in the institutions of rural society. For me, the two most important questions are the extent to which the state was able to enforce its literacy standards and, secondly, what it meant to be a "literate" peasant in Mao's China, economically, socially and politically.

The main body of the thesis is divided into nine chapters, each of which examines a different aspect or period in the history of literacy education since 1949. The chapters are linked by an overarching chronological structure. The first period, which I call the period of lesser literacy emphasis, lasted from 1949 until the eve of collectivization in 1955. During this period literacy succumbed to other, more urgently defined priorities in mass education related to the political consolidation and security of the new state. Chapter one examines these issues and traces the stagnation of literacy education between 1949-55. Chapters two and three address how the literacy movement was frustrated, first by the fiscal weakness of the state and by the state's inability to impose a national school system on the countryside, and secondly by the state's tortuous relationship with the very village school teachers whom it depended upon to make the literacy movement work.
With collectivization in 1955 the literacy expectations of China's leaders were revised. I call the following years from 1956-60 the period of greatest literacy emphasis. During this period China's leaders formulated an ideology of peasant literacy to fit their expectations of peasant economic and social life in rural collectives. Chapter four looks at the construction of this ideology and its implications for the continued reproduction of rural-urban differences in the PRC. Chapter five analyzes the relationship between literacy and rural collectivization, while chapter six scrutinizes the national literacy campaigns of 1956 and 1958 and assesses their results. Language reform is treated in a separate chapter (seven). Chapter eight completes this section by examining the popular motives for and uses of literacy in rural collectives.

The third part of the thesis deals with the decline of literacy from the mid-1960s until 1976. Chapter nine focuses on two developments. First, it traces the increased politicization of the content of adult literacy education, followed by the collapse of the literacy movement during the Cultural Revolution years and its limited revival in the 1970s. Secondly, chapter nine examines the Cultural Revolution attack on what critics called the 'two track educational system' (liangzhong jiaoyu zhidu), and treats critically the Cultural Revolution model of rural school education which briefly replaced it.
The emphasis of the thesis is on the period from 1949 through the early 1960s. This is not only because of the interruption of literacy work during the 'ten years of turbulence' from 1966-76, but, more importantly, because I believe that the formative intellectual decisions, policies and societal developments with respect to literacy all took place during the earlier period. If we view the history of PRC literacy education over the longer duration from 1949 to the present reform era the Cultural Revolution can appear as merely an interregnum between two mini-epochs. But situating the Cultural Revolution as I have done enables the reader to see the Cultural Revolution as the final, in some ways culminating, stage of literacy under Mao, when many of the tensions built up over previous years finally exploded. Thus many of the prominent educational themes of the Cultural Revolution-- the attack on teachers, the temporary destruction of the two track educational system, and the obliteration of education's link to physical and social mobility-- had their origin in previous years, as I hope to show.

This study is based upon pioneering research into previously untouched sources. The greatest part of the research was carried out at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou during 1988-89. I spent the greater part of one year in Guangzhou, with Zhongshan University as my base. The greatest part of my library research was conducted at three main institutions in Guangzhou: the superb Zhongshan
provincial library in Guangzhou, a virtual treasure trove of materials for virtually any aspect of the social and economic history of modern Guangdong; the Guangzhou municipal library, which enabled me to locate many valuable contemporary materials; and the library of Zhongshan University, with its incomparable collection of Guangdong educational journals.

At Zhongshan University I was fortunate to link up with colleagues in the Anthropology Department there who were working on a similar project on changes in cultural values in rural Guangdong under the reform period. This fruitful collaboration enabled me to undertake field work on a half dozen occasions in four rural Guangdong counties. These four counties were located in the Cantonese heartland surrounding Guangzhou: Hua, Nanhai, Panyu and Taishan counties. Field work in these counties consisted of interviews, several dozen in all, with rural adult education officials and administrators, school principals and teachers, students and parents. The interviews were valuable not only as a means of verifying information gleaned through official sources, but also as a source of insights and opinions unavailable from the official media.

During my year in Guangdong I was privileged to read a great many materials never previously looked at by any Western scholar. These included local and provincial archival materials, document collections, literacy surveys, and conference reports, many of them handcopied from the
early 1950s. In some cases, as indicated, I was able to obtain access to previously and currently classified government and Party documents.

Local sources were particularly useful to this study. I was able to examine literacy primers from many different villages and levels of government, as well as local educational histories, several of which were kindly provided to me when they were still only in draft version. During field trips I was often able to peruse internal county educational department bulletins, which supply information and viewpoints not expressed elsewhere.

I have read all of the Guangdong provincial education journals for the 1950s and 1960s, and compared the findings in these with my reading of the major national journals. The most valuable Guangdong journals I consulted were Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua (Guangdong education and culture) and Guangdong jiaoyu (Guangdong education). Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua ceased publication in the early nineteen fifties, but it is a vital source for studying efforts to transform popular education during this period, as well as the debates which accompanied those efforts. Guangdong jiaoyu, the journal of the Guangdong education bureau, is indispensable for all aspects of Guangdong education after 1949. Unlike most of the other Guangdong materials used in this study, copies of these journals are available in some North American libraries.
One other Guangdong source which I found to be particularly valuable is the *Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, 1949-85* (Guangdong educational yearbook). Like its companion volume at the national level, the *Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, 1949-1981* (China educational yearbook), the *Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian* is a wealth of information and statistics on virtually every aspect of education in Guangdong.

Parts of the research for this thesis were also done in Beijing. While there (in the heady days of late May, 1989) I met with officials at the People's Education Press (*Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe*) and spent time at the Beijing Teachers University (*Beijing shifan daxue*) where I was introduced to the valuable work being done at the university's Rural Education Research Unit.

In Hong Kong I made extensive use of the research materials of the Union Research Institute, now held by the Baptist College of Hong Kong. Material contained in this thesis is also based on research I did during a previous year spent at the Universities Service Center in Hong Kong.


3 Rawski, p. 140.


5 For a persuasive dissenting view of Rawski's conception of Qing literacy and her argument concerning its modernization-enhancing effects, see Alexander Woodside, "Some Mid-Qing Theorists of Popular Schools: Their Innovations, Inhibitions, and Attitudes Toward the Poor" *Modern China* 9 1 (Jan. 1983): 3-35; and his "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy" (unpublished paper presented to the UCLA Education in China Workshop, Feb., 1989).


12 Seeberg, pp. 269, 278-279.
13 Seeberg, p. 269.

14 "Xia Yan de feifu zhi yan: Jianguo yilai sanda cuowu" Yangcheng wanbao 18 Nov. 1988.


16 Zhang Zhigong's views are discussed in Woodside, "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy," pp. 6-8.

17 Hu Yaobang, "Guanyu nongcun saochu wenmang gongzuo" in *Dali kaizhan wenmang yundong* ed. Guangdong sheng jiaoyu ting (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1956), p. 25. Hu's speech was also printed in *Renmin ribao* 16 Nov. 1955, and reprinted in Union Research Institute L0364 42222.


19 This school of thought is most closely associated with Jack Goody. Its earliest and most pure formulation (before critics forced its modification in key respects) is to be found in Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy" in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). The view is presented in its most ideal form here for the heuristic purpose of contrasting it with the opposite model of literacy described below. The idea that literacy facilitates cognitive transformations by giving persons access to "vicarious experience" is from Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: The Free Press, 1958), see the introduction.


31 Naquin and Rawski, pp. 178-181. As these authors note, there was a marked contrast in both economy and society between the Pearl River delta and its adjacent major urban
centres like Canton and Foshan (which had populations in the eighteenth century of between six hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand, and two hundred thousand, respectively), and the rest of the region. On the history of lineage development in the delta, see David Faure, "The Lineage as a Cultural Invention: The Case of the Pearl River Delta" Modern China 15 1 (Jan. 1989): 4-36. On academies in Guangdong, Tilemann Grimm, "Academies and Urban Systems in Kwangtung" in The City in Late Imperial China ed. G. William Skinner, pp. 475-498.

32 Feng Bingkui, Zhongguo wenhua yu lingnan wenhua (Taipei: Taibei zhongxing daxue fashang xueyuan, 1962). For a contemporary celebration of these differences, see Huang Naizhao, He Wenguang and Gu Zuoyi, Guangzhou ren: Zuori yu jinri (Guangzhou: Guangzhou wenhua chubanshe, 1987).

33 Guangdong nianjian 1987 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1987).

34 Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 6 (Oct. 1950): 2-6. Interestingly, Qin Mu wrote the preface for the recent 1987 book mentioned above, Guangzhou ren: Zuori yu jinri, which is a celebration of Cantonese cultural distinctiveness in the 1980s, everything from language and food to the prevalence of Hong Kong fashions and late night shopping.

35 In Guangdong as elsewhere an important part of the effort to takeover and reform popular culture involved rewriting the "feudal" messages of traditional opera by inserting new revolutionary themes. For a description of these efforts in Guangdong see "Yinian lai guangdong sheng nongcun wenyi yundong gaikuang" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 2 4 (Feb. 1951): 13-14. See also Huang Ningying, "Yueju gaijin de juti wenti" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 2 5 (Mar. 1951): 53-55. The effort was overseen by the newly formed Huanan cultural arts association and Guangdong united cultural arts association. They oversaw the efforts of groups like the Chaozhou Opera Improvement Association (Chaoju gaijin hui), which was composed of twenty leading Chaozhou opera performers. New themes introduced in the 1950s included "women's literacy," "the fateful moment of rent reduction," "clarification of rumours," and "an honourable husband and wife." The use of popular oral tradition as a vehicle for spreading revolutionary messages originated long before (Peng Pai rewrote traditional peasant folksongs and operas, imbuing them with revolutionary content), and was used heavily in the wartime base areas. Some of the repertoire originally developed then were introduced nationally after 1949, such as the famous "White-haired Girl" opera (Baimao nu). In Guangdong, former base areas led the way in the reform of traditional opera, with state encouragement. Heyuan county in the East River region, for example, claimed
that nearly every village had established its own theatre troupe by the end of 1950.

36 Dai Xingyi, "Qianxi woguo de wenmang renkou wenti" Renkou yu jingji 6 (1990): 23-26. I am grateful to Alexander Woodside for bringing this article to my attention.

37 Klaus Belde, Saomang: Kommunistische Alphabetisierungsarbeit (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1982).


39 Although the absence of any firm distinction between state and society has received the theoretical attention of China scholars only recently, the artificiality of such distinctions was made clear years ago in an article by Marianne Bastid. Bastid pointed out that most PRC residents asked to identify "the state" referred simply to the "upper levels" (shangji), regardless of their position in the administrative hierarchy. Marianne Bastid, "Levels of Economic Decision-Making," in Authority, Participation, and Cultural Change in China ed. Stuart R. Schram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 159-197.
Chapter 1

THE STAGNATION OF EARLY POSTREVOLUTIONARY MASS EDUCATION

In this chapter I explore the various and competing elite impulses which stimulated the literacy movement, and then examine how these contradictory impulses were expressed in the formation of early literacy policy. The central argument of this chapter is that between 1949 and 1956 Chinese leaders were openly, if self-consciously, reluctant to make adult literacy education an unequivocal, irreducible state priority.

Literacy education in the early years of the People's Republic succumbed to other more urgently defined mass educational priorities. That spreading literacy was not a full, unequivocal priority of the Chinese government after 1949 may seem surprising, even contradictory. Official statements in the early 1950s frequently explained the historical necessity of universal literacy for 'building socialism' (shehuizhuyi jianshe). Lenin's famous dicta that 'it is impossible to build a socialist society on a foundation of mass illiteracy' and that 'illiterates stood outside politics' were widely quoted in official China in the 1950s, as was Mao's injunction that 'New China cannot be established on a foundation of eighty percent illiteracy.'

Western scholars and observers of the Chinese Communist Party have also suggested that the CCP possesses a consuming
interest in mass literacy. I would maintain, however, that this interest has been mainly assumed rather than investigated. To question this interest, as I am about to do with documentary evidence, is to challenge one of the most deeply cherished notions about the Chinese Revolution: the Communist Party's commitment to the educational salvation of the poor. One is reminded of the way in which the history of literacy in France became intimately bound up with the debate over the legacies of the French Revolution, and hence with the fundamental values of French political life.

Edgar Snow began the Western practice of linking the CCP to a consuming interest in mass literacy by interviewing young 'Reds' who credited their loyalty to the CCP to the party's efforts to rescue them from illiteracy. "Did they (the peasants) like the Red Army?" Snow asked Old Dog, a seventeen year old veteran of the Long March. "The Red Army has taught me to read and write" said Old Dog.1

The authors of Rozman's book on modernization in China describe 1949 as a "watershed" and a "breakthrough" along the way to accomplishing the "core" modernization tasks of universalizing literacy and primary education marked by the commitment of the leaders and by the PRC state's "much greater capacity for control and coordination."2

In the remaining parts of this chapter I will show that universal literacy was not an urgent priority for the CCP in the first half of the nineteen fifties. Furthermore, in
this chapter I will also show that the state's "capacity for control and coordination" was in fact severely hampered by the disparate views of the various state actors on the subject of mass education. The CCP's approach to mass literacy was both more complex and more divided than has previously been assumed.

A Fragmented State

How unified and strong was the PRC state in education? There is an established view which credits the success of mass educational efforts in the PRC with the organizational power of the Chinese bureaucratic state. The World Bank, for instance, has identified the organizational power of the Chinese state as the single most important factor contributing to the success of literacy in China after 1949. In 1982 the Bank's non-formal adult education specialist for East Asia described "the mobilization of political will, the creation of a strong bureaucratic organization and the establishment of a definitive planning process" as the "sine qua non of China's adult education success."3

Vilma Seeberg in her study of literacy attainment in the PRC emphasizes that "moderates" and "radicals" alike relied on a "top-down structure" of educational planning. For Seeberg, the most salient characteristic of this structure was the preeminent role of the CCP as a "highly
centralized, doctrinaire, disciplined" Leninist party, "fully integrated" into the state bureaucracy.4

Vivienne Shue has recently made an important contribution to our understanding of the limits of state power in the PRC. Her concept of the "honeycomb polity" helps us to see that despite a formidable bureaucratic apparatus the power of the Maoist state was actually "deeply compromised and fettered" by localist restraints.5

I agree that Mao's China was a "honeycomb polity." However I would like to refine this important concept by taking it one step further. Shue focusses on central-local relations and emphasizes the diversity of the peasant periphery. She says little about diversity at the top and how this might affect her argument. I intend to show that there was also confusion of purpose and competing interests at the top of the polity. Moreover, these competing views and interests at the top of the polity are what enabled local interests to defend themselves against centre demands.

That diverse educational influences found representation and expression within the new state is hardly surprising, if we follow recent scholarship on bureaucratic politics. The PRC state was not a monolith. Like all states, it was comprised of an essential "pluralism" of policy tendencies: a set of competing and difficult to reconcile interests founded on the compartmentalization of bureaucratic responsibility, geographic interests, centre-
local divisions, generational splits, political differences, and other cleavages.

Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg have recently termed "a fragmented structure of authority" as one of the most "salient characteristics of the structure of power" in China. This "fragmented structure" was also a feature of the educational state as well. Indeed, it is possible to argue that education was an arena of state activity that was especially prone to "fragmentation" by competing ideologies.

For one thing, as Lieberthal and Oksenberg point out, compared to other less overtly ideological areas of state activity where the political "zone of indifference" is wide enough for the Communist Party to accommodate non-Party "experts" with relative ease, education and culture are realms where the communist party has much greater interests and responsibilities. 6

Thus it is probably correct to hypothesize that in education the famous conflict between party "ideologues" and state "experts" was especially volatile and deeply entrenched. Vilma Seeberg attributes a major cause of the uneven progress of literacy education after 1949 to the fact that the administration of literacy education was "continuously shifted" between party and state organs. Seeberg interprets this as the alternation of what she calls "Maoist Radicalism" (defined as a party-led "mass politicization approach" to education) with a more pragmatic, "manpower needs"-based "Moderate Policy"
emanating from the Ministry of Education, the bastion of professional expertise in education after 1949.7

It would be insufficient, however, to view the conflicts over literacy policy exclusively or even primarily from the purely structural perspective of bureaucratic politics, involving a struggle between "ideologues" entrenched in the party apparatus and pragmatic "experts" ensconced in the state bureaucracy. For one thing, this (false) dichotomy obscures the fact that educational philosophies that emphasize the paramountcy of professional expertise or of a "manpower needs"-based approach to education are themselves ideological statements, rooted in particular conceptions of social order. Secondly, a purely structural approach-- even if it explodes the myth of monolithic state power-- is of limited value for unpacking the complex intellectual influences that formed early literacy education policy.

Early Elite Influences on Mass Literacy Policy

What were the roadmaps that guided early literacy planners? Mao Zedong, for one, appears not to have been greatly interested in the problem of peasant illiteracy in the early 1950s, his scarce pronouncements on the subject indicating ritual obeisance to its importance rather than a genuine sense of emergency. Mao's much celebrated-- and
often cited-- 1949 comment that New China could not be successfully established on a foundation of 80% illiteracy in the countryside appears on balance merely to have been a formulaic restatement of the above-noted, similarly well-worn pronouncement of Lenin's.8

In fact it could be argued that Mao showed far greater interest in the problem of peasant literacy during his early years as a peasant organizer and instructor at the Peasant Movement Training Institute at Canton in the 1920s. There, in his classroom lectures, as the preserved notes of his students reveal, Mao pondered the reasons why peasants preferred the old-style "Han learning" (hanxue), which emphasized classical literacy and moral indoctrination, over the modern "foreign" subjects (yangxue). As a revolutionary, Mao was most concerned with the lessons the party could draw from this in its bid to attract peasant support, and he suggested that communist schools learn from the example of the traditional village school.9

After 1949 Mao's public pronouncements on literacy were both rare and brief. There are no great disquisitions on peasant literacy in Mao's writings, as there are on the nature of class antagonisms under socialism or the relationship of intellectuals to the communist party.

Mao's interest in the literacy movement (apart from the language reform movement about which he also made scattered pronouncements) appears to have been aroused most by collectivization in 1955-56. With collectivization Mao
began to urge the importance of peasant literacy for calculating and recording workpoints in the collectives. In order to uncover the sources that stimulated and shaped the early literacy movement, we will have to look beyond the apparently limited influence of Chairman Mao.

One sign of the inadequacy of viewing the debate over early literacy policy in terms of a simple dichotomy of party ideologues versus professional experts is particularly compelling. That was the appearance in 1949 of Ma Xulun as first Minister of Education in the People's Republic of China.10

To describe Ma Xulun as an "expert" in the sense in which that term is usually employed, as a modern technocrat, would be seriously to misunderstand Ma's intellectual world and his place, and that of many other intellectuals like him, in modern China. Ma Xulun represented not modern technocracy but the elite tradition of classical education, some of whose post-1911 leaders converted to communism and became linguistic revolutionaries.

Born in 1884, Ma was an accomplished classical scholar, a renowned philologist and former professor of Chinese philosophy at Peking University for twenty years (1916-36). His earliest works pre-dated the 1911 Revolution, yet his greatest scholarly contribution-- a textual criticism of the Shuowen jiezi (a 100 A.D. analytical dictionary of characters)-- did not actually appear until 1957. In between, Ma continued to publish philological studies of
inscriptions on Zhou dynasty stone drums and philosophical researches on Laozi and Zhuangzi. Meanwhile he served, variously, as director of propaganda in the Peking headquarters of the KMT; Vice Minister of Education in the Nanking government; co-founder of the China Association for the Promotion of Democracy; and, finally, first Minister of Education in the People's Republic and a prominent member of the Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Language.

What does the appearance of someone like Ma Xulun as the first Minister of Education in Mao's government tell us about the formation of education policy in the new state? After all, at the time of the May Fourth Movement Ma had been one of the most ardent opponents of the baihua (plain speech) movement to replace the old classical language with vernacular script.

At the very least, Ma's appearance suggests that contrary to what Western scholars have often assumed and what Chinese leaders themselves often publicly portrayed, the communists were far less certain of the necessity to jettison as much as possible of the enormous legacy of China's educational past, in their search for reliable foundations upon which to build the education of New China. Ma Xulun's location in the universe of PRC officialdom suggests that Chinese leaders believed in the possibility that the classical past and its representatives had a role to play.
But what sort of role? Ma Xulun and other linguistic revolutionaries like him were officially there to provide technical assistance and scholarship to support and ratify the CCP's language reforms. Ma's 1957 study of the Shuowen jiezi, for example, analyzed one of the earliest efforts to devise standardized pronunciations for the characters; it therefore placed the CCP's efforts to standardize the language as the culmination of a heritage that stretched back to the first century.

But Ma Xulun influenced the PRC literacy movement in another, equally important way. Ma Xulun and his contemporaries brought to the early literacy movement an elite scholar's erudite appreciation of the extraordinary historical depth and rich complexity of the Chinese written language.

The vantage point from which Ma viewed the intricacies of Chinese literacy in 1949 represented the accumulated efforts of half a century of linguistic scholarship. From his vantage point as a linguist Ma was predisposed to reject quick solutions to China's illiteracy problem. He understood the Chinese language too well to accept such solutions. Therefore, combined with his dedication as a linguistic revolutionary to simplify the script in order to make it more accessible, Ma Xulun also stressed the unavoidable complexities of Chinese literacy. And he did so in ways that bridled the impatient aspirations of other revolutionaries who did not share Ma's perspective.
In nearly all of the twentieth century social revolutions, the impatience of the revolutionaries has been reflected in the sense of urgency with which they have embraced the goal of universal literacy. Lenin announced a national campaign to eradicate illiteracy within two years of the 1917 Revolution, and made it a criminal offence for illiterates between the age of eight and fifty to refuse to study. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed within one month of the 1945 August Revolution that all Vietnamese were to be able to read and write romanized Vietnamese within one year, while possibly having to fight a major war against the French at the same time. In Cuba, Fidel Castro launched a universal literacy campaign in 1961, within two years of the defeat of the last Batista forces; and in Nicaragua, the Sandinos launched their national literacy crusade (Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetizacion) within fifteen days of winning power.12

Yet in China Ma Xulun began by warning delegates to the first national conference on worker-peasant education in September 1950 to resist the temptation simply to "decree" the immediate abolition of illiteracy in China.

The raising of the people's impoverished educational level was an enormously complex undertaking, Ma told delegates to the conference, which could only be accomplished by "gradually eliminating" illiteracy over an extended period.13 Qian Qunrui, another leading educational figure in the early years of the People's Republic, echoed
Ma's views when he stated in 1951 that because of the backwardness of the economy, the shortage of qualified teachers, and the diverse kinds and levels of literacy among the peasant population, the literacy movement could not afford to begin on a nationwide scale. Rather, it would be limited at first to the "most important" areas.

By "most important" areas Qian explained that the first priority would be to expand literacy education in the CCP's pre-1949 base areas. Placing the former base areas ahead of all other regions in the provision of literacy education can be seen as reward for political loyalty during the party's time in the wilderness.

But it also had to do with the fact that, as Qian Qunrui put it, peasants in the old base areas were "already organized." That is to say, peasants in these areas were already firmly under the CCP's control. Qian recognized, in other words, that literacy was potentially politically empowering, and was therefore politically dangerous when introduced into localities, such as most of Guangdong, where the power to channel literate skills into politically "safe" uses was not fully assured.

In Guangdong, where big lineages had nurtured a strong tradition of elite scholarship in private academies (shuyuan) which prepared lineage sons for success in the imperial examinations, a 1951 conference on peasant and worker education appears to have agreed with Ma's views on the need for gradualism in the inculcation of literacy. Du
Guoxiang, Director of the Guangdong Bureau of Culture and Education, told conference delegates that "impatient striving" after immediate universal literacy would only lead to the blind worship of illiteracy eradication statistics at the expense of nurturing the quality of literate skills among China's masses of ordinary peasants.15

In fact some Chinese educators argued that the sources of "conservative" intellectual opposition to the idea of raising literacy levels through mass campaigns--educational elitism, professional resistance to the communist party, and political neglect--were "especially strong" in Guangdong province.16 The Cantonese writer Qin Mu argued in 1950 that the Guangdong gentry was uninterested in mass primary education. Specifically, Qin Mu argued that gentry control of rural education led to the stagnation of primary schooling in Guangdong during the 1930s and '40s. Gentry had used education to consolidate local dominance by building private middle schools and universities to serve as feeder institutions for local commercial and political networks, but had neglected primary education. As a result primary enrollment on the eve of 'Liberation' was unchanged from what it had been in 1937 (about 1.5 million).17

Conservative intellectual opposition to literacy campaigns was particularly strong in Guangdong for another reason as well. For historical reasons which began with the Opium War, Canton, along with Shanghai, was the preeminent bastion of Western-style educational professionalism or
"bourgeois" pedagogy (as Mao preferred) in the nineteen fifties. The bourgeois pedagogues resented communist party interference in educational affairs. In taking the view that Chinese literacy acquisition was a complex, time consuming effort for both students and teachers that defied quick and easy solutions imposed from above by politicians, elite antiquarian scholars like Ma found support from more modern-minded professional education circles.

Such persons represented a broad spectrum of differing educational views, and it would be unfair to portray them in the same narrow and condescending terms as Mao did. But it is worth pointing out that in Guangdong its members in the early nineteen fifties included those whom the Cantonese writer Lu Lan described in 1952 as "foreign-educated Ph.D.s" (yangboshi) who attacked mass literacy campaigns with sophisticated imported theories of hereditary intelligence (like those of the British-American Harvard psychologist and proponent of "selective breeding," Raymond Cattell). These pedagogues, according to Lu Lan, argued that it was unproductive to waste scarce resources and effort on educating the poor, who lacked the innately superior learning abilities found among the upper classes.

When it came to streaming of classes into good and bad students, they similarly ignored the social causes of poor academic performance and allegedly seized upon the fact that the majority of bright students were from the upper classes while bad students were overwhelmingly from the lower
classes. This they said was further evidence that the class basis of academic performance was "heavenly instilled" (tianxing ruci).18

The Elitist Nature of Early Literacy Education Policy

Officially more than eighty percent of the Chinese population over the age of fourteen could neither read nor write at a level sufficient to be classified as literate according to the party's minimal demand of a knowledge of at least one thousand characters.19 But local surveys indicate a huge range of illiteracy rates. These figures from Guangdong were probably representative of the situation in the country as a whole. A 1950 township level survey of illiteracy in Guangdong taken immediately after the communists took power in the province showed illiteracy rates that ranged from a high of ninety percent in Tanjiao township in Jieyang county near Shantou, in northeastern Guangdong, to a low of sixty five percent in Wenxiu township, Gaoshan district, in southern Guangdong.20

In the Pearl river delta region, where lineage and overseas-sponsored education was especially significant before 1949, illiteracy rates still varied enormously. For example, even in Shunde county, one of the most prosperous counties in the delta, the illiteracy rate in Longjiang township was over eighty two percent, higher even than the
seventy eight percent average for all townships in this survey.

Such variation even in a county like Shunde underscores the need for caution in drawing inferences about the extent of popular literacy in this region based upon a falsely presumed correlation between economic prosperity and level of educational attainment. Numerous factors could be cited to explain the extent of illiteracy in Longjiang township in Shunde in the early 1950s. The majority of the literate elite may have fled to Hong Kong, which is near Shunde; or the township may have been home to a particularly large number of dependents of overseas Chinese, the preponderance of whom were normally elderly males and women. Both of these groups tended to have high rates of illiteracy.

The exact reasons for the high illiteracy figure in Longjiang were not given. The point is that the economic prosperity of the delta, nurtured in part by the strength of its lineages and overseas links, did not lead to universally high literacy rates across the region. Furthermore, some of the same factors that contributed to the economic success of the region may also have been the cause of severe imbalances in illiteracy rates, by locality, by sex, and by social class as well. Annales historians have similarly argued that prosperity can sometimes work against literacy-- in prosperous areas, people wanted their children to take advantage of job opportunities.
National and regional figures alone do not convey the full range of the illiteracy problem in the countryside. When viewed from the village, illiteracy was often greater than national or regional figures alone might suggest (the opposite, of course, was also sometimes true). The Chinese educational press in the early 1950s was replete with examples like Chengjie, a village of one thousand near Guangzhou. There was only one primary school graduate in Chengjie in 1951, the son of a local landlord who had studied in an English language school in Hong Kong. In Xi village, population two thousand, only three percent of villagers could read and write.22

Illiteracy was especially high among women. A 1950 survey of Hexi district, the oldest communist base area in the East river region, can serve as an example. Located in Heyuan county, Hexi was composed in 1950 of six townships and some forty seven villages, with a total population of 65,815. Hexi had completed land reform in the winter of 1947, well before other parts of Guangdong. In 1950 there were 285 evening schools operating in the district, attended by 6,515 men and 9,164 women. But in the regular primary and middle schools in the district, the situation was the opposite. In the primary schools in Hexi there were 6,580 males and only 1,280 females. In the district's middle schools there were 211 males and only 9 females.23

The policy discussions of Chinese leaders in the 1950s show two partly contending impulses as stimulating literacy
during this period. One emanated from the CCPs accumulated wartime experience in mass education. This tradition emphasized the popular mobilizational uses of mass education, more than education's presumed capacity to facilitate bureaucratic rule. Moreover, the "Yanan model" stressed the deployment of a wide array of popular educational techniques, of which literacy education was but one.24

The second impulse originated in a functionalist conception of literacy's role in bureaucratic and economic rationalization. This impulse became increasingly prominent after 1949, as China's revolutionaries-turned-state builders began to perceive illiteracy as an obstacle to political unity and economic progress. Initially, however, these two impulses were in competition with one another in the early nineteen fifties. In the end, the older mass mobilizational uses of education prevailed, and literacy education foundered.

Of the two impulses stimulating literacy in the early 1950s, Ma Xulun had emphasized the second one, the critical importance of literacy for facilitating bureaucratic rule. Shortly after assuming his position as China's first Minister of Education Ma enunciated a literacy education policy that was deliberately and dramatically elitist. In late 1950 Ma put forward the Ministry of Education's position that the most urgent mass educational concern was
to increase the level of literacy among rural party members and village activists.

By village activists Ma was referring to members of the Youth League, Women's Federation and other mass organizations which transmitted central policies to local constituencies. Henceforward, said Ma, the literacy movement in the countryside was to be restricted exclusively to the activists and party members who constituted the party-state's network of local cadres. Only later would the movement gradually be expanded to include other social groups as well.25

Ma's decision to rest the literacy movement on a firmly elitist foundation laid the new state open to charges it was willing to forsake its moral obligation to the poor for the sake of the statist objective of consolidating bureaucratic rule in the countryside. Given the enormity of peasant illiteracy, what were the reasons behind Ma Xulun's patently self-conscious decision to exclude the vast majority of China's peasants from the government's literacy education plans? Ma's speech on the subject shows the considerable pains he was at to justify this policy as being temporarily necessary.

Several key considerations lay behind the deliberately elitist orientation of early literacy education policy. One was the belief, already mentioned, that literacy was increasingly seen as a functional requisite for local leaders, as party work shifted from military and political
struggle to the complex management and administrative tasks associated with state-building and planned economic development. As Qian Qunrui explained in 1951, local functionaries were "the bridge between the masses and the state in the implementation of state policies and directives. We must therefore make greater efforts to educate them in order that their cultural and political level can be raised and their leading role and transmission function can reach its peak." 26

A second reason for the elite emphasis of early literacy policy was the related fear that these functions were constantly in danger of being appropriated and subverted at local levels. The danger came from former elites who sought to exploit their monopoly on badly needed literate skills in order to achieve privileged positions and treatment in the new bureaucratic and political order, or else to sabotage the efforts of the new government in the hope that it could not survive.

The gap between the educational level of most village cadres and the educational demands of rapid modernization was politically hazardous in another way. The PRC state was forced from the outset to rely on former literate elites who would pledge allegiance to the new state to carry out its administrative functions. Such dependence was politically sensitive however, because it constantly ran the risk of de-legitimizing a movement which rode to power on the ideology and the reality of peasant support.
Worried reports from Guangdong in 1951 spoke of illiterate village cadres becoming increasingly resentful of the fact that intellectuals from the old society were rapidly assuming positions of power purely on the basis of their superior educational qualifications. They blamed not necessarily the intellectuals, but the communist party for forsaking its moral obligation and historical debt to peasants. These same Cantonese cadres charged that whereas the party had relied upon peasants to carry out the difficult and costly struggle for power, the party was now content to rely on intellectuals to run the country.27

Illiterate village cadres in Guangdong were said to be feeling inferior after 1949, because they feared that even though their political credentials were of the highest order, they would never become the "experts" (zhuanjia) who were needed to run the new society. The motive of a Cantonese peasant cadre named Dong Chengdui for becoming literate was typical of the pressures facing illiterate village functionaries in the early 1950s. In 1949 Dong was chosen to attend a five day conference on the popularization of scientific farming techniques. Fearful that his inability to take notes at the meeting would prevent him from remembering valuable information and thereby cause him to lose face among the other villagers, Dong resolved to stay up the night before the meeting in order to memorize sixteen characters that described a single farming technique. But when he returned from the conference Dong
found that he still could not recall any of the detailed discussions that had taken place and, worse, that he could remember only twelve of the sixteen characters.28

Another illustration of the motives which impelled some local functionaries to become literate comes from a nineteen fifties Guangdong rural literacy primer, entitled "Stories about learning culture" (Xue wenhua de qushi). The primer attempted to motivate illiterate activists to become literate by detailing the face-losing experiences of two illiterate woman activists. Luo Yefang was an illiterate from Maoming county in southwestern Guangdong. Liu Si was an illiterate from Pingyuan county in northeastern Guangdong. Both joined the communist party and took up local leadership positions in the early nineteen fifties.

Li Si was elected head of the local Women's Federation in 1953. Afterwards, she was chosen to attend a sixteen day party-sponsored literacy class. But after attending she was still only able to write her name and the names of the local township, district and county. When she was elected head of the village cooperative other villagers ridiculed her inability to read and write. She had to rely on the cooperative accountant to explain bulletins from senior government and party levels, and to formulate production plans on her behalf.

Luo Yefang faced similar kinds of social pressures. She experienced the "bitter taste" of illiteracy within a few months of becoming assistant township head and enduring
the scorn of others. Probably, in both instances the scorn was unusually severe because of resentment of female leaders. Luo Yefang was determined to become literate, but found it impossible to find time to study because of the number of official meetings she attended.29

The latter was a formidable and much discussed problem in the nineteen fifties, as local officials faced increasing official and personal pressures to become literate. At the same time as they began to face these pressures, however, they also faced apparently stronger pressures to attend meetings, mediate conflicts, etc. Many reports from this period speak of local officials and activists being the first to enroll in literacy classes and the first to drop out.30

As a result of such problems, the effort to improve literacy among peasant cadres and communist party members came to focus on special full time intensive courses held at county capitals. Cadres chosen to attend such courses were released from their village duties for the duration of their studies, and then expected to return to the village.

The effort took the form of the creation of a national network of cultural make-up schools (wenhua_buxi_xuexiao). The schools aimed to impart a condensed primary school education within one to three years and prepare a select number of graduates for further study in special "accelerated worker-peasant middle schools" (gongnong_sucheng_zhongxue). Students were recruited from among
township and village cadres, peasant associations, mass organizations, and the communist party.

By late 1950 eighteen accelerated worker-peasant middle schools were set up across the country. Combined enrollment, however, was only twenty five hundred. By 1955 the number of schools had risen to eighty seven, with fifty one thousand students.31

In Guangdong there were a total of twenty two cadre make-up schools operating by 1955. The first worker-peasant accelerated middle school in Guangdong opened in Guangzhou in February 1951. Nearly two hundred students attended, drawn from counties across the province.32 By 1955 there was still only this one worker-peasant accelerated middle school in Guangdong.33

My research shows these schools were bedevilled by problems. They especially found it difficult to recruit the type of students for whom the schools were originally intended. In many cases local authorities were unwilling to release their officials to attend these schools. The schools were located in county capitals and officials feared that persons sent to these schools would not return to the villages, using the schools merely as "a brick to open a door" (qiaomen zhuan).

As a result, the opportunity to attend such schools was frequently awarded to the least qualified officials whom local authorities believed they could afford to lose, or else as a reward to persons with long or distinguished
revolutionary careers. In 1951 it was estimated that around half the students in the worker-peasant accelerated middle schools had "cultural levels" below that of primary school graduates.34

In the case of areas of the province populated by minority peoples, Guangdong authorities followed national practice in setting up minority institutes for training cadres from among these peoples. Before such institutes were established in Guangdong, minority cadres were given short term courses in existing colleges and universities. Thus in the early nineteen fifties one hundred minority people cadres graduated from short term training classes at Nanfang University in Guangzhou. Upon completing their courses graduates were sent back to their villages with ten photographs of Mao Zedong and a hoe.35

Influence of Wartime Experience on Illiteracy among Communist Party Members in North China and Guangdong in the 1950s

Ma Xulun was especially concerned about the pervasiveness of illiteracy within the communist party itself. By the communist party's own estimates, a staggering sixty nine percent of communist party members were illiterate in 1949-- only marginally less than the eighty percent figure claimed for the country as a whole.36
Ma Xulun placed the blame for this situation directly on the legacy of wartime mass educational experience. He complained publicly in 1950 that New China had inherited a huge corps of peasant cadres with impeccable revolutionary credentials but no education.

A Ministry of Education document which bears the imprint of Ma's views was even more explicit. It bluntly declared that while mass education in the Old Liberated Areas of North China had scored tremendous victories in raising peasants' political consciousness and inspiring them to struggle against the Japanese invaders, the achievements in terms of raising popular literacy levels were "not very great".37

Mark Selden's research on the Yanan period confirms this view. Selden found that many district magistrates in the Shan-Gan-Ning border region government were "illiterate or only semiliterate" peasants who hired intellectual cadres onto their staffs to handle administrative duties; that local cadres such as township and sub-district heads "typically were illiterate peasant revolutionaries" recruited during land reform; and that the township itself remained "relatively insulated" during the communist period, with "professional administrators and literate cadres concentrated in the regional and district bureaucracy."38

In 1951 Qian Qunrui further confirmed this judgement. He referred to the "three kinds" of village education practiced in the 'old liberated areas' as political
education, technical education related to village economic activities, and "cultural learning" or basic literacy. Only the first two had prevailed, said Qian, while literacy was neglected.39

It is not hard to see why the communist party was able to emerge victorious in North China with its ranks brimming with illiterates. In the effort to recruit local activists, the ability to read and write was often simply less important than other considerations. Illiteracy was not necessarily a handicap to the pursuit of power and prestige in the village world. The popular culture sanctioned numerous non-literacy based sources of local authority, which the communist party was able and willing to ally itself with. As Richard Madsen has shown, such sources included one's social class background, a charismatic ability to arouse the political emotions of fellow villagers, and even the ability to defend the village community against the demands of outside interests.40

Yet in 1949 the educational profile of the communist party in North China was strikingly different than that of the Guangdong branch of the party. In both instances the educational structure of the party was shaped by wartime experience, but the results were exactly opposite. The communist movement in Guangdong was comprised almost exclusively of urban intellectuals and students who joined the party during the Japanese occupation of 1938-45. Except for the peasant movement in Haifeng, Guangning and Hua
counties during the 1920s, and scattered guerilla bases established during the Japanese occupation, the communist presence in Guangdong villages was virtually non-existent before 1949.41

The preponderance of students and intellectuals is reflected in statistics gathered in 1950. Of one hundred twenty nine "leading" communist party cadres in Guangdong in 1950, thirty four were university graduates; eighty eight had attended some form of middle school; and only three were merely primary school graduates. More than eighty eight percent of these leading cadres joined the party during the war against Japan. When the first Guangdong peoples congress convened in 1950, thirty two of the forty political party delegates (which included delegates from non-communist parties) were from non-worker and non-peasant backgrounds. Twenty four had college level education. Significantly, less than six percent of those attending were illiterate.42

But as the CCP expanded into Guangdong after 1949, the educational profile of the party in Guangdong was gradually reversed. The lower echelons began to fill up with illiterate activists. At the same time, the indigenous leadership of intellectuals and students who had joined the party during the Japanese occupation was purged in the early 1950s. Many of its leading members were subsequently replaced by northern cadres more loyal to the party center.43
Statistics bear out the increasing preponderance of illiterates in the Guangdong party structure after 1949. By 1953 the number of cadres in the province had risen to 193,000. Of these, fully sixty five percent had less than a junior middle school education. Thirty four percent had only a primary school education.

By 1956 the educational profile of the Guangdong party structure had deteriorated even further. A classified report prepared by the Guangdong education bureau in that year estimated that four of every seven leading cadres in most townships in Guangdong were illiterate.44

Prohibition of Literacy Education in Guangdong in the Early 1950s

The priority given to improving literacy among the new village elite collided in the early 1950s with an older tradition of mass education in the CCPs wartime base areas. Some CCP leaders believed that the social mobilization goals which had dominated the party's approach to popular education before 1949 had continuing relevance for the postrevolutionary period. Furthermore they believed that these goals should take precedence over literacy education in the new state, at least under certain circumstances.

During the Yanan period Chinese leaders conceived of popular education as comprised of two distinct streams.
Though not mutually exclusive, one emphasized learning to read and write (lit., "learning culture"), while the other stressed political mobilization. As explained in a Ministry of Education document of 1949, the winter schools (dongxue), which were the touchstone of mass education efforts in the base areas, had both a "cultural" as well as a "political" purpose. One was to inculcate basic literacy skills for daily living, and to communicate current party policies and directives in order to achieve compliance and mobilization. The other political purpose allotted some significance to literacy education, but it also emphasized the deployment of a wide panoply of popular educational devices to ensure that party messages reached non-literate audiences as well. These included oral, aural, and visual means such as lantern slides, photography exhibits, popular dance and theatre troupes, even the ancient system of village lectures (xiangyue).45

Mao himself attached great importance to such forms of popular education, perhaps more than he attached to book learning. As early as 1927 Mao had remarked that "the greatest achievements of the peasant associations are always to do with popularizing political propaganda. Some simple slogans, picture books, and lectures... the results are extremely wide-ranging and rapid." When Mao scorned academically-oriented modern schools, it was usually from this perspective. "Can opening ten thousand law and political science schools succeed in popularizing politics
among the peasants, men and women, young and old in such a short time as the peasant associations have been able to do?" Mao asked rhetorically. "I think not." As Stuart Schram has pointed out, Mao's "approach to revolution stresses the importance of cultural change, and education, in the broadest sense, is the instrument by which he seeks to create new men and women" (italics added).

Hence the Ministry of Education's first policy statement on worker-peasant education was a curious document. On the one hand it affirmed the functional importance of literacy for bureaucratic-economic rationalization and local leaders as the targets. But on the other hand it also set limits on the allowable emphasis given to literacy education.

Specifically, the Ministry of Education stated that the painstaking effort required to "learn culture" was in conflict with the priority of political mobilization during land reform. The state did not want peasants to become preoccupied with the laborious task of learning characters at a time when it believed peasants' mental energies would be better spent cultivating the political psychology which the state regarded as critical to the success of land reform. Literacy education was therefore to be forbidden in areas where land reform had not yet been carried out.

In 1950 this included virtually all of Guangdong province, which did not even begin land reform until the end of 1950. The Guangdong educational yearbook records that
it was not until 1952, three years after the founding of the new state, that mass education in the province switched from 'contemporary political affairs education' (zhengzhi shishi jiaoyu) to 'cultural education' (wenhua jiaoyu) with 'literacy education' (shizi jiaoyu) as its 'keypoint' (zhongdian).50

With literacy education prohibited in Guangdong until after the completion of land reform in 1952, the initial aims of mass education in the province after 1949 were purely propagandistic. They included instructing peasants on the party's policies with respect to land reform, the marriage law, state grain requisitions and anti-hoarding measures, and the prohibited use of Hong Kong currency.51

The curriculum was fluid according to the rapidly changing political situation, and conducted largely through mass meetings and various other non-print media. A 1952 report on mass education in Fengxun county in Guangdong describes the focus of this effort as organizing travelling lantern slide shows which instructed villagers on American imperialism and landlord sabotage; as well as photo exhibitions of Korean war battle scenes and life in the Soviet Union.52

The decision to prohibit literacy education in Guangdong until the completion of land reform had serious historical consequences for the type of local leaders which were recruited in Guangdong villages in the early 1950s. It
also had historic implications for the educational profile of the party as a whole in Guangdong.

Mark Selden found that in North China villages during the 1930s and 1940s, "the overwhelming majority of local activists who emerged in the course of the land revolution were illiterate peasants or soldiers...who were innocent both of revolutionary ideology and of the workings of stable administration." The post-1949 prohibition of literacy education in areas which were undergoing land reform was remarkable because it signalled the willingness-- if not the intention-- of the state to see the same pattern of illiterate local leadership reproduced in rural Guangdong after 1949.

The state decision not to allow literacy training in areas undergoing land reform may also simply have reflected Chinese leaders' respect for the arduousness of Chinese literacy. Or it may have been a sign of lack of confidence in ability of the Chinese peasantry, that peasants could not safely accomplish two important and difficult tasks at once. It is worth bearing in mind that literacy training and political activism were not inherently irreconcilable. In neighbouring Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh used land reform as the occasion to mount a mass education campaign designed to create a corps of village leaders who were both politically reliable and literate. Within five years, Chinese leaders would be studying this experience in order to "catch up" in literacy education. Finally, however, we should
perhaps also bear in mind the crucial fact of the outbreak of the Korean War and how it raised the spectre of subversion and invasion, especially in the South. Class warfare was a way to defend against these perceived threats, and land reform was a much more effective way of fomenting class struggle than study.

Land reform was not the only occasion during which it was officially advised to downgrade the time and effort devoted to literacy education. The importance of literacy education was further degraded in the early 1950s by the Ministry of Education's provision that in the case of "important political movements" villages should reduce the time and effort spent on literacy education and devote more attention to "political education on current policies."55

Thus after the Korean war broke out in late 1950, the Ministry of Education announced that the main educational task of citizens across the country was to take part in the movement to "Resist America and Aid Korea". Village winter schools (which had an estimated enrollment of thirty five million at the time) were identified by the Ministry as being one of the country's most important mobilizational weapons for carrying out the movement. The Ministry expressly called upon local officials to root out those who clung to the belief that "learning culture" was more important than non-literacy based "political and current affairs education."56
In fact local officials and villagers alike were not likely to consider familiarity with current "international affairs" a natural priority of village educational curriculum. During the Resist America and Aid Korea Campaign, for example, party educators discovered to their chagrin that many Cantonese villagers did not even know where Korea was. As Richard Madsen says, "the members of a relatively poor, isolated farming village are not likely to extend their conception of public responsibilities much beyond the boundaries of their village."  

Perhaps in order to ensure that central aims did penetrate villagers' conception of their public responsibilities, in 1951 officials at the Ministry of Education ordered responsibility for the formulation of curriculum in winter schools taken out of village hands and centralized at higher administrative levels.

In November 1952 political education in the rural winter schools was divided into two categories. "Current affairs political education" included the "glorious success" of the campaign to resist America and aid Korea, achievements in the rehabilitation of the economy since 1949, and Sino-Soviet friendship. General "political education" embraced efforts to encourage peasants to strive for "patriotic increases" in farm output, to participate in mutual aid teams, to realize the historic importance of the worker-peasant alliance, and to consider the future prospect of socialism in China.
By late 1953 the primary focus of village winter schools shifted to promoting the "general line for the transition to socialism," especially those aspects which involved state monopolization of the grain trade and cooperativization. In its 1954 directive on winter schools the Ministry of Education ordained three main educational tasks: explaining the new constitution adopted in 1954, promoting cooperativization, and popularizing the policy of compulsory grain purchases. In addition to these main objectives, the schools also undertook to popularize selected "current affairs," including national defence, the liberation of Taiwan, opposition to U.S. imperialism, and the cultivation of an "international" outlook among peasants. Only brief mention was made of the need to teach peasants basic reading and writing skills in the winter schools.59

These Ministry of Education directives reveal the degradation of literacy education throughout the first half of the 1950s. The crucial turning point, however, occurred in 1953 as the result of a brief failed attempt to promote a method which held out the promise of astonishingly quick literacy acquisition.
Qi Jianhua and the Accelerated Literacy Method

The "accelerated literacy method" (suchenq shizi fa) was the creation of Qi Jianhua, a PLA cultural commissar in the Yunnan garrison. The method was originally developed by Qi for use among illiterate army cadres and soldiers in the southwestern province of Yunnan. Qi claimed to have devised a phonetics-based pedagogy capable of imparting to illiterates a basic knowledge of 1500 characters within the amazingly brief space of only fifteen days. Furthermore, Qi claimed to have tested the technique widely and to have tested and replicated the results among more than 12,000 illiterate army cadres and soldiers in Yunnan.60

The emergence of these claims from within the ranks of the PLA so soon after 1949 is intriguing. The early Soviet literacy drive was led by the Red Army, which set up thousands of so-called illiteracy "liquidation points" (likpunkty) across the countryside. Illiterates were taken to these "liquidation points" for six to ten week-long crash literacy courses.61 The accelerated literacy method may have represented Qi Jianhua's attempt to carve out a new role for the PLA in liberated China similar to that of the Soviet Red Army, as leader of the country's literacy drive.

The accelerated literacy method claimed to teach illiterates to read and write 1500 characters in about 150
hours, in three easy steps. The first step required learning thirty seven phonetic symbols based on the old national phonetic alphabet (zhuyin fuhao). This step was expected to take twenty to thirty hours of class time. The next step involved an "assault" (tuji) on a list of two hundred phonetically represented characters, to be memorized at a rate of twelve to twenty four per hour. Memorization meant ability to recognize individual characters as well as to explain their meaning, with emphasis upon the former. During this stage transcription aids to character recognition were gradually eliminated.

In the third and final step of the method, connected discourse was introduced in order to facilitate reading ability and grammatical construction. In addition, some attention was paid to developing students' ability to write, and to expanding students' knowledge of the range of meanings contained within individual characters.62

For a brief period of about six months between May 1952 and January 1953 Qi Jianhua's accelerated literacy method was greeted as a panacea for China's illiteracy problem. The manner in which it was rapidly embraced portended similar literacy campaigns in the future, most notably that of the Great Leap Forward.

So enticing was the promise of the accelerated literacy method that it proved impossible to contain its use within the officially targeted group of party members and cadres. As local and higher officials across the country learned of
the technique and began to experiment with its use, a string of similarly spectacular results was announced, often surpassing those made by Qi Jianhua. In Chongqing, for example, a group of illiterate textile workers claimed to have increased their literacy level from an average of 400 characters to more than 2000 in a mere twenty one days. In Tianjin a group of factory workers announced they had made a similar breakthrough in just twenty three days.63

In Guangdong, newly literate peasants wrote letters to Chairman Mao, detailing their miraculous accomplishments and extolling the virtues of the accelerated literacy method. Among these virtues was that with the accelerated literacy method farmers still had ample time for working in the fields, thus solving the "contradiction" between work and study.64

The apparent promise of the accelerated literacy method was particularly alluring when compared to the slow nature of literacy acquisition using other methods. Previous experience had shown, for example, that villagers studying in year-round evening schools needed an average of two to three years of study just to be able to recognize between seven hundred and eight hundred characters (the officially defined margin of 'semi-literate' status), while even in the best evening schools peasants could expect to take the same amount of time to acquire the minimum literacy standard of one thousand to fifteen hundred characters.65
In the seasonal winter schools, progress was far slower. Because of the long gap between seasons, peasants often complained that little real progress was ever made in these schools; what was learned one season was forgotten the next, so that each year required starting over again from scratch (niannian kaixue, niannian kaitou).

With promoters of the accelerated literacy method promising superior results within a matter of weeks, it was hardly surprising that both official as well as popular pressure to expand the movement increased rapidly, long before the true impact and results of the movement were known. In one village in Fujian, for instance, peasants refused to attend the village evening school any longer, after they learned that a special accelerated literacy class had been set up for select persons in the village.66 For many villagers the accelerated literacy method simply meant the utopian prospect of the removal of illiterate status without years of drudgery in sparetime schools.

In May 1952 the accelerated literacy method received the official endorsement of the central government, which began to promote its use on a national scale. Hebei province was declared the key experimental region in this national effort. As part of the effort, the Ministry of Education prepared a teachers' guide and a two volume literacy primer for students which included dialect versions of the phonetic symbols. Qi Jianhua's original scheme for the PLA employed Mandarin.
In Guangdong, dialect versions of the method had already been prepared in late 1951 for the province's four main dialect groups (Guangzhou, Kejia, Chaozhou and Hainan). Jiangmen and Huiyang were designated as "keypoints" for conducting literacy experiments using the accelerated literacy method. The choice of these two Guangdong localities may have been dictated by the fact that Jiangmen was an important commercial hub for surrounding regions, and therefore mass education was economically important in this area. Huiyang, on the other hand, was an important site of communist activity before 1949; its choice may have reflected the official state policy of preferential treatment of former base areas.

Between August and November 1952 Guangdong authorities trained over twenty three thousand teachers to use the accelerated literacy method. These teachers were then dispersed to over thirty counties and cities in the province.67

Nationally, the number of persons using the method shot upward. By 1953 the number of persons enrolled in adult literacy classes nationwide reached twenty million. Nearly one third of these were learning by Qi Jianhua's accelerated literacy method.

Within months of its nationwide implementation, however, critics of the accelerated literacy method pounced upon what they described as its "excessively simplistic" approach to what they claimed was an enormously complex and
"long term" undertaking. These views were officially aired as early as January 1953 at a conference of regional educational officials.

The following month the first national illiteracy eradication work conference brought together literacy theorists and activists from across the country. They decided that the accelerated literacy method had been hastily implemented in a "blind" fashion. Moreover, delegates to the conference concluded that the method's capacity to rapidly solve China's illiteracy problem had been vastly overrated.

Delegates to the conference found that the method only worked well under ideal conditions. Ideal conditions included not only well-trained teachers. The method also only worked well with sufficiently capable and highly motivated students. Both of these were in short supply in most areas where the method had been brusquely introduced over previous months.

The accelerated literacy method was also criticized for falsely exaggerating the importance of technique above all else. The Vice-Director of the Henan education bureau complained, for example, that the method had been introduced in a formalistic way, without due consideration for the different levels and kinds of literacy among villagers, and without regard to differences in local economies.

From Guangdong, similar complaints emerged regarding the formalistic application of the method.
officials complained that the accelerated literacy method ignored the value of linking literacy education to other forms of work and economic activity.70

What these criticisms seem to have been saying was that the accelerated literacy method, as an example of 'scientific pedagogy,' showed an excessive and misplaced faith in the power of pedagogical technique. Coupled with that was an accompanying failure to comprehend actual environmental constraints upon, and incentives for, ordinary persons to become literate. It was the product of a utopian imagination, which blithely assumed that an artificial linguistic environment (phonetic writing) could be easily and successfully imposed from above.

The most damning criticism of the accelerated literacy method was that it was actually prolonging China's long march to universal literacy and jeopardizing the future of popular education in the countryside. The method concentrated on eliminating illiteracy fast, but not on consolidating literacy. So the achievements were inevitably ephemeral. In many areas moreover the accelerated literacy method was linked to the collapse of sparetime primary school classes. The literacy level of graduates of accelerated literacy classes was so low they were unable to meet the standards of a primary school curriculum.71

As these basic flaws and limitations of the accelerated literacy method became evident, a chastened official policy emerged in early 1953. This policy called for the continued
implementation of the method, but on a greatly restricted and tightly controlled basis, emphasizing the importance of fostering the method under ideal conditions. In reality the accelerated literacy method vanished into the PRC annals of failed mass literacy experiments. Qi Jianhua's dream of pedagogical fame as the inventor of instant mass literacy never came to pass. And the literacy movement as a whole in China simply collapsed thereafter, until its sudden revival in 1956.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated two things with respect to early literacy education in the PRC. First, that Chinese leaders were not as interested in literacy as we have sometimes assumed; and that their main interest in literacy education during this period was a statist one, based on the need to educate illiterate peasant cadres in order to facilitate bureaucratic rule. Second, this chapter has demonstrated that Chinese leaders were openly reluctant to permit the teaching of basic reading and writing to achieve unchallengeable supremacy over the older social mobilization aspects of popular education. When these two aims collided, as they did in the early nineteen fifties, literacy education lost.
Only for a brief moment in 1952 did literacy education receive strong backing from the state with the launching of the ill-fated "accelerated literacy method." After the first national illiteracy eradication work conference met in January 1953 to discuss its poor results, it closed with a decision to "rectify" literacy efforts across the country. The conference reaffirmed the importance of a "stable advance" in illiteracy eradication. But in reality this conference marked the virtual collapse of popular literacy efforts across the country for the next several years until collectivization.

Reports distributed in late 1954 and early 1955 spoke of a pervasive "non-interest" in popular literacy activities nationwide. In many localities, literacy workers were transferred out of their jobs to other responsibilities. One scholar has estimated that by the end of 1953 national literacy enrollments may even have fallen below what they were in 1949.

In Guangdong, there were only 843,000 persons enrolled in literacy classes in the spring of 1954. This represented seven percent of all illiterates in the province. Altogether between 1950 and 1954, 1,840,000 persons joined winter schools and literacy classes in Guangdong, out of a total adult illiterate population of twelve million. Yet, according to a classified Guangdong government source, fewer than ten percent of those enrolled-- barely 180,000--
achieved the minimum literacy standard of 1000-1500 characters.

The slow progress of literacy in the first half of the nineteen fifties was not due solely to the ambivalence of China's leaders and to the limited value which they placed on popular literacy during this period. We must also examine the structure of the educational system itself. The 'people-managed' or minban school has often been seen as a hallmark of the CCP's willingness to seek flexible and creative responses to the problems of rural education. While not denying this aspect of the minban schools, I argue that the minban schools have also been a critical source of tension within the PRC education system. Why were 'people-managed' schools established in the first place? Did villagers support them? What was their relationship to the state-run school system? I will examine these issues in the next two chapters.


4 Seeberg, pp. 63-64.

5 Shue, *The Reach of the State*, pp 147-152.


7 Seeberg, pp. 55-62.

8 Mao's educational pronouncements are collected in *Mao zhuxi lun jiaoyu geming* (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 1967).

9 The classroom notes of Mao's students while he was instructor and director of the Peasant Movement Training Institute are preserved in Guangzhou nongmin yundong jiangxi suo jiuzhi jinian guan, ed., *Guangzhou nongmin yundong jiangxi suo ziliao xuanbian* (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 1987), pp. 181-220.

10 Ma also served as Minister of Higher Education after the Ministry was divided in 1952, and was a vice-chair of the powerful culture and education committee of the government affairs council (zhengwuyuan) which later became the state council. For a detailed biography of Ma's life and contributions, see Jinyang xuekan bianji bu, comp. *Zhongguo xiandai shehui kexuejia zhuanlue*, 10 vols. (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1983), vol. 2, pp.10-31. Biographical information on Ma can also be found in Donald W. Klein and Ann B. Clark, eds. *Biographical dictionary of Chinese Communism, 1921-1965* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) vol. 1, pp.465-468.


12 The Russian, Cuban and Nicaraguan literacy campaigns are discussed in Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds., *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987). For the Vietminh literacy campaign, see Alexander Woodside, "The
Triumphs and Failures of Mass Education in Vietnam" Pacific Affairs 56 3 (Fall 1988): 401-427. The size of the illiterate populations in these countries was, of course, much smaller than the Chinese. In Cuba, for example, the total number of illiterates in 1960 was estimated to be 1.7 million; in Nicaragua in 1979 the figure was 979,000. By contrast, there were around 500 million illiterates in China in the early 1950s. Only Tanzania waited as long as China to launch a nationwide mass literacy campaign. Julius Nyerere waited until 1971, a full ten years after independence before launching the first national literacy campaign. Like the Chinese campaign of 1956, the Tanzanian literacy campaign was closely tied to the perceived functional requirements of the effort to establish a collective economy in the villages. See Julius Nyerere, "Education in Tanzania" Harvard Educational Review 55 1 (1985): 45-52. See also the chapter on the Tanzanian campaign in Arnove and Graff, pp. 219-244.

13 Ma Xulun, "Guanyu diyici guanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi de baogao" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nonqmin jiaoyu), p. 13. "Ma Xulun buzhang zai diyici guanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi shang de kaimu ci" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nonqmin jiaoyu), p. 6. The first national conference on worker-peasant education still adopted the optimistic position, nevertheless, that illiteracy could be eliminated among 70% of peasants within only 7 years (3-5 years for cadres).

14 Qian Qunrui, "Wei tigao gongnong de wenhua shuiping manzu gongnong ganbu de wenhua yaoqiu er fendou" Renmin jiaoyu 3 1 (1 May 1951): 12-16. See also the following. "Jiaoyubu guanyu gedi zhankai 'sucheng shizifa de jiaoxue shiyan gongzuo de tongzhi';" "Jiaoyubu guanyu zhengdun gongnong yeyu xuexiao gaoji ban yu zhongxue wenti de tongzhi;' and "Jiaoyubu guanyu yijiu wuwu niandong dao yijiu wuliu nianxunchuzhimaoyuanxuexi de tongzhi." All appear in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nonqmin jiaoyu), pp. 25-26, 30-32, 60-63.


17 Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," pp. 3-4.

18 See Lu Lan, "Xiangcun jiaoshi ye er yao qingsuan zichan jieji jiaoyu sixiang ma?" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua (April
Cattell is not specifically mentioned in this article, but his theories gained notoriety around the time this article was written.

19 See, for example, Wang Changyuan, Zhongguo shehui zhuyi chujj jieduan jiejji jigou yanjiu (Beijing: zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1988), p. 97, which claims that in 1949 there were two hundred eighty million illiterates over the age of 14 in the countryside, 83% of the rural population over 14 years.


22 "Nongmin wanren ru xuexiao" Hong Kong wenhui bao 8 Dec. 1951 in Union Research Institute L0136 4222 3235.


25 Ma Xulun, "Guanyu diyici quanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi de baogao;" Qian Chunrui, "Wei tigao gongnong de wenhua shiping manzu gongnong ganbu de wenhua yaoqiu er fendou."

26 Qian Chunrui, "Wei tigao gongnong de wenhua shiping manzu gongnong ganbu de wenhua yaoqiu er fendou." See also Guo Moruo, Guanyu wenhua jiaoyu qongzu de baogao: zai zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi diyi jingsu guanguo weiyuanhui disanci huiyi shang de baogao (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 1951), especially pp.9-11.


29 Qian Fei and others, *Xue wenhua de qushi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1956).


31 The need for such schools was raised by Ma Xulun in his opening speech and report to the first national conference on worker-peasant action. See "Ma Xulun buzhang zai diyici quanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi shang de kaimu ci" and Ma Xulun, "Guanyu diyici quanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi de baogao." Detailed regulations governing the operation and curriculum of the schools are contained in the following: "Gongnong ganbu wenhua buxi wenxiao xixian shishi banfa," in *Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian* (zhigong ganbu jiaoyu), ed. Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu bu gongnong jiaoyu si (Beijing: n.p. 1979), pp. 18-22; and "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang ganbu wenhua jiaoyu gongzuo de zhishi," in *Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian* (zhigong ganbu jiaoyu), pp. 30-34. See also Guo Moruo, "Guanyu wenhua jiaoyu gongzuo, yijiu wuling nian liyue shiqi ri zai renmin zhengxie guanguo weiyuanhui dierci huiyi de baogao" *Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua* (Aug. 1950): 2-6, which was also published as a book (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 1951).

32 On the development of cadre make-up and accelerated middle schools in Guangdong see the following. Li Zhaohan, "Guangdong diyi suo gongnong sucheng zhongxue jieshao" *Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua* 3 (May 1951): 6-7; "Gongnong jiaoyu de gezhong zuzhi xingshi he neirong" and "Yijiu wuyi nian kaizhan gongnong jiaoyu gongzuo chubu fangan," in *Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui dalibiao dahui cailliao* (yi, san).

33 *Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian*, p. 103.

34 "Gongnong jiaoyu de gezhong zuzhi xingshi he neirong."

35 "Baiyu xueyuan chufa gongzuo" *Nanfang ribao* 8 June 1952 in *Union Research Institute* LO139 4242. See also "Jin yibu zuohao minzu jiaoyu gongzuo" *Guangming ribao* 25 Oct. 1954 in *Union Research Institute* LO139 42411, which discusses the establishment of minority colleges (minzu xueyuan) across the country as the "keypoint" of minority educational policy.


1984), p. 893 and Union Research Institute LO13 4222 322. Ma Xulun's comments are contained in "Ma Xulun buzhang zai diyici quanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi shang de kaimu ci" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 4-10 and Ma Xulun, "Guanyu diyici quanguo gongnong jiaoyu huiyi de baogao" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 11-14.

38 Mark Selden, The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 159, 214, 221. See also Renmin jiaoyushe, ed., Nongmin shizi jiaoyu de zuzhi xingshi he jiaoxue fanqfa 4 vols. (Beijing: n.p., 1950), vol.3, pp. 2-3, which says that in the North China base areas there was but limited time for study, in between fighting and producing.

39 Qian Qunrui, "Wei tigao gongnong de wenhua shuiping manzu gongnong ganbu de wenhua yaoqiu er fendou." Nonetheless, despite the reservations expressed by some educators concerning the legacy of wartime mass education, in 1951 the Ministry of Education's official journal, Renmin jiaoyu, compiled a handbook on the organization and teaching methods employed by the literacy movement in the former base areas, which was distributed across the country in the early 1950s. See "Jieshao 'nongmin shizi jiaoyu de zuzhi xingshi he jiaoxue fanqfa'" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 2 5 (March 1951): 62.

40 Madsen, Morality and Power in a Chinese Village. On the important question of the influence of popular culture on communist policies, see also the work (much criticized, however) of Ralph Thaxton, China Turned Rightside Up: Revolutionary Legitimacy in the Peasant World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

41 Siu, pp.108-110.

42 Siu, p. 122.

43 On the purge of Cantonese cadres during land reform, see Vogel, Canton Under Communism, pp. 101-124.

44 Guanyu guangdong sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo guanmian quihua de baogao (jimi wenjian) (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiaoyu ting, 1956), p. 3. See also Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 23.

45 "Jiaoyubu guanyu kaizhan yijiu sijiu nian dongxue gongzuo de zhishi" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 1-3.

46 The comments are from Mao's 1927 Report on the Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan, as cited in "Xuexi he guanche Mao zhuxi de jiaoyu sixiang: wei jinian


48 "Jiaoyubu guanyu kaizhan nongmin yeyu jiaoyu."

49 On the land reform in Guangdong, see Vogel, Canton Under Communism, pp. 91-124.

50 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 102.

51 Cai Fei, "Shehui jiaoyu de fangxiang" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 1 (May 1950): 37-38.

52 "Fengshun xian wenhua guan gongzuo bao" in Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua (Mar. 1952): 10-11.

53 Selden, The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China, p. 145.


55 "Jiaoyubu guanyu kaizhan nongmin yeyu jiaoyu de zhishi."

56 "Jiaoyubu guanyu jiaqiang jinnian dongxue zhengzhi shishi jiaoyu de zhishi" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 23-24; "Jiaoyubu guanyu jiaqiang nongmin yeyu jiaoyu zhong kangan yuanchao shishi jiaoyu de zhishi" in the same source, pp. 19-20. At least some peasants appear to have welcomed the change. A group of Fujian villagers, for instance, was recorded as heralding the emphasis upon political and current affairs education as a welcome relief from the drudgery of learning characters. Indeed, such education may easily have been more immediately useful for getting by or getting ahead in the politically charged atmosphere of early 1950s Chinese villages. "Chuantou nongmin xiaozhang Yu Hongduan bu lianxi qunjiao, minxiao wei banhao" Fujian ribao 23 Jan. 1953 in Union Research Institute L0136 4222 3237.

57 "Jiji tigao dongxue jiaoshi de zhengzhi he wenhua shuiping" Changjiang ribao 30 Dec. 1951 in Union Research Institute L0135 4222 3135.


59 See the following directives: "Guanyu yijiu wuer nian dongxue yundong de tongzhixi" (from the Ministry of Education); "Jiaoyubu, saochu wenmang gongzuo weiyuanwei
guanyu yijiu wusan nian dongxue gongzuo de zhishi;
"Jiaoyubu, qingniantuan zhongyang guanyu yijiu wusi nian
dongxue gongzuo de zhishi," in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 27-29, 35-38, 42-45. See also "Meixian saomang gongzuo" Lian jiada xinbao 29 Jan. 1954 in Union Research Institute L0136 4222 3235, which describes mass education in one rural locality in 1954.


64 Yang Guang, Sucheng shizi de qushi (Guangzhou: Nanfang tongsu duben lianhe chubanshe, 1952); Dai Jishan, Sanyuanli nonqmin xue wenhua (Huanan renmin chubanshe, 1953); Hong Kong Wenhuibao 27 Mar. 1953 in Union Research Institute L0136 4222 3235. The latter is a letter from a newly literate peasant to the mayor of Guangzhou praising the accelerated literacy method, expressing gratitude to Mao, and promising to repay the Chairman with concrete deeds.


66 "Zhenge cun minxiaoh xiaozhang ying dong xueyuan shang minxiao, buyao dengdai jin sucheng shizi ban" Fujian ribao 2 Mar. 1953 in Union Research Institute L0136, 4222 3237.

67 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 102.

68 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 577.

69 Qu Naisheng, "Fuwu shengchang, yikao qunzhong."
70 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 103.

71 "Jiaoyubu guanyu shengdun gongnong yeyu xuexiao gaoji ban yu zhongxue wenti de tongzhi" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 30-32.


73 On the collapse of the literacy movement after 1953, see the following. "Zhonggong zhongyang dui jiaoyubu dangzu guanyu diyici quanguo nongmin yeyu wenhua jiaoyu huiyi de baogao" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 46-47; "Jiaoyubu yeyu wenhua jiaoyu huiyi de baogao" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 48-49, 52, 54; "Jiaoyubu guanyu yijiu wuwu nian dong dao yijiu wuliu nian chun zuzhi nongmin canjia xuexi de tongzhi" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), p. 60; "Geji jiaoyu bumen bixu jiaqiang gongnong jiaoyu de lingdao" Renmin jiaoyu 12 (1955): 4-5.


75 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p.103.

76 Guangdong jiaoyu ting, Guanyu quanguo sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo quannian quihua de baogao (jimi wenjian), 1956. See also "Dali kaizhan nongcun saochu wenmang yundong," in Dali kaizhan saochu wenmang yundong, ed. Guangdong jiaoyu ting (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1956), p. 48. This article was originally published as an editorial in Nanfang ribao Jan. 5, 1956. On the national illiteracy rate, see "Geji jiaoyu bumen bixu jiaqiang gongnong jiaoyu de lingdao."
Chapter 2

MINBAN SCHOOLS AND THE REAFFIRMATION OF VOLUNTARISM IN VILLAGE EDUCATION: THE GUANGDONG EXPERIENCE

One of the most important features of the Chinese educational system since 1949 has been the emergence of a double track system consisting of state-run schools, on the one hand, and locally sponsored 'people-managed' or minban schools, on the other. This chapter is concerned with the causes, processes, and the long term implications of the emergence of minban schools. First I examine the state's attempt to takeover village education in Guangdong in order to show how minban schools represented an attempt to build upon the traditional institutions of village education, especially the village sishu. After discussing problems encountered by minban schools, I show that minban schooling was necessitated not only by belief in the inherent virtues of educational decentralization, but by the fiscal and organizational inability of the Chinese state to impose a single nationwide public school system. Finally, I attempt to demonstrate some of the long term implications of the 1950s reaffirmation of voluntarism in village education.
The School Crisis of the Early 1950s and the Resurgence of the Sishu

More than any other event of the early nineteen fifties, land reform signified the intrusive power of the new state and its social engineering capacity. In terms of its effects on village education, however, land reform resulted in an unforeseen political and economic crisis. Land reform destroyed, without replacing, the institutional foundations that had provided the main fiscal and social support of modern primary and middle school education in the countryside since the early part of the century. Mass exodus of students from these schools after 1949 simultaneously prompted an explosion in the popularity of the traditional village sishu. The ensuing crisis in rural school education exposed the glaring fiscal weakness of the new state, and stimulated an intense search for new institutional forms and sources of financial support to replace those destroyed by the Revolution. The effort was not fully resolved until 1956, however, when collectivization finally created a new corporate structure within which villages became responsible, as they had been traditionally, for organizing and funding the basic education of their members.

Since the earliest modern schools were established at the turn of the century, modern primary and middle school
education in rural Guangdong had rested upon a tripartite foundation of lineage endowments, commercial capital and overseas remittances. The latter two forms were often channelled through lineage-based organizations. In 1949 the province's 1.59 million primary school students were distributed throughout some 28,200 schools, nearly all of which were privately owned. Before land reform, more than ninety percent of the nearly 30,000 primary schools in Guangdong were dependent upon lineage contributions, mostly in the form of land endowments. Only six percent of primary schools were publicly financed and these were confined mainly to cities and towns.

More than half of the 670 middle schools in the province were also privately run. Middle school enrollment was 137,000. In 1951 Shen Hengsong, a Guangdong educational official, said these private middle schools could be divided into five types. There were the half dozen or so "politically progressive" middle schools which had ties to the CCP and a similar number with direct ties to the Guomindang. There were thirty six foreign missionary schools some of which had a long history, like the Huaide girls' school in Chaoan, established in 1896. The fourth type of private middle school mentioned by Shen Hengsong were profit-oriented schools established by overseas Chinese. Concentrated mainly in the cities, these schools were of poor quality and had low standards; their principals devoted all their energies to recruiting students. Finally,
there were the local gentry-run private middle schools which were an important part of the rural political networks, attached to competing gentry factions.  

Rural primary and middle school education in Guangdong was thus overwhelmingly a private, usually lineage-based activity. In the early years after 1949, this foundation was fatally undermined by the actions of the new government. One of these was to outlaw the taxation powers of local elites, which were often used to subsidize lineage schools. In addition, the sharp decline in overseas remittances after 1949, along with the flight of commercial capital and the implementation of land reform, resulted in a sharp contraction in the number of both schools and students. Land reform further undermined the solvency of lineage schools, first by the enforcement of rent reductions, which curtailed the main source of income for private schools, and later by the expropriation of corporate property, which made it virtually impossible for lineage schools to continue.

By September 1950 the number of primary and middle school students, teachers and schools was falling rapidly in all parts of the Pearl River delta, except Baoan and Huanxian. In the southern part of the province a 40-50% drop in middle school enrollment was recorded in most counties in 1950.3 Across the province, the number of middle schools fell from 670 in 1949 to 569 by the first half of 1950. Most of the middle schools that closed during this period were private, established by overseas Chinese or
with their support. Thus the total number of private middle schools in Guangdong declined from 360 to 260 during the first half of 1950.4

In Taishan county, where the development of local education had historically been closely tied to overseas investments and donations, according to the official internally circulated Taishan county educational history (Taishan xian jiaoyu zhi), primary and middle school enrollments plummeted by 12% and 49%, respectively, within a single school term. From 1949-53 the total number of primary schools in Taishan was reduced by more than 50%, from 900 to 370. These figures also reflected the amalgamation of numerous schools, since inter- and intra-lineage competition over the years fostered a profusion of unusually small schools.5

One contemporary estimate put the number of primary and middle school students who had ceased to attend school in Guangdong by late 1950 at approximately 80,000. It was estimated that perhaps as many as "several tens of thousands" of these had dropped out in order to "join the revolution" as land reform cadres and village militia members.6

In October 1949 a special expropriation (jiequan) committee was set up in the province to supervise the takeover of private and publicly run schools. Shortly afterward similar committees were set up in cities and counties across the province.7 These committees, whose work
was not fully completed until 1953, took control of the sixty six mission-run primary and middle schools in Guangdong (with total enrollments approaching 6000 students) during 1951-52. The remaining three hundred private middle schools were not taken over until the winter of 1953.8 According to the Guangdong educational yearbook, the new government's takeover of rural primary school education was not complete until 1952.9

The mass exodus from primary and middle schools was motivated by fear of the alleged fate that befell students who remained in schools after they were taken over by the communists. For instance, village reports from this period refer to the popular belief that children who studied in communist schools disclaimed their filial obligations.

Another popular belief was that those who studied in communist schools would be summarily beheaded by Nationalist forces when they returned.10 In Guangzhou, workers believed that if they signed up for evening literacy classes they would be press-ganged to liberate Taiwan, or else sent off to Hainan island (a form of internal exile; the southern version of Qinghai).11 Even in Haifeng, where Peng Pai pioneered literacy work in the 1920s, rumours abounded that in communist evening schools for women the teachers turned the lights out and fondled the women.12

Examples of such popular mistrust abound. When a group of Han literacy evangelists arrived in Yao villages on Hainan island to set up literacy schools in 1950, they found
that Yao villagers regarded the enterprise as a trick
designed to entice their children into becoming PLA
soldiers. They regarded the literacy classes as an
illegitimate attempt to enlarge the state sphere in Yao
society.13

In early 1950 Guangdong educational authorities began a
program of subsidies to "politically progressive" private
middle schools, including Longtian and Hepo middle schools
in Xinning, Dongshan middle school in Meixian, Huaqiao
middle school in Shantou, as well as to the pro-CCP Jieyang
county-run middle school. In later years the graduates of
these middle schools played a key role in shaping rural
education policy in Guangdong.14

In 1949 Guangdong had one of the highest levels of
primary school enrollment in the country, exceeded only by
Hebei and Shandong.15 Still the 1.59 million children
attending modern primary schools in Guangdong represented
less than thirty percent of the school age population. This
represented slightly more than the twenty five percent of
school age children attending primary school nationwide in
1949.16 An equal or greater number of Guangdong children
may have attended traditional village sishu in 1949.

Gauging the exact number of sishu in Guangdong is
difficult. Their extinction had been the goal of zealous
school modernizers since the turn of the century.17 For
much of the twentieth century, therefore, the easily
camouflaged sishu were often driven underground, beyond the
gaze of county magistrates and educational inspectors. Classes were usually held privately, in the homes of teachers or parents, or else in the easily convertible premises of village temples and ancestral halls.

As a draft educational history for Panyu county which I examined in Panyu in the late 1980s shows, there were 6,500 students studying in sishu in 1942. This represented only about a third less than the total number enrolled in modern primary schools in the county. The proportion was undoubtedly much higher in outlying areas, where the demand for and inroads of modern education were much less.

We would do well, then, to examine briefly the chief reasons for the continued popularity of sishu in the twentieth century in the face of constant elite efforts to suppress them. The reasons for the persistence of this indigenous village educational institution well into the twentieth century also bear upon the communists' efforts to obliterate the sishu as well.

The sishu persisted into the twentieth century because it continued to serve the educational needs of villagers in ways that the modern schools, with their rigid schedules, high fees, and "foreign" curriculum, were unable to manage. The early communist organizer, Peng Pai, had recognized these reasons and became one of the first to comment on the popularity of sishu in Guangdong in the 1920s, noting that villagers would invite a sixty or seventy year old "Eight
Legs Teacher " (baqu xiansheng) to instruct their children rather than send them to a modern primary school.19

Mao Zedong also felt compelled to address the question of the stubborn popularity of the sishu in Guangdong in the 1920s. Evidence shows that Mao dwelt at length on the disjunction between the educational needs of peasants and the curriculum of the modern schools in his lectures to future peasant leaders while Mao was director of the famous Peasant Movement Training Institute in Guangdong in the mid-1920s. According to the class notes of one of his students, Mao lectured that "the peasants detest the new learning (xinxue)...The contents of this kind of learning are regarded by the capitalists as a new kind of talismanic wonder, but it has absolutely nothing to do with peasants, (this business of learning stories) like 'a horse has four feet,' 'the tortoise and the hare' and 'younger brother, come quickly we're going to sing a song'. And he went on, "The sishu teachers can solve many of the peasants' problems the teachers in the new schools often cannot even answer...The education a peasant wants is for economic needs-- economic liberation. The textbooks are full of geography, history and other knowledge written by teachers living in the foreign concession in Shanghai; they conform to the needs of the capitalists but they contain absolutely no benefit for the ordinary peasant... with respect to writing such things as lists, law suits, field contracts and tenancy agreements."20
A few years later Mao revealed how in his youth as a student in a modern middle school in Changsha he had detested the "ignorance" of peasants who protested against modern schools (often by burning them and killing the schoolmasters), but that after living for half a year in villages "I realized that I was wrong and the peasants were right." Peasants rejected the "foreign learning" (yangxue) because it taught only "city things" which had nothing to do with the needs of the village, and preferred instead the "han learning" (hanxue) of the sishu.21

The way in which peasants regarded the modern schools as "foreign" (yang) and the sishu as indigenously Chinese (han) was symbolic of another reason for the continuous and even heightened popularity of the sishu in certain periods of the twentieth century. This reason is perhaps even more significant than the inability of the modern schools to satisfy local economic needs.22

Taken for granted by peasants and ignored by governments for centuries, the village sishu emerged in the twentieth century to become one of the supreme rallying symbols of village cultural preservation against the alien forced incursions of foreign imperialists and modernizing governments alike.

This happened on at least three occasions in the twentieth century. The first time was at the turn of the century, with the rise of the first attempts to suppress the sishu and replace them with a national system of modern
primary schools. Often such efforts were part of modernizing drives spearheaded by zealous county magistrates. Thus when You Kezhen, an energetic native of Haifeng— the same Haifeng which was shortly to produce Peng Pai— was named magistrate of Zijin county in 1912, one of his first acts was to declare his intention immediately to replace all sishu with modern primary schools.23

When Liao Hanzhao was appointed magistrate of Xinxing county in Guangdong in 1931 he proclaimed his determination to rid the county of all sishu, on the grounds that their classical curriculum was "abstruse" and "harmful" to students' minds, and hopelessly opposed to modernization.24 This effort, like You Kezhen's in Zijin, largely failed to extinguish the sishu (there were still one hundred seventy known sishu in Xinxing in 1938). Some counties adopted a more compromising attitude, like the authorities of Huazhou county in Guangdong who in 1934 administered a county-wide examination to all sishu teachers. Those who passed were given primary school teaching certificates.25

Others adopted a policy of accommodation, licensing sishu and encouraging them to incorporate modern primary school subjects into their curriculum. As a rule, however, government regulations and exhortations were less effective in reforming sishu than changes in local economies. In areas where foreign trade was important, like the Pearl River delta region, or where commercialized agriculture
demanded accounting and management skills, the readily adaptable sishu changed with the times.

The second occasion when the sishu became a rallying symbol for village cultural preservation was during the Japanese occupation between 1937-45. At that time the curtailment of overseas remittances and the withdrawal of other sources of private funding, as well as the flight of many teachers and students, forced the closure of many primary and middle schools in Guangdong. In Taishan county, for example, which was occupied five times between 1937-45, around 20,000 primary school students were displaced in this way.26

Large numbers of such teachers and their students turned to rural sishu. They were less detectable, and, for those fleeing the cities, offered sanctuary from Japanese warplanes. The sishu rapidly became rallying centres and symbols of patriotic resistance and cultural preservation against a threatening alien invasion. In Zijin county a new kind of sishu appeared during the war, known as "specialized national culture halls" (guowen zhuanxiu quan) which were dedicated to the study of traditional written culture.27 In Panyu, the Strive for Wisdom sishu (qiuzhi xueshu) became renowned for its patriotic resistance to the Japanese. One of ten new sishu that appeared in Shiqiao district of Panyu between 1940-45, the qiuzhi xueshu was operated by a husband and wife who taught students classical literature and history, written calculation and use of the abacus. During
festival days, the sishu organized student theatrical troupes to travel to neighbouring villages where they performed plays with themes like national courage and the importance of resisting the Japanese.28

For their part, the Japanese attempted to manipulate the sishu for their own purposes. In 1942 the Japanese-sponsored puppet government of Guangdong sponsored the establishment of fifteen sishu in southern Panyu. The schools were funded by a loan from the People's Food Regulation Association (minshi shitiao hui), an association set up under the department of agriculture and forestry to look after forced rice requisitions for Japanese troops. The schools aimed to counteract the propaganda of groups like the Strive for Wisdom school and the Association of Young Comrades Resisting Japan (qincinian kanciri tongzhi hui) which also set up its own school.29

During the war Mao himself had also urged the party to "make use of and transform" the sishu into a weapon against the Japanese.30 What Mao may not have realized was the extent to which the village sishu would soon become a rallying symbol against the communists themselves, as the latest alien invaders to arrive at the village gate.

The third occasion when the sishu became a rallying symbol as defender and preserver of threatened values was in the early 1950s. The invasion of the village by the communist state drove villagers once again in droves to seek what they perceived as the cultural sanctuary of the
traditional village sishu. As enrollments in rural primary and middle schools in Guangdong plummeted and many schools collapsed in the early nineteen fifties, village children, often following their teachers, flocked by the thousands into village sishu.

In Nanhai county, for instance—which ironically was the ancestral home of Kang Youwei, China's famous early modernizer who was among the first proponents of a nationwide school system to extirpate the "backward" cultures of peasant China—a hundred new sishu appeared in 1950 alone, including three in Nanshan township where previously only a modern primary school had existed. By late 1950 sishu enrollment actually surpassed that of regular schools in some parts of south-central Guangdong. Although precise figures for the number of students attending sishu in the early 1950s are impossible, contemporary sources estimated that the total number of sishu in the province "multiplied" to 6000, and perhaps as many as 10,000, during 1950-51.

The surging popularity of the village sishu was as alarming to the new government as the declining enrollments and collapse of many modern schools. In mid-1950 Shen Hengsong, a leading educational official in the Pearl River delta region, described what he called "old" as well as "new" reasons for the persistent and suddenly enhanced popularity of the sishu. As 'old' reasons, Shen cited the renowned flexibility of the sishu, especially its capacity
to adapt to the changing labor requirements of the agricultural cycle. He also emphasized the sishu's function in imparting basic literate skills such as letter writing, accounting, and use of the abacus, whereas modern schools taught only academic subjects and physical education, which peasants considered useless. Finally, Shen cited the sishu's traditional role as a source of minimal livelihood for the educated unemployed.

The "new" reasons Shen offered for the suddenly expanded popularity of the sishu included the collapse of so many regular schools since 1949, which created an opportunity for sishu to expand as the only available alternative. Perhaps more important was what Shen described as a misapplication of the central government's policy towards intellectuals from the old society. Widespread indiscriminate firing of schoolteachers, said Shen, was causing many of teachers to open their own sishu, and to take their personally loyal students with them.32

The new socialist government, like every previous twentieth century modernizing government in China, regarded the sishu as another 'feudal' obstacle to progressive change and modernization of the countryside. Authorities in Guangzhou announced their intention to halt the growth of new sishu, and to suppress or "reform" (gaibian) existing ones. But as Shen Hengsong pointed out in 1950, any plan to eradicate the sishu would have to first take into account that they currently performed a valuable positive function
for the state, by supplying basic literacy education to dropouts from the regular schools, and by providing work for unemployed intellectuals who would otherwise form a burden on the new state.33

As was the case under successive republican regimes, opinions over how to handle the sishu were split in the early 1950s. Some favoured a policy of outright suppression, while others advocated grudging tolerance, coupled with gradual efforts to "reform" the sishu through the assertion of greater control over teachers and curricula.

In actual practice, the manner in which sishu were dealt with in Guangdong varied greatly from place to place, depending on the attitudes of local officials. Thus, for instance, some localities attempted to ban sishu within a radius of 2 li of regular primary schools, presumably to prevent students from deserting the primary schools; while others simply decreed that existing sishu had to begin using modern textbooks and add political education to their curricula.

In other instances, sishu were to begin teaching Mandarin as a means of breaking down what was regarded as their excessively parochial outlook. Still others required that regular schoolteachers made regular visits to sishu, in order to provide instruction in modern subjects like physical education, fine arts and singing, and to instruct students in proper classroom behaviour and discipline, while
sishu teachers in return made frequent visits to regular schools to instruct students in the use of the abacus. Finally, in some cases sishu were simply converted or amalgamated with regular primary schools. 34

However limited the success which greeted efforts to bring these two education worlds closer together, it soon became evident that the policy of outright suppression of sishu was the least successful. At best, suppression merely drove the sishu underground, forcing them to operate on a clandestine basis, within people's homes. At worst, however, forceful suppression of the sishu had the dreaded effect of provoking greater popular dissatisfaction and mistrust of the new government. As Shen Hengsong put it in mid-1950, the "feudal" nature of the sishu was rapidly becoming a less important problem than the rising crescendo of popular opposition towards the new government over its handling of the sishu affair. 35

Rise of the Minban Schools

Thus the popular realities of the village educational world, which were historically shaped by the changing conditions of rural economic and social life and by the set of cultural and political institutions that evolved from those conditions, defied the overweening ambitions of state planners to impose their artificial vision of reality upon
Chinese villagers. The eventual way out of this conundrum of deserted and collapsing modern schools and surging popularity of what was officially a "feudal" institution was through compromise; through what sociologists and others prefer to describe as a form of "negotiation" between state and village.

The negotiation involved combining the principles of the sishu with those of the village-run (minban) schools developed by the communists in the wartime base areas to form a separate system or "track" of village education apart from the regular state-run school system.

At the time this negotiated compromise with the village sishu was celebrated and treated as one of the creative innovations of the CCP's revolution in village education. In reality it proved to be arguably the single most ominous "compromise" in the educational history of the PRC. This negotiated compromise was laden with latent implications which finally came to the surface, causing unparalleled furor, during the educational debates of the Cultural Revolution. It began, inauspiciously, with the issuing of government regulations for addressing the funding crisis in rural primary education.

Initial regulations issued in 1950 with respect to the problem of financing village primary schools stipulated that county governments should take over former funding sources such as market rents and miscellaneous local taxes, as well as the income generated by lineage endowments. At least 80%
of the latter was to be used to finance village education. County government control of village primary schools in this way was intended to be a temporary measure, until new structures of political authority were established in the villages themselves. After land reform eliminated the means of financial nourishment for lineage and most other privately run schools such schools, along with newly established ones and various kinds of adult literacy classes, became officially known as minban (people-managed) schools. Minban meant that such schools were organized, financed and operated by villagers themselves.

Management of the minban schools was entrusted to associations of local villagers, known variously as xiaodonghui, xuexiao jijin baoquanhui, and, later, most commonly as xiaowuweiyuanhui. The associations were a longstanding institution, formerly under the control of the old village elites. As mentioned earlier, after 1949 membership in the associations was composed of representatives from the newly established peasant associations, village militia, and branches of the Women's Federation and Youth League.

Since these representatives frequently lacked the administrative skills-- and even the literate skills-- to run the schools, however, the state conceded that villages would need to rely upon the "advice" and "assistance" from sympathetic village elders and "enlightened personages" (kaiming rensi) -- another concession from the past forced
by the state's ambitions in the villages outstripping its capacity to effectively determine village educational structures.

Village schools in the early 1950s were financed from a variety of sources. These included such things as user fees for public toilets and local market and temple fair taxes (also commonly used for this purpose during the republican era as well); allocation by the village peasant associations of the "fruits of victorious struggle," (which referred to wealth and property confiscated during land reform); as well as "donations" from local merchants, rich peasants and overseas Chinese; and tuition fees.

Tuition fees were generally higher than they were before 1949, and were normally paid in kind in the early 1950s. Figures from mid-1951 show that tuition in rural lower primary schools in Guangdong averaged 10 catties of rice per school term (with a range of 4-50 catties) and 15-20 catties per term (with a range of 5-70 catties) in rural senior primary schools. Even with increased tuition levels, however, minban schools were still often incapable of providing for the basic subsistence needs of their teachers.37

In addition to former lineage and other privately run village primary schools which operated on a full time basis, the minban category of schools also embraced the full range of sparetime popular educational activities for adults. Most of these were tried originally in the former base
areas. After 1949 it became deliberate state policy to encourage a diverse range of village-supported adult educational activities, and to ensure that these activities conformed, as the sishu did, to the natural rhythms of village life. This was in contrast with the regular school system, which aimed for nationwide standardization. The difference was politically sensitive, as discussed below.

Such popular educational activities included winter schools (dongxue) and evening schools (yexiao), the two most common forms (winter schools in the north, where the short growing season limited the amount of study time to winter months; evening schools in the south, where the nearly year-round growing season dictated a different study pattern). They also included so-called open-air schools (lutian xueiao), rainy day schools (yutian xueiao), half-day schools (banri xueiao), mobile schools (liudong xueiao), fieldside study groups (ditou xiaozu), bed side study groups (kangtou xiaozu) (the latter in North China), and others.

Sparetime schools included basic literacy classes and, from 1953, primary and middle school curriculums as well.38 In 1951 the central government launched a campaign to eliminate seasonally based classes and place all forms of sparetime education on a permanent, year round basis.

Guangdong authorities found it easy to agree with this change in principle, because seasonal winter schools were found mainly in the north. The difficulty in Guangdong usually lay rather in meeting the national requirement of
nearly three hundred hours of study per year, since farming was also a year round activity or nearly so in Guangdong.39

As for curriculum, in 1953 the Guangdong education bureau stipulated that sparetime primary school education for peasants should be spread over a five year period and include two hundred eighty hours of instruction in the following subjects: language and literature, arithmetic, politics, history, geography and natural science.40 Provinces published their own primary textbooks and literacy primers in the early 1950s, but these generally conformed closely to the pattern of model texts prepared by the Ministry of Education.41

In practice villages often enjoyed considerable flexibility to determine their own curricula. The following table shows the 1953 teaching plan of Yellow Bamboo village sparetime primary school in Huiyang county, Guangdong.
In the case of adult literacy education, after 1955 curriculum was based upon the principle of a three-tiered set of literacy primers, prepared by local (township and county), provincial, and central authorities. This system, which remains in use to this day, is discussed in the following chapter under the content of literacy education.

Suzanne Pepper has written that "the minban schools, financially supported and managed by the villages themselves, were not so much an innovation as a adaptation of a continuing tradition, the old-style privately run village school," or sishu.42 The minban school indeed represented a conscious effort to copy the old style sishu's reliance upon local sources of funding and initiative, as well as its flexible curricula adjusted to suit local economic needs rather than the academic prerequisites of higher education. In fact, Mao had himself pointed this out as early as 1927, when he compared the CCP's evening classes to the village sishu upon which they were modelled, and contrasted these two forms of "Han schools" (hanxue) favourably against the "foreign schools" (yangxue) with their rigid schedules and taught modern subjects which were irrelevant to local economic needs.43

The minban school, however, was rather more than simply a reincarnated version of the village sishu. It is important to realize, for instance, that in other ways communist leaders regarded the minban school as an important weapon for crushing old solidarities and forging a break
with the social past. That is to say, in theory, the very act of the collective establishment of a people-run school by the village poor was supposed to aid the process of creating a new, class-based solidarity in the villages, which would overcome the old lineage-based solidarities that formerly underpinned Guangdong village schools. Thus as one writer put it in 1951, the establishment of a minban village school, under the control and direction of the village poor, was properly understood as representing an affirmation of "class fraternity" (jieji youai).44

Similarly, the widespread practice of amalgamating undersized lineage schools into larger minban schools was also intended to erode lineage solidarity as well as to improve efficiency. Lineage competition, fed by overseas remittances, led to the proliferation in the twentieth century of large numbers of relatively small schools in parts of rural Guangdong. This was especially true in the overseas Chinese home areas. Thus, for example, in the 1930s Taishan, Nanhai and Zhongshan counties each had primary school populations of between 65,000-70,000. But in Zhongshan there were only 450 primary schools, while in Nanhai there were more than 700 schools and in Taishan there were 1300 schools, each serving the same school population size. After 1949 the number of primary schools in Taishan was halved, from 900 in 1949 to 450 in 1986.45

The policy of self-reliance in local education also produced some of the earliest efforts in collectivism in
Guangdong villages after 1949, well before the formation of mutual aid teams and forms of cooperation. As early as 1951, for example, the poor peasants of Buxin village in Huiyang county mobilized a team of one hundred villagers to clear a section of wasteland in order to establish a farm to support the village minban school. In another district, students from two primary schools organized themselves into work teams in order to collect firewood which was sold to finance the village school. Similar examples were widespread in Guangdong villages in the early 1950s.

Still, the potential solidarity-making effects of minban schools often eluded the architects of the new education. The weakness of the state was evident from numerous aspects of the history of the actual operation of the minban schools. For one thing, minban schools were generally short-lived. In the Chaoshan region of northeastern Guangdong, for instance, 30-40% of the minban schools established in 1950 collapsed before the end of the year. In Xinjing county, Guangdong, there were 261 evening schools for 14,000 peasants operating in November 1952, but the following month they all folded when the county began land reform.

Conditions in the newly established minban schools were severely lacking: most were housed in former ancestral halls and temples, often without desks or chairs, which students were required to bring. There was a shortage of teachers and funds; and a high rate of absenteeism among students and
teachers alike. The minban schools faced cultural obstacles as well. Villagers considered it an impropriety and loss of face for illiterate elders to be taught in the same class alongside young children, and to be taught by teachers who were themselves only primary and middle school students, recruited to teach in minban school during their sparetime.49

In fact, in villages where educational poverty ran deep, it was often difficult to find anyone capable of teaching at all. There were, of course, well publicized examples of literacy evangelists like the former primary school principal who, against the wishes of his family who wanted him to remain at home, felt a patriotic calling to bring (Han) literacy to illiterate Miao villagers on Hainan island. But such examples were necessarily relatively rare in the 1950s.50

When the villagers of Longlou, on coastal Hainan, decided to establish a village school in 1950 only five of the seventy nine villagers had any previous education, and they were all from landlord and rich peasant families. The single surname village eventually elected Wang Nengchen, a village landlord, to assume the title of teacher. But Wang was later accused of using his status as village teacher in order to disguise the exploitive nature of his class background and to ingratiate himself with the villagers. After he was arrested the villagers invited several barely literate activists from nearby to serve as teachers in
Longlou. These "hundred character teachers" (bāizi xiansheng), as they became known, made the "crimes" of Wang Nengchen the main curriculum of the school.51

Problems such as this made the time-consuming and, for a state with severely limited fiscal powers, extremely costly task of training of large numbers of politically reliable literacy teachers seem all the more urgent. For until it was overcome, infiltration of village schools would remain a major threat to the state. It was one of the few available means by which former village elites attempted to re-establish their power and prestige.

Although officially excluded from serving on school management committees, members of the old literate elite were often the only ones in a village with the literacy and managerial skills needed to teach and administer the minban schools. This period of PRC history abounds with reported instances of old elites attempting to use their control over village schools in order to frustrate the new government's ambitions, including such means as using the ancient "feudal" thousand character and trimetrical classics (the qianziwen and sanzijing, respectively) as literacy primers, thus diverting the minban schools from their intended purpose of popularizing correct political attitudes and current state policies.

In other instances old elites, once they had captured control of village schools, deliberately distorted the communication of those policies in order to shield their
property and protect their status in the village. Reports such as these of minban schools serving as the "hideouts for evildoers" were especially frequent during the Korean War, when the fear of internal subversion reached its peak.52

Limits of State Power and the Reaffirmation of Voluntarism in Village Education

At the end of 1952 a brief unsuccessful attempt was made to bring all primary and middle schools in the country under virtually direct state administration--a realization of the most persistent dream of Chinese educational modernizers since the turn of the century.53 Although the effort was never formally enunciated by statute (the initiative was described merely as originating from "leading educational departments" (jiaoyu lingdao bumen), which indicates its limited support), for a brief period in 1952-53 all primary and middle schools in the countryside were designated as gongban (publicly run) schools. Funding for all schools, according to this utopian-minded venture, was henceforth to be obtained from the state budget through a new agricultural surtax and allocated by county governments. Tuition fees were to be turned over to the state treasury. County governments were to assume full responsibility for the recruitment, training and salaries of all teachers; and uniform standards were announced related to curriculum,
school size and equipment, teacher qualifications, and other areas.54

Chinese critics of this failed experiment, writing afterwards, attributed it to a worshipful infatuation with foreign, Soviet models of education, and a corresponding denigration of the party's own wartime educational heritage. Specifically, they claimed that the new Soviet mania for state planning had instilled in some Chinese educational planners a mentality of "attempting to monopolize everything." This left villagers unable to plan for their own educational needs. And it also denigrated the value of the CCP's own wartime heritage of decentralized village schools.55

The failure was also attributable to an assumption that a powerful state could be created, capable of controlling the education of China's five hundred million peasants in historically unprecedented ways. The experiment and the debate which surrounded it were really an early manifestation of a debate that has haunted the PRC ever since 1949. This debate concerned whether to encourage decentralized, locally oriented village minban schools of "many kinds, many forms" (duoyang, duo xingshi), such as the CCP promoted in Yanan in the 1940s; or whether to strive for their "regularization" (zhengqu hua) or incorporation/equivalency with the state system of primary schools. The latter, as noted, were located mainly in cities and towns.
Once the attempt to incorporate all minban schools into the state system was abandoned as hopelessly unrealistic shortly after its inception, China's state leaders reverted to a historic compromise with the past. In late 1953 the State Council reaffirmed the earlier official policy of encouraging villages to organize and run their own schools. In spite of this, however, because popular enthusiasm for minban schools was a good deal less than the enthusiasm of some Chinese leaders, the minban school did not become a significant feature of rural education until the late 1950s, when the "Yanan way" was vigorously resuscitated by Mao and others.

The 1953 decision to rest responsibility for village education in the hands of villagers themselves represented, at one level, a recognition of the value of local initiative against the potentially harmful effects of over-centralization. The threat of overcentralization was not, however, the primary motivating concern behind the 1953 decision. The decision to rest responsibility for village education in local hands was fundamentally a reluctant admission of the fiscal and organizational weakness of the Chinese state to establish a genuine nationwide public school system. Such a system of universal public education had been a consistently sought after goal of Chinese educational reform ever since Zhang Zhidong had outlined plans for the first such system at the turn of the century. Confronted with the same chronic fiscal and bureaucratic
weaknesses, the post-1949 Chinese state was faced with little choice but to reaffirm the historic principle of voluntarism in local educational effort which had guided Chinese rural education for centuries.

The principle of voluntarism in village educational effort had serious historical consequences for the future structure of Chinese education. The state committed itself to a policy of reverting to voluntarism in village education while simultaneously raising the level of funding for a more rapid development and improvement of urban, state-run primary schools. When Zhou Enlai announced this policy in 1953, he justified the decision to concentrate scarce state funds on already superior schools in the cities as being necessary because of the greater educational requirements imposed by industrialization in the cities, and because of the rapid growth of the school age population in China's swiftly industrializing cities. In the countryside, existing state-run schools were strengthened and improved, but after 1953 no further state funds were allocated for the purpose of establishing new state-run primary schools in rural areas.

In 1954 Guangdong authorities announced that there would be no further expansion of state schools in the countryside, except in minority districts and in the former base areas. In the case of the minority districts, this decision reflected the urgency with which Guangdong leaders regarded the need to consolidate state power in the
sensitive non-Han areas of the province; and a belief, with a long history in China, that the extension of Chinese education into such areas was an effective means for achieving this.

In the case of the former base areas, the privileged position these areas enjoyed with respect to state support for literacy education and the expansion of education in general was basically a reward for longstanding political loyalty. It was also an attempt to showcase a continuing revolutionary spirit in these areas, as a model for others to follow. It was important that a poor, former base area in the East River region of Guangdong become a model of educational achievement after 1949, rather than the prosperous delta counties whose big lineages had traditionally given this area a lead in education in the province. In other words, the former base areas had an important legitimizing function for the educational policies of the new state.

After 1953 the state educational system was expanded in cities and towns and certain privileged parts of the countryside. Meanwhile villages were encouraged to establish on their own various forms of "non-standard" primary schooling.

Thus two sorts of divisions began to take shape in the structure of Chinese primary education after 1953. One split was between the superior quality, state-funded schools concentrated in urban areas and inferior quality village-
funded schools in rural areas. Not surprisingly village-sponsored education lagged behind, and urban, state-funded education surged ahead. By 1957 over eighty percent of urban school age children were said to be attending primary school, compared to only fifty percent of rural school age children. Over time an increasingly higher proportion of primary school graduates came from state schools, indicating the much higher drop out rate in village schools.

The second chasm which began to form in Chinese primary education after 1953 divided superior state-funded full time schools in the countryside, located mainly in market towns or townships and county seats, from poorer quality, spare time schools in the villages.

There was an important historical aspect to this chasm. In Guangdong, with its history of powerful lineages competing for imperial examination honours by endowing schools, the best state-run schools in each county usually had long histories. In most cases they were formerly privately sponsored elite schools under the old order, which now catered to the new elite.

The research I have done concerning a number of rural counties in Guangdong shows that the state schools, especially the elite "keypoint" (zhongdian), "central" (zhongxin) and number one (diyi)schools, often had histories which stretched back as far as the mid-Qing, when they originated as private academies (shuyuan) and charitable schools (yixue). These schools then became county and
district schools during the republican era and were finally designated as central, keypoint, or number one schools in the 1950s. In Xinxing county, for instance, fully sixteen of the county's seventeen leading state-run primary schools in the 1950s were established before 1949, including such ones as the Central Primary School in Tiantang town. The Central Primary School was originally established in the 52nd reign year of the Kangxi Emperor (1713) by the local county magistrate. The Xijie Primary School in Chengguan town was originally established as a charitable school during the 6th year of the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (1728); while the Shangsha district Central Primary School originated as an academy in the Daoguang period (1821-50). Examples like these abound in the local educational histories which I have examined.

Exponents of voluntarism in local educational effort attempted to persuade themselves and others that the peasantry's vaunted tradition of voluntarism in education (the sishu, charitable schools and academies) would be a sufficient historical basis upon which to build a modern, self sustained educational system in the countryside, without fiscal support from the state. Statistics on the actual growth of minban schools during the early to mid-1950s belie this sense of optimism. As we have already seen, the minban schools faced enormous problems, not least of which was lack of peasant enthusiasm and support for schools which, in comparison to the venerable and coveted
state schools in the towns, were often described by villagers as being "not like schools at all."

The fact is that China's poverty-stricken villagers probably often lacked the financial resources, the optimism and the interest that state leaders expected and presumed of them. Thus the many hortatory stories that appeared in the popular press during this period which described villagers' heroic efforts to "build schools from nothing," also testified to the exasperating difficulty and probable defeat of many of those efforts. The following example testifies to both the thinness of resources and the limited ambitions of many minban village schools. In 1953 the peasants of Feie village in Heshang county, Guangdong combined their labour, material and funds to build a village school. In addition the school also received a single cash donation from a local returned overseas Chinese. The school recruited fifty to sixty students, a heterogeneous group comprised of all ages. Six of the students were selected to serve as teachers because there were no formally qualified teachers in the village. School expenses were met from the income of a small farm plot worked by the students, and by students selling their urine to a local fertilizer company. The school's stated mission was to impart a basic knowledge of "several hundred characters" to each student.62

In 1952 minban students constituted only 5.5% of primary school enrollment across the country. The figure had risen to 3.8% in 1953; 5% in 1954; 6.7% in 1955; and 6%
in 1957 minban enrollment represented 7.8% of total primary enrollments. Then it jumped sharply the following year to 25.5% with the advent of the Great Leap Forward. In Guangdong, even by 1962, following the contraction of education after the Great Leap Forward, minban schools still accounted for only 22% of all primary students in the province, and 39% of all primary schools.

The policy of voluntarism in village education adopted in the early 1950s thus represented not only a desire to make rural education more responsive to local needs. It also represented the first defeat of the dream of a universal system of state schooling and marked the reality of the fiscal and organizational weaknesses of the socialist state. It also carried with it a heavy long-term price.

In the first place, the slow growth of minban village schools, combined with the official policy of non-expansion of the number of state-run primary schools in the countryside after 1953, meant that, in relative terms, primary school enrollment actually grew only very slowly during the period 1949-57. This is contrary to what has often been claimed on the basis of absolute increases. The real expansion took place in the predominantly urban, state-funded higher educational sector. Using 1952 enrollments as a baseline, an anonymous Soviet writer calculated in 1957 that primary school enrollments grew by an average of only 1.3% annually between 1953-55, compared to an average annual increase of 18.3% in junior middle school enrollments.
between 1953-56 and nearly 32% in senior middle schools. During the period of retrenchment in the early 1950s which followed the failure of the brief attempt by the state to take over all schools, primary enrollment actually fell, from 55 million to 51.2 million between 1952-54. By 1957 more than 40% of primary school age children in China between the ages of 7-12 were receiving no education at all.

In Guangdong, the increase in primary school education before the Great Leap Forward was even smaller-- much smaller-- than the national average. The proportion of primary school age children attending school rose by only 2.7% between 1949-57-- nearly half the national average of 5.2%. Official sources offer no explanation for this trend, but it is possible to speculate on some of the reasons. It may be that Guangdong was attempting to redress the historically dismal level of development of senior middle school education in the province, while simultaneously hoping to "coast" on the relatively high level of development of primary school education inherited from the past. Before 1949, primary school enrollment in Guangdong at approximately 1.59 million was second only to Hebei and Shandong. But there were only 137,000 middle school students in Guangdong in 1949, and nearly all of these were junior middle school graduates. Moreover the pass rate for Guangdong middle school graduates entering universities was only 40% in 1949, well below the 65% rate in Huabei and Huadong.
Whatever the reasons or justification, the results of this imbalance, wherein state funds were concentrated disproportionately on urban, higher education and the regular primary system while villages were left to fend for themselves, provided the makings of an accumulating social and political crisis. Across the country, while the school age population grew by 16.9% between 1951 and 1957, total state expenditures on all levels of education rose by only 7% over the same period. Since very little of this state educational investment was directed towards rural primary education, and since the minban schools' percentage of total enrollment remained at around 5% of the total between 1952-56, it was abundantly clear that the villages of China were worst affected by this retrenchment. As large numbers of school age children continued year after year to fall through the loose net of China's woefully underdeveloped rural school system, the number of adult illiterates continued to pile up, setting the stage for a long term national crisis in basic education.

Later Effects of What Happened in the 1950s

Finally, the policy of voluntarism in village educational effort enshrined in the early 1950s produced a permanent distortion in China's educational investment pyramid that Chinese educational planners have since never
been able to reverse. The structure of educational investment in modern industrial societies resembles a pyramid, with the greatest amount of investment concentrated at the base of the pyramid for universal basic education. In China, this investment pyramid seems turned permanently upside down, with the least proportionate share of state investment directed towards basic primary education for the majority, and a disproportionate share concentrated on higher education for the few.70 Thus, for example, in 1985 the state's per capita spending on peasant sparetime education for adults was unchanged from what it had been more than thirty five years earlier in 1949.

Even more astonishing, however, is that the actual amount was an unbelievably low figure of less than 1 mao (one tenth of one yuan) per person.71 In 1984 the Guangdong Education Bureau advocated that county governments should "generally" devote at least 1% of their educational expenditures to peasant education.72 In 1982 more than 81% (48,250,000) of Guangdong's population were classified as 'farmers'.73

On the other hand, in 1988-89 persons with a university education comprised only .88% of the total population and there were fewer than 2 million university students in the entire country; yet higher education ate up more than 20% of state educational funds.74 According to the World Bank, Chinese universities enjoy perhaps the lowest student-teacher ratio in the world, 3.7: 1 in the one hundred thirty
six universities surveyed by the Bank, compared to a 12:1 average in the East Asia-Pacific region as a whole excluding China; and compared to 25:1 in France and 15:1 in the U.S. 75

In fact, official PRC figures on state educational expenditures rarely separate funding according to educational level. The most complete set of figures was published in an internally circulated World Bank report, which showed that in 1979 the proportion of total state educational expenditures was exactly the same (29.8 billion yuan) at the tertiary level as it was at the primary level. Given the vast difference in the number of students—1.7 million in higher education compared to over 180 million primary school students in 1985—this indicates just how severe the imbalance in state funding for different educational sectors has become in the PRC. The same World Bank report also found that the proportion of state funds spent on primary education had actually even declined from 1977 to 1979. In 1979 China's proportion of total educational spending devoted to primary schooling (thirty four percent) was substantially lower than that of the average of the World Bank's category of "Less Developed Countries," (forty five percent), and lower even than that of the OECD countries (thirty seven percent). 76

Given this extreme situation, it is not difficult to see that China's wobbly upside down educational investment pyramid, perched delicately on a point, is socially and politically unstable as well. Just how potentially
destabilizing became clear recently during a wave of protest by Chinese university students. When Shanghai university students went out on protest for better living and study conditions in the fall of 1986, Shanghai workers reacted angrily, taking over empty university classrooms where they left their own blunt messages of protest written on the blackboard walls. University students, said these workers, had no right to demand more money from the government and the people. They already were the most officially privileged sector of Chinese society; their free education and living allowances was paid for by the toiling masses of workers and peasants, many of whom received little or no education themselves.

Educational imbalances were not only fiscal. Peasant schools and state schools also inculcated different kinds of literacy. The next chapter examines literacy ideologies in the PRC and their role in shaping and reproducing the basic divisions between city and countryside in the PRC.
1 Wu Qingsheng, "Weichi nongcun xiaoxue de daolu" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 3 1 (May 1951); Zhang Mingsheng, "Guangdong chudeng jiaoyu de qingkuang yu wenti" Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 15, 76, 102.


4 Shen Hengsong, "Guangdong sili zhongdeng xuexiao de guoqu he weilai."

5 Taishan xian jiaoyu zhi bianxie zu, ed., Taishan xian jiaoyu zhi (neibu faxing) (n.p.: 1987), p. 18. The sharp decline in remittances resulted partly from the embargo placed upon China during the Korean War. Equally important, however, were the fears of relatives overseas that personal remittances were being appropriated for public purposes, and the intended recipients persecuted. There was widespread evidence of both, in defiance of the central government's official policy. Ironically, one of the most popular uses for which zealous local officials "mobilized" personal remittances, was for the funding of village schools. See Peterson, "Socialist China and the Huaqiao."

6 Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," p. 5; Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 15.


8 On the takeover of mission schools in Guangdong, see Shen Hengsong, "Guangdong sili zhongdeng xuexiao," p. 14. On the takeover of these and other private middle schools in Guangdong, see also Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 51, 76.

9 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 19.

10 Shen Hengsong, "Duiyu jinhou chuli sishu de yijian" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 2 (June 1950): 14; Su Hongtong, "Yue zhongnan lu yiban jiaoyu qingkuang de jieshao" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 5 (Sept. 50): 16-20.

11 Guangzhou jiaoyu ju shejiao ke, "Fazhan zhong de guangzhou gongnong yeyu jiaoyu" 1 2 Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua (June 1950): 50-51.

13 "Qiongyai renmin xuexi wenhua" Renmin ribao 31 Mar. 1950 in Union Research Institute L0139 4242. The Yao in Guangdong numbered around 40,000 in 1949, concentrated in Liannan and nine other counties in the Beijiang special district in northern Guangdong. After 1949 Liannan was named a "keypoint" county for spreading education among the Yao, while over one hundred Han school teachers were dispatched to teach in Yao primary schools in northern Guangdong as well in the early years after 1949. "Yaomin jiaoyu you henda fazhan" Changjiang ribao 3 Dec. 1951 in Union Research Institute L0139 424125; "Wenhua jianxun" Renmin ribao 18 July 1953 in Union Research Institute L0139 424125.

14 Shen Hengsong,"Guangdong sili zhongdeng xuexiao."

15 Qin Mu, "Guangdong jiaoyu wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," p.3.


17 It is interesting to compare Chinese educational reformers' views of the sishu with those of early Russian educational reformers toward the sishu's Russian counterpart, the volnye shkoly (village schools). Volnye shkoly were informal schools established by peasant families, taught by itinerant literates, local priests and retired soldiers, and funded from payments from households or by the community. But whereas Chinese educational modernizers saw the sishu as a symbol of Chinese "backwardness" and tried to expunge it, volnye shkoly lived a furtive and illegal existence until 1882 when early Russian modernizers rescued the volnye shkoly and attempted to harness it to their modern purposes. Much of the expansion of schooling that took place in Russia following the Emancipation of 1867 was in fact the formalization and registration of existing volnye shkoly. Chinese educational revolutionaries turned reluctantly to the same strategy in the early 1950s, after half a century of failed efforts to repress the sishu. Ben Eklof, Russian Literacy Campaigns, 1861-1939" in Arnove and Graff, eds., National Literacy Campaigns, pp. 125-126.

18 Panyu xian renmin zhengfu jiaoyu ke, ed., Panyu xian jiaoyu zhi (chugao) (n.p.: 1988), pp. 4-5. In larger urban
centres, like Guangzhou, where foreign trade and relations with the West stimulated greater demand for the kinds of knowledge and skills imparted by modern schools, and where the enforcement power of local governments was generally greater, modern schools were more successful. Thus, for example, in 1924, according to a survey, there was a roughly equivalent number of students studying in sishu and modern primary schools in Guangzhou, around 30,000 (because of the nature of the sishu, the number of sishu is usually underrepresented in such surveys). By 1944 there were an estimated 3,670 sishu students, compared to more than 47,000 enrolled in modern schools. Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi guangdong sheng guangzhou shi weiyuanhui, wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, ed., Guangzhou jin bainian jiaoyu shiliao (Guangzhou: guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1983), pp. 263-264.


22 It is important not to attempt to explain too much about the social demand for education using the argument that the modern school curriculum was "irrelevant" to village economic needs. While true from the standpoint of the objective needs of "the village," it is nevertheless important to keep in mind the desire for social mobility was also an important "demand factor" for individuals and families, in which case modern education lacks not "relevancy."


26 Taishan xian jiaoyu, p.87.

27 Zijin xian jiaoyu zhi, p.47.

28 Panyu xian jiaoyu zhi, p.6.

29 Panyu xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 11-13.

31 On the increased popularity of sishu in Nanhai county and in the south central part of the province in general, see the following. Nanhai xian wenjiao ke, "Sishu shi de zhuhanbian" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 4 (Aug. 1950): 54-55; Zhong Zhong, "Zhujiang qu yiban jiaoyu qingkuang suxie;" Su Hongtong, "Yue zhongnan lu yiban jiaoyu qingkuang de jieshao," p. 18. For province-wide estimates of the growth of sishu, see Zhang Mingshen, "Guangdong chudeng jiaoyu de qingkuang yu wenti," p. 11 and Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," p. 6.

32 Shen Hengsong, "Duiyu jinhout chuli sishu de yijian."

33 Shen Hengsong, "Duiyu jinhou chuli sishu de yijian." See also Su Hongtong, "Yue zhongnan lu yiban jiaoyu qingkuang de jieshao," p. 18.

34 Nanhai xian wenjiao ke, "Sishu de zhuhanbian;" Su Hongtong, "Yue zhongnan lu yiban jiaoyu qingkuang de jieshao;" Huang Shan, "Guangzhou de sishu shi xuexi dahui" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 6 (Oct. 1950): 36-37.

35 Shen Hengsong, "Duiyu jinhou chuli sishu de yijian."

36 In the mid-1950s the school management committee was relocated at the township (xiang) level, under the township government. Wu Qingsheng, "Wei chi nongcun xiaoxue de daolu." "Raoping xian jianku banxue de jingyan" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 3 2 (June 1951); "Dongjiang qu qunzhong banxue de juti shili" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 3 2 (June 1951); "Shitan zenyang guanche qunzhong banxue de fangzhen" Renmin jiaoyu 6 (1957): 19.

37 In Zijin county until 1952 only one primary and one middle school were state-financed. All others were financed by local authorities using a variety of means, including rice requisitions from landlords and rich peasants, appropriation of the income of temple associations, and tuition. Zijin xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 67. See also the following sources on financing for minban schools during the early 1950s. "Xizang minxiao fadong qunzhong ruxue ji jiejue jingfei yu shi zongjie" in Guangdong sheng divijie gongngong jiaoyu huiyi (yi), pp. 96-97. "Yijiu wu yinian kaizhan gongnong jiaoyu gongzuo chuibu fangan" in the same collection, pp. 5-12. Zhang Mingsheng, "Guangdong chudeng jiaoyu de qingkuang yu wenti," p. 12. "Guanyu kaizhan yiwi yinian dongxue gongzuo de zhishi" Changjiang ribao 18 Nov. 1951 in Union Research Institute L0135 4222 3135.
38 Chen Zhou, "Laoqu nongmin jiaoyu gezhong fangshi de jieshao" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 25 (March 1951): 27-29 describes the various forms of popular education in use in Guangdong villages during the early 1950s. In most cases, these practices were originally popularized in CCP base areas during the war against Japan. See also "Gongnong jiaoyu de gezhong zuzhi xingshi he neirong" in Guangdong sheng divijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailiao (yi).

39 On the policy of year round sparetime study in rural villages, see "Jiaoyubu guanyu dongxue zhuan wei changnian nongmin yeyu xuexiao de zhishi" 28 Feb. 1951 in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 21-22. On the situation in Guangdong, see "Gongnong jiaoyu de gezhong zuzhi xingshi he neirong."

40 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 109.

41 The Ministry of Education circulated lists of primary and middle school texts to the regions, and later the provinces, which then selected from these lists and reported their choices back to the Ministry in Beijing. They could also choose from outside these lists, if they felt that the centrally prepared texts were unsuited to local curricular needs, but in such cases the texts used had to be submitted to the Central Ministry for prior approval. On primary school texts see also Seeberg, pp. 151-192. According to Seeberg, the Ministry of Education compiled five sets of textbooks for primary and middle schools between 1949-79, in 1951, 1958, 1969, 1974, and 1979. Each of these dates coincides with important transitions in the political history of the PRC.


46 Wu Ming, "Huiyang xian gongnong yeyu jiaoyu de qingxing" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 3 3 (July 1951): 22.

47 See "Yiwu wuyi nian kaizhan gongnong jiaoyu gongzuo chubu fangan," p. 6. In Fei county, Shandong in 1955 286 planned minban schools failed to open their doors because of shortages of books, premises, teachers and other causes, removing some 10,000 illiterates from the school rosters for that year. "Strengthen the Concrete Leadership of the Work


49 In many cases, parents could not afford books, or even the lamp oil, that every student was required to bring for evening classes. On the problems faced by minban schools in Guangdong see the following. Zhang Bailin, "Guanyu banli nongmin yeyu jiaoyu de jidian tiyan" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhu 4 1 (Nov. 1951). Zhou Ping, "Guangzhou shi diyici gongnong jiaoyu huiyi zongjie bao" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhu 2 3 (Jan. 1951) 28-32. For case studies, see "Sanshui xian gongnong yeyu jiaoyu de jidian jingyan jiaoxun" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhu 2 5 (March 1951); and "Minban xiaoxue ye neng quanmian yuejin" Guangdong jiaoyu 11,12, (10 June 1960), which describes the Shaoxiang minban primary school for thirty six students which was set up in Dongwan county in 1954. The school was housed, in typical fashion, on the premises of a dilapidated former temple, without doors or windows, while the verandah served as the teacher's living quarters. Fourth year students were said to be unable to write a complete sentence. See also Wang Zhongqing, "Minxiao gongzuo zhong de jige wenti" Renmin jiaoyu 2 1 (1 Nov. 19-50).

50 He Hanmin, "Zai wenhua da geming zhong gongxian chu wo bisheng de liliang" Guangdong jiaoyu 9 (May 1960): 15.

51 "Jianchi lixue shiwu nian de longlou can yexiao" Guangdong jiaoyu 2 (Feb. 1966).


53 The fear that the schools might become platforms for counter-revolutionaries played a part in stimulating this effort at instant realization of the dream of a public school system. In the early 1950s the government was committed to taking over private schools. But there was no way to guarantee that a 'people-funded' minban school was not just a former lineage school under a new name. Many, in fact, were just that.
On efforts to implement this policy in Guangdong, see, for example, Xinfeng xian jiaoyu zhi (Zhaoqing: Xinfeng xian jiaoyu ju, 1978), p. 132; Zijin xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 63-67.

"Shitan zenyang guanche qunzhong banxue de fangzhen; Xin Ming, "Ban xiaoxue de liangtiao luxian."

"Shitan zenyang guanche qunzhong banxue de fangzhen; Xin Ming, "Ban xiaoxue de liangtiao luxian."


"Zhengwuyuan guanyu zhengdun he gaijin xiaoxue jiaoyu de zhishi," pp. 732-733. See also Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 89 which explains the goals of primary education expansion under the first five year plan.

"Zhengwuyuan guanyu zhengdun he gaijin xiaoxue jiaoyu de zhishi," pp. 732-733.


Seeberg, p. 222.

Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 78-86. For other examples of this unbroken continuity in elite rural primary schools, see Zijin xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 20-22 and Taishan xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 127-134.

"Yi suo wanquan you nongmin ziban de xuexiao" Guangming ribao 17 July 1953 in Union Research Institute L0136 4222 3235.


Seeberg, pp. 222, 224.


Su ren, "Zhong, xiaoxue jiaoyu fazhan wenti de wo jian" Renmin jiaoyu 5 (1957). Of course, the different percentages also reflected the much smaller base of middle school students in 1952.
67 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 51-52.

68 Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," pp. 3-4.

69 "Shitan zenyang guanche gunzhong banxue de fangzhen," p. 17.

70 As Seeberg (p. 75) writes, "the proportion of funds expended on primary schooling as part of the total educational expenditures is similar at the national (29.8%) and local levels (which includes both provincial and county funds- ed.) (32.5%). Given the relative size of the three sectors of education, however, this proportionality indicates a rising level of per-student place funding with rising level of education."

71 Tai Xuepin and Shi Dengming, "Ruogan wenti de rensi dui dangqian fazhan nongmin jiaoyu" Henan chengren jiaoyu 1 (1985): 12-14 in Fuyin baokan ziliao series G50 2 (1985): 21-23. The history of educational financing in one rural Guangdong county, Zhaoqing, illustrates this imbalance. In 1954 Zhaoqing allocated over 514,000 yuan on primary and middle school expenditures, compared to only 800 yuan on peasant sparetime education (mostly as subsidies for teacher training and salaries). In 1966 the figures were 922,000 yuan and 5,900 yuan, respectively (at the supposed height of educational egalitarianism in China; these figures question that characterization); while in 1985, under Deng Xiaoping's program to raise the neglected status and living standards of intellectuals, the figures stood at 3,616,000 yuan and 9,600 yuan respectively. Xinfeng xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 182. See also the table on educational expenditures in the appendix of this volume.


73 Wu Yuwen, ed., Guangdong sheng jingji dili, p. 67. This means that 81% of Guangdong people were classified as rural residents according to China's household registration system. Since 1978 a declining number of these people all across the province, but especially in the Pearl River delta region, earn their living directly from agriculture. A growing number live in market towns. With few exceptions most of these persons continue, however, to be classified as rural residents. On the urbanization trend (cheng- zhenhua) of recent years, see Zhu Yuncheng, ed., Zhongguo renkou: Guangdong fence, chapter 8, pp. 208-235.


76 China: Socialist Economic Development Annex G: Education Sector (internal World Bank report No. 3391 CHA, June 1, 1981) cited in Seeberg, p. 76. The figures in this paragraph are from this and other World Bank reports cited by Seeberg on pp. 75-78. See also the Bank's 1985 report, China: Issues and Prospects for Education (Annex 1 to China: Long-Term Development Issues and Options) (Washington: The World Bank, 1985). Edgar Wickberg has pointed out to me that between 1900-1911 the educational system seemed also to spend disproportionately on higher education. The reasons, I think, have to do with the higher value placed on highly trained personnel and, as Wickberg suggests, a decision to invest scarce state funds where the state can most effectively control the results.
Chapter 3

CHANGING LITERACY IDEOLOGIES IN POST-1949 CHINA AND THE CONTINUED REPRODUCTION OF RURAL-URBAN DIFFERENCES

Most studies of literacy's place in the twentieth century have emphasized its role in the modernization process. In much of this work, literacy was understood to be a tool, the possession of which granted the holder access to a range of modern economic, political and cultural opportunities which were otherwise inaccessible. Thus conceived, literacy was seen by many as the essential precondition for successful modernization, the sine qua non of modern industrial society from which all of its characteristic skills, attributes, and even its purported cognitive dimensions (rationality, critical thinking, the capacity to think in abstract terms, and so on) were derived.1 Alexander Woodside has aptly characterized this view as "the new ideological Great Tradition which links per capita income, industrial productivity, overall economic adaptability, and other good things, to literacy."2

Universal literacy's link to modernization thus has become one of the great shibboleths of the twentieth century. It is part of the prevailing orthodoxy of Third World politicians and economic planners; international development agencies, and leaders of Western industrial states alike; the latter of whom worriedly link their own
recently shrinking literacy rates to their nations’ loss of economic competitiveness with states which are perceived to accord literacy a much higher cultural value.

Guangdong educators in the PRC shared the same conception of literacy as a catalyst for modernization. In 1950 Zhou Ping, one of Guangdong’s new educational officials, proclaimed that literacy was linked to a host of modernization-enhancing skills and attitudes, including heightened productivity, problem-solving analytical ability, as well as the more mundane literate skills of accounting and book keeping that were necessary for managing industrial and commercial enterprises. At the first Guangdong provincial conference on worker-peasant education in 1951, delegates claimed that previously uneducated peasants had experienced exponential increases in labour productivity and enhanced creative powers after attending literacy classes.

In recent years the modernization theory view of literacy has come under increasing attack from scholars in a wide variety of disciplines. These critics insist that the “literacy myth,” born of Enlightenment views of the positive effects of education grafted onto twentieth century modernization theory, reifies literacy as a neutral skill or technology of the intellect. The literacy myth ignores the intrinsically normative or ideological nature of literacy definitions and, from that, the role of literacy prescriptions in reproducing the social distribution of knowledge.
In this chapter I caution against conceiving literacy in China as simply the techniques of reading and writing. Instead I use the theoretical tools described above to construct a picture of literacy in Mao's China which emphasizes literacy's place in the political economy. In particular, I will examine how literacy ideologies have operated to reproduce urban-rural differences in China, rather than reduce them as the literacy myth would suggest. The idea that literacy education in the People's Republic might work to perpetuate urban-rural differences instead of eliminating them runs contrary to what both Western scholars and official Chinese sources alike have argued about literacy's social effects.

Officially, the expansion of literacy was part of what the Soviets originally termed the "cultural revolution" which accompanies the political revolution and the economic revolution. The cultural revolution, according to Soviet and Chinese theory, aims at the elimination of the "three great differences" inherited from the former historical epoch: the difference between workers and peasants, between city and countryside, and between mental and manual labour.

Western scholars have argued that the expansion of basic education since 1949 has in fact resulted in a significant narrowing of the urban-rural gulf. As one prominent example of this view, the authors of Gilbert Rozman's study of the modernization of China argue that the near universalization of primary schooling in the PRC has
"sharply narrowed the urban-rural and interprovincial imbalances" that existed before 1949.6

I suggest that Western scholars have for the most part assumed this trend rather than investigated it. My own research on this subject points to a quite different conclusion. In addition to establishing that the expansion of popular literacy after 1949 did not contribute to a narrowing of the urban-rural gap, but in fact had the opposite effect, my research also shows that the solidification of urban-rural differences through education was not accidental. These differences were fully intended by Chinese leaders. They were part of a particular social formation that took shape in China from the mid-1950s, in which education played a crucial role.

The village schools and adult literacy classes for peasants initiated their learners into two vastly different educational worlds. In this "two track educational system" (liangzhong jiaoyu zhidu), which was to come under fierce attack during the Cultural Revolution, the government schools placed students on the bottom rung of an educational ladder whose ultimate objective was unlimited access to the full universe of literate knowledge and culture-- and to the full range of jobs and social prestige which accompanied such access.

On the other hand, the village schools and peasant literacy classes inculcated terminal literacies. Their
economic and social uses stopped, as it were, at the village gate.

The reasons for the restricted forms of literacy offered to villagers were both economic and social. Economically, village literacy education attempted to foster specific and limited forms of economic competence which were applicable within the closed confines of the collective units of production and consumption into which Chinese rural society was divided from the mid-1950s.

Socially, the restricted literacy objectives of village education aimed at preventing education from generating a revolution of rising socio-economic expectations which China's poor agricultural economy was unable to satisfy, and which, if unleashed, might destabilize the kind of social order which Mao and his supporters were endeavouring to create in China in the mid-1950s. The Maoist vision of Chinese rural society was one in which peasants remained in their economically and socially self-sufficient communes as the basis for maintaining social order and for guaranteeing the country's precarious food supply.

Literacy Definitions as Elite Prescriptions of Social Order

Edward Said has said with respect to the methodological importance of formulating points of departure for scholarly inquiry that "there is no such thing as a merely given, or
simply available starting point: beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to enable what follows from them."7 Starting from the premise that literacy is an independent skill enables an inquiry that focusses on appropriate and effective pedagogical techniques (the most efficient means of inculcating the skill), and the multitude of factors which affect the rate and quality of the skill's acquisition (psychological, social, cultural). But it ignores or pushes aside as incidental the question of the social construction of literacy.

Literacy is not a socially and politically neutral technology, simply waiting to be picked up and mastered by all those to whom the technology is made available. Reading and writing are social practices. As Brian Street puts it, what we call "literacy" consists of different kinds of social practices involving reading and writing which are "embedded" in economic, political and cultural systems.

When we view literacy in these terms, the notion of a single, undifferentiated "literacy" yields to the more nuanced concept of different kinds of literacy or "literacies." In Street's words literacies are "socially constructed technologies... used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes."8

Extending this analysis further, we can establish the point that literacy definitions are not objective inferences drawn from empirically calculated minimum skill requirements or "functionality." Literacy definitions are ideological
statements of what kinds and levels of literate practices are deemed or desired as necessary by, or for, different social groups. As Charles Hayford puts it, "any particular concept of literacy is a political and even moral abstraction beyond the reach of empirical data."9

Such abstractions are historically derived. As Harvey Graff explains, "virtually all approaches to literacy follow from...historically-based assumptions: about the nature of social and economic development, of political participation and citizenship, of social order and morality, of personal advancement, and of societal progress."10

In other words then, it may be useful to think of literacy not as a socially autonomous and politically neutral "technology" of the intellect, but in terms of what members of the French Annales school of history might refer to as "mentalités" of literacy: ways of conceiving and representing literacy that are characteristic of a particular social or cultural group, class or epoch. More specifically, since historically the growth of literacy has been conceived and managed by ruling social and political elites, literacy conceptions serve as statements of the economic and political ambitions that rulers hold for those whom they govern. Literacy definitions are elite prescriptions for how society should be ordered.
Defining Literacy After 1949

During 1949-50 a large number of literacy surveys were undertaken across China, as part of the CCP's attempt to take stock of the national situation. As such, these surveys were no different than similar surveys designed to determine the number of tenant farmers, landless labourers, overseas Chinese, and other social groups. The attempt to quantify the number of official illiterates, however, quickly met with confusion. As explained in official sources, the confusion stemmed from the widely varying criteria reported in use to determine who was and who was not "literate," and the resultant "huge discrepancies" in methods of calculation.

In the end the authorities settled for the same estimation method used by the republican state before them. All those who admitted to having never attended any kind of school were considered illiterate, a standard that was maintained in the 1954 national census and, apparently, in the 1982 census as well. As for the definition of what exactly constituted minimal literacy, the Ministry of Education decreed in 1950 that peasants had to demonstrate knowledge of one thousand characters in order to be judged literate by the state.

This definition represented implicit recognition of the validity of the centuries old 1000-2000 character framework.
embodied by the san-bai-qian trinity of classical literacy primers (the sanzijing, bai jiaxing and qianzi wen) and their republican era offspring, including those of the CCP itself. The CCP had adopted the 1000-2000 character framework ever since 1929 when Mao and his colleagues decided to compile their own version of James Yan's People's Thousand Character Classic (Pingmin qianzi ke), which Mao had been exposed to several years previously. Mao Zedong was a twenty six year old primary school principal in 1922 when he and other members of the communist party members joined James Yan's YMCA-sponsored literacy campaign in Changsha. Within a few years Mao was calling on the party to use Yan's People's Thousand Character Classic as a model for mass literacy efforts among peasants in the Jinggangshan.13

In August 1950 Party officials and educators met to discuss what they called the "common character research problem." The problem was to decide how many characters--and which ones--ought to be considered the foundation for literacy education in the People's Republic. From previously existing character glossaries, dictionaries and literacy primers, including primers from different provinces, they eventually selected 1,589 characters to serve as the foundation for adult literacy education in the new state.

A second conference was called to discuss the "common character problem" in December 1950. It was followed by
"testing work" and further consultations with specialists. As a result of these efforts an official list of 2000 characters was promulgated by the Ministry of Education in June 1952 which it said was to serve as the basic "reference material" for localities to design their own literacy primers and "popular reading materials." "Localities" referred to anything from the large regional administrations which were set up for a brief period after 1949 to provinces and counties.14

As a result of the discussions at the first national conference on worker-peasant education held at Beijing in late 1950, the Ministry of Education decreed in December 1950 that within three years of part time study illiterates (wenmang) and 'half-literates' (ban wenmang) should be able to recognize 1000 commonly used characters (chanqyoncizi) and possess preliminary (chubu) reading, writing and computation skills. Illiterates spent the first year of study learning to read (shizi). The second year was devoted solely to arithmetic (suanshu); and the third year presumably combined all three. After the third year graduates were entitled to hold a certificate of official literate status (fei wenmang zhengshu) issued by the county government. No mention was made in the document of examinations. The official certificate of literate status qualified one to enter a two year program of further sparetime study. Here students studied Mandarin speech, arithmetic and 'general
knowledge' (chanoshi). Class length for both programs was set at 1-2 hour classes, 150-200 classes per year.

These literacy criteria were aimed at Communist Party members, cadres and local activists who were the main targets of the literacy movement. The literacy certificates issued by county governments for both programs were deemed equivalent to junior and senior primary school graduation certificates, respectively, for the purpose of winning acceptance to special cadre schools. The objective spelled out in late 1950 was for all village cadres and party youth activists to achieve the one thousand character literate status within 3-5 years.15

The new formal category of 'half-literate' (ban wenmanq) was particularly intriguing. The origins of this concept are unclear. It may have been derived as a result of the proxy measure of literacy by school attendance: those who had never attended any form of school were considered illiterate for statistic-gathering purposes, but there was the problem of how to categorize the many who had attended a sishu for a time and who knew several hundred characters, not to mention the many who had failed to complete primary school. A more likely reason, however, seems to have been the determination to borrow what was originally a Soviet concept and bend it to describe Chinese literacy. During the Russian literacy campaign of the 1920s different literacy schools were established for those who were 'half-literate.'16
Soviet literacy experience was closely studied by Chinese mass educational planners in the early 1950s. In Guangdong, Chao Yimin, the Chairperson of the Central-South Culture and Education Committee, identified three kinds of illiterates in 1951: those who knew no characters at all, those who knew around one hundred or so characters, and those who knew more than five hundred characters.17

In 1951 the editors of the Ministry of Education's official journal wrote that according to "usual practice" (yiban de xiquan) an 'illiterate' was considered to be someone who knew between zero and three-four hundred characters. These persons, even though they could recognize bank notes and perhaps even write simple receipts, were nevertheless considered 'illiterate' because they generally did not know how to use the writing brush (literally, 'had not yet mastered the tools of writing'). A person was considered 'half-literate' who was able to recognize 500-600 characters "more or less," could hold a writing brush, and who was therefore in a position of being "half able and half unable to get by" in "daily written cultural life."18

Subsequent attempts to refine and clarify these official prescriptive definitions appeared to have been equally ad hoc. In 1953 the newly formed National Anti-illiteracy Work Committee issued a circular on literacy standards (saomang biaozhun) which stated that a 'half-literate' was someone who "knew how to read" (neng shidao) at least 500 characters but who had still not attained the
complete literacy standard as determined in new literacy graduation examinations. A 1984 definition of 'half-literate' offered the following more sophisticated criteria. A 'half-literate' was someone who had learned the common character components, the order of strokes for writing some 800 characters, and who knew the method by which characters were arranged in "traditional" Chinese dictionaries (those, in other words, which did not rely on pinyin romanization to organize the sequence of characters, which most peasants found unintelligible)-- criteria which emphasized analytical capability as the basis for developing reading skills.

Localities frequently defied or were unaware of these shifting, arbitrary definitions. Many localities simply imposed their own. Thus, for example, some localities in Guangdong and elsewhere defined as 'literate' only those who had graduated from senior primary school-- a much more stringent definition, considering that in the early 1950s only around ten percent of primary schools even offered the senior level curriculum (grades 5-6), and that most of these schools were in the cities. Those with a junior primary school education were considered 'half-literates.'

Still other localities in Guangdong were found in the 1950s to have issued 'literacy certificates' to those who could read 600 characters. This definition was not without some historical justification. One of the earliest modern adult literacy primers, the Liubaizi ke tongsu jiaoyu duben
which was written in the classical language, was comprised of 600 characters.22

My own research in rural Guangdong shows that similar practices of local ad hoc-ism were still taking place in Guangdong as recently as the late 1980s. In late 1988 I was told by the Chairperson of the Panyu county adult education committee that the county used a sixty percent pass mark as the criteria for testing literacy. The test was based on a 1200 character literacy textbook published by the Guangdong education bureau in the early 1980s, which Panyu authorities adopted in 1982. Panyu authorities decided that peasants who recognized eight hundred characters, equivalent to sixty five percent of the characters in the provincial education bureau's literacy textbook, would be considered officially literate. On this basis Panyu had achieved a literacy rate of over 90% by 1982.23

The Panyu county educational authorities were operating on the basis of established practice. In 1953 the National Anti-Illiteracy Work Committee decreed that in order to "standardize" literacy requirements, a demonstrated knowledge of 600 characters (a score of 60%) would now be required in order to pass the character recognition component of new comprehensive literacy examinations. Local authorities were now required to administer such examinations to all graduates of literacy classes.24

Soviet influence appears also to have been behind the arbitrary definition of the appropriate age group target of
adult literacy education. In the famous Soviet 1919 Decree on Eliminating Illiteracy (upon which the Chinese 1956 decree of the same name was modelled) the new Soviet state declared the adult literacy campaign would be targeted at those aged 14-50 years. The minimum age was based on school completion. In 1918 the new Soviet state decreed five years compulsory primary schooling for children aged 8-13 years. The maximum target age was presumably based upon some judgement or measure of the utility of educational investment in persons with limited time left in the labour force.25

China adopted the same target group definition in the early 1950s, despite the fact that fewer than one third of Chinese primary school age children were attending school. In China the target group was further sub-divided into youth (qingnian) aged 14-25 years, to whom the most urgent effort was directed, and adults (zhuangnian), to whom a lesser priority was applied. The definition of youth was based on the age criteria of the Youth League, which was similarly a borrowed Soviet institution.

In 1955 Hu Yaobang, in his capacity as head of the Youth League, explained that China had diverged from the Soviet experience and limited its goal of eliminating illiteracy initially to youth only because of the much greater burden of literacy in Chinese imposed by the non-alphabetic nature of the language and the difficulty of the characters.26 In 1956 the central government reiterated the
14-50 years target; in 1957 it lowered it (without explanation) to those aged 14-40; and in 1978 the target was set at persons aged 12-45 years.27

In 1953 the Anti-Illiteracy Work Committee introduced the first modification of the quantitative literacy standard spelled out in 1950. The committee referred to "three kinds" (sanzhong) of adult literacy, one for peasants (nongmin), one for urban labourers (laodong renmin) and one for cadres and urban factory workers (ganbu, gongren). The committee ordained that cadres and urban workers needed to know 2000 characters, plus have the ability to read simple (tongsu) books and newspapers and write 200-300 character reports, such as might be required of cadres to facilitate bureaucratic communication, in order to qualify as officially literate. Urban labourers were decreed to require a knowledge of 1500 characters. Peasants were still required to know only 1000 characters, plus show the ability to read "the simplest" (ie. specially prepared) books and newspapers and be able to keep simple accounts and write receipts of the kind used in village transactions.28

In 1956 the State Council together with the newly formed Anti-Illiteracy Commission headed by senior communist party officials jointly decreed that the literacy standard for peasants was the knowledge of 1500 characters, plus the ability to comprehend popular books and newspapers, write simple notes and keep account books, and perform simple calculations using the abacus. Significantly, the official
literacy standard for cadres and urban workers remained higher at 2000 characters. The 1956 definition of literacy was reiterated by the central committee in 1978 following the accession to power of the Deng Xiaoping leadership group, and continues to be the official standard of adult literacy in China down to the present time.29

The 1950s Debate Over Methods of Literacy Instruction

The traditional method of literacy instruction in China involved the memorization of around two thousand unrelated individual characters. The traditional san-bai-gian trinity of classical primers added up to around two thousand characters in total. Out of the three, the sanzijing (Trimmetrical classic) was the only one which told a story. Even so, as Rawski says, all three were "essentially collections of characters" whose primary value "was not a story but the convenient form in which they introduced characters to beginning readers."30 Only after students had memorized the two thousand odd individual characters contained in these texts were they taught how to read actual discourse. And even then, students typically committed enormous time and energy to memorizing the classical texts before the pedagogical emphasis shifted to exegesis of the texts.
PRC educators called the traditional method the "concentrated method of character recognition" (jizhong shizi). After 1949 the traditional method was temporarily rejected because it was considered to rely excessively upon rote memorization, at the expense of developing creativity. During the first half of the nineteen fifties PRC educators began to experiment with an alternative method of literacy instruction, known as the "diffuse method of character recognition" (fensan shizi). Under this method, students began to learn textual discourse from the beginning. New characters, instead of being introduced randomly as under the traditional method, were drawn from the text under study.

As a Chinese scholar recently explained, the traditional method of memorizing individual characters without the aid of context rendered individual characters "unintelligible things." This was not a problem, however, under the traditional system. The traditional pedagogy emphasized memorization and was unconcerned with the comprehension factor in the early stage of literacy acquisition precisely because it assumed that all students would eventually go on to read the classics themselves. The traditional method was a useful pedagogical device only; its aim was to establish a foundation for later study, not to impart a "functional" literacy.

The problem arises when the same pedagogy was applied to peasant literacy education in the nineteen fifties. Such
peasants were not learning characters as basic preparation for higher forms of study. Their formal education ended with the basic literacy class they attended. Hence the concern over the practical utility of learning a conglomeration of unrelated characters.

The problem was that following three years of study some graduates of literacy classes in the nineteen fifties were able to pass literacy tests comprised of three thousand individual characters. But they were unable to formulate written discourse; they lacked the ability to comprehend a single coherent sentence; and were even, it was said, incapable of properly holding a writing brush. In other words, such peasants might be considered officially literate according to a simple numeric definition of character recognition. But they lacked the ability to read and write. They remained, to use the modern Western concept which had now become the objective of peasant literacy education, "functionally" illiterate for all practical purposes.

Yet, the traditional method of memorizing unrelated characters was revived in China beginning in the mid-1950s. It was revived, significantly, especially in the elite state-run schools. The return to popularity of a modified form of the traditional concentrated method of character recognition was based on claims that this modified form represented a more 'scientific' approach to literacy education than the method of simply learning texts, and that it could deliver much greater and faster results.
The modified form of the concentrated method of character recognition attempted to combine the traditional reliance on memorization with insights derived from modern psycholinguistics. The modified method made use of the structural rules by which Chinese characters combined phonetic and semantic elements. By teaching these rules to beginning learners, children would develop the analytical capacity, critical for developing reading skill on an ongoing basis, to infer meaning and pronunciation from unfamiliar characters and words without the constant aid of a teacher. The method involved grouping together individual characters on the basis of similar pronunciation as the basis for teaching students to discriminate the phonetic and semantic (usually pictographic) elements of characters.35

The new/old method was promoted most heavily in elite institutions. In 1958 the leading center for educational research in China, the psychological research unit of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, formally established an experiment using the method at the elite Heishan Beiguan keypoint primary school in Liaoning province. The method claimed to enable children to learn up to 2300-2500 characters in two years. After its reportedly successful experimentation at the Heishan Beiguan primary school, the technique was introduced into the famous elite Jingshan school in Beijing in the late 1950s. From there it spread to other elite schools. Gradually, the concentrated method
of character recognition was widely adopted in the superior state-run primary school system.

It is significant, however, that even to this day the method remains most widely used in the northern provinces. It is much less popular in southern provinces like Guangdong.36 There is an important reason for this. As Venezky points out, and as the following example shows, the concentrated method of character recognition utilized common phonetic syllables as the basis for teaching character recognition. Examples would include such syllables as hua-flower; hua-China; hua-change. The method taught acoustic memory recall ability as an aid to character retention. In areas outside the Mandarin-speaking region for which the method was devised, however, the advantage of these syllabic associations was lost. The burden of memorization was actually increased for Cantonese and other dialect speakers, because the method required the learner to develop acoustic memory recall in a second language, Mandarin. In Guangdong, therefore, the concentrated method of character recognition was associated even more with elite learning than in the north, since in Guangdong the method was additionally linked to the elite ability to speak Mandarin.

The concentrated method of character recognition was praised for its analytical strength: students were taught how to learn new words by alternating tones for a single syllable and how to construct compound characters from components. It was also praised for its capacity to "load"
a greater number of characters into lessons. Not everyone, however, was as pleased with the method.

The method, which was the creation of linguists in Beijing and elsewhere, was sharply attacked by leading educational revolutionaries in the communist party. One of these critics was Lin Handa. In 1955 Lin used the occasion of launching a stinging attack on the concentrated method of character recognition in order to make one of the most important speeches on popular literacy in the history of the People's Republic. In this speech Lin did not limit himself to a discussion of the pedagogical merits and demerits of the concentrated recognition method. What was crucial about this speech was that Lin forced the discussion of the method out of the purely pedagogical sphere, and dropped it squarely into the realm of politics. In so doing, Lin's polemical speech on literacy accomplished nothing less than the establishment of the ideology which has guided peasant literacy education in China from the mid-1950s until the present.

Lin Handa and the Ideology of Peasant Literacy

One of the PRC's most important mass education figures, Lin Handa was a former primary and middle school teacher who spent three years in the U.S. studying for a doctorate in mass education (Colorado) before becoming the first head of
the social education division in the Ministry of Education in 1950. He was appointed Vice-Chair of the newly established Anti-Illiteracy Work Committee in 1952 and was Vice-Minister of Education from 1954-57. Besides this, Lin was a high ranking member of the Committee for the Reform of the Written Language, where he wrote some of his most important works.37

In his late 1955 speech on the literacy movement, published prominently in one of the country's leading intellectual newspapers, the Shanghai Wenhuibao, Lin launched a blistering attack on the traditional method of literacy instruction which involved memorizing individual, contextually unrelated characters. The question of "what should be taught," said Lin, touched deeply on the very question of "what is literacy."38 He criticized the view which considered literacy to be the knowledge of a certain number of individual characters (danzi).

In the first place, said Lin, conceiving of literacy in this way led to the creation of artificial numeric standards, which failed to take into account reading ability and the numerous other dimensions of literate ability in the Chinese script. Words, not individual characters, were the basic units of comprehension in Chinese. Therefore learning individual characters was not as effective as learning words and strings of words. Learning these laid a stronger foundation for developing the crucial social skills of reading and writing.
Second, Lin criticized the philosophy of education upon which the individual character method was based. Although he did not refer to the traditional literacy pedagogy specifically, Lin clearly had it in mind when he spoke of what he described as the prevailing notion that "the purpose of eliminating literacy was simply to be able to recognize characters, and that the purpose of being able to recognize characters was to enable one to study..." (emphasis added). Lin's implicit point was that the traditional pedagogy, where the initial memorization of 2000 or so unrelated characters was regarded as but a preparatory phase for further study, was unsuited to the terminal objectives of mass literacy instruction in the villages.

Lin blamed all of the dangerous ills which in his view had infected mass education in China since the Revolution on the traditional idea that the purpose of eliminating illiteracy was to initiate one into the world of academic learning. This concept of literacy had led, in Lin's view, to the regrettable practice of village schools attempting to imitate the regular school system, where basic literacy instruction was still the preliminary introduction to years of steadily more advanced learning. This practice had in turn led to the false notion that the most important factors in launching a literacy movement were securing appropriate school space, and living up to artificially imposed standards in securing funds, administrative cadres, and full time teachers. And it led to the elevation of "quality"
measures and attendance rates as the standard measures of success, instead of the utility of the knowledge learned.

Finally, Lin drew a critical inference from what he argued were the sociological effects of an excessively academic-oriented approach to popular literacy. Lin argued that the "best" students in village literacy classes—the ones who attended regularly, did not come late, and scored highest—were regrettably not the cadres and local activists whom the state had decreed were the most important targets of the literacy movement. Rather, Lin noted with an obvious tone of chagrin, the "best" students in village literacy classes were those whom he described as "young girls and old village women." Lin's analysis betrayed his lack of commitment and basic lack of concern for solving the age-old problem of female illiteracy in China. It also revealed in addition that his real concern with respect to improving popular literacy was narrowly utilitarian: to inculcate productive skills among the most important members of the village labour force, which, in the villages to which Lin Handa was referring, apparently did not include women.

The reason why young girls and old women had so regrettably become the best students in village literacy classes was, according to Lin Handa, because they had nothing better to do with their time. For them, literacy classes had become a form of recreation, a welcome and pleasurable diversion from the drudgeries of housework. Those who were part of the main village labour force,
however, could not afford to waste their time attending literacy classes which simply taught students to recognize characters, without any immediate purpose or use.39

The obvious solution to this problem was to make literacy education more relevant to the bureaucratic and economic needs of village officials and farmers. The reason why Chinese workers were making more rapid progress in literacy education than peasants, said Lin, was because workers followed the experience of the Soviet Union in striving for ways to use literacy to improve technology and production. For them, the link between literacy and economic development was clear. In the countryside, however, the reason why in literacy classes "activists were not as good as the masses" and "men were not as good as women," was that literacy education was not integrated with economic construction in the villages.

From this analysis it followed naturally that the traditional pedagogical assumption of Chinese literacy education, which was that literacy acquisition required the prior memorization of a prescribed number of individual unrelated characters, was unsuited to present needs. What Lin proposed was a kind of terminal rudimentary literacy for peasants that would enable them to cope with the "simple" tasks of everyday written communications.

It is crucial to realize the political context of Lin's speech. Lin was writing in November 1955, four months after Mao went over the heads of the Communist Party establishment
to launch a drastic and massive acceleration of collectivization. Lin expressed the view that village literacy education would henceforward have to be integrated with the local bureaucratic-economic requirements of collectivization. What he meant specifically by this is of fundamental importance for understanding literacy's contribution to the formation of post-collectivized Chinese rural society.

Lin advocated a curriculum based on the principles of "integrating with practice" (lianxi shiji) and "learning in order to use" (xue yizhi yonq). In concrete terms, Lin proposed that literacy education in the villages should begin with learning the vocabulary of daily economic and social life: one's name, the names of one's neighbours, the name of the village, names of agricultural implements and local farming practices, the names of the agricultural seasons, etc. From this very localized literacy vocabulary, villagers would gradually be introduced to "relevant" vocabulary drawn from a wider social-geographic realm which included county and province. Finally, villagers would be introduced to vocabulary of national relevance, which included names of state and party leaders, important state institutions, and the official ideology.40 In the mid-1950s this approach became the basis of village adult literacy education.
The Role of Village Literacy Education in the Formation of China's Honeycomb Polity

From the mid-1950s literacy for Chinese villagers meant knowledge of around 1500 characters related to local economic needs, plus rudimentary instruction on the structure of the state, the official ideology, and the major state personalities. This conception of literacy for peasants was enshrined in a three tiered structure of village literacy primers which villagers had successfully to complete in order to be ordained officially literate.

In 1956 Hu Yaobang outlined regulations for compiling the three levels of peasant literacy primers. The first two tiers were comprised of about one thousand characters in total. These primers were designed to inculcate localized economic and bureaucratic competence in China's collectivized rural villages. Thus they included the vocabulary items listed by Lin Handa, such as names for local agricultural implements, crops, fertilizers, and people and place names.

One of the vital purposes of these primers was also to introduce learners to the vocabulary and literate skills required for collective living. Thus peasants were taught the new vocabulary of production teams and production brigades which replaced the former villages; of "secretaries" who replaced the former village chiefs; of production quotas, collective work assignments, and the
like. The literacy primers inculcated the language of the revolution. They played their part in altering the social reality of the village by equipping villagers with a new state vocabulary with which to apprehend and describe the momentous changes in their institutions of daily living.

Village literacy primers also attempted to conjure up a new reality through books. This was clearly the case when literacy primers portrayed a make-believe world of tractorized farming, mechanized irrigation pumps and other forms of 'scientific' farming. The objective of such lessons was to create an appetite for modernization, to conjure up on paper an imaginary village world which most peasants might otherwise not even have dreamed about. See the following page for an example from a Guangdong literacy primer.

A crucial feature of village literacy primers after 1955 was their effort to inculcate elementary accounting skills and other numerate abilities of the kind needed to make the collective economy of the village-production team work. This especially meant instruction on calculating and recording workpoints, as well as instruction on the preparation of receipts, simple notes to superiors to explain absence from collective work due to illness, etc. Below are several examples from a Guangdong literacy primer.

Hu Yaobang called for the village primers to begin instruction in the pinyin method of romanization, as an aid to character recognition. Hu believed that knowledge of
毛主席语录

农业的根本出路在于机械化。

43 农机名称

（看图识字）

手扶拖拉机  水轮泵

直播机  柴油机

Fig. III Yunfu County Literacy Primer

source: Yunfu hongyexiao wenhua keben
(Yunfu red evening school cultural primer)
Yunfu county, Guangdong, 1972
十四、证明条

今卖出青瓜种两斤，每斤肆元，该款捌元。此证。 第四生产队 3月6日

伍队长：我今天因病不能出勤，请假一天。陆云 6月9日

读写：

1. 读写：
   买入 收费 收入 支出
   买入 卖出 应该 供应
   买到木瓜三担，每担〇元，该款〇拾〇元。
   卖出鸡蛋五斤，每斤〇元〇角，该款〇元〇角。

2. 抄写：卖出 买入 该款 此通

Fig.IV Guangzhou Workpoint Primer
十二、借条
今借到
第〇生产队喷雾器叁个。
第〇生产队经手人〇〇〇
〇〇月〇〇日

十三、申请条
〇队长：
我因女儿交学费，想借支伍元，请
批准。
〇〇〇〇月〇〇日

练习
1. 读、讲：
今借到 第八生产队煤油叁
斤，喷雾器两个。
第七生产队经手人 陆〇〇
4月8日
今收到 今借到 经手人

2. 认识部首 〇(大方框): 因 因
3. 书写：我 女 借支 批准 〇

【教学提示】指导学员抄写时，讲下列笔画名称：
丶(撤折)，如经、云、叁、到。
源：
Jigong riyong shizi keben
(workpoint reading primer for everyday use)
comp. Guangzhou shi jiaoyu ju, 1963
pinyin would also enable peasants to improve their pronunciation in Mandarin, and to look up characters in the dictionary. We will discuss this issue separately, but at this point we need to note that this provision of Hu's was not implemented in Guangdong. As we will see, in the late 1950s Guangdong authorities flatly refused to make northern Mandarin speech the basis of literacy education in Guangdong villages.

The third primer in the three tiered series was comprised of around 500 characters. In addition to introducing learners to those aspects of the national polity mentioned by Lin Handa, including state institutions, personalities and ideologies, this primer also introduced the basics of natural science. Presumably this was to prepare students who would go on to study a primary school curriculum.42

Hu Yaobang said that the initial village level primer should be compiled by "local intellectuals" within the township, under the supervision of the local Youth League branch. This primer was not required to be submitted to higher authorities for approval. The second level primer was to be compiled by county authorities and then submitted to the education departments of the county governments for their approval. The final level primer was compiled and approved by the provincial education bureaus of provincial governments. Hu Yaobang estimated that peasants would require an average of three to four months each to complete
the village and county literacy primers, and a further seven to eight months to complete the provincial-national primer.

Vivienne Shue has argued that the institutional changes in Chinese agriculture between 1949 and collectivization in 1956 added up to an encystment of rural communities in China, a paradoxical turning inward in economic, social and political terms. As Shue says, "The economic claims, the political rights, and, for that matter, the moral horizon of the Chinese peasant was assumed, from the earliest days of the People's Republic, not to stretch beyond the xiang (township)."43 The system of village literacy instruction prescribed for Chinese peasants from the mid-1950s was very much part of this process of encystment, which Shue labels as the emergence of the honeycomb polity. The three tier system of village literacy instruction sought to unite the pursuit of localized economic development with limited incorporation into the world beyond the village in ways decided upon by the central authorities.

It is highly significant that the state did not deem it necessary for urban workers to receive literacy education using the same three tiered process emphasizing the economic, social and cultural link with specific localities. Urban workers utilized a single national standardized literacy primer prepared by the People's Education Press in Beijing. The mass education of urban workers did not involve any similar effort to contain, intellectually, socially or politically, the mobility aspirations stimulated
by education. Workers were already the most privileged group in the PRC social hierarchy. As well, the ideological importance attributed to workers placed a premium on the cosmopolitan national and international aspects of their "class viewpoint." Marxism attributed no such epoch-making manifest destiny to peasants.

Most important, however, was that peasants had a crucial role to play in producing the country's food supply. That necessitated keeping them on the farm. The literacy education that was given to Chinese peasants by the state was therefore intended to cement new allegiances to the rural production teams and brigades, where the production of China's food supply occurred. It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of this aspect of Chinese literacy education since 1949. In later chapters the close, critical link between literacy ideologies and control of social and geographic mobility is traced in greater depth and detail.

Literacy Education and the Reproduction of Rural-Urban Differences

From the preceding analysis we can begin to see how education worked to reproduce rural-urban differences in the PRC. The critical fault line that ran through educational China was the one that separated locally specific, work-
oriented, self-sponsored rural literacy education, on the one hand, from the cosmopolitan, academically focussed literacy that was imparted in the urban state-sponsored primary school system on the other hand.

One way to get at this division is by looking at its most obvious manifestation. The different numerical definitions of minimum literacy in these two streams of literacy education exposes the differing ambitions that Chinese leaders held for different social groups.

As we saw, the state council in 1956 ordained that 1500 characters was the minimum peasants needed to know in order to be considered literate by the state. But the ideology of vocationally oriented local literacies for peasants sanctioned the appropriateness of even narrower definitions if only they produced, or were expected to produce, economic results. In 1956, for example, Jiangsu province launched a movement for "every person to learn 100 characters" (yiren baizi). The purpose of this movement, it was said, was to "serve the needs of socialist construction" by teaching peasants a specified list of the one hundred most important characters necessary for daily agricultural life. And we have already seen how, in one locality in rural Guangdong, villagers were taught limited literacy by so-called "one hundred character teachers" (baizi xiansheng). Thus the 1500 character definition promulgated by the state council in 1956 may have represented the maximum requirement imposed in many localities, not the minimum.
On the other hand, at no time in the history of the People's Republic has the literacy requirement for graduates of the urban state-run primary school system fallen below 3000 characters. Moreover in the first decade of the PRC the minimum literacy standard was even considerably higher than 3000 characters. It was 3000 characters for junior primary graduates (grades 1-4) and 4000 characters for senior primary graduates (grades 1-6).45

In recent years, the gulf has grown wider. Official prescriptions of village literacy have remained relatively unchanged. On the other hand, however, the standards expected of urban students have risen sharply in recent years. The author of a recent handbook aimed at urban students on how to improve reading proposes that "for most persons" (yibanren), a minimum knowledge of around 5000 characters was needed just 'to get by' (jiu keyi le) in reading "ordinary" political, technical and cultural works.46

The greater emphasis upon writing in the state schools is also significant. For as Levine points out, it is with writing that many of the possibilities for personal and social transformation lie. Writing narrative prose (as opposed to receipts and basic accounts) "conveys and records innovation, dissent and criticism; above all, it can give access to political mechanisms and the political process generally." Whereas reading is more often intended to "elicit passive behaviours or to encourage conformist
responses that reproduce or further institutionalize existing social arrangements," with the end result that minimal reading competence tends to be "merely sufficient to bring its possessor within the reach of bureaucratic modes of communication and authority."47

The different conceptions of literacy in state primary schools and peasant literacy primers were thus significant of a much more profound social division which the educational system fostered and reproduced. The state-run primary school system and the various village level mass educational efforts were intended to inculcate very different kinds of literacies. Learners exposed to them were initiated into two completely different educational worlds, leading to vastly different social roles. The one led to advancement through the ranks of the state educational system and the most prestigious occupations obtainable within the system. The other was terminal. It led no further than the physical boundaries of the rural production team or, perhaps, the brigade.

The different social expectations which accompanied literacy inculcated in the state primary schools and literacy in rural production teams were the modern equivalent of the old split between elite primers like the Thousand Character Classic and the "miscellaneous word books" (zazi) which taught basic utilitarian literacy to the children of non-gentry in the late imperial period. The san-bai-qian trinity of ancient literacy primers was aimed
at elite pupils, whom it was assumed would go on to read the classics themselves, and to achieve the lesser or higher positions of social status which their classical literacy enabled.

By contrast, the zazi were aimed exclusively at non-gentry pupils. In fact zazi were deliberately excluded from the elite curriculum, as vulgar and unworthy of the attention of elite pupils. Unlike the elite primers, the social purpose of the zazi was that of "inculcating the importance of being a farmer, of daily written business accounts, and of calculation by an abacus." In somewhat the same way, the literacy primers used in rural China from the mid-1950s sought to inculcate the importance of being a good collective farmer, able to read and to record workpoints and to understand labour assignments and other written instructions. The extracts shown below from a late imperial zazi and a 1972 peasant literacy primer demonstrate the close resemblance between these two forms of non-elite literacy instruction, including nearly identical vocabulary items.

In conclusion, despite the widely proclaimed intention to make the educational system serve the needs of peasants and workers and to use the educational system as an instrument for standing the old class structure on its head, this analysis of the social construction of literacy shows that the real intended purposes of literacy instruction were nearly opposite. China's deliberately bifurcated
Fig. V Eighteenth Century Character Glossary

source: Duixiang siyan (Illustrated four-character glossary). Reprinted in Rawski, Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China, p. 130
Fig.VI  1972 Character Glossary

source:  Yunfu hongyexiao wenhua keben
(Yunfu red evening school cultural primer)
Yunfu county, Guangdong, 1972
educational system continued to reproduce social class differences in the new state. If educational systems perforce perform an important "gate-keeping" function, then the critical "gate" in the Chinese educational system after 1949 was the one that permitted entry to the elite state primary school system for a select few and consigned the rest to a form of economically and socially restricted, terminal literacy.49

Our discussion of the structure of village education is not complete until we consider the contribution of a critical social group, school teachers. The success or failure of educational policy depended on the receptiveness and effectiveness of the teaching corps. Were village school teachers cultural agents of the state, 'transmission belts' in Leninist terms? Or were they more closely tied to local interests and values? Did teachers help or hinder the state's effort to revolutionize the educational world of villagers? These issues are examined in the next chapter.

2 Alexander Woodside "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy," p.2.


4 "Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui kaimuci" in Guangdong diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailiao (yi), also reprinted in Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 2 6 (April 1951): 2-3.

5 See, for example, Harvey J. Graff, "Whither the Future of Literacy?" Communication 11 (1988): 5-22. See also Graff, *The Literacy Myth*, esp. the theoretical discussion in the Introduction, and the Introduction to Graff, ed., *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-13. Graff, a social historian, is widely recognized as one of the leaders of the movement to redefine scholarly approaches to the study of literacy. Another provocative work which seeks to revise our understanding of literacy is Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Street's work contains a critical overview and analysis of anthropological and psychological literature which treats literacy as an independent variable, a view which Street calls the "autonomous" model of literacy. He advances an alternative model which he calls the "ideological" model of literacy. For a perceptive critique of the concept of functional literacy from a similar perspective, see the article by sociologist Kenneth Levine "Functional Literacy: Fond Illusions and False Economies" Harvard Educational Review 52 3 (Aug. 1982).


8 Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, p.97. Kenneth Levine makes the same point: "What does it mean to insist that the significance of literacy or illiteracy must be seen in relation to their cultural and political contexts? To put it quite simply,...we must consider the application and exercise of reading and writing skills to specific bodies and types of information. Literacy cannot be reduced to the
question of the fluency with which an individual is capable of reading a newspaper; it is also and equally a matter of the information the newspaper contains." See Levine, "Functional Literacy: Fond Illusions and False Economies," p.263.


10 Graff, ed., Literacy and Social Development in the West, p. 3.

11 See the Question box in Renmin jiaoyu 2 4 (Feb.1 1951): 50-51.


13 Hayford, To the People: James Yen and Village China, pp.42-46, 161. See also his "Literacy Movements in Modern China," pp. 160-161. On Mao's early association with the YMCA (he and his colleagues rented office space in the Y's Changsha headquarters), see Linda Shaffer, Mao and the Workers: The Hunan Labor Movement, 1920-1923 (White Plains, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1982), pp. 57-61, 86-88. Yan's People's Thousand Character Primer drew vocabulary from the list of 4,261 "foundation characters" identified by Chen Hegin. Chen, an American-trained professor at Nanking University, surveyed over 500,000 characters in everyday texts like newspapers, magazines, contracts, street signs and children's books. This represented the first scientifically-based attempt to determine character frequency. But in the end Yan selected only 1200 characters from Chen's list of over 4000 for the People's Thousand Character Primer. Chen's foundation characters are listed in his Yuti wen yingyong zihui (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1931). Chen's findings are described in detail in John DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 107-109.

14 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 580-582. The list is reprinted on pp. 580-581. The characters varied in complexity from one stroke to twenty three. The majority were more than ten strokes. On problems with respect to the selection criterion see below.

15 "Jiaoyu bu guanyu kaizhan nongmin yeyu jiaoyu de zhishi" Dec.14, 1950 in Renmin jiaoyu 3 (1951). Also appears in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 15-18, as well as Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p.895, see also p. 578.
16 "Sulian saochu wenmang de jingguo" in Guangdong sheng divijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailiao (yi), pp.24, 26.

17 Chao Yimin, "Dongxue jiaoyu de fangzhen ji youguan de jige wenti."

18 See the Question box in Renmin jiaoyu 2 4 (Feb.1 1951): 50-51.

19 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 578.

20 Literacy Situation in Asia and the Pacific Country Studies: China (Bangkok: UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific, 1984), p. 19.

21 Primary schooling in the early 1950s was officially six years. However in the countryside the overwhelming majority of primary schools provided only junior primary schooling, grades 1-4. Lofstedt reported that in 1951 only around 10% of primary schools offered six years of schooling, and most of these were in the cities. See Jan-Ingvar Lofstedt, Chinese Educational Policy: Changes and Contradictions, 1949-1979 (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980), cited in Seeberg, p. 159.


23 Author's interviews with Liu Huan, Chairperson of the Panyu county adult education committee general office, Panyu, December, 1988.

24 "Saochu wenmang gongzuo weiyuanhui guanyu saomang biaozhun biye kaoshi deng zanxing banfa de tongzhi" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nonqmin jiaoyu), pp.33-34.


26 Question box in Renmin jiaoyu 2 4 (Feb.1 1951): 50-51. Hu Yaobang, "Guanyu nongcun saochu wenmang gongzuo," p.25. The greater emphasis upon youth (qingnian) than adults (zhuangnian) was buttressed by claims that while comprehension powers (lijie li) did not erode with age, the memory capacity (jiyi li) critical for learning Chinese characters declined markedly after the age of thirty. Other specialists in the psychology of learning disputed this claim as unscientific, however, arguing that if there was a decline in learning performance among adults it was because
they had more responsibilities than youth, and less time to study. See Xiang Laoruo, "'Chengnian ren lijie liqiang jiyi liruo' de shuofa shi meiyou kexue genjude" Renmin jiaoyu 2 (1957): 52-54.

27 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 578.


29 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 578, 895-897, 900-901.

30 Rawski, Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China, p. 48.

31 See the article by Li Botang in Kecheng, Jiaocai, Jiaofa 15 1 (1984): 17-20, and, by the same author, Xiaoxue yuwen jiaocai jianshi (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1985). The contemporary equivalent of strict adherence to the prescribed classics was criticized in the 1950s by those who wished to bring 'education and life closer together," to use the expression of Tao Xingzhi, who had also wanted to reform China's education along these lines. An example is the comment in 1956 of Guo Moruo, that many of the teachers from the old society were still prone to impose the rigidities of the old pedagogical orthodoxies on today's youth. To illustrate, Guo recalled how in his own youth at the turn of the century any books not on the prescribed reading lists were considered to be full of "strange ideas" and how he was boxed on the ear by his teacher for daring to criticize Mencius. Guo Moruo, "Correctly Understand the Meaning of Overall Development" Zhongguo qingnianbao 14 (16 July 1956) in Extracts China Mainland Magazines 49 (27 Aug. 1956), pp. 18-20.


33 Li Jiangang, Xiaoxue jiaoyu daquan, p. 309.


35 As explained by three prominent proponents of the method, the concentrated character recognition method is based on the fact that about 80% of Chinese characters can be classified as pictophonetics, characters which are jointly comprised of a phonetic and pictographic component (the other categories are pictographs, self-explanatoritories, associate compounds, phonetic loans, and synonyms). By emphasizing the structural rules of pictophonetics, the method "breaks down the barrier that new characters must
come out exclusively in sentences, and puts together the characters that have the same pronunciation. In this way, children can draw inferences about other cases from one instance, and can learn characters much faster." Fan Liu, Tong Lequan, and Song Jun, "The Characteristics of Chinese Language and Children's Learning to Read and Write," in The Future of Literacy in a Changing World ed. Daniel A. Wagner (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 88. According to some sources, both the diffuse character recognition method as well as the concentrated character recognition method employ pinyin romanization at the foundation stage of instruction. See Li Jiangang, Xiaoxue jiaoyu daquan, pp. 309-310; Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 580; and Richard L. Venezky, "Language, Script, and Reading in China" in Reading in China: Report of the U.S. Reading Study Team to the People's Republic of China ed. June Y. Mei (New York: National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, n.d.), pp. 58-59. While true of urban primary schools at present, it is unclear but rather doubtful that this was uniformly practiced in village schools, then or now.

36 See Venezky, p. 65.

37 Lin Handa was born in 1900 into a poor family from Zhejiang. He joined the communist party in the mid-1940s. From 1959 until his death in 1972 he worked as a researcher and editor at the Committee for Language Reform. In addition to his work in education, Lin Handa was also known for his work in collecting folk history stories. Jinyang xuekan bianji bu, comp., Zhongguo xiandai shehui kexuejia zhuanlue, vol. 4, pp. 159-168.

38 Lin Handa's speech was published in two parts. See "Wei shehui zhuyi jianshe kaizhan saomang" Wenhuibao, 2 Nov. 1955, part 1; 3 Nov. 1955, part 2.


40 Lin Handa, "Wei shehui zhuyi kaizhan saomang gongzuo," part 2. The principle of locally relevant curriculum did not have to await collectivization before it was practiced, of course. Schools like the Dadianxia village sparetime school in Jieyang county (a former base area) in Guangdong was set up in 1948 by CCP members working underground. Unlike the peasant sparetime schools set up by the Guangzhou educational office which employed a regular primary school curriculum, the Dadianxia school followed the principle developed in Yanan and implemented throughout the old base areas of modelling curriculum on local economic needs, for example concerning pest control, drought measures, use of the abacus, etc. By 1954 the Dadianxia school had become a model for surrounding townships. "Chuangban liunian zhuo

42 The origin of the three tier series of literacy primers was attributed by Hu Yaobang to a village Youth League branch in Shandong province in the mid-1950s. The method was also based on the decentralizing reforms introduced by the communists at Yanan in the early 1940s, when standardized texts were replaced by texts written by prefectural, county and central authorities. Seybolt, "The Yenan Revolution in Mass Education."

43 Shue, The Reach of the State, p. 132-133.

44 "Guanyu dongyuan xuesheng zai hanjiaqi zhong canjia saomang gongzuo de tongzhi" Xinhua ribao (Nanjing) 6 Jan. 1956 in Union Research Institute L0364 42222.

45 Seeberg, p. 161.

46 Ning Hongbin, Zenvang tigao yuedu nengli (Beijing: Beijing ligong daxue chubanshe, 1988), p.32. The author of this handbook was also anxious to point out this figure of 5000 characters represented only around one half of the total number of characters contained in the standard dictionary of contemporary popular usage, the Xinhua zidian. Three of China's leading researchers in the field of reading skills among primary school children recently estimated in 1987 that 3,500 characters as the necessary basis for reading "non-expert" newspapers and magazines. See Fan Liu, Tong Leguan, and Song Jun, "The Characteristics of Chinese Language and Children's Learning to Read and Write," p. 90. A 1987 encyclopedia of primary school education in China lists 3100 characters as the minimal literacy requirement learned in state-run primary schools. But its author also pointed out that besides simply being able to recognize 3000 characters, in order to be considered truly literate primary school graduates should also have acquired the following literate abilities: to read pinyin transcription; write with a pencil, pen, and writing brush at a certain speed and standard; be able to use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar characters; be able to comprehend as well as speak the "common language" (putonghua); be able to read and comprehend books and magazines for youth; and be able to write simple narrative prose (jixuwen). Li Jiangang, Xiaoxue jiaoyu daquan, pp.307-309, 1125-1128. None of these are required of peasants in order to be considered literate by the state which, as we have seen, in 1978 renewed the 1956 definition of peasant literacy as knowledge of 1500 characters.
47 Levine, "Functional Literacy: Fond Illusions and False Economies," pp.261-262. As evidence that the gap between reading and writing still persists, as recently as 1984 the Ministry of Education's teaching plan called for immediate introduction of writing classes in all grades within "the full day (state-run) system" of urban primary schools. It is significant that no mention was made of introducing writing classes into village sponsored primary schools or adult literacy classes. The directive, entitled "Guanyu jiaqiang xiaoxuesheng xiezi xunlian de tongzhi" is reprinted in Li Jiangang, Xiaoxue jiaoyu daquan, pp. 1123-1124.

48 Woodside, "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy," pp.19-20. Rawski quotes the regulations of one late imperial charitable school: "generally what pertains to orthodox studies should be made primary; all tsa-tzu (zazi) and vulgar books must not be studied." See Rawski, p. 128. The educational aims of the zazi are discussed in Rawski, Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China, pp. 128-139. The social implications of the different audiences for which the zazi and the elite literacy primers were intended are discussed in Woodside, "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy," pp. 19-21.

Chapter 4
THE PROBLEM OF THE TEACHERS

The history of the literacy movement in the People's Republic of China is, at one level, a history of the gap between two educational worlds: the one that existed in the minds and in the organizational blueprints of China's state leaders, and the other that guided village educational practice. This chapter examines the nature of that gap as it related to one type of social actor who occupied an absolutely critical place in the effort to re-make the educational world of Chinese villagers: the humble village school teacher.

Amazingly, there has been only one book written in the West on the critical subject of teachers in the People's Republic. Gordon White's important 1981 book, *Party and Professionals: The Political Role of Teachers in Contemporary China*, looks at teachers from the perspective of interest group politics in the PRC and the tensions between professionalism and party involvement in the schools. But White's book looks mainly at teachers in the regular state-run schools, which are also located mainly in urban areas. This chapter examines the uncharted terrain of the lowly village school teacher. These teachers plied their craft outside of the state-run school system, in the popularly funded and managed minban (people-managed)
schools. Some of Gordon White's insights and arguments do apply to this group as well, however, particularly those which deal with tensions between Party demands and teachers' demands for greater professional autonomy.

The Awkward Image of the Village School Teacher

It is appropriate to begin our study of the tensions between state educational aims and popular thought with a study of the role of teachers. Nothing so symbolizes those enduring tensions as the awkward, contradictory image of the village school teacher in socialist China. Officially and ideally, teachers were the pre-eminent "transmission belts" of state policy in the villages, the very agents upon whom the reproduction of state and society most crucially depended. For that reason, village teachers early on became the objects of intense concern and scrutiny by the new state.

The actual history of their plight belies the official image of school teachers as dutiful Leninist "transmission belts." Probably no other social group in rural China has been so frequently or persistently charged with crimes against the Revolution as the school teachers. Mao himself admitted in 1958 that primary school teachers were the main targets in the 'Anti-Rightist' campaign of 1957. According to Mao, no less than one third of the 300,000 persons
labelled 'rightists' during the campaign were primary school teachers. Many more teachers were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution; an unknown number were killed.

The contradictory image of the village school teacher after 1949 also extended to his and her symbolic and material status in village society. The importance and concern with which teachers were officially regarded by the state seems incongruous at first with the popular-- and largely accurate-- image of the village school teacher as one who was chronically poverty-stricken and dependent on the charity of the community. Did the teacher's traditionally exalted moral stature survive intact even though the village teacher was now officially the representative and spokesperson for a new and radically different moral code?

The plight of teachers since 1949 can only properly be understood with reference to their historical position in village culture and society. What is important to realize is that in 1949 the educational world of the village was not without its own history, was not merely "blank" (as Mao suggested it was a few years later) and therefore easily malleable for the purposes of an outside force. There was very little celebration of the revolutionary virtues of "blankness" when it came to village school teachers.

The institution of the village school master was one of the oldest and most richly symbolic in village culture. It was the post-1949 state's effort to inscribe its hegemony on
this ancient institution and use it for historically alien purposes that has produced such contradictory images of the village teacher-- and such suffering on the part of the teachers.

From the state's point of view, one of the earliest concerns over teachers was to bring about an overall improvement in their ranks so that they could begin to play the transmission belt role that party leaders in Beijing envisioned for them. From Beijing's perspective, there was a tremendous shortage of teachers; most were under-qualified; many were barely literate themselves; nearly all lived in poverty. Initially, though, the greatest concern of the new government with respect to rural teachers was the question of their political loyalty, and especially their capacity to mobilize popular resistance.

Real and Potential Subversiveness of Village School Teachers

The Korean War in the early 1950s dramatically heightened the concern that already existed over the loyalty of village teachers. As the spectre of counter-revolution and invasion loomed in the minds of China's leaders, and the country mobilized against all manner of real and imagined foes, teachers became a particular target of suspicion.
Guangdong may have been worse affected than most areas by these fears, because the province was a KMT stronghold before 1949 and because of its proximity to British-ruled Hong Kong. Between October 1950 and August 1951 Guangdong authorities announced that they had dealt with more than 52,600 "bandits" and arrested a further 89,701 "criminals," and uncovered 1,571 cases of counterrevolution. During the same period 28,332 persons were executed in Guangdong for various offences.

There were several reasons why teachers were particularly targets of suspicion during this period. An obvious reason was that teachers who had plied their craft in the old society were considered to be among the "reactionary forces" in village society, along with landlords and former officials. As such, there was a more or less constant fear that 'bad elements' among these groups would try to seize upon any opportunity for restoring the old social and political order.

A more important reason for the particular fear attached to schoolteachers, however, was an acute historical consciousness of the close bonds that traditionally obtained between village schoolmasters and their students, and between teachers and the communities they served. Furthermore, there was undoubtedly also an intense awareness that such bonds had historically formed the basis for collective political action against state authority. Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the massive anti-dynastic movement
which began in Guangdong and which shook the Confucian state
to its core in the mid-nineteenth century, had begun his
revolutionary career as a frustrated scholar and village
schoolteacher.

Guangdong, in fact, positively abounded in subversive
school teachers. In 1883, as a sixteen year old
iconoclastic revolutionary who had recently embraced
Christianity, Sun Yatsen smashed and mutilated the idols in
the village temple where his family members regularly
prostrated themselves, in order, as Lyon Sharman puts it,
"to drive superstition forcibly out of men's minds (and)
make an entrance for new ideas" (an act for which the
village elders banished Sun from the village as one whose
mind had been poisoned by foreign influence). Peng Pai,
too, began his revolutionary career as a village school
teacher, as did many of the urban intellectuals who joined
the communist movement in Guangdong during the Japanese
occupation.

The tradition was not only emblazoned on the historical
memories of rulers; it was embedded in the popular culture
as well. Alexander Woodside points out that "Confucian
societies recognized the existence of an important
tradition of the poor, idealistic backwoods scholar-teacher
who dreams of making, and sometimes does make, a dramatic
intervention in politics." The tradition explains the
paradox that successive Chinese governments, powerful though
they were in some realms, had never taken the view that they
could afford to ignore, with impunity, the ideological rumblings of lowly village schoolteachers. Certainly, the Chinese state that was being constructed in the early 1950s could not, in its own view, afford to ignore potential challenges from rural schoolteachers, when the state's own moral authority—not to mention its political and administrative structures and policing power—was still only weakly established in the vastness of rural China.

Thus the ancient Confucian bonds between teachers and their students, combined with their attendant status as the acknowledged village leaders in matters pertaining to moral order, could and did result in teachers from the old society becoming magnets for culturally-based forms of popular opposition to the new state. But the perceived threat that the village school teacher posed to the new government did not stem exclusively from their potential status as symbols and defenders of the established moral order against the alien values of an intrusive new state power. The perceived threat of teachers also had distinctly modern foundations as well. This was especially the case in certain parts of China, such as the Pearl River delta region of Guangdong and the lower Yangzi area, and in the major urban centres. In these areas, in particular, the development of modern education since the early part of the twentieth century had led to a significant professionalization of teaching. As early as 1920, for example, the National Association for Educational Autonomy, formed in Beijing, pledged to work for
the separation of education and politics, and for the fiscal autonomy which its founders regarded as essential for the achievement of their goals. Organizations like the National Education Association demanded the same, while in the 1920s teacher strikes swept across Guangzhou, Wuhan, Tianjin, Beijing and other major cities to protest warlord government interference in education.10

After 1949, in areas where there had occurred a significant professionalization of teaching in the twentieth century, teacher opposition to the new state was also articulated in terms of an ideology of professionalism. It stressed the prized inviolability of professional autonomy and independence from outside authority.11 The "bourgeois educators," as the new government customarily labelled these critics, denounced party interference and the attempt to introduce politics into what they regarded as "purely educational" concerns. For its part, the state fought back with stinging denunciations of teachers' alleged aloofness from society and their arrogance towards ordinary working people.

In Guangdong, even the literacy journals themselves, which tended to be edited by committed state educational officials rather than committed professional educators, came out swinging against teachers-- which shows the level of tension which existed in Guangdong in the 1950s between elite professionally-minded teachers and the state. In the latter part of the 1950s a Guangdong literacy campaign
journal published a litany of "bourgeois" shortcomings which it alleged were common among Guangdong school teachers. These included teachers' belief that ideological education was a matter for "factory leaders" not teachers, whose job was to teach culture (wenhua) not ideology (sixiang); their nonchalant attitude toward economic development concerns; their fear and loathing when called upon by the party to descend to the factory floor (when they did, said this article, they invariably revealed their ignorance about factory production and even needed a dictionary to look up factory terms). Teachers stressed professional concerns and ignored political concerns. They considered that ancient poetry and literature was "tasteful," but that communist literature was not even worth discussing in the classroom.12

In Guangdong, probably more than in any other region of the country with the exception of the lower Yangzi, professional teachers were identified with the foreign, American model of education introduced into China after 1922. In 1950 the Cantonese communist educational official Zhou Ping delivered a long speech at Lingnan University (latterly Zhongshan University) comparing the "old" and the "new" education in China. Zhou decried the Western education which had been "mechanically copied" into China since the twenties. In Zhou's words, it had led teachers and students to worship everything in American civilization as superior and to consider everything in Chinese civilization as inferior. The teachers who taught this
foreign education caused the Chinese people to "forget their roots" (liule ben). Teachers in missionary schools in Guangdong flaunted their scientific knowledge, but in reality they used religion to deceive people.

As evidence of the damaging effects of this teacher-directed foreign worship, Zhou Ping told of classes which taught appreciation for literature and art of Europe and America, which Chinese students found difficult to comprehend and often repugnant to their own cultural values. Teachers were graduating students who knew foreign languages and literature but who could not write essays in Chinese and who could not even speak Chinese well.

For Zhou Ping, "sinicizing" (Zhongguo hua) Chinese education meant making it more mass, more populist. As examples of "national" (minzu) education, Zhou cited the village schools, winter schools, popular libraries, folk songs, and other examples of popular education that the CCP had developed in Yanan during the 1940s. Thus the "old" education was alien and elitist; the "new" education was national, indigenous and populist in orientation.

But Zhou Ping was also aware that there was resistance to this interpretation of Chinese education from teachers in Guangdong. He spoke of how teachers who agreed with and cooperated with the CCP's educational policies in Guangdong were being labelled "running dogs" of the communist party by other teachers.13
Many rural schoolteachers in Guangdong in fact announced their resentment at being called upon to "donate" their spare time to the tasks of teaching evening literacy classes for peasants and to training lesser qualified teachers for village 'people-run' schools. Others charged that the new emphasis upon mass education heralded an inevitable decline of educational quality and standards. This charge was countered by communist educators with the accusation that elite educators from the old society used "old eyes to evaluate new kinds of schools".

Some teachers, as we have already noted, even advanced theories of hereditary intelligence to oppose the expansion of mass education. They argued that it was fruitless to expend effort and resources on literacy education among the poor because they lacked the innately superior learning abilities of the upper classes.14

Thus when it came to the political role of teachers, theory strayed rather far from reality in the early 1950s. In the ideal Marxist-Leninist state that communist party leaders envisaged themselves to be fashioning, school teachers fulfilled an important "transmission belt" function (to use Lenin's term), inculcating state policies and ideological truths among the "masses." The reality of the situation, as expressed in the above examples of opposition from teachers, was quite different, however.

There was, of course, a vast difference between teachers whose opposition was based upon their learned
familiarity with Western theories of hereditary intelligence and teachers who were barely literate themselves but who nonetheless were the respected guardians of an older moral tradition. But the variety of opposition only serves to illustrate the diverse complexity of the difficulties faced by Chinese leaders in their dream to make of rural schoolteachers the instruments of a new national ideological uniformity and cohesiveness.

In his masterful work on the modernization of rural France, Eugen Weber described the late nineteenth century Parisian political project of sending thousands of Parisian school teachers to the French countryside to make "peasants into Frenchmen." Weber's point was to show the continued potency of local popular cultures in rural France at the end of the nineteenth century.15 But for our purposes Weber's work also serves to highlight the relative weakness of the mid-twentieth century Chinese "totalitarian" state compared to the evidently much more powerful French modernizing state of the late nineteenth century. The post-1949 Chinese state lacked the organizational power and fiscal strength to mount a Beijing version of the Parisian political project of dispatching thousands of its own teachers into the countryside.

Instead, the Beijing political project was forced to rely, for reasons of the centre's organizational and fiscal weakness and the sheer enormity of village China, upon brief rudimentary "re-education" classes for existing teachers.
The aim of such classes was to impart, over the course of a few weeks or a few months of sparetime study, a basic familiarity with state ideology and policies.

"Re-education" classes to solve teachers' 'attitude problem,' 'standpoint problem,' and 'to serve whom' problem began during the movement to Resist America and Aid Korea in 1951. They have been a recurrent feature of CCP teacher education ever since. Yet as recently as 1987 the authors of a publication of the central committee's party school on the development of "Chinese socialist spiritual civilization," felt that while intellectuals' opposition to foreign imperialism was "clear-cut," their rejection of "feudalism" was as yet still incomplete.16

The effort to make of rural schoolteachers "transmission belts" of the state required the destruction of the autonomous organizations which had fostered the growth of teachers' sense of professional identity and independence from state authority during the first half of the century. In Guangdong, the locus of teachers' organizational self-help efforts was the local teachers' alliance (jiaolianhui). Beginning in 1951 the alliances were replaced by an official educational workers' union (jiaogonghui), with branches in every county. The educational workers' union was to represent formally the interests of the province's 70,000 primary and middle school teachers.
The educational workers' union had a dual purpose: to draw teachers firmly within the ambit of state control; and to de-professionalize the teaching corps. The latter was accomplished by the formal re-definition of teachers as a particular kind of "worker." Thus the educational workers' unions included in their membership not only teachers but all personnel attached to the schools, including clerical, custodial, and other kinds of staff.

By defining teachers officially as part of the "working class" (gongren jieji), the state hoped not only to level the social differences that existed between intellectuals and manual workers. More importantly, it also sought to reduce what modernization theorists would call the "social bargaining power" of teachers as a skilled group.

But if the officially defined "social position" (shewei diwei) of teachers should be understood as a process of "negotiation" between the state and social groups, it is important to recognize that the poorly educated, often barely literate village primary school teacher possessed very little real "social bargaining power"-- which helps to explain why primary school teachers were often the most spectacular victims of the PRC's pathetic history of discrimination and persecution against society's 'learned elements' (zhishi fenzi).

On a normative level, the official designation of teachers as members of the working class was intended to make teachers' demands for recognition of their "special"
professional interests appear as selfishly motivated separatism. The message to teachers and others was that teachers' insistence on special interests was destructive of broader "class solidarity." This in fact was an accusation that was hurled at school teachers with increasing frequency and ferocity from the mid-1950s.

In one of the first political campaigns directed expressly at school teachers, primary and middle school teachers in 1951-52 became the target of a fierce effort to expunge what the Cantonese communist educator Zhou Ping had earlier described as the mentality of "My job is to teach. I care only about teaching the various subjects, and that the students do well on the examinations. Your social reforms are not a part of my responsibility." In 1951 the educational workers' unions were instructed to make participation in the "Resist America Aid Korea Campaign": one of their "main activities" for that year.19

In Guangdong these "Re-education" efforts were in many cases spearheaded in the rural localities by urban students and intellectuals who had fled the cities and joined the Communist Party during the Japanese occupation. After the occupation many took positions in the educational administrations of county governments.20

In at least some instances, however, county authorities in some Guangdong localities appear to have sided with the teachers and attempted to limit the influence of politics in the schools. This may have been especially true of areas
where the "Western" model of education had become particularly well entrenched. In the overseas Chinese county of Taishan, for instance, county authorities in 1953 issued regulations that limited the amount of time school teachers and students could legitimately spend participating in political and social movements. The Taishan authorities decided that teachers should spend no more than twelve hours per month engaged in political movements; senior middle school students no more than three hours per week; junior middle school students no more than two hours per week; and primary school students no more than $1^{1/2}$ hours per week.21

During the Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957, primary school teachers became the single biggest target group. As noted, primary teachers accounted for at least one third of all those who received the 'rightist' label. Just as their desperate poverty and feeble status encouraged primary teachers to vent their displeasure loudly when official protest channels were briefly opened, their weakness made primary school teachers especially vulnerable to locally-exacted retribution and "settling of scores" later on. The Great Leap Forward renewed the criticism of school teachers as elitist "experts," and resulted in further attacks. But it was during the Cultural Revolution that village teachers were most vociferously and brutally vilified, as we will see in a later chapter.
Conflicts Between Teachers and Village Cadres

Beginning in the early 1950s the traditional management bodies for village schools, the 'school supervisory associations' (xiaodonghui), composed of lineage elders and other members of the local elite, were taken over by members of the new village elite. Henceforward Party members, representatives drawn from the Peasant Associations, Youth League and other mass organizations exercised administrative and political leadership in the schools.

Local cadres also controlled the education and social welfare funds from which village schoolteachers were paid and cared for by their local communities. Cadres were therefore in a position to pressure teachers by withholding the essentials of life.

Teachers frequently expressed resentment over this and over political interference from village cadres, many of whom were illiterate or barely literate activists catapulted into power during land reform. By 1956 teachers' complaints of heavy handed treatment from peasant cadres had become so pervasive that the central government instructed local Party committees and judicial organs to investigate cadres who ignored discipline codes and who violated the "human rights" of village teachers. These violations included physical beating and even the withholding of food from recalcitrant teachers.22
For a brief period during the ill-fated Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957, teachers were encouraged to provide frank assessments of the party's failure to "link up" with the schools. Such assessments are important for historians because they reveal the kinds and degrees of tension that still existed between teachers and official functionaries nearly a decade after the revolution.

Teachers charged local cadres with "looking down" at them with an air of political superiority. Cadres refused to take teachers' opinions into account when deciding educational matters. Party cadres with no teaching experience, and often with very little education themselves, prepared the political texts. Even when they talked with students, complained one teacher in 1957, the attitude of cadres was patronizing and insincere: they talked excessively about the importance of having "correct political viewpoints," but not at all about "life problems, educational work (and) study problems." The result was that students found it difficult "to feel close to" the Communist Party.

One critic of this period even went so far as to attribute the superior and disdainful attitude of cadres toward village schoolteachers to the new local political elite's consciously trying to ape the old-style mandarins attitude of haughty arrogance toward petty village intellectuals. The minds of local cadres, said this critic, were "vivid with the remnant thought of the ruling classes
of the old society." Their actions against teachers "the manifestations of a kind of sectarianism that discriminates against (low) intellectuals."23

Unlike the mandarins of the past, however, peasant cadres of the early 1950s were generally poorly educated, barely literate political activists. It seems as likely, therefore, that cadres' arrogance towards teachers reflected a self-conscious determination to assert the primacy of revolutionary class background over educational attainment (or even basic literacy) in the distribution of rank and power in New China.

The reverse was, of course, sometimes also true. Poorly educated cadres sometimes deferred to intellectuals, especially the more highly educated ones, and often for traditional reasons. Mao himself apparently regarded this phenomenon as serious enough to warrant comment. In 1958 Mao made the somewhat astonishing admission that "We've been afraid of professors ever since we came into the towns. We did not despise them, we were terrified of them."24

Indeed it would appear from the evidence that, despite the best efforts of the state to make them see otherwise, school teachers on the whole continued to view their social role and responsibilities in predominantly professional terms-- or at least in non-'transmission belt' terms.25 A measure of the continued mutual distrust that existed between teachers and the new state and its local functionaries was that in 1957, nearly a decade after the
revolution took power, still only 4% (5,687) of primary schoolteachers in Guangdong were members of the communist party. And that was up from only 2% the previous year.26 The fact that this occurred in the midst of a Party recruitment drive is even more significant.27

A similar pattern is reflected in the local county educational histories I have looked at for Guangdong province. In rural Xinxing county, for instance, there were no Party members among school teachers in 1949. Fifty primary and middle school teachers were admitted to the Youth League that year. This suggests that most of the pre-1949 teaching corps may have remained outside the Communist Party.

Thirty three teachers joined the Youth League in Xinxing county in 1956; presumably these were teachers who had begun teaching since the revolution. 1958 is the first year for which the Xinxing county educational history mentions actual communist party members among teachers in the province. In that year 17% of primary and middle school teachers in the county were said to be members of the communist party.

In Guangdong's Huazhou county, a similar pattern was repeated. Fewer than 10% of the more than three hundred middle school teachers were party members in 1956. Only 6% of the eighteen hundred primary school teachers in Huazhou were party members by 1956.28
The Impoverished Social and Material Status of the Village Teacher

In the long run the attempt to mould a steadily expanding corps of sufficiently educated and politically reliable rural teachers was frustrated by the socialist state's inability to overcome and reverse the historically awkward popular image of the village teacher. The customary image of the village schoolmaster in Chinese peasant culture was an ambiguous one—full of moral authority, but short on economic reward.

On the one hand, there was no shortage of popular epithets, still in use in the early 1950s, to describe the admirable moral stature of teachers and their calling. The village teacher was popularly and affectionately known as haizi wang—"king of the children." Arthur Smith observed that the village schoolteachers he encountered in nineteenth century rural Shandong possessed "one of the most honourable of callings" in rural society. Daniel Kulp observed that the classically-educated village teacher in early twentieth century Guangdong was "popular among the villagers, willing to associate and converse with them in a universe of discourse familiar to them, and ready to render any kind of assistance to them."29

Similarly, Liao Taichu's famous survey of republican era rural sishu revealed that villagers depended upon sishu
teachers for a wide range of literacy-related personal and community services, from the preparation of legal petitions and suits to wedding and funeral notices, and even for choosing auspicious names for children and adults.30

James Hayes has written that in Cantonese villages local schoolmasters were among the "literate specialists" who guarded the various handbooks and written prescriptions that guided customary practice in social rites and other village affairs.31 The 1987 local educational history of Zijin county in Guangdong reports that during the late Qing and republican eras village teachers in the urban and commercialized areas of the county were poorly paid and their social status suffered compared to more profitable callings. But in the poor villages of Zijin the local schoolmaster possessed the most exalted status in the community, and was frequently requested to preside at weddings and funerals, to inscribe couplets for these occasions, and to occupy the seat of honour at banquets.32

But while teachers may have commanded the respect and admiration of villagers, it was an occupation that few peasant families directly wanted for their sons. The split image of the worthy but chronically poverty-stricken village teacher was a real one, as in Wu Jingzi's eighteenth century satirical novel Rulin waishi (The Scholars) which poked fun at the social manners of the literati. One of the characters in the novel was Mr. Zhou, who was over sixty but had never succeeded in the lowest level prefectural
examination. Old Mr. Zhou epitomized the popular image of the poverty-stricken village scholar. He went about in an "old felt cap, a tattered grey silk gown, the right sleeve and seat of which were in shreds, and a pair of shabby red silk slippers."33

Teaching was, of course, a form of leisure activity for prosperous retired officials. But mostly it was the refuge of the minimally literate and frustrated would-be scholars. For these thwarted scholars, teaching in a village school offered the only available, partially face-saving alternative to a life of manual labour.34 One popular Guangdong aphorism expressed the view that "men who haven't hit bottom aren't schoolteachers" (ren bujian buzuo xiansheng). Another opined that "a family (man) with at least a couple of pecks of grain, doesn't resort to teaching" (jia you erdou lianq, budang haiziwang).

Such popular attitudes were probably especially prevalent in Guangdong (especially in certain parts of Guangdong), where the economy offered literates valuable alternatives to teaching. Compared to the potential wealth-making opportunities available in a thriving commercialized agricultural economy, unencumbered by feudal restrictions on the transfer of land and people, teaching in a Guangdong village school seemed, at least to villagers who grasped or dreamed of genuine social mobility, an occupation "without prospects" (meiyou chuxi).
This was true notwithstanding the fact that teachers sometimes profited as literate intermediaries from the increased use of written contracts and litigation in Guangdong's free-wheeling rural economy. Teaching in a village school was normally still something that one settled for, not aspired toward. We can see that clearly from the popular saying in Haifeng in the 1920s that village teaching was one of the "four olds," along with poverty, sickness and death.35

Long held popular expectations such as these did not vanish in 1949.36 In fact, they were most probably unintentionally strengthened by the actions and policies of the new state.

The traditional moral prestige of the village schoolteacher had been gradually eroded since the turn of the century. Young graduates of modern schools were often bereft of the highly regarded classical knowledge that distinguished their elder confreres and made them esteemed in the eyes of the communities in which they lived.37

In the early 1950s, this erosion of teachers' traditional status as moral icons continued, as an unprecedentedly interventionist state sought deliberately to transform village teachers into 'transmission belts' for inculcating official policy and values. To the extent that these efforts were successful (and there was, as we have seen, a great deal of resistance), they created teachers who no longer represented the community's customary values to
itself. Instead they created state agents, local spokespersons for a new and alien set of beliefs and values.

The material living standard of rural teachers in the 1950s was notoriously low. In early 1951 the country's two largest newspapers, Renmin ribao and Guangming ribao, began a series of regular reports on the poverty and low educational levels of most rural schoolteachers. Worst off were primary teachers in the self-financed minban schools. Reports from as late as 1957 referred to teachers who went without pay for up to three months and were forced to subsist on food rations borrowed from their students.38

Officials candidly admitted in the 1950s that rural minban teachers across the country suffered from an "inferiority complex" (zibeiqan). They felt that their work was without value or prospect of improvement in the future.39

A 1952 survey of students in a primary teacher training school in the Southwest found that fewer than 30% of those enrolled were genuinely committed to becoming primary schoolteachers. Most were enrolled because they had failed to gain admission to more preferred institutions, or because tuition was inexpensive, or because they were attending on a trial basis.40

National statistics show that the average income of rural primary schoolteachers rose by nearly 25% between 1951 and 1953. However, statistics that delineate incremental improvements can camouflage the abysmally low standard of
living that continued to afflict the majority of rural primary school teachers not only during the 1950s, but throughout the 1970s and 1980s as well. In 1980, for example, rural primary school teachers were still the lowest paid occupation in China, followed by rural middle school teachers. That was more than thirty years after the founding of the PRC.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the literacy movement experienced frustration precisely at the point where state met local society, in the person of the village school teacher. Ideally, village teachers would have been trained, dedicated agents of the state. But the PRC inherited a complex legacy in teachers. Poorly educated, poverty-stricken teachers frustrated literacy education as much as elite professionally minded educators who decried what they saw as unwarranted political interference and declining educational standards. Both had a cultural role as defenders and mobilizers of village resistance against intrusive state authority. More than rich peasants, more than former landlords and capitalists, teachers have been the social group most singled out by the Party for criticism and ostracization. The irony is that at the local level the Communist Party depended most critically for the successful
transmission of educational policy on persons it trusted least. The explosive relationship between school teachers and the state was therefore one of the most critical weaknesses affecting Chinese literacy education during the Mao years.


3 Ezra Vogel, *Canton Under Communism*, p.64.

4 For instance, the Chairperson of the Central-South Culture and Education Committee was careful to note in 1951 that unemployed intellectuals who were one of the few available sources of teachers for the winter schools that were being set up by the communists in areas newly under their control were mostly all from the socially undesirable backgrounds of landlords and rich peasants. He also noted that it was impossible to produce enough "new" intellectuals in the immediate future, and that therefore the party must for the time being rely on these old intellectuals while "uniting" and "transforming" them. Chao Yimin, "Dongxue jiaoyu de fangzhen ji youguan de jige wenti."

5 The historical explanation for this undoubtedly has to do with the combination in late imperial Guangdong of the ideology of social mobility through the examination system, a profusion of examination-oriented lineage schools, intense population pressure, and a more or less stationary bureaucracy. As a result, the climate of rising expectations generated by the exam system was probably especially intense and unstable in Guangdong, the number of frustrated would-be upper level exam graduates especially high. Such frustrations not surprisingly often erupted into anti-establishment uprisings. Such uprisings often showed the imprint of Guangdong's particular culture. The presence of the West gave Guangdong's anti-establishment rebels access to alternative visions of society, which produced everything from the apocalyptic vision of moral retribution of the Taipings to the republican vision of Sun Yatsen.


Edgar Wickberg has pointed out to me that Mao himself falls into the category of those who were radicalized by contact with a radical teacher. Mao studied at Xu Teli's Hunan First Normal School which at the time was a national center of dissent.


On teachers' opposition to party involvement in schools and education in Guangdong during the early 1950s, see Zhou Ping, "Jinhou de renwu he gongzuo: quansheng wenjiao gongzuo huiyi zongjie baogao" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 5 (Sept. 1950): 2. See also Zhang Mingsheng, "Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui zongjie baogao" in Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailiao (yi), reprinted in Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 2 6 (April 1951): 5-10; and Xiao Xiangyong, "Dui shehui jiaoyu de yidian yijian" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 5 (Sept. 1950): 10-11.


Lu Lan, "Xiangcun jiaoshi ye er yao qingsuan zichan jieji jiaoyu sixiang ma?" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua (April 1952): 6-7.


17 "Tuanjie quansheng aiguo jiaoyu gongzuozhe wei banhao renmin de jiaoyu shiye er douzheng" in Guangdongsheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailliao (yi), p.63-74. See also Zhang Mingshen, "Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi." The All China Union of Educational Workers was formed in 1950 as the umbrella organization for the union's local branches.

18 David E. Apter, The Politics of Modernisation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). White describes how teachers in the state schools in the PRC have used their social bargaining power on different occasions and in different ways. See his "Distributive Politics and Educational Development: Teachers as a Political Interest Group." The subject of intellectuals 'social bargaining power' has become a valid subject of debate in China since 1978. For an introduction to recent views on the subject, see Shi Ping, Zhishi fenzi de lishi yundong he zuoyong (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue yuan chubanshe, 1988).

19 Zhou Ping, "Jinhou de renwu he gongzuo," p. 2. On the campaign itself, see "Guanyu jiaoshi xuexi wenti de baogao" in Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huiyi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailliao (yi), pp. 75-87. See also Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 17-18.

20 Siu (1989), pp. 109-110 describes how this happened in Xinhui during the late 1940s.

21 Taishan xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 99. On teacher opposition to using the schools to promote the central government's social and political campaigns, see also Xiao Xiangyong, "Dui shehui jiaoyu de yidian yijian."


23 "Discrimination Against Primary Teachers Not Allowed." On the complaints expressed by teachers during the 100 flowers movement, see "Jiaqiang xuexiaozhong dangyuan he qunzhong de lianxi" Renmin jiaoyu 2 (1957): 21; also "Jiaoshi tan jiaoyu gongzuo neibu maodun" Renmin jiaoyu 6 (1957): 6-13.

25 For one possible explanation of this phenomenon, see White, "Distributive Politics and Educational Development," p. 119. Building on the analysis of the Hungarian sociologist Andras Hegedus concerning the role of the technical division of labour in determining social interest groups, White argues that the "objective position" of teachers in the "social division of labour" is, in the final analysis, more significant than the actions of the state in shaping their self-conception.

26 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p.57.

27 CCP membership levelled off at about six million just after 1949. It began to grow rapidly in 1954. Within a year and a half it had grown to 10.75 million. By mid-1957 there were 12.5 million Party members, more than double the 1954 figure. Craig Dietrich, People's China: A Brief History (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 93.

28 Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 149; Huazhou xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 26-27. By the mid-1950s generational divisions began to emerge between school teachers from the old society and younger teachers with a greater loyalty and commitment to the revolution. A 1956 article from Guangdong described a split between the "old hands" (laopaizi) who became teachers before 1949 and the "new force" (xin lilianq) of teachers educated and imbued with the values and ideals of the revolution. Lin Liming, Guanyu dangqian jiaoyu gongzuo zhong de jige wenti" Guangdong jiaoyu (10 April 1956): 4.


32 Zijin jiaoyu zhi, p. 63.

33 The quotation is taken from the excerpt of the novel in Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed., Chinese Civilization and

34 Li Jiangang, Xiaoxue jiaoyu daquan, p. 82.

35 Cited in Galbiati, P'eng P'ai and the Hai-Lu-feng Soviet, p. 77.


38 The income and social welfare measures instituted for teachers in the 1950s are summarized in Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 124.

39 "Shitan zenyang guanche qunzhong banxue de fangzhen." The material living standards of rural primary school teachers varied widely locally and across the country. In mid-1951 the average salary for rural primary teachers in Guangdong was 70-80 catties of grain per month. In Zijin county, rural primary teachers' salaries were converted in the early 1950s from 200 catties of foodgrain per month in kind, to 35-40 yuan per month in cash. In 1956 the central government established a minimum wage of 23 yuan per month for rural primary teachers, but in some parts of the country minban primary teachers received far less, 10 yuan per month in Yunnan and only 4 yuan per month in Guizhou. Zhang Mingshen, "Guangdong chudeng jiaoyu de qingkuang yu wenti" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 3 2 (June 1951): 10-13. Zijin xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 63. Wu Yen-yin, "We should Pay Enough Attention to the Middle and Primary School Educatjn and Teachers," p. 13.

40 See Zhang Ruxin, "Zuo yige renmin jiaoshi shifou guangrong."

Chapter 5

THE IMPACT OF THE COLLECTIVIZATION OF AGRICULTURE ON THE NEED FOR POPULAR LITERACY

In previous chapters I have shown that until the mid-1950s China's leaders did not consider mass literacy an urgent priority in the new state. The early 1950s carried on the wartime tradition of using schools as conduits for political propaganda. This could involve literacy, but did not require it. Various oral techniques like lantern slides and mobile theatre troupes eliminated the need for trained teachers, textbooks, paper, ink and writing utensils, all of which were in short supply. Moreover, oral education was a faster way of transmitting Party messages, since it did not involve the long, tedious effort of learning characters. Literacy in these years was deemed important but only among cadres, for bureaucratic communication and knowledge of political theory contained in written texts.

Collectivization forced China's leaders to revise their conception of the importance and timetable for achieving mass literacy. The collectivization of Chinese rural society in the mid nineteen fifties is well known in the West. But the literacy campaigns which accompanied collectivization are hardly known at all in the West. Yet the architects of collectivization attached tremendous importance to literacy. Chinese politicians and economists
in the mid nineteen fifties regarded mass literacy as crucial for both the immediate consolidation of collectives and for their long term success as agents of economic development and cultural change.

In this chapter I examine how China's leaders viewed the importance of literacy for collectivization. In particular, I will show that their vision of literacy's relationship to collectivization was rooted in a number of assumptions about literacy: assumptions about the relationship of literacy to science and rationality; assumptions about literacy's role in fostering planned economic development; and about the functional relationship of literacy to bureaucratic integration. In addition, I will show that the urgency with which Chinese leaders came to regard mass literacy in 1956 was the result of their reading of Soviet history and of their worried comparisons of literacy levels in China and the Soviet Union on the eve of collectivization. In the 1950s collectivization in China was still what it has been for most of this century, one of Marxism-Leninism's greatest and most sacrosanct shibboleths. Mass literacy was its inseparable close companion.

Literacy and the Effort to Reform People's Customs

Although the perceived link between mass literacy and modernization did not become the basis of state literacy
policy until collectivization, aspects of it were evident from the early 1950s. It stands out most in the Party's views of popular culture. When Chinese leaders considered the importance of literacy for the creation of a modern society, they saw two aspects. One was the inculcation of specific kinds of knowledge and skills which involved reading and writing. The other was the belief that literacy was the means for effecting a prerequisite cognitive transformation in peasant culture. Extirpating the fatalistic outlook of peasant popular culture and getting peasants to think scientifically was seen by China's leaders as the essential precondition for the emergence of a modern technological society.

There was, of course, nothing particularly new about this in the nineteen fifties. As Paul Bailey and others have shown, the effort to "reform people's customs" was a prominent feature in the ideology of Chinese popular education since the turn of the century.1 China's post-1949 leaders were, in this sense, participants in a common theme in twentieth century educational reform in China.

Moreover, it did not really matter which political camp one came from. Early twentieth century educational reformers of all political stripes shared a common faith in the importance of literacy for 'scientific' thinking and, along with that, a more or less common disdain for what they perceived as the backwardness of Chinese peasant culture. That was true whether the reformers acquired their belief in
the Enlightenment-inspired "literacy myth" inside the classrooms of Columbia University Teachers' College or in those of Moscow's University for Toilers of the Far East. Both exposed their Chinese students to the same eighteenth and nineteenth century European ideas about the relationship of education to science and progress.

Nothing was more firmly associated with the onerous cultural obstacles to modernization in the minds of China's educated leaders than the tenacious peasant habit of ascribing to the gods phenomena whose real explanation required an ability to think in secular, scientific terms. Guangdong's earliest communist mass educator, Peng Pai, bristled at the beliefs of peasants in Haifeng. He specifically mentioned their wasteful burning of incense to propitiate the gods; their faith in Buddha and spirits; and their blind obedience to Emperor and the upper classes. Peng Pai blamed these "uncivilized" lower class behaviours on the traditional class structure: "this is what the exploiting classes confer on the peasants, in order to keep them as slaves for generation upon generation, this uncivilized civilization."2

Half a century later in Peng Pai's Haifeng, local communist educational officials in Minzhu village were still recanting Peng Pai's concerns, as they confidently declared that the ten-odd village literacy classes operating in Minzhu would empower peasants to give up their "ugly habit" of worshipping idols. In the process of eliminating this
wasteful habit the villagers of Minzhu would also save
themselves a lot of money, said these officials.3

The official view after 1949 was that 'thousands of
years of feudalism have given rise to conservative,
superstitious, and unhealthy habits among peasants, these
being a serious obstacle to modernizing agriculture and
hygiene in the villages.'4 One particularly poignant
illustration of the latter concern involved an outbreak of
plague in Guangdong in 1950.

In the spring of 1950 there was an outbreak of plague
on Ban Island off the Leizhou peninsula in southern
Guangdong. A team of Soviet epidemic disease experts was
called in to vaccinate the local population against further
infection. But to the embarrassment and chagrin of the
Chinese officials who accompanied the Soviet doctors, the
local villagers refused to allow themselves to be vaccinated
by the foreign doctors. The villagers believed that the
vaccinations were really a foreign trick to render the
villagers infertile.5

In this one story were contained all of the tensions
and ambiguities felt by Chinese intellectuals in their
attitudes towards the West, towards Chinese peasant culture,
and towards the possibilities for China's modernization.
Here the representatives of modern, scientific, foreign
civilization came up against the bedrock of ancient peasant
beliefs and mistrust of outsiders. Instances like this kept
alive the constant tension in the state's perception of the
peasantry: as source of national strength, and symbol of China's backwardness.

Guangdong educators also saw the unscientific beliefs of peasant culture as holding up the application of science to agriculture. In Xinpeng township in Zhongshan county, a thirty six member "youth assault team" was mobilized in 1955 to destroy local popular beliefs that 'rice without insect infestation was like heaven without dragons' and that to attack insects with insecticide would violate the will of the gods.6

The struggle against superstition was waged with particular intensity and evangelical zeal in the non-Han minority populated borderlands of Guangdong. The mainly oral cultures of the Yao, Miao and other minority peoples in Guangdong were seen by Guangdong's socialist modernizers as being especially sorcery-laden.7

Officially, China abided by a policy of "autonomy" (zizhi) for minority nationalities borrowed from the Soviet Union. This policy was expressed in the organization of the PRC state structure as well as in official cultural policy which encouraged the development of indigenous languages and education. Thus, for example, written scripts were developed for previously oral languages. Manchus in Guangzhou had their own school in the 1950s.8

Nevertheless, the impulse to "reform" minority peoples cultures was powerfully present in Guangdong in the 1950s. And the evidence of this impulse was nowhere more apparent
than in the educational domain. Traditional Yao education consisted of apprenticing select Yao youth to become shamans, who protected Yao villages by propitiating gods and driving away ghosts and demons. But in 1954 only nine of seventy-three teachers in Yao primary schools in northern Guangdong were Yao. The rest were Han literacy evangelists who volunteered or were sent (the latter was more common) to minority-populated areas. None of these seventy three spoke the Yao language. Instead they taught Yao children to become literate in Chinese.9

All of these efforts to use literacy education as a means of extirpating superstition, convincing peasants to 'believe in science' (xiangxin kexue), and fostering the integration of minority regions were put into practice long before collectivization became an urgent issue in China. Although they were seen as essential to the creation of a modern citizenry, these efforts acquired a greater sense of immediate relevance after 1953, as China embarked on the effort to create a fully "planned" (jihua) and "organized" society.

**Literacy Expansion Targets Under the First Five Year Plan**

The ideology of planning and organization began to dominate Chinese social thought from 1953 with the inauguration of the First Five Year Plan for the development
of the national economy. A quick look at any economic journal of the 1950s will show the tremendous sense of utopian confidence that infected Chinese planning circles. With a sense of hubris unmatched at any time since, China's state planners and politicians in 1953 marched confidently into the future, believing without the slightest sign of doubt that they were about to create the perfect planned society.

The revolutionaries believed that the elimination of private property and the profit motive made possible much greater economic efficiency. Against the haphazard nature of economic development in the capitalist countries, with each pursuing his or her own selfish interests, the revolutionaries trumpeted the theoretically greater efficiencies of a centrally planned economy in which public ownership of the means of production made possible for the first time in history the perfect coordination of all factors of production.

Furthermore, production under such a centrally planned system would be designed to serve societal needs and the development of the national economy as a whole, rather than serve the interests of individual capitalists who did not have society's interests at heart. In short, the revolutionaries, who believed in a theory of historical progress, believed that they were creating the world's most historically advanced form of civilization.
Education played a critical role in this ideology of planned economic development. It is often overlooked and unknown in the West that the theory of "human capital" actually originated in the Soviet Union. The original human capital theorist was Stanislav Gustavovich Strumilin, the famous high-ranking member of Gosplan (the Soviet central planning agency) during the Soviet industrialization drive of the 1930s.

Strumilin's idea of considering education a factor of production and coordinating educational investment with economic growth targets accordingly found its way into Western development economics and American social science as "human capital" theory in the 1960s. It entered the West via UNESCO, one of the few arenas where the ideas of the 'East' and 'West' blocs had a chance to intermingle in the Cold War world of that time.

Not surprisingly, the human capital concept found its way into Chinese economic development strategy as well. China's First Five Year Plan, modelled after the Soviet one, introduced the Chinese practice of setting educational 'production quotas' based on planners' calculations of the kinds and quantities of human resource skills needed to fulfill the plan.

The First Five Year Plan called for a steady, measured increase in the number of literates and other levels of educated 'talent' (rencai) over the duration of the Plan. The Plan anticipated a need for some 20-23 million new
literates to meet the needs of "national construction" over the course of the plan. This target was further subdivided into an increase of around 3-4 million new literates per year, broken down into regional and provincial targets.

Guangdong's target under the First Five Year Plan called for the elimination of illiteracy among 6,370,000 illiterates. Only twenty percent of these new literates were expected to achieve an educational level equivalent to that of a primary school graduate by 1957. In addition, the Plan set specific targets in Guangdong for primary and secondary graduates from the state system, as well as for various levels and types of university graduates and specialized technicians.12

When the First Five Year Plan was formulated in 1953, collectivization was still envisioned to be a long way off, perhaps as much as three or more five year plans away. Hence the above targets did not include estimates of the numbers of new literates needed in a fully collectivized rural economy. Within a few years, however, this would become a crucial planning issue. The problem for the architects of collectivization was not just that the literacy targets of the First Five Year Plan had not anticipated collectivization within five years. The problem was also that even the modest literacy targets set forth in the plan were not being fulfilled.

Jack Goody has argued extensively for the functional importance of literacy in bureaucratic forms of
organization. He emphasizes that writing is essential for bureaucratic integration because it is the technology which permits recording, classification, storage, retrieval and transmission of information across space and time.13

For Goody, the role of writing in bureaucratic states stands out especially in the administrative sphere, including its use in the state economy. As he puts it:

The central problem concerning the contribution of writing to the economy has to do with its role in 'development' in the very broadest sense, that is, in promoting new technologies (and the associated division of labour), in extending the possibilities of management on the one hand and of commerce and production on the other, in transforming methods of capital accumulation, and finally in changing the nature of individual transactions of an economic kind.14

In terms of modern economic development, Goody sees the most basic contribution of literacy to this process as what he calls the ability "to read the seed packet." By this Goody means that the functionally literate required a minimum level of reading and writing skill, without which modern economic inputs cannot be applied.

China's economic planners shared these views of the functional importance of literacy. In Guangdong in 1953 one of the stories circulated to stimulate peasants' desire for literacy was the example of a Guangdong poor peasant called Guo Chengzhang. Guo managed to secure some scientifically bred seeds, but was unable to grow them because he could not read the seed packet.15

As early as 1949, China's newspaper for better educated readers, the Guangming ribao, had identified the literacy
skills that peasants would eventually need in order to function in a collectivized society. Peasants would need "culture" (wenhua) in order to allocate work schedules on a rational, efficient basis; to calculate the value of workpoints; to draw up production plans and reports; and to look after the registration of shares, cooperatively owned farm implements and the like.

Beyond these immediate uses of literacy, the authors of this article looked forward to the technical revolution that would accompany nationwide collectivization. It would also require literacy in order for peasants to apply advanced technology related to pest control, water conservation, improved cultivation methods, and the mechanization of farming.16

In 1955 Dong Chuncai, Vice-Minister of Education and Vice-Chair of the soon-to-be-established National Anti-Illiteracy Association, outlined what he maintained were the three most significant uses of literacy under the collective system. First and foremost, said Dong, increased popular literacy was necessary to strengthen management of the collective system of ownership and production. The evaluation of work, recording of workpoints, formulation of production plans, and registration of personal property with the collective all required the ability to read, write and calculate.

Second, said Dong, literacy was necessary to promote technological advances in the countryside, because
scientific knowledge was contained and transmitted by the written word. The use of chemical fertilizer, soil improvement techniques, pest control, the design and operation of modern agricultural implements; all these scientific activities required the ability to read and write.

Thirdly, Dong pointed to literacy's increasingly important political function. Teaching local cadres and peasants how to read books, reports and documents made it simpler and more effective for the Party to communicate its messages to villagers. Written communication was also more easily directed at individual audiences than oral forms of communication, said Dong. In this way written communication from the state would better enable peasants to grasp "their individual responsibilities under the new social system."17

By 1955 cooperatives were making detailed calculations of the number and types of literate persons required for particular occupational categories.18 Hu Yaobang stated in 1956 that exactly 47% of the Chinese countryside would be fully mechanized by the year 1967. On this basis Lu Dingyi in 1960 estimated that China's soon-to-be mechanized rural economy would require 1,840,000 tractor drivers and a further 440,000 unspecified types of "technical cadres' (jishu ganbu).19

In 1956 the head of the Guangdong branch of the Youth League declared that collectivization had created a desperate need for all kinds of new literate 'talent' in
production teams and brigades: cooperative leaders, team leaders, accountants, technicians, veterinarians, health care workers and agricultural workers. Xiang Nan, a leading figure in the national branch of the Youth League, was even more adamant about the pressing need for literacy under collectivization. "The development of the co-operativization of agriculture will change the outlook of all rural work, and one of these changes is the demand of the peasants for the study of the written language which becomes more and more urgent," proclaimed Xiang.

For the running of the co-operatives calls for the drawing up of plans, the keeping of books, and if the people are illiterate, these tasks cannot be well done. This is why (the peasants) say, 'co-operatives are really good, but without knowledge of characters, we cannot run (them) properly.'

Chinese Literacy Levels in the Mid-1950s and the Debate Over Collectivization

The problem was that by 1955 the ordained need for literacy in order to bring about collectivization had outstripped the capacity of the state and the willingness of villagers to satisfy this need. This was not an overly urgent concern as long as collectivization was still relegated to sometime in the indeterminate future, as it had been a few years earlier when the First Five Year Plan was enunciated. But by the mid-1950s a debate was taking place at the highest levels of China's leadership over the speed
of collectivization. Within the context of that debate, the literacy level of the Chinese people began to emerge as a paramount concern.

Western coverage of the mid-1950s' debate over the speed of collectivization has tended to focus on the mechanization issue: whether collectivization was viable before the mechanization of agriculture or whether, as Mao and others argued, collectivization could actually speed up the mechanization of agriculture. The debate over literacy levels was also a crucial aspect of this debate, however. In fact, in some ways it underlay the whole debate over mechanization.

Nothing was of more concern to China's leaders' when discussing the literacy requirements of collectivization than comparisons with the Soviet Union. Such comparisons were frequently made and much talked about in Chinese educational circles on the eve of collectivization.

Chinese educational planners writing in the 1950s were convinced that the Soviet Union had embarked on collectivization in 1929 with a literacy rate that was far better than China's in the mid-1950s. By 1955 Chinese planners were warning each other that the Soviet literacy rate on the eve of collectivization was around 80%. In China, they pointed out, the situation was ominously reversed: the official rate of illiteracy in China on the eve of collectivization was 80%-- unchanged from what it had been in 1949.
It would not have mattered had they known that this figure was exaggerated, as the research of Western scholars of the Soviet literacy drive shows. They were aware that the Soviet Union had declared universal literacy an urgent priority since 1919. That was when Lenin had issued the famous "illiteracy decree" calling upon all illiterates to enroll for study (Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaia, personally led the literacy crusade of the 1920s). By contrast in China universal literacy had been positively ruled out as an immediate objective in 1949; and the literacy movement as a whole had been in a state of collapse since early 1953.

To make matters seem even worse, Chinese educational planners writing in the mid-1950s were also aware that the Soviet Union had instituted its first plans for implementing universal primary education in 1925, and had basically achieved that goal by 1933. By contrast, in China barely 52% of primary school age children were attending school in 1956. In response China drew up its own first compulsory education plan in 1956. But even in the 1990s China has still failed to realize its goal of universal primary school education.23

Finally, during the Soviet collectivization drive literate urban workers were dispatched to the countryside to serve as managers in the new collectives. The practice was institutionalized in the form of the Shefstvo system whereby urban factories "adopted" rural collectives. Altogether
around 25,000 of the 250,000 Soviet urban workers who took part in this movement were resettled permanently in the countryside. Most became chairpersons and members of kolkhoz (collective) management boards.24

China could scarcely afford such a system of resettling literate urban workers in the countryside to solve the management needs of cooperatives. In fact in China the rural literacy targets of the first five year plan had been intended in part to accomplish the opposite: to supply a growing number of literates to meet the shortage of educated labour in the cities. China's urban population grew from 58 million in 1949 to 92 million in 1957. In Guangdong the urban population grew from 4 million in 1949 (13.3% of the population) to over 6 million in 1960 (16% of the population).

Most of this rapidly growing urban labour force was recruited from among rural illiterates. In the early 1950s, before collectivization, Chinese planners cited the urgent demand for literate labour in the cities as a reason for expanding literacy education in rural areas under the first five year plan.25

Faced with these kinds of worrying comparisons with literacy rates in the Soviet Union, Chinese literacy planners in the mid-1950s turned to the experience of neighbouring Vietnam for help. Chinese educational delegations were sent to study the anti-illiteracy experiences of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
Northern Vietnam was a fraternal socialist state. It was also, perhaps more importantly, a neighbouring Asian society with a large peasant population and a shared Confucian educational heritage. The turn toward Vietnam may have reflected Mao's growing disillusionment with the Soviet Union and increased Chinese interest in Southeast Asia.

Moreover, Ho Chi Minh had carried out a large and relatively successful literacy campaign in the 1940s, which Chinese literacy campaigners wished to study. Chinese educational journals from the mid-1950s included numerous articles and reports on the Vietnamese literacy campaign. Many recommended that China adopt some of the same campaign methods. At the first national conference of anti-illiteracy activists held in Beijing in 1956, representatives of the Hanoi Municipal Education Bureau were even on hand to award silver medals to Chinese literacy activists.26

The growing sense of alarm by 1955 was reinforced by the failure to meet even the minimal literacy projections set forth in the first five year plan. The plan had projected an increase of 23 million new literates, mostly basic level cadres, over the duration of the plan (1953-57). But by 1955 as few as 4 million persons, and no more than 9-10 million persons had actually been made literate over the entire period since 1949.

Most of these persons, moreover, had received literacy education before the abrupt collapse of the literacy
movement in early 1953. In 1954 there were only 24 million persons enrolled in literacy classes across the country. And of these no more than 2 million became officially literate in that year. Taking into consideration population growth, the official illiteracy rate in 1955 was still pegged at 80%, the same as it had been in 1949.

In Guangdong, there were only 843,000 persons enrolled in various kinds of sparetime education in 1954, out of a total illiterate population between the ages of 14 and 50 of approximately twelve million. The illiteracy rate among 14-50 year olds in 1956 in Guangdong was also officially unchanged from what it had been in 1950—around 75-80%. According to a draft educational history I was able to examine of a primary school in Tanbian township in Panyu county near Guangzhou, adult literacy efforts in this township did not even begin until the Great Leap Forward in 1958.

In July 1955 Mao settled the debate over whether collectivization in China would continue to proceed gradually as originally planned and as many Party leaders still believed was the wisest course given China's low level of development, or whether collectivization would proceed quickly and immediately. Mao had chose the latter.

On July 30 1955 Mao went over the heads of the Party establishment who opposed his views and directed them instead to a meeting of provincial Party bosses. With one
speech Mao transformed the course of collectivization and the history of China.32

Suddenly, the expansion of popular literacy became an urgent national priority, for the first time since 1949. If the rural economy collapsed because there were not enough literates to make collectivization work, the whole nation was in trouble. A collapsed rural economy meant food shortages.

The sense of urgency with which literacy suddenly came to be regarded under these circumstances cannot be exaggerated. In 1955 one of the delegates to a Youth League forum pointed out that at the rate of the Ministry of Education's current target of just over 3 million new literates in 1955, it would take 60 years to eliminate illiteracy among the more than 180 million illiterates in China between the ages of 14-50.33

Liang Weilin, head of the Guangdong Bureau of Education and leading member of the Guangdong Anti-Illiteracy Association, lamented in the midst of the collectivization drive that "50,000, even 100,000" new literates per year in Guangdong was not enough to keep up with the planned pace of economic development in the province. At the current rate, said Liang, it would require "decades, even a century" to eliminate Guangdong's illiteracy scourge.34

China was paying the price for the low priority accorded to literacy since 1949. It was also paying the price for the land reform policy of prohibiting literacy
education which resulted in filling up the bottom ranks of the party-state structure with illiterate village activists. And it was now paying the price for the collapse of the literacy movement since 1953. According to one source, when the cooperativization was launched in Guangdong most village cadres were so poorly educated that they "had mouths but were unable to speak (and) writing brushes that never moved."35

To reduce the level and extent of illiteracy among rural cadres in order to make collectivization work, some 53,000 illiterate cadres in Guangdong were enrolled in special full-time literacy classes in 1956. The object of these classes was to impart a basic knowledge of 2000 characters within the astonishingly brief time of 2 1/2 months. This would be accomplished by learning three characters per hour, for 600 hours, spread over 2 1/2 months!36

Rapid collectivization beginning in the summer of 1955 left many newly formed mutual aid teams and cooperatives in a state of organizational chaos because they lacked the literate personnel necessary to make them work. Many were forced to seek ingenious if cumbersome ways around the illiteracy problem, as the following examples show.

When the peasants of Fengtang township in Guangdong's Luoding county formed mutual aid teams, it was discovered that five of the eight households in one team did not even have one literate family member. In order to keep track of
each household's labour contribution, eight sheets of paper were distributed, one for each family. Each family used a stick of incense to burn one hole in its paper for each day worked. This was in order to ensure that the family was not cheated in the distribution of team proceeds. Before long, however, one family's sheet of paper caught on fire and was destroyed. After that the team was disbanded because members could no longer agree on how to share the work and benefits.

In another case, the peasants of Charong township formed a cooperative, only to realize that none among them was literate enough to keep the accounts. Instead of keeping books, each member of the cooperative left a section of bamboo with the cooperative leader. After each full day worked, members went personally to the home of the cooperative leader to deposit one yellow bean each in his or her section of bamboo. For every half day of work, a single grain of rice was deposited.37

Illiterate cooperative leaders inflicted waste and chaos on cooperatives. Chen Fengying was assistant team leader in Pule cooperative in Lechang county, Guangdong. His illiteracy required him constantly to rely upon others to compile his reports and explain written communications.38 In Guangning county, Guangdong, Qiu Lianfang was elected leader when his village formed a cooperative in 1955. Unable to read or write, Qiu wrought chaos on the cooperative when he attempted to rely on his memory alone
rather than solicit help from others. Members turned against him after Qiu repeatedly confounded the distribution of workpoints and work assignments. He would dispatch large teams to labour on tiny plots and vice-versa.39 Organizational problems brought on by widespread illiteracy were one of the major causes of widespread dissolution of cooperatives across the country in 1955. Estimates range from 20,000 to as many 200,000 mutual aid teams and cooperatives dissolved between February and July, 1955.40

By late 1955 and early 1956 the situation had become critical. One editorial writer summed up the 1956 situation rather euphemistically in the following terms: "With several hundred million peasants heading for cooperation, individual and dispersed production have turned to take the shape of collective production on a large scale, and backward means of production and techniques are being gradually replaced by progressive means of production and techniques...But without literacy, many new production techniques and other forms of knowledge cannot be mastered by the broad peasantry. This could greatly prolong the time required for carrying out the technical revolution..."41

It was the sense of growing urgency as China lunged towards collectivization that compelled Mao in 1956 to launch the most drastic literacy measures yet undertaken in the People's Republic. China's first national mass literacy campaign was launched in early 1956, at the height of collectivization. It adopted the ambitious target of
completing China's long march to universal literacy within the space of seven years. Its successor campaign, mounted at the height of the euphoric Great Leap Forward in 1958, entertained even more utopian objectives.


3 "Nongcun de xuexi rechao" Hong Kong Dacionqbao 21 Aug. 1950 in Union Research Institute L0136, 4222 3235.

4 "Nongcun zhong pochu mixin kaizhan weisheng gongzuo de jingyan" in Renmin jiaoyushe, ed., *Nongmin shizi jiaoyu de zuzhi xingshi he jiaoyu fangfa* (Beijing: 1950). This article is also reprinted in *Renmin jiaoyu* 1 2 (1950): 122-128. Chapter 8 in the book is devoted exclusively to experiences in using literacy education to eradicate superstition. See "Fan fengjian mixin de jiaoxue jingyan," pp. 146-150. For a summary of these techniques, see Lao Han, "Jieshao 'nongmin shizi jiaoyu de zuzhi xingshi he jiaoxue fangfa'" *Renmin jiaoyu* 2 1 (Nov. 1950): 46. In the same book, see also "Zhankai sixiang," pp. 88-89, which comments on the "closed thinking" (sixiang zhan bu kai) of peasants and workers who work with their muscles and have few opportunities to use their minds.

5 See Xiao Xiangyong, "Dui shehui jiaoyu de yidian yijian."


7 An exception was the Zhuang minority which, in Guangdong, was for the most thoroughly sinicized. Most Zhuang speak and write Chinese and are culturally indistinguishable in many ways from the Han majority. On the minority peoples in Guangdong, a good demographic overview can be found in Zhu Yuncheng, ed., *Zhongguo renkou: Guangdong fence*, pp. 338-364.

8 "Dui shaoshu minzu jiaoxue shang de jidian yijian" Guangming ribao 30 Jan. 1954 in Union Research Institute L0139 42411. There were nineteen hundred Manchus in Guangzhou in the early 1950s, descendants of Qing banner garrisons. Most Manchu children attended the Guoguang primary school. A special school for Muslim children was also established in Guangzhou in the early 1950s, the Qingzhen primary school. On the two schools see "Sui
Tensions were evident between Han and minority people attending the same schools in Guangzhou in the 1950s, over, for example, Muslim students' demands for separate dining facilities where pork was not served, and over charges that Han students disrespected minority customs and culture and still clung to the "Great Han chauvinism" (dahan zhuyi) practised by the Guomindang government. See "Zunzhong shaoshu minzu tongxue de shenghuo xiguan" Zhongguo qingnianbao 6 Nov. 1953 in Union Research Institute LO139 42411.

9 "Guli jiaoshimen genghao de ban Yaozu jiaoyu shiye fuwu" Nanfang ribao 21 Sept. 1954 in Union Research Institute LO139, 424125.


12 On the educational aspirations of the First Five Year Plan, see the following. "Jiaoyubu dangzu guanyu diyici quanguo nongmin yeyu wenhua jiaoyu huiyi de baogao;" "Zhonggong zhongyang dui jiaoyubu dangzu guanyu diyici quanguo nongmin yeyu wenhua jiaoyu huiyi de baogao," both in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nonqmin jiaoyu), pp. 47-54, 46-47. Also, Lin Handa, "Wei shehui zhuyi jianshe kaizhan saomang gongzuo;" and Li Fuchun, Report on the First Five Year Plan for Development of the National Economy of the People's Republic of China (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1955). The plan's requirements for various kinds of specialized talent (zhuanmen rencai) in the countryside are presented in Yang Xiufeng's 1954 speech to the second national conference on higher education for the countryside, "Peiyang nongcun zhuanmen rencai yaozou ziji de lu" in Yang Xiufeng jiaoyu wenji (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1987), pp. 43-53. On Guangdong's literacy target under the First Five Year Plan, see Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 23.

13 Goody, The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society.

14 Goody, The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society, pp. 46, 92.

15 "Yige shizi buduo nongmin xianzai yineng shuxie zichuan." This story was reprinted in the Hong Kong newspaper Dagongbao 4 Mar. 1953, in Union Research Institute LO136 4222 3235.

16 "Nongye hezuohua xuyao wenhua" Beijing Guangming ribao 2 Sept. 1949 in Union Research Institute LO135 42222. The official view of the relationship of literacy to collectivization was also spelled out by the Guangdong bureau of education in "Dali kaizhan nongcun saochu wenmang yundong" in Dali kaizhan saochu wenmang yundong ed. Guangdong sheng jiaoyu ting (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1956), pp. 47-48, originally published as an editorial in Nanfang ribao 5 Jan. 1956.

17 Dong Chuncai, "Diyici quanguo nongmin yeyu jiaoyu huiyi de zongjie baogao," pp. 29-34. See also "Dali kaizhan nongcun saochu wenmang yundong," pp. 47-51.

18 Dongzhang cooperative in Shanxi calculated that it needed twenty-odd persons literate in such areas as work point calculation, preparation of reports, and so forth in order for the cooperative to become viable. At the time there were only two persons in the cooperative with such abilities. Lu Can, "Shanxi pingxun xian shixing nongye shengchan hezuoshe ban minban xiao de jingyan" Renmin jiaoyu 8 (1985): 52-54.


22 The comparison was drawn by Chen Yi, Chairperson of the National Anti-Illiteracy Association. See New China News Agency Beijing 15 March 1956 in Survey China Mainland Press 1251 20 March 1956, pp. 4-5. See also New China News Agency Beijing (English) 20 June 1956 in Current Background 400. The comparison was based on information provided in a widely read speech given by the famous Soviet educator I. A. Kairov in 1951 to the first national conference on worker-peasant education on the Soviet Union's experience in literacy education. For a report on Kairov's speech see "Sulian saochu wenmang de jingguo" in Guangdong sheng diyijie gongnong jiaoyu huixi ji jiaoyu gonghui daibiao dahui cailiao, vol.1, pp. 21-26, one of the largest reports in the collection. Kairov's claims were patently inflated, however. The most optimistic Soviet data from the 1920s claimed a literacy rate of 51-55% (which most Western specialists and contemporary Soviet sources reject as too high) and even Krupskaia herself complained in 1929 that ten years after the decree on illiteracy not a single article of it had been implemented. The massive "assault" (for that was the violent image in which it was conceived) on illiteracy in the Soviet Union really occurred in the 1930s in the context of Stalin's forced collectivization. The coercive nature of the literacy drive was underlined by the coordination committee's official title, the gramCheka (Cheka were the initials of the secret police, gram was an abbreviation for literacy), and by the widespread peasant resistance it encountered, including setting schools on fire, beatings and murdering of literacy teachers. A common belief was that peasant girls who went to the crash literacy schools (called likpunkty: literally, "liquidation points") were sold to become slaves in China. On the history of Soviet literacy campaigns, see Ben Eklof, "Russian Literacy Campaigns, 1861-1939" in Arnove and Graff, eds., National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives, pp. 123-145.

23 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 123, 125; New China News Agency Beijing 20 June 1956 in Current Background 400. The


25 One analysis of the educational requirements of industrialization pointed out that over the course of the decade the size of China's urban industrial proletariat would increase from 3 million to 10 million (presumably this referred to workers in state factories only) and that the added numbers would be recruited mostly from the villages, where most people were still illiterate. "Jianshe xin zhongguo bixu zhansheng erda luohou," pp.27-28. See Witold Rodzinski, The People's Republic of China: Reflections on Chinese Political History Since 1949 (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 56 for the urban growth rate in the 1950s. On urban growth in Guangdong during the same period, See Wu Yuwen, Guangdong jingji dili, pp. 67, 88. The growth of the urban population in Guangdong during this period was the result of two developments. One was the effort to spread modern economic activity southwest and north from its traditional centre in the Pearl River Delta. The northern city of Shaoguan, for example, was developed into a centre for heavy industry after 1949. The other development was the large influx of peasants into Guangdong cities during the economic crisis brought on by the Great Leap Forward.


27 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 578, 1034.

29 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 103.

30 "Dali kaizhan nongcun saochu wenmang yundong," in Dali kaizhan saochu wenmang yundong, p. 48. See also Guanyu Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo guanmian quihua de baoqao (jimi wenjian).

31 Tan Ruihong, Dali tanbian xiaoxue zhi (n.p., 1978), p. 17. I am grateful to the teachers and administrators of Tanbian primary school for presenting me with a copy of this document during a visit to their school in December, 1988.

32 Mao's famous speech of July 1955 in which he called for a drastic acceleration of the collectivization campaign has been widely reprinted. See, for example, Xuexi 11 (Oct. 1955). The timing of this particular reprinted version is significant. Mao's speech so stunned the rest of the Party Establishment, which had just previously reaffirmed the official policy of gradual collectivization over the course of several five-year plans, that Xuexi, the leading theoretical journal for cadre consumption, published two subsequent monthly issues in which Mao's speech was not even mentioned.

33 Xiang Nan, "Let the Whole Youth League Take a Hand in Wiping Out Illiteracy."

34 Liang Weilin, "Liji dongshou, zuzhi liliang, dali kaizhan quanheng fanwei de nongcun saochu wenmang yundong" in Dali kaizhan saochu wenmang yundong, ed. Guangdong sheng jiaoyu ting (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1956), p. 36. This document was originally published as an editorial in Nanfang ribao, 5 Jan. 1956.

35 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 109.

36 Guanyu guangdong sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo guanmian quihua de baoqao (jimi wenjian); Liang Weilin, "Liji dongshou, zuzhi liliang, dali kaizhan quanheng fanwei de nongcun saochu wenmang yundong" and "Dali kaizhan nongcun saochu wenmang yundong" both in Dali kaizhan saochu wenmang yundong, pp. 36-41, 47-51.

37 Both of these examples were raised by Tian Xin in "Jiji zhudong, xianqi yige xuexi wenhua de gaochao," p. 42.

38 "Saochu shengchan shuangfang shou" in Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang jiji fenzi daibiao dahui huikan, p. 95.

40 On the lack of numeracy skills in Guangdong collectives, see the examples in Zhonggong zhongyang bangong ting, ed., Zhongguo nongcun de shehui zhuyi gaochao 3 vols. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1956), vol.3, esp. p. 956. On the management problems in cooperatives caused by lack of skilled personnel, see also Lo Zicheng, "Guanyu nongye hezuoshe gonggu de gongzuo" Xuexi 6 (June 1955): 5-8. From his 1962 interviews with north China peasants Jan Myrdal uncovered other examples of the management problems in the collectives caused by educational poverty. Zhang Zhongliang was appointed book keeper of the Liuling village production team in 1958 because he had attended school during one winter at age nine and was now the most educated person in the village. In a neighbouring village, accounting responsibility was given to Luo Hanhong who had once attended primary school for a period. The village sponsored him to attend an elementary accounting course organized by the local party branch, as a result of which he compiled with several others a 500 character primer for teaching villagers how to keep track of their own workpoint earnings and to read the collective's account books. See Jan Myrdal, Report from a Chinese Village trans. by Maurice Michael (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), pp. 96-101, 183-195. The figure on the number of collectives and mutual aid teams disbanded in 1955 is cited in Stavis, The Politics of Agricultural Mechanization in China, p. 58.

41 "Lead positively the Movement for Eliminating Iliteracy" Renmin ribao 1 April 1956 in Survey China Mainland Press 17 April 1956, pp. 3-5. I have altered the translation slightly to improve the English. Mao's views on the relationship of literacy to collectivization are contained in his preface to the famous three volume collection of reports on the progress of the collectivization campaign released by the central committee and widely studied by local officials across the country in the mid-1950s. See Zhonggong zhongyang bangongting, comp., Zhongguo nongcun de shehui zhuyi gaochao. See also Zhou Enlai's speech on the subject, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guowuyuan guanyu jiaqiang nongmin yeyu wenhua jiaoyu de zhishi" Renmin jiaoyu 8 (1955): 50-51.
Chapter 6

THE NATIONAL LITERACY CAMPAIGNS OF 1956 AND 1958

The years from 1956 to 1959 were the period of the most intense anti-illiteracy activity in the history of the People's Republic. These were the years of China's two great national literacy campaigns. The first accompanied the collectivization of agriculture in 1956. The second, following closely on its heels, accompanied the Great Leap Forward in 1958-59.

The following figures indicate the extent of anti-illiteracy activity during this period. Compared to previous and later periods, the number of persons who claimed to have been made literate during these four years was staggering. In 1955, on the eve of the literacy campaign, a total of 3.68 million persons were made literate. In 1956 and 1957 the number of persons made literate increased sharply to 7.43 million and 7.2 million persons, respectively. An even more spectacular increase in the number of persons made literate was recorded during the Great Leap Forward in 1958. A total of forty million persons became literate in 1958, according to official sources. This was followed by a further twenty six million persons in 1959.

When the Great Leap collapsed, however, so did the literacy campaign which accompanied it. By 1961, for
example, the number of persons who became officially literate in that year had fallen to less than 500,000. By 1962 the figure was only 162,000.

Altogether as many as eighty million Chinese may have acquired basic literacy in the four years between 1956-60. The official illiteracy rate was reduced from eighty percent in 1955 to only forty three percent by the end of 1959. This left eighty six million illiterates officially remaining in the 12-40 year old age cohort which was the focus of anti-illiteracy efforts.

In Guangdong, official statistics tell a similar story. In 1954 a total of 987,000 were enrolled in literacy classes. In 1955 the number actually declined to 843,000. But in 1956 the number rose to 2.7 million persons, followed by 1.12 million persons in 1957. In 1958 a total of anywhere from 2.6 million to 5.5 million persons were made literate, depending on the source. The Guangdong educational yearbook, published in 1986, claims a figure of 4,860,000 new literates in 1958. Guangdong's official illiteracy rate was reduced from seventy nine percent (11 million) in 1949 to fifty two percent (7.59 million) in 1957. By the end of 1958 Guangdong's literacy rate fell to thirty nine percent (4.86 million); even less if one uses the more optimistic figures.

The problem is that the most spectacular achievements in literacy education are recorded for the period which we know to have been the most chaotic and unreliable in the
history of the PRC. What is one to make of the above figures in that case? This chapter analyzes the rise and fall of the literacy campaign between 1956 and 1960 and attempts to assess its results. By looking carefully at the course of the campaign and examining what its critics had to say, we can arrive at a better understanding of the significance of the above statistics. The central argument of this chapter is that the literacy campaigns of 1956 and 1958 revealed the weaknesses and the limits of the mass literacy campaign for effecting genuine and permanent improvements in popular literacy.

Chinese leaders realized this as well. Faced with intense criticism of the failures of this method, Mao and the others who had supported the campaign had to admit its defeat. The close of the nineteen fifties marked the end of the national literacy campaign as the most valued means of eliminating illiteracy in China.

The 1956 National Literacy Campaign: Aims and Objectives

On March 29, 1956 the central committee and the state Council jointly promulgated the "Decision Concerning the Eradication of Illiteracy."3 The Decision aimed for the complete elimination of illiteracy among 14-50 year olds within the space of seven years.4 In subsequent years this
age target was adjusted to a lower age limit of 12 years and an upper limit of 40-45 years.

The objective of the 1956 Decision was to wipe out illiteracy entirely among cadres within 2-3 years. Among urban factory and enterprise workers the goal was within 3-5 years. A lesser objective was set for peasants and urban labourers. The Decision called for eliminating illiteracy among seventy percent of peasants and urban labourers within 5-7 years.

Literacy standards were different for peasants than they were for workers. Urban workers and cadres were required to demonstrate a knowledge of 2000 characters in order to be judged officially literate. Peasants were required to know only 1500 characters. As well, peasants had to be able to write simple notes and keep accounts, perform simple calculations using an abacus, and read "simple" (qianjin) popular (i.e. specially written) books and newspapers.

Peasants were to acquire literacy in stages. The graded system of literacy primers discussed in chapter three was to form the basis of peasant literacy education. Peasants would progress through three different literacy primers of around five hundred characters each. Each primer was comprised of a separate vocabulary, one each for village-township, county, and provincial-national knowledge.

The first national mass literacy campaign in China was the product of a combination of influences: Leninist
organization; Stalinist "storming" methods; and YMCA-inspired, James Yanist grass roots techniques of mass mobilization. The latter had been copied by the CCP since the days of Mao's earliest contacts with Yan's Mass Education Movement in the 1920s. Only in the late 1950s, however, were these techniques revived on a massive, nationwide scale.

The beginnings of the organizational structure for the 1956 literacy campaign were put in place in 1949. A worker-peasant sparetime education department was set up in the Ministry of Education in 1949. Parallel to this was the Central Anti-Illiteracy Work Committee (saochu wenman gongzuo weiyuanhui), an institution which was borrowed from the Soviet Union. It was established in November 1952, under the state council.

In the early 1950s the anti-illiteracy work committee oversaw the establishment of township level literacy movement committees (shizi yundong weiyuanhui). The committees were composed of members of the newly emerging mass organizations: the Youth League, Women's Federation, Educational Workers' Union, the village militia and other groups.

Beginning in October 1953 the Central Anti-Illiteracy Work Committee was gradually merged (hebing) under the authority of the Education Ministry, a move which reflected the declining importance attached to literacy efforts following the failure of the accelerated literacy method.
Members of the committee opposed this move, not only because they lost their bureaucratic independence from the Ministry, but because the Ministry of Education was known to favour expansion of state schooling over adult literacy as the best means to solve the illiteracy problem.6

With the advent of the 1956 literacy campaign a separate bureaucracy for adult literacy work was restored, in the form of the National Anti-Illiteracy Association (guanguo saochu wenmang weiyuanhui). The Association, which met for the first time in March 1956, was headed by Chen Yi and other leading members of the Communist Party. These included Liao Luyan (one of the leading officials in charge of agricultural policy), Hu Yaobang (then head of the Youth League), Qian Qunrui (educator and specialist in Sino-Soviet relations), Lu Dingyi, Lin Handa, Hu Qiaomu, Lin Feng and Wu Yuzhang.7 Unlike the Ministry of Education, communist politicians, not professional educators, played the leading role.

Branches of the association were subsequently established at all levels of the administrative hierarchy down to the township. In Guangdong a provincial branch of the association was set up in 1956, composed of thirty-nine leading provincial communist party officials, headed by Gu Dacun. In addition, the Guangdong committee of the communist party established its own anti-illiteracy "leadership group" (lingdao xiaozu) in 1956. This committee was also chaired by Gu Dacun. By the end of 1956 anti-
illiteracy associations were established in approximately eighty percent of counties in Guangdong. By 1957 there were a total of around 6,500 anti-illiteracy associations at all levels in Guangdong, with a combined membership of 484,200.8

The Anti-Illiteracy Association was modelled directly on the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Eradication of Illiteracy which was set up by Lenin in 1919. The local associations were to "cooperate" with and "assist" the local educational bureaus to implement the literacy campaign. The role of the associations was to mobilize popular support and participation. Local educational bureaus were responsible for procuring teachers, literacy primers, school space and other administrative aspects.

Within the associations the Youth League played an especially prominent role. This also reflected Soviet practice. In 1955 Hu Yaobang, in his capacity as head of the Youth League, described the Youth League as the "natural helping hand" (tianran zhushou) of the literacy campaign in the villages. This echoed Stalin's nearly identical reference to the Soviet Komsomol (Young Communist League) as the literacy movement's "helping hand."9

The formal vocabulary of the 1956 campaign was also distinctly and deliberately reminiscent of the militantly combative imagery used in Stalin's 1930s literacy campaign. Literacy instructors were the campaign's "assault troops" (saomang dui). Youth League members were the "advance troops" (xianjun) who conducted propaganda work, procured
benches, desks and lamp oil for students, etc. Such deliberate aping of the Soviet literacy drive was subsequently heavily criticized during the brief Hundred Flowers Movement as proof that Chinese communist educators had a "colonial learning attitude" (zhimin de xuefen) towards borrowing from the educational experience of the Soviet Union.10

The March 1956 decree on illiteracy called upon all provinces, cities, counties, districts, and townships to formulate concrete plans and timetables for the eradication of illiteracy and submit them to the central authorities before mid-1957. To fulfill these plans, people and resources were mobilized on a scale never before witnessed in China. Rejecting the notion of educational "standardization" (zhengquihua) which had dominated mass education policy since the collapse of the literacy campaign in 1953, the 1956 campaign called for a decentralized, mass movement.

The objective of the campaign was to mobilize every available resource and commitment. Uniform standards were unnecessary and a hindrance to mass action. Lack of school space would be overcome by utilizing whatever kind of space was available, including former lineage halls and temples. Outdoor classes would be held in the fields while peasants rested from their work. The lack of teachers would be solved by summoning everyone who possessed any amount of
literate ability. The guiding principle was to be one of "using people to teach other people" *(yimin jiaomin).*

On the basis of this principle Lin Handa estimated in 1955 that China was capable of mobilizing an anti-illiteracy "army" of millions. It included 7-8 million peasants who had already experienced some form of literacy education since 1949. It also included all available primary and middle school graduates (by "available" Lin specified that he meant those graduates who were already living in the countryside). As well, the anti-illiteracy army could enlist the more than one million primary school teachers in the villages.11

Guangdong authorities announced in 1956 that they had "mobilized" a "great anti-illiteracy army" *(saomang dajun)* of two million persons. Guangdong's anti-illiteracy army was comprised of 400,000 Youth League members, half a million primary and middle school graduates, 110,000 primary school teachers, 600,000 "superior" primary school students, 300,000 middle school students, and 20,000 middle school teachers.12

In a classified document sent to central authorities in 1956 for their approval, the Guangdong education bureau called for this anti-illiteracy army to organize forty five percent of the province's 12-13 million illiterates aged 14-50 into literacy classes by the first half of 1956, and the remainder by the end of 1956. On this basis, illiteracy in Guangdong was to be eliminated by 1961, well before the
seven year objective set forth in the 1956 anti-illiteracy Decision. Before central authorities had a chance to respond to this plan, however, the head of the Guangdong branch of the Youth League publicly pledged to finish the task much sooner, by 1959.13 The Great Leap Forward pattern of bumping up quotas and pushing ahead target dates was already beginning to take shape in 1956, along with, it seems, an influential Great Leap faction in the Guangdong Party Branch.

In his major 1956 speech on the literacy campaign in China, Hu Yaobang identified three main forms of literacy instruction for the campaign.14 They included graded classroom instruction (*banji jiaoxue*), small group instruction (*xiaozu jiaoxue*), and individual instruction (*qebie jiaoxue*). The first referred to instruction in the minban schools which were to be widely established, financed and run by the newly established agricultural collectives. Such schools were to be run on a year round basis. In addition to setting up minban schools for illiterate adults, the newly founded collectives also became responsible for setting up full time minban primary schools for their children. Before collectivization this responsibility had belonged to township governments.

The second type of literacy instruction took place in informal small groups, such as outdoor "foot of the field" (*ditou xiaozu*) classes in South China and "bed side reading groups" (*kangtou xiaozu*) in the North. Finally, there was
the mobilization of literates to teach illiterates on a one-to-one basis. This method was sometimes known as "taking the characters to the doorstep" (songzi shangmen). It was often used with women who could not leave their households, either because of domestic chores or because their husbands forbade them to attend school. The method also referred to parents who received instruction from their children after they returned from school.

Problems in the Supply and Distribution of Literacy Primers

Despite this outwardly impressive organizational structure, the literacy campaign encountered serious logistical difficulties from the outset. One of the most serious was the shortages and bottlenecks which occurred in the production and distribution of literacy primers. Without a sufficient and timely supply of literacy texts the literacy campaign was bound to founder.

The rationale of the 1956 literacy campaign was predicated upon the capacity of localities to compile, publish and distribute their own basic level township literacy primers. These were to be specifically designed by local officials and educators to foster local economic and cultural needs. After completing the basic level primer, villagers were to receive instruction in the two primers produced at higher administrative levels. Chronic shortages
of paper in the face of suddenly mushrooming demand was only a part of the problem.

The literacy campaign organizers assumed the smooth cooperation of local publishing houses with cooperative authorities as well as the capacity of the publishing houses to meet production schedules. Neither of these seems to have been the case in the mid-1950s.

For one thing, the publishing industry was biased towards the production of reading materials for an educated public. Popular reading materials had been in severe short supply since 1949. In 1954, for example, out of a total of 950 million books published nationwide, only about a third of these could be classified as suitable for poorly educated persons with limited reading ability. This was despite the fact that these persons constituted around eighty percent of the population.15 The publishing industry inherited by the PRC originated in the early days of the republic and preserved many of its pre-1949 features, especially the tendency to cater to an urban, educated reading public.16

Locally compiled literacy primers were supposed to be printed and distributed by the local branches of the state printing agency Xinhua, which maintains its own network of state bookstores across the country. All other locally distributed popular reading materials were normally edited and published by the state publishing house for educational materials, the People's Education Press (Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe) in Beijing. These materials were then normally
printed by local People's Press publishing houses in the provinces, and distributed by local Xinhua bookstores.

During the literacy campaign village officials and literacy instructors frequently accused local Xinhua branches of failing to meet agreed upon distribution schedules and quotas. Local Xinhua managers, for their part, accused local education departments of chronic over-ordering, which resulted in a pile-up of unused literacy primers in some localities. Xinhua managers also complained that the reason they were unable to meet supply schedules was because inexperienced local literacy authorities constantly requested last minute changes and additions to galley proofs of the literacy primers they compiled.17

These bureaucratic delays and wranglings nearly brought the literacy campaign to a standstill not long after its inception. The situation was so desperate by the spring of 1956 that the Ministry of Education decided to take extraordinary measures in an effort to rescue the campaign.

The Ministry decided to allow three literacy primers from the northern province of Hebei to serve as national models. These could be used by villages all across the country until such time as local problems in composition, production and distribution of literacy primers were sorted out. In the summer of 1956, within months of the launching of the literacy campaign, copies of these primers were circulated to all provinces in China for local distribution.
The decision to promote northern literacy primers for use throughout the country was in flagrant violation of one of the central principles of the literacy campaign: to foster local economic competence. This, however, was not the only compromise with the principles of the campaign necessitated by the crisis in supplies of local literacy primers.

In 1956 the Ministry also stipulated that in areas where adult literacy primers were still unavailable, regular primary school texts could be temporarily substituted until problems in the supply of adult primers were sorted out.18 This, too, violated the campaign's stated principle of inculcating economically useful practical knowledge to adults, since regular school primers were more academic in orientation. The decision also meant that adult learners were exposed to texts that were based on a psychology of child learning which was often inappropriate for adults.

Popular Opposition to the Literacy Campaign

Popular resistance to the literacy campaign was widespread, among villagers and local officials. Both often failed to see the economic value of expending time and resources on literacy education. Unlike state planners, for whom this connection was the *raison d'être* behind the
campaign, villagers and their officials often regarded literacy education as impractical and economically wasteful.

During collectivization local leaders in the new collectives frequently opposed the literacy movement and refused to set up literacy classes. They refused to release villagers from labour obligations in the collective so that they could attend literacy classes, on the grounds that literacy education was a waste of time which had nothing to do with farming and which furthermore robbed the collective of precious labour power. Many collective leaders took the position that it was the function of collectives to raise agricultural production through the application of labour and the responsibility of the schools to educate. But the two were basically unrelated in their view. Spreading literacy would not raise the food supply, so far as they were concerned.19

Thus, for example, in Guangdong's Yangyun county, the local party secretary of Nanpu district actually banned literacy education in 1956. The reason he gave was that the production of food and other agricultural commodities came from peasants working in the fields, not from their learning how to read and write.20

Many peasants evidently took a similar view. Literacy education was a long process, full of drudgery and with little, if any, immediate pay-off. Consequently during collectivization many villagers took the view that "taking part in the cooperative movement was like riding a train,
but participating in a literacy class was like riding in an ox cart."21 A Guangdong literacy official said that villagers regarded the danger that literacy classes would interfere with farm work as one of the three great fears (san da pa) of the 1956 literacy campaign. The other two were not enough teachers and insufficient primers.

In the minds of China's state planners, collectivization and the literacy campaign were complementary. In reality collectivization caused a decline in enrollments in some areas. By April 1956 Guangdong parents and cadres were withdrawing their children from schools so that they could join newly formed production teams. The problem was so severe that the vice-secretary of the Guangdong committee of the Communist Party actually spoke out on this subject, warning that collectivization, far from stimulating peasants' demand for literacy, was actually leading to mass dropouts.22

China's leaders thought that peasants would want to become literate after collectivization, so that they could record and read their workpoints and understand written labour assignments. But the above evidence suggests peasants themselves may have thought otherwise. For many Chinese peasants agricultural production was still a matter of muscle power. Of course, this was reinforced by state policy which stressed production increases and set state procurement quotas which had to be met.
The Great Leap Forward Literacy Campaign

The mobilization of labour reached previously unseen heights during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). That the literacy campaign did as well is proof of the persuasive and coercive powers of the state apparatus and of local cadres. It would be wrong to attribute either or both of these, as the Chinese media did at the time, to the "enthusiasm" of the peasant masses. After working to the point of near-exhaustion in the fields, peasants were expected to labour in makeshift literacy classes at night.

The mobilization of labour armies for the construction of dams and irrigation works left a visible and permanent contribution to the infrastructure of rural China. The results of the literacy campaign are much harder to evaluate. But in all likelihood the results were probably much more ephemeral.

The literacy campaign stalled briefly in 1957 during the momentary respite between the end of collectivization and the beginning of the commune movement. The first sign of its revival came in February 1958. Chen Yi, head of the national anti-illiteracy association, predicted an imminent "atomic explosion" in culture across China.

The rapid escalation of literacy goals in Guangdong after Chen Yi's speech hinted at the impending pandemonium. An educational work conference was convened in Guangdong in
April 1958. At this conference Qu Mengsheng, a high-ranking delegate to the conference, announced a new target for the literacy movement in Guangdong. He wanted to see the complete elimination of illiteracy in Guangdong within four years. Later that month, however, a "correction" to Qu's figure was published in the Guangdong education bureau's official journal. The correction stated that Qu had "meant to say" that literacy work in Guangdong would be completed "within three years." The very same issue of this journal contained another report, however, which stated that the Guangdong committee of the communist party had decided on yet another target date for the elimination of illiteracy in Guangdong. The party wanted to see illiteracy eliminated in Guangdong within one year. Within a month the target was revised upward yet again.

In May 1958 the head of the propaganda department of the Guangdong communist party committee astounded delegates at a meeting of "advanced anti-illiteracy units." He announced that Guangdong was to become a "fully literate" province before October 1, 1958. A literate Guangdong, he said, would be Guangdong's gift to the nation on national day. As a sign of the mounting chaos that was infecting party and government circles in the spring of 1958, this latest target contradicted the official view put forward by the Guangdong provincial education bureau only weeks before. It had stated that Guangdong needed at least seven more
years to successfully eradicate illiteracy within its borders.26

The adventurism of the Great Leap Forward literacy campaign became reflected as well in changing official views of how long an individual needed in order to become literate. With the mounting of the national literacy campaign in 1956 the central committee had adopted the position that peasants would require at least sixteen months of sparetime study in order to achieve the minimum literacy standard of 1500 characters. The utopian expectation of the 1958 literacy campaign was based on the principle that 'a year is like a day' (yinian ru yiri). Hence becoming literate during the Great Leap Forward usually required a matter of days.

The Great Leap Forward philosophy was based on the "Yanan spirit" of hard work and thrifty self-reliance. The former communist base areas of the country were identified by Mao and others as the post-1949 repositories of this tradition of hard work and self reliance. Hence the former base areas in Guangdong emerged as the province's leading models for literacy work during the Great Leap Forward.

One county in particular was made to stand out above all the others. Puning county in northeastern Guangdong, one of the oldest CCP base areas in Guangdong, became the first "literate" county in Guangdong in June 1958. Baoya village in Puning had only weeks earlier received the distinction of becoming the first officially "cultured"
village in Guangdong. Puning joined Ningan county in Heilongjiang, Dengfong county in Henan, and Jieyang county, which was another former base area in Guangdong located close to Puning in the Shantou district. These four counties were identified by the centre as national models for the Great Leap Forward literacy campaign.

Puning was said to have set a target of fifty days in 1958 for eliminating illiteracy among its 69,700 illiterates. There was no indication as to what this target was based on. But in keeping with the Great Leap Forward habit of meeting and surpassing quotas, Puning claimed to have eliminated illiteracy within its borders in only 45 days!

Puning's "assault" on illiteracy involved the creation of what might be described as a "total learning environment." Literacy "checkpoints" were set up at strategic locations on village paths to intercept and test illiterates. Characters were posted on trees, doorways, inside homes, anywhere illiterates were to be found. Shops were required to place character cards alongside their goods; peasants unable to read the cards were not allowed to purchase the goods. Mutual responsibility systems were set up to ensure that literacy quotas were respected and fulfilled; anti-illiteracy "command posts" (*zhihuibu*) were set up to direct the campaign across the county.

Other former base areas tried to compete with Puning for the most heroic literacy accomplishments. Above all,
the official examples of literacy work in the former base areas were meant to convey the message that no material obstacle was too great to overcome when confronted by steely willpower. In Lufeng county, once part of the former Hai-Lu-feng Soviet, there was a well publicized example of a fifty year old woman who taught herself how to write using pig grease because there was no ink available in her village.

If the Great Leap Forward exalted the former base areas as paragons of Maoist virtue, claims of miraculous literacy achievement were by no means confined to the former base areas. In the spirit of "socialist competition" (shehui zhuyi jingsai) similar claims were announced throughout Guangdong. A factory in Jiangmen claimed to have eliminated illiteracy among its workforce in a mere nine days. An illiterate returned overseas Chinese woman was said to have learned 2,800 characters in five days. A commune in Shantou claimed to have achieved a 99.9% literacy rate in 38 days. In the central district of Guangzhou 10, 395 persons were said to have been made literate in 25 days. Prosperous Shunde county in the Pearl River Delta claimed a literacy rate of 100%. Huiyang county declared itself illiteracy-free in July 1958, after only 60 days of heroic effort.

On September 27, 1958 Guangdong declared itself illiteracy-free. Guangdong thus became the second province to declare that illiteracy had been "basically eliminated."
Heilongjiang had become the first province to claim the title in 1958.

Specifically, Guangdong's leaders claimed that by September 1958 eighty eight percent of 12-40 year olds could read and write anywhere from 1500-3000 characters, plus write 300-500 character essays and read simple books and magazines. This included, Guangdong officials said, eighty six percent of all peasants in Guangdong, ninety eight percent of all cadres, and ninety two percent of all urban workers in the province. The official goal now was to "overtake" Liaoning and Jiangsu within three years as the most educationally "advanced" province in China.

Similar grandiose claims characterized the expansion of primary education in 1958-59. The central committee in 1958 set a goal for achieving universal primary education within 3-5 years. Officially, at least, this was nearly accomplished.

Commune production teams and brigades took over responsibility for primary education. During the Great Leap, most were operated on a part-work, part-study basis. Nationally, enrollment rose thirty four percent in 1958 over the previous year. This meant more than eighty percent of primary school age children were attending school in 1958.

Guangdong claimed equally phenomenal primary school expansion. Primary enrollment in Guangdong rose thirty percent in 1958 to more than five million. The following
year Guangdong declared that universal primary education had been achieved in the province.31

All of the above literacy and school enrollment figures are, of course, more or less indicative of the level of chaos to which China had descended by 1959. In accordance with the Great Leap slogan of 'more, better, faster, more economically,' such figures multiplied in localities and provinces across the country and led to the breakdown of the country's statistical system. That in turn became the critical factor leading to the breakdown of the Chinese economy in 1959-60.32

The Great Leap Forward in literacy education continued until the middle part of 1960 at which time the economic crisis reached severe proportions. The end of the Great Leap Forward literacy campaign was marked by the central committee's decision in late 1960 to order responsibility for village literacy education to be taken out of the hands of the anti-illiteracy associations and local education bureaus and placed in the agriculture departments' Village Work departments (nongcun gongzuo bu) of county governments.33 The decision followed a series of top-level Party meetings held between July-August 1960 which marked the renunciation of Great Leap policies and the mounting of new economic policies designed to rescue the country from famine and economic collapse.

By late 1960 the focus of anti-illiteracy work in Guangdong had ceased to be the education of illiterates.
Instead it had become the effort to determine what the real rate of illiteracy actually was in the Guangdong countryside in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. The Guangdong Education Bureau stipulated in 1960 that in order for a rural production team to declare itself officially literate, it would first have to undergo inspections by team officials and commune officials. It would then require final verification by three administrative levels: production brigade, commune, and county. Verification by the county government involved dispatching work teams (gongzuotuan) to conduct on-site investigations in order to determine actual illiteracy rates.

The results of these investigations were often enlightening. For instance, as the result of one such investigation in Guangdong's Chaoan county in 1960 it was discovered that the number of illiterates was actually one and one half times greater than the number of illiterates reported two years earlier in 1958! Local officials had falsely reported the number of illiterates in the county at the outset of the Great Leap, in order to magnify the extent of their achievement.

Even with such outside inspections, however, the inspection procedure itself contained built-in mechanisms for underestimating the exact number of illiterates. As Seeberg notes, the Chinese method of literacy evaluation then as well as now differs from that used in most countries. In most cases, literacy evaluation involves...
measurement of individual performance by means of tests. In China, however, the object of literacy evaluation measures is to ascertain the level of compliance of a unit (production team, brigade, commune etc.) with central regulations. There were at least three major problems with this approach.

First, a unit's level of compliance is gauged selectively, by having the inspection team visit a select number of (in this case) production brigades within a commune. Usually only between one and two thirds of a commune's brigades were visited. Extrapolating from this, in any given county a total of only about one sixth of all production brigades would be inspected.

In and of itself, this method does not necessarily make for a distortion of actual literacy rates within a given unit. It indicates that literacy statistics are based on a relatively limited sample. But so long as the sample is representative and the size of the sample large enough to be reliable such a method could be defended as accurate.

A more serious problem has to do with the nature of the inspections themselves. No testing of individuals was involved in the verification process. Instead verification took the form of presentation of written and verbal progress reports to the inspection team, coupled with the team's own on-site observations. The potential for abuse with this kind of system was obvious.
The third problem was that the objective of such inspections was often not to determine actual literacy rates so much as the unit's adherence to central policies, which changed. Thus it was political compliance that the inspection units were looking for, above all. If the current policy called for all-out effort and quick results, the inspection team looked for evidence of such. If the current policy called for moderation and retrenchment, the inspection teams looked for compliance with such. In short, their function was the laying of praise and blame more than quantification.

Guangdong authorities originally claimed that five and one half million peasants became literate between January and September 1958, when the province declared itself illiteracy-free. In 1959 these same authorities admitted that around thirty percent of these villagers had subsequently "relapsed" into illiteracy, up to sixty percent in some counties. In Puning county, the former base area which months earlier had declared itself Guangdong's first "literate" county, at least fifty percent had "relapsed" into illiteracy in Hongse commune. In Shunde, which months before had claimed one hundred percent literacy (perhaps to show that a prosperous enclave bordering Hong Kong could do better than a state-supported former base area like Puning), forty percent of peasants in Mingzhu commune had "relapsed" into illiteracy by 1959.
Retrospective analyses are hardly more generous. The Guangdong educational yearbook in 1986 estimated that the proportion of peasants who "relapsed" into illiteracy in 1958-59 was "more or less" forty percent across the province. But it was as high as sixty percent in some units.39

In fact the use of the term "relapse" (fumang or huisheng) is probably not even justifiable in most cases. Most of those who allegedly "relapsed" into illiteracy probably never acquired any meaningful degree of literacy in the first place in the thirty-sixty day crash literacy courses that were implemented in 1958-59. Of those who graduated from such classes and remained on the official literacy roster, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the literacy they acquired must have been minimal.

Critics of the Literacy Campaign

It would be wrong to assume that the literacy campaigns of 1956 and 1958 swept across China without critics of the campaign speaking out against it. Such criticisms were plentiful, especially in Canton and Shanghai. Both were centers of intellectual opposition to the communist party's mass movement approach to education.

Taking advantage of the lull between literacy campaigns, a Shanghai educational journal in 1957 published
an article whose authors took direct aim at the principle of "people teaching people" (yimin jiaomin). Arguing that "mass teachers" (qunzhong jiaoshi) were not good enough to instruct peasants, they took the position that educating illiterate peasants was harder, not easier, than educating children. The Communist Party was really being demeaning towards peasants by saying that anyone could teach them, whereas trained graduates of normal schools were required to teach children. Adult learners, said these critics, needed specially designed learning materials and specially trained teachers who understood the different and complex psychology of adult learners.40

This criticism was nothing, however, compared to the sophisticated attacks mounted by Guangdong intellectuals in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward. Its colossal failure and wastage summoned forth the most searingly critical condemnations of communist party educational policy ever to have appeared in the Guangdong annals of official China.

The first of these punishing judgements was in the form of an editorial which appeared in Guangdong jiaoyu in January 1960. Together with a similarly argued 1962 treatise on why the party's conception of education needed "revision" and a 1962 editorial on the need to "correctly understand" some "fundamental" problems in education, these works show the level of opposition to the literacy campaign which existed in high places in Guangdong.
Put simply, the authors of all three articles argued that there was no such thing as "leap forwards" in education. To suggest otherwise defied an "objective law" of education, namely that the accumulation of knowledge progressed incrementally, "from little to much, from shallow to profound, from simple to complex, from a low level to a high level, progressively upward."41

Contradicting one of the fundamental premises of the human capital approach to education, these authors proclaimed that "schools are not factories" (xuexiao buneng gen shengchan danwei dengtonggailai). To make the case, they cited Marx's observation that while it took relatively little time to grow wheat or raise cattle, it took much longer for other kinds of "production," especially "spiritual production" (jingshen shengchan).

Mere hours were needed to turn out a pair of shoes from a factory assembly line. But it took nine years to "produce" a junior middle school graduate; twelve years to "produce" a senior middle school graduate; and sixteen to seventeen years to "produce" a university graduate. This was because unlike the production of shoes in a factory, the accumulation of knowledge required time for each new bit to be absorbed, digested and consolidated. And since the process of education could not be equated with mass production it was therefore folly to use a "production campaign" (shengchan yundong) approach to increase the supply of literates.
Extending this analogy further, the critics pointed out that "if there is wastage in the production of steel, the waste can still be recycled" (a reference to the infamous failed backyard furnace campaign of 1958). Sadly this was not the case for "wastage in the training of human talent." Because the educative process was by nature long and costly, all attempts to defy this nature by making "sudden and quick assaults" (tuji) on illiteracy were bound to produce exactly the opposite: long term human damage and wastage.

One author even invoked Confucius to call for an end to mass literacy campaigns until such time as a modicum of rural prosperity was achieved. He cited Confucius' admonishment of "sustenance and then instruction" (fu erhou jiao). This author was writing, it is worthwhile to note, in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward famine that killed somewhere between twenty and thirty million Chinese peasants.

Thus the legacy of the literacy campaigns of the late 1950s, especially the legacy of the Great Leap Forward literacy campaign, is complex and uncertain. Official China has yet to arrive at a comfortable reassessment of its overall contribution to the struggle for literacy. For example, the vastly inflated claims of the number of persons made literate during the Great Leap continue to be reprinted as if they were meaningful, perhaps because the alternative is too painful to contemplate. But individuals who have
attempted to assess the history of this period have found little to praise and much to lament.

The educational historian Chen Bixiang is one of those who looks darkly on the literacy legacy of the Great Leap Forward. Chen's conclusion is that the number of persons who became truly and permanently literate during the Great Leap Forward was really "very few." The campaign failed because it was predicated not upon the carefully researched educational needs of illiterate villagers, but upon a sheer utopian determination to "sweep away" illiteracy in one fell swoop. As a result, not much was really learnt. And the little that was learned, said Chen, was quickly forgotten when enthusiasm evaporated once the true complexity of the undertaking became clear.42

The literacy campaign of the late 1950s aimed not only to inculcate a certain number of characters. It was also the vehicle for carrying out reform of the written and spoken language. Owing to its unique linguistic complexity, these reforms had special significance when applied to Guangdong. I deal with this aspect of the literacy campaign in the next chapter.
1 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 577-578, 1037.

2 For statistical overviews of the progress of literacy in Guangdong see the following. Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 15, 103-104; Wu Yuwen, Guangdong sheng jingji dili, p. 69; Zhu Yuncheng, ed. Zhongguo renkou: Guangdong fence, pp. 389-390.


4 It is interesting to compare these estimates of the time needed to make the Chinese population of over 600 million fully literate with other estimates for China and elsewhere. In the colonial world, for example, the Dutch precisely estimated in the 1940s that it would take 167 years to eliminate illiteracy amongst their Indonesian colonial subjects, while on the Gold Coast of Africa, the figure was put at 600 years. J. S. Furnivall, Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and the Netherlands Indies (New York: New York University Press, 1948), p. 394. In late Qing China, the 1908 proposal for constitutional government envisioned 1% literacy among the Chinese people by 1915, 2% by 1916, and 5% by 1917. Woodside, "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy," p. 23. The significance of these figures lies not in the accuracy of the numbers, which are meaningless in themselves, but as indicators of the changing nature of elite literacy prescriptions in different historical and political contexts.

5 Chu Tunan was Chair of the committee. Vice-Chairs included Lin Handa and Li Chang. Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 576.

6 "Jiaoyubu dangzu guanyu diyici quanguo nongmin yeyu wenhua jiaoyu huiyi de baogao" and "Zhonggong zhongyang dui jiaoyubu dangzu guanyu diyici quanguo nongmin yeyu wenhua jiaoyu huiyi de baogao," both in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 47-54 and 46-47.

7 "Jiaoyubu guanyu yijiu wuwu niandong dao yijiu wuliu nianxun zuzhi nongmin xuehi de tongzhi"; "Jiaoyubu guanyu chouban geji sao chu wenmang xiehui de tongzhi; Jiaoyubu, saomang xiehui han zhuang guowuyuan zhuanfa de guanyu geji saomang xiehui renyuan bianzhi de fangan;" all in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 60-63, 64-67, 137-138. The membership of the association can be found in
8 "Guanyu yong jida de nuli jiaqiang dui saomang gongzuo lingdao de zhishi" cited in Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p.103. On the example of Xinxiang county, see Xinxiang xian jiaoyu zhi. The membership of the Guangdong anti-illiteracy association can be found in Hong Kong Dagongbao 17 May 1956 in Survey China Mainland Press 1293 22 May 1956, p. 21.


10 For example, see Wang Tongqi, "Jiaoyu fangzhen de taolun he yixie xuyao yanjiu jiejue de wenti" Renmin jiaoyu 2 (1957): 22-23. And for a reply to such criticisms: Zhang Jian, "Xuexi sulian jingyan de chengji bushi zhuyao de ma?" Renmin jiaoyu 8 (March 1957): 16-18. On the other hand, uncritical worship of Soviet educational practices was also invoked to explain what was alleged to be a relative neglect of mass education in China compared to the funds and theoretical attention lavished upon the development of regular school education. For example, one critic charged that specialists in mass sparetime education were like "blind men trying to make their way down a road" without a systematic body of theory to guide them. Every available intellectual effort was being made to study Soviet regular and higher education, but none to study peasant education. As evidence, this writer cited the Ministry of Education's official journal (Renmin jiaoyu). It, said the writer, carried many articles with titles like "Leadership Work of Principals in Soviet Regular Schools" and "Teaching History...in Soviet Regular Schools" but hardly any articles about peasant sparetime education. "Duo wei yeyu jiaoyu xiangxiang" Renmin jiaoyu 6 (1957): 64-65.

11 Lin Handa, "Wei shehui zhuyi jianshe kaizhan saomang gongzuo." See also "Qingnian tuan zhongyang tongzhi pubian jianli qingnian saomang dui" Renmin ribao 2 Jan. 1956 in Union Research Institute L0364 42222.

12 Approximately 'several' hundred thousand of these persons were chosen for short term literacy teacher training classes in order to prepare them to become the "backbone" of the literacy campaign in Guangdong. Another report on the training of literacy teachers referred to the creation of an "anti-illiteracy army" of at least 800,000 in Guangdong, of whom some 200,000 ideally should possess "a certain level" of literacy. Guanyu Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo
13 "Guanyu guangdong sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo guanmian guihua de baogao (jimi wenjian)." Guangdong authorities estimated that in the more prosperous parts of the province like the Pearl River Delta the complete elimination of illiteracy would take only three years. Guanyu guangdong sheng saochu wenmang gongzuo guanmian guihua de baogao; "Dali kaizhan nongcun saochu wenmang yundong," p.48. The claims put forward by the Guangdong Youth League branch are found in Tian Xin, "Jiji zhudong, xianqi yige xuexi wenhua de gaochao," p. 43.

14 Hu Yaobang, "Guanyu nongcun saochu wenmang gongzuo," p.26; "Yijiu wuliu nian guangdong sheng putong jiaoyu he shifan jiaoyu he shifan jiaoyu de baogao." "Yijiu wuliu nian guangdong sheng putong jiaoyu he shifan jiaoyu de baogao.


17 "Jiaoyubu, wenhuabu guanyu yijiu wuliu nian ligian gongnong saomang ji yeyu xiaoxue jiaoxue yongshu wenti de jueding;" and "Jiaoyubu, wenhuabu guanyu gongnong yeyu wenhua xiaoxue keben gongying wenti de lianhe tongzhi," both in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp.127-129, 130-131. Also Wu Yongxing and Wan Dalin, "Research on Curriculum and Teaching Materials in China" paper presented to the International Conference on Social Studies Education, University of British Columbia, June 1988, describes the activities of the Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe (People's Education Press), the major publishing house for educational materials in China.

18 "Jiaoyubu, wenhuabu guanyu yijiu wuliu nian ligian gongnong saomang ji yeyu xiaoxue jiaoxue yongshu wenti de jueding."

19 "Zuodao shengchan, saomang liang buwu" Guangming ribao 4 Dec. 1955 in Union Research Institute L0364 4222.

20 "Jiji xuexi he dali guanche guanyu saochu wenmang de jueding" Renmin jiaoyu 4 (1956): 6; "Lead Positively the Movement for Eliminating Illiteracy" Renmin ribao 1 April
1956 in Survey China Mainland Press 1269 17 April 1956, p. 3.

21 "Zenyang jiasu saochu nongcun wenmang gongzu" Guangming ribao 28 Nov. 1955 in Union Research Institute L0364, 42222.


23 See "Jiaoyubu guanyu saochu wenmang gongzu de tongzhier" in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 93-95, which describes the "falling off" of the literacy campaign across the country in late 1956-57. For a description of this process as it occurred in one locality in Guangdong, see "Wo shi zheiyang dang yige saomang ganbu" in Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang jiji fenzi daibiao dahui huikan (Guangzhou: Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang jiji fenzu daibiao dahui mishuchu, 1958), pp.91-92.

24 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p.577.


27 The literacy campaign in Puning is described in Guangdong jiaoyu ting, comp., Wenhuq geming de shangyou Puning: jieshao Puning xian saochu wenmang de jinqyan (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1958). Parts of this were reprinted in Nanfang ribao 19 June 1958. See also, Hong Kong Dagongbao 9 June 1958; Puning xian wenjiao ju, "Jixu zuohao gonggu tigao gongzuo" Guangdong gongnong jiaoyu 1 (25 Jan. 1959): 21-22; Puning gongnong jiaoyu diaocha zu, "Liangzhong taidu, liangzhong xiaoguo" Guangdong gongnong jiaoyu 2 (25 Feb. 1959): 7-8; and "Wei shenme zheishi wushiwugexiang, she neng tigian saochu qingzhuanjian wendang?" in Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang xiehui, ed., Xiangzi daqimo zhuangkuo de saomang dayuejin (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, n.d.).

For example, in 1959 the Guangdong party committee decreed that all village primary school students in third year and above begin practising the system of part-work, part-study (bangong bandu), for the declared purpose of mobilizing agricultural labour. During the latter half of 1960 37% (2,120,000) of the province's primary students were enrolled in this system. Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 51-52.

Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 125.

Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 23, 51-52.

The breakdown of the statistical system during the Great Leap Forward is described in Li Choh-ming, The Statistical System of Communist China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 83-108. For the social and economic breakdown that ensued, see Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., The Cambridge History of China, vol. 14: The People's Republic, Part 1: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949-1965 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), essays by Nicholas Lardy and Kenneth Lieberthal. The Stalinist overtones of the Great Leap have often been overlooked by Western scholars. The conventional historiography which associates the Great Leap with Mao's departure from a Soviet 'development model' appears to have obscured the fact that much of the psychology and methods of the Great Leap bear a strong resemblance to those employed by Stalin during the forced industrialization of Russia in the 1930s. Stalin's biographer, Isaac Deutscher, describes, for example, how Stalin was in this period "completely possessed by the idea that he could achieve a miraculous transformation of the whole of Russia by a single tour de force"; how Stalin appeared to "live in a half-real and half-dreamy world of statistical figures and indices...a world in which no target and no objective seemed beyond his and the Party's grasp."

In 1928 Russia produced 3 1/2 tons of pig iron; Stalin ordered 32 tons annually by 1932. See Isaac Deutscher, Stalin revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 321-322. This ultimately grim Stalinist utopianism had its influence on the literacy campaign which accompanied collectivization in both countries as well, as was explained above.

The directives which spelled out this shift in bureaucratic responsibility are as follows. "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang nongcun saomang he yeyu jiaoyu gongzuo de lingdao he guanli de tongzhi" and "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu bu guanyu chedi zhixing zhonggong zhongyang 'guanyu jiaqiang nongcun saomang he yeyu jiaoyu gongzuo de lingdao he guanli de tongzhi'" both in Gongnong
jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nonqmin jiaoyu), PP. 107-108, 139-140.

34 Chen Ziyun, "Dali zhiyuan nongye, jiji kaizhan yi zhuyin shizi wei zhongxin de quanzhong xuexi yundong, wei tigian wancheng saomang he puji yeyu jiaoyu de guangrong renwu er fendou" Guangdong jiaoyu (yeyu jiaoyu ban) 5,6 (20 Nov. 1960): 3. The exact methods of inspection and verification were not explained in this document.


36 Seeberg, pp. 168-169 (which in turn is based upon Hong Yongfan, Continuing Literacy work in China (IIEP, 1983)) and Literacy Situation in Asia and the Pacific Country Studies: China (Bangkok: UNESCO, 1984).


38 Puning gongnong jiaoyu diaocha zu, "Liangzhong taidu liangzhong xiaoke;" "Zou quanzhong luxian wancheng saomang renwu de guanjian" in Guangdong shenq saochu wenmang jiji fenzi daibiao dahui huikan, p. 21.

39 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 104.

40 Shanghai saomang 14 Feb. 1957 in Union Research Institute 42207.


The literacy campaigns of 1956 and 1958 involved more than simply teaching villagers how to read and write. They were also about teaching peasants how to speak Mandarin and write in pinyin romanization. In both of these endeavours, Guangdong's ancient tension and conflict with central states in Beijing resurfaced. What is more, this tension surfaced not only among ordinary peasants bewildered by elite linguistic experiments mounted from afar, but even among top members of the communist party in Guangdong who openly defied Beijing's orders. This chapter examines the conflict between Beijing and Guangdong over the language reform issue. I will show how a combination of popular opposition and resistance by the Guangdong elite defeated Beijing's plan to impose an artificial linguistic environment on Guangdong.

A Brief Historical Overview of Language Reform in China

In 1950 the Cantonese cultural critic Qin Mu attributed the strength of localist sentiment in Guangdong to the profusion of dialects in Guangdong. The "local clan outlook" (difang zongzu guannian), as Qin Mu called it, was
related to the fact that there were no less than four major dialects in Guangdong, each of which split into a bewildering variety of sub-dialects.1 Also in 1950, a Mandarin-speaking educational official complained that linguistic parochialism was one of the chief causes of "feudal personal relations" (fengqian guanxi) among Guangdong cadres. The state's work was being frustrated because, whether working among themselves or with outsiders, Guangdong cadres clung to their dialects, and insisted that others learn their dialect if they wished to have any dealings.2

Beijing's concern with Cantonese linguistic parochialism can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century. In the early eighteenth century the Qing dynasty set up Correct Pronunciation Academies (zhengyin shuyuan) in Guangdong and Fujian in an unsuccessful attempt to spread the use of Mandarin among South China elites.3 By the nineteenth century, by which time Cantonese linguistic autonomy from Beijing had begun to assert itself in historically new ways.

The interest in making the Chinese language more "Western" by writing it with Roman alphabet letters came early to Guangdong, perhaps earlier than anywhere else in China. Missionaries in Hong Kong and Guangdong were the first to adopt alphabetic schemes for writing Chinese. Furthermore, the missionaries based their romanized transcription not on the northern-based dialect known as
"official language" (guanhua) or Mandarin, but on the multitude of Guangdong dialects spoken in the Guangdong hinterland where most of the missionaries lived and worked. Thus, for example, between 1890-1904 Christian missionaries in China produced 133,870 romanized bibles or portions thereof, of which only about two per cent were based on Mandarin and the rest on local dialects. A Cantonese Christian named Wang Bingyue may well have been the first Chinese to devise such a phonetic scheme for Cantonese. Wang, a pastor of the London Missionary Society, devised his scheme in the 1890s and is now celebrated as one of China's earliest language reformers. Wang's phonetic scheme, which he published in an 1897 book entitled Pinyin zibu (Guide to the Alphabetic Writing of Chinese), used stenographic symbols and Roman alphabet letters, but was based on Cantonese sounds and tones.

When the 1913 Conference on the Unification of Pronunciation was convened by the new republican Ministry of Education and decided to make Mandarin the new "national language" (guoyu) of the Chinese Republic, Southern delegates protested strenuously against the decision to "Force the South to Follow the North." In fact, the end of the examination system and the political decentralization that accompanied the 1911 Revolution may actually have reduced the normative value and social demand for Mandarin outside its spoken area. The rise of the provinces after 1911 was not limited to greater political independent-
mindedness. In Guangdong it was also expressed in a movement for Cantonese dialect literature (fanqyan wenxue) centred in Guangdong and Hong Kong. Even the 'stage Mandarin' (xitai quanhua) in traditional Cantonese opera disappeared as the use of Cantonese apparently spread rapidly after the 1911 Revolution.

At the level of elite nationalism, however, the movement for the linguistic unification of China in the 1920s and 1930s centred on the promotion of Mandarin and Mandarin-based romanization. In 1918 the republican government adopted a Mandarin-based phonetic alphabet based on modified characters, the Zhuyin zimu. In 1928 it was superceded by an official romanization scheme for the national language (quoyu romazi or gwoyeu romatzyh). Those who still advocated dialect romanization were charged with leading a movement of "cultural traitors."

CCP's Support for Dialect Romanization before 1949

During the 1930s and '40s it was the Guomindang government which, in the name of nation- and state-building, opposed dialect romanization, confiscated dialect literature and arrested and imprisoned its 'treasonous' writers. The CCP took its cue from Stalin's version of federal nationalism ('nationalist in form, socialist in content') and championed dialect standards of reading and writing as
legitimate, non-treasonous expressions of local culture. This is critical, because after 1949 the CCP renounced this policy, against the opposition of Guangdong.

The CCP's language policy originated in the Soviet Union. The person who was most responsible for it was Qu Qiubai, who was forced to flee to Moscow in 1928 after Chiang Kaishik's massacre of communists in Shanghai. While in Moscow Qu, who had no linguistics training, was recruited by two Soviet professors to help them devise a romanization scheme for the Dungan Chinese minority in Soviet Siberia. The Zhongquoluadinghua zimu (Chinese romanized alphabet) was based, by coincidence, on Mandarin. It was in fact based on the Shandong version, which happened to be the form of Mandarin spoken by the Chinese minority in Siberia). In 1930 a handbook on use of this script was published by Wu Yuzhang, who fled to Moscow at the same time as Qu Qiubai. Wu later became a central figure in the anti-illiteracy movement in the PRC, where he held leading positions in the National Anti-Illiteracy Commission and the Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Language.11

Qu Qiubai coined the term "common language" (putonghua), which the CCP later officially adopted, to describe the broad Mandarin dialect spoken by seventy percent of Chinese which he believed would eventually spread throughout China. Qu was a Marxist; he abided by Marx's prediction that dialects would disappear as a matter of objective historical necessity, the unification of language
proceeding inevitably from the unification of the economy and of the state. But he also held to the view that the "dialects cannot be forcibly unified," a position which he took up when he became Commissioner of Education in the Jiangxi Soviet upon his return to China in 1931.

Qu Qiubai's New Script Alphabet (Sin wenz) which he helped develop in Moscow, was formally adopted by the CCP in 1937. But it was also adapted to create separate romanization schemes for the eight major regional dialects of the country, and was even modified to take account of sub-dialect variations between villages in the Yanan area. The CCP at Yanan also continued to promote and publish dialect-based "people's literature." Romanized dialect writing was supported by leading populist writers like Mao Dun and Lu Xun who believed that it brought writing closer to the daily speech of ordinary people ("From the lips of living people take words and phrases that are full of life and transfer them to paper," Lu Xun had written).

At Yanan the CCP became formally committed to the idea of abolishing the characters and replacing them with a phonetic alphabet. The Party took the view that this was an essential step in the eventual achievement of universal literacy, but most agreed that the realization of this goal lay somewhere in the distant future; some said by the year 2030 A.D, while others like Wu Zhihui said that it would likely take until the year 2930 A.D. As Mao told Edgar Snow in 1936:
Chinese characters are so difficult to learn that even the best system of rudimentary characters, or simplified teaching, does not equip the people with a really efficient and rich vocabulary. Sooner or later, we believe, we will have to abandon characters altogether if we are to create a new social culture in which the masses fully participate.12

The Changed Policy on Alphabetic Writing after 1949

Three important changes occurred in the CCP's language reform policy after 1949. First, the CCP abandoned its earlier support for dialect romanization and mounted a policy of strict opposition to it. As DeFrancis says, "the possibility of separate regionalect Pinyin systems, appear(s) to have been deliberately suppressed...separate alphabetic treatment for the regionalects has been a virtually tabooed subject since 1949."13 Second, the goal of replacing the characters with an alphabet was effectively abandoned for the foreseeable future. Promotion of alphabet writing continued, but its purpose was now different. It was now upheld primarily as a means to facilitate the recognition and correct Mandarin pronunciation of characters during literacy training. Third, the PRC embarked, on Mao's personal instructions, on a large scale effort to simplify the existing characters. This signalled abandonment for the foreseeable future of the earlier goal of abolishing the characters and replacing them with an alphabet.
Mao threw the newly established Committee for Research into the Reform of the Chinese Language into a frenzied effort with his 1952 instructions to Ma Xulun, the Minister of Education and Chair of the Language Reform Committee, that:

The writing system must be reformed, it should take the phonetic direction common to languages of the world; it should be national in form, the alphabet and system should be elaborated on the basis of the existing Chinese characters.14

Mao's instructions were certainly not based on a careful assessment of the linguistic advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of phonetic writing (Mao was no linguist). Mao's instructions to Ma Xulun were more likely motivated by the fact that Mao was just then becoming involved in his first great confrontation with Western imperialism over Korea. Nationalism was a priority and that meant getting rid of the old Roman-alphabet based Sin Wenz and replacing it with a system that was more authentically Chinese. As Wu Yuzhang, one of the original architects of Sin Wenz at Yanan, told the Language Reform Committee, "We must do away with the idea that it is necessary to use the Latin or Cyrillic alphabet."

The intensity of the search for a new alphabetic system of transcription to match Mao's prescription is evident from the fact that between 1950-1958 more than seventeen hundred different phonetic schemes were proposed in the PRC, an outpouring which Charles Hayford says was "rivalled in the West only by the search for a perpetual motion machine."15
The PRC's language reform policy crystallized in 1955-56 with a series of measures intended to promote character simplification, Mandarin speech and romanization. The state council announced the first plan for simplifying Chinese characters in 1956. A total of 515 simplified characters and 54 simplified particles were promulgated, which was increased to over 2000 in 1964.

The usefulness of simplified characters for improving literacy acquisition has been questioned by Western experts and Chinese linguists. A specialist with the World Bank has pointed out that "there is no experimental evidence to indicate that characters with fewer strokes are easier to read than characters with more strokes."16 Indeed, Chinese researchers who have recently conducted such empirical tests have concluded that "in recognition (of characters)...there is no marked difference between simple and complicated characters."17 Simplification may in some cases even retard character recognition, by eliminating cultural cues which formerly aided recognition, and by reducing the discriminability of characters.

Following a national conference on language standardization, sweeping new measures were promulgated in 1955-56 for the promotion of Beijing-based Mandarin as "common speech " (putonghua) across China. Henceforward Mandarin was to be introduced into the language and literature classes of all schools at all levels across the
country. Zhang Xiruo, one of the architects of this project, explained its significance:

The People's Republic of China is a nation which is highly unified. The government, economy, culture and national defense have all realized an historically unprecedented unity... (but with respect to linguistic divisions) there are still some rather serious distinctions which pose an obstacle to the exchange of ideas between people from two different regions. In order to meet the needs of all the nation's people, strengthen their unification, advance their culture to meet the needs of socialist construction, and insure the success of the First Five Year Plan and future plans for building the economy, we should energetically promote the teaching of the standard vernacular and broaden its dissemination; this is a serious political responsibility... We call on everyone to learn this form of pronunciation, to train their own tongues and ears, and gradually achieve the ability to hear, read, and speak it.18

Starting on January 1, 1956 writing was to be horizontal from left to right instead of the traditional vertical from right to left format. A draft plan was promulgated for a new system of Mandarin-based romanized phonetic writing known as hanyu pinyin, which was formally adopted in 1958.19 The hanyu pinyin system drew elements from Sin Wenz and the other major romanization systems devised in the early part of the century. Critics, however, charged that hanyu pinyin was a foreign importation which slighted China's own cultural and linguistic heritage.20 Hence the search for a more perfect alphabet continued: according to a recent article on the "modernization of the Chinese language" another 1,667 proposals for alphabets were put forward by PRC linguists between 1958-1980.21
In his 1955 speech on the literacy movement Lin Handa stated that pinyin should be used as an aid to character recognition in areas "where dialect conditions permit." This seemed to imply that Lin believed use of pinyin in the literacy campaign ought to be confined only to Mandarin-speaking parts of the country. In fact, beginning in 1956 the use of pinyin was encouraged in literacy classes across the country as a means of aiding literacy and promoting putonghua simultaneously. Thus, in 1956 Hu Yaobang called for township level primers compiled by cooperatives to begin Mandarin-based pinyin instruction. Hu made the astounding claim, which was based on virtually no empirical evidence, that the use of putonghua in literacy education would actually speed up literacy efforts.

Within the broadly defined Mandarin speaking areas, which accounted for about seventy percent of the Chinese population, pinyin was promoted for the purpose of facilitating character pronunciation without need for constant recourse to a dictionary or teacher. More than this, however, the inculcation of pinyin also aimed to standardize pronunciation, eliminating local sub-dialects of Mandarin and replacing them with the unified standard of Beijing speech.

Outside the Mandarin speaking regions of the country, the relationship of pinyin to literacy instruction was different and more complex. The promotion of Mandarin-based pinyin as part of literacy training was intended to
inculcate Mandarin speech. But it did not-- and this is crucial-- facilitate dialect speakers in becoming literate. It made it harder. In the Mandarin speaking regions of the north and southwest, phonetic writing was at least based on a form of speech that was familiar in pronunciation and grammatical patterns. But for dialect speakers in Guangdong using a Mandarin-based alphabet complicated the process of literacy acquisition enormously. In effect it imposed a double burden. There was the burden of learning a phonetic script based on Roman letters which were completely alien and without historic or cultural roots in the society. Then there was the additional burden of learning to pronounce it in a speech which was also essentially "foreign," whose pronunciation was based on utterly different sounds, and which employed different grammatical rules of construction. That CCP leaders in the nineteen fifties promoted Mandarin-based pinyin as a means of speeding up literacy acquisition among peasants stands as one of the most brazen miscalculations in the history of post-1949 literacy education. So too does the statement by H. S. Bhola, in a publication prepared for UNESCO, that the use of Mandarin for becoming literate "received widespread acceptance throughout the country and among groups of all ages."24 In fact, Guangdong leaders were going to have none of it.
Beijing's effort to popularize Mandarin in Guangdong began with the arrival of the first PLA troops. Starting in 1950 Guangdong cadres at the county level and above, as well as all middle school students (the source of future cadres), were required immediately to begin the study of Mandarin. Mandarin was by far the most heavily stressed class in early 1950s cadre schools in Guangdong. The cultural make-up schools (wenhua buxi xuexiao) for cadres taught Mandarin, math, natural science, geography, history, politics, physical education and music. But in the first year Mandarin occupied sixteen of twenty eight classes during the first term and twelve of twenty eight classes in the second term. In second year Mandarin took up ten of the twenty eight classes in each term. The next closest subject in importance to Mandarin was mathematics, which by comparison took up only seven of the twenty eight classes in both years.25

Mandarin was also made a compulsory subject in the senior level classes of all sparetime primary schools in 1950.26 As the table on p. 101 shows, it was also the most important subject in these schools as well, accounting for far more class hours than the next most stressed subject, which was arithmetic. Peasants in Yellow Bamboo Drop sparetime school spent one hundred eighty class hours
practising to write characters, but five hundred forty class hours learning to speak Mandarin. In 1950 the Guangdong government, following central orders, decreed the rapid establishment of quoyu (the term putonghua for Mandarin had not yet been consecrated) teacher training classes. It also instructed village peasant associations to set up local Mandarin classes and to hold Mandarin speaking competitions.27

Guangdong's first open act of defiance towards central language policy came in 1952, during the brief reign of Qi Jianhua's "accelerated literacy method." Readers will recall that Qi Jianhua designed the method using thirty seven phonetic symbols modelled after the old Mandarin-based national phonetic alphabet (zhuyin zimu also known as zhuyin fuhao). Guangdong authorities went along with the effort to promote accelerated literacy using phonetic symbols. However they refused to use the Mandarin-based phonetic alphabet. Stating that it was necessary to take account of "our province's practical situation," the Guangdong government proceeded to publish, in defiance of central policy, their own dialect-based phonetic schemes to represent the province's four main dialects.28 The accelerated literacy program collapsed before Beijing could suppress these dialect phonetic schemes.

When the central government announced its 1956 plans for popularizing Beijing-based "common speech" across the country, Guangdong authorities responded with a
characteristic mix of formal enthusiasm up front and considerable skepticism behind the scenes. In 1956 the provincial education bureau announced plans for the rapid popularization of Mandarin. Except for national minority areas, putonghua instruction was to be introduced in the language classes of all primary and middle schools and teacher training institutes. Within six months, all county and city governments were to train teachers in putonghua instruction. From the level of the province down to the county, committees for promoting putonghua were to be set up. But the education bureau said that it foresaw problems and resistance to learning putonghua because of the complexity of Guangdong dialects.29

The evidence that is available confirms their skepticism. Mandarin teachers in the Chaozhou region reported in 1956, for example, that their students believed that the use of Mandarin in the classroom would lower teaching standards and unnecessarily increase the burden on students. Also, it would result in those who could not speak well being subjected to laughter and ridicule from other students. Sensing this, students deliberately ignored their Mandarin lessons, gambling that this would ultimately result in their gaining an edge over other students who wasted their limited study time on Mandarin.30

Guangdong teachers, for whom Mandarin was as foreign as it was to their students, also found themselves the brunt of student laughter when they tried to speak Mandarin in the
classroom after hours of self-study at the prodding of school authorities, but with little results. The methods employed to persuade teachers and students of the value of learning Mandarin were mainly hortatory and probably largely unconvincing. Teachers in a Muslim primary school in Guangzhou told their students that Chairman Mao spoke Mandarin, so if they wanted to understand his speeches they would have to learn Mandarin (in fact Mao's heavily accented Hunan version of Mandarin was notoriously difficult to comprehend). Teachers in this school also said that PLA soldiers spoke Mandarin, so if they wanted to understand the tales of old PLA soldiers they needed to know Mandarin.31

The use of Mandarin-based pinyin in the literacy campaign reached its apogee during the Great Leap Forward. Pinyin was hailed as a "shortcut" (jiejing) to literacy. The model for this claim was the experience of Wanrong county in Shanxi province. In December 1959 Wanrong became the site of a national conference convened to discuss its reportedly remarkable achievements in using phonetic reading (zhuyin shizi) to inculcate literacy. The Great Leap literacy campaign was foundering in late 1959 and the experiences of Wanrong were hailed as solving its two greatest problems: the large percentage of new literates who "relapsed" into illiteracy due to failure to master the skills of character recognition and recall, and the need for a learning method which enabled those with basic literacy to
consolidate reading skills without the continual presence of teachers.

Wanrong officials claimed that youth could master the basics of pinyin transcription in 15-20 hours, adults in 25-30 hours. Having accomplished this, illiterates needed a further 120-130 hours to master basic reading and writing knowledge of 1500 simple characters. Sparetime reading courses for new literates could be shortened from three years to one year using the method.32

The reaction to pinyin in the villages of Guangdong was not nearly so enthusiastic as it was among Chinese leaders, who ordered Wanrong's experience copied on a national scale. Guangdong peasants popularly referred to these strange squiggly alphabetic symbols as "chicken intestine" symbols (jichang zi) and as "foreign letters" (yangwen).33 The pinyin campaign showed the confidence of China's leaders that they could impose an artificial environment on the peasantry. It also showed the peasants' equally adamant rejection of that environment imposed from above.

The official statement which outlined the use of pinyin in the literacy campaign stipulated that in the northern speech areas (beifangqu) its purpose was primarily to increase reading ability and only secondarily to "correct" pronunciation. In the dialect regions, however, pinyin was expressly linked to the promotion of Mandarin in the literacy campaign.34 When the sparetime education division of the Committee for Reform of the Chinese Language issued
its draft teaching plan for phonetic reading in early 1961, it reaffirmed that the central purpose of phonetic reading was to facilitate reading and promote Mandarin nationwide.35

Guangdong's leaders directly defied these central orders. In June 1960 Qu Mengjue, the Guangdong provincial party secretary, announced that Guangdong "might" establish "some" experiments in Hakka, Chaozhou and Hainan-speaking areas, to see how well phonetic alphabets could be applied to the "complicated linguistic features" of Guangdong.36 In an article entitled "Why we should use dialect phonetic alphabets" which was published in August 1960 Che Mu, a top member of the Guangdong committee of the communist party, announced that Guangdong was not going to follow Beijing's orders to use Mandarin-based pinyin in the literacy campaign.

The official pinyin alphabet contained letters that represented sounds which did not exist in Guangdong dialects, like 'zh,' 'ch,' 'sh,' 'r,' 'e,' 'u' and others. How, asked Che Mu, could Guangdong villagers be expected to learn these letters easily when the sounds they represented were not part of their spoken languages? Guangdong, said Che Mu, was going to proceed to develop its own pinyin schemes based on Guangdong dialects.37 The village that Guangdong's leaders chose to represent as a model for this effort was, significantly, the village with the greatest reputation for patriotism in all of China: Sanyuanli, the village outside of Guangzhou which had risen up in
spontaneous resistance against British invaders during the Opium War.38

Over the course of several months in late 1960 the Guangdong education bureau promulgated dialect pinyin schemes for each of the province's four main dialects (Guangzhou, Kejia, Chaozhou and Hainan). Each of the schemes was subsequently published in the official journal of the provincial education bureau.39 Guangdong educators heralded the arrival of these schemes as their own "magic weapon" (fabao) in the struggle for literacy. In reality, however, their extreme complexity and artificiality explains why they were greeted "with all manner of doubts and anxieties by peasants and cadres." When Chaoan county set up a "Chaozhou dialect pinyin reading experimental class" in Yangguang brigade in Jiangdong commune in October 1960 there were a large number of "blockhouses" (diaobao) who refused to participate no matter what. Among these blockhouses were the wife of the brigade's Party secretary and the family members of most cadres.40

The reasons for popular resistance and apathy are plain to see.41 For one thing, despite wide linguistic differences, the dialect pinyin schemes did attempt to remain loyal to Mandarin-based pinyin in the sense of limiting the dialect schemes only to those letters already used in Mandarin pinyin. This meant, however, that sounds not present in Mandarin-- of which there were an abundance-- had to be represented by the awkward and frequently
inadequate method of combining letters used in Mandarin pinyin, and by the use of additional diacritical markings. The creators of the Guangdong schemes decided not to alter the Mandarin pinyin pronunciation of individual letters in order to make them conform to dialect syllables. Thus, for example, the Guangzhou dialect pinyin scheme had to incorporate two additional diacritical markings on the letters 'e' and 'o'in order to represent sounds absent from Mandarin. As an added complication, the sounds represented by 'z,' 'c' and 's' were indistinguishable in the Guangzhou dialect from 'j,' 'q' and 'x' respectively. This imposed the additional burden on users of having to decide which letter to represent on the basis of the letter that followed.

This was only the start of the complexities of Guangdong's dialect pinyin schemes. Much more so than was the case with Mandarin pinyin, which was based on Beijing speech, the four basic Guangdong dialect schemes concealed a bewildering diversity of sub-dialects with varying degrees of resemblance to one another in terms of pronunciation and grammatical structure. Thus the Kejia (Hakka) pinyin scheme was based on the main variant of the Kejia dialect spoken in Meixian county. It did not conform to variations of this dialect spoken elsewhere in the province, which devised their own variant schemes based as closely as possible on the original. Similarly, the Chaozhou scheme was based upon Shantou pronunciation, which had to be modified for use in
sub-dialect areas like Chaoan, Denghai, Puning and other Chaozhou-speaking counties. The Hainan dialect was based upon the version spoken in Wenchang county, which had to be modified for use in other areas of the island. The same, of course, was true of the Guangzhou dialect.

Western scholars appear to have been unaware of Guangdong's overt resistance to Beijing's attempt to promote Mandarin via the use of pinyin in the literacy campaign and of Guangdong's defiant promotion of its own dialect pinyin, despite the fact that as DeFrancis says, such schemes were a virtually "tabooed subject" after 1949. DeFrancis made what he himself calls a "puzzled reference" to these dialect schemes in 1967. In 1983 DeFrancis finally got the opportunity to raise the issue of Guangdong dialect romanization schemes personally with Zhou Youguang, one of the senior members of the Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Language. According to DeFrancis, Zhou told him in 1983 that the schemes were drawn up by a "group of linguists in Guangdong" and were adopted by the Guangdong government, but "were actually not used at all."42 The example of Chaoan county which was cited above, as well as others which I have uncovered, shows, however, that these schemes were actually used in Guangdong.

Che Mu said that Guangdong was implementing what he called a "two step" procedure (lianq buzou) for teaching literacy to Guangdong peasants. Guangdong villagers were obtaining basic literacy using dialect pinyin schemes.
Mandarin *pinyin* instruction would occur eventually, in sparetime primary schools, but only *after* a peasant had first attained the state's minimal literacy requirement in his or her own local dialect. The Guangdong party committee asserted that their policy in this respect was not only "appropriate" but "necessary" in view of Guangdong's complex linguistic environment, and that it did not "conflict" with the central government's policy of popularizing Mandarin.43

In reality, by late 1960 the literacy campaign in Guangdong and all across the country was collapsing. In November 1960 Chen Ziyun, Vice-Director of Guangdong's bureau of education, announced that the dialect *pinyin* requirement for literacy would be waived for peasants who already knew at least seven hundred characters, and for everyone who "found it difficult" to master Roman letters.44 In mid-1960, as we have seen, the central committee took responsibility for literacy education out of education bureaus and placed it with local agricultural bureaus and party village work departments. This took literacy education out of the hands of linguistic experimenters and placed it in the hands of officials whose main concern was to increase the food supply.45

At the same time as part of the effort to restore central authority after the chaos of the Great Leap, knowledge of Mandarin was made a more urgent requirement for members of the village elite: brigade cadres, core militia members, labour heroes and Youth League members.46 In this
way, knowledge of Mandarin was reaffirmed as a badge of elite status, as it had always been, among those who ruled in the villages in the name of state authority.

The quest to spread Mandarin among peasants and elites in rural Guangdong still has a long way to go. My own research in Guangdong villages during the late 1980s showed that a great many village and township cadres in the areas I visited were unable to speak Mandarin, or else could speak it only very poorly. Inevitably, this was a source of embarrassment. It was also, more importantly, a source of status gradations among rural officials. Ability to speak Mandarin functions as a kind of political capital to be deployed on certain occasions and not others. In instances when one wishes to speak with the authority of the state or the party, Mandarin is a badge of one's qualification to do so. On the other hand, when one wishes to defend local interests against the state or to show that one has local interests at heart, then local dialects are the preferred means of communication. The situation is not unlike that of French peasants in Eugen Weber's study, who used patois to discuss local politics but switched (if they were able) to French when discussing national issues.47

All of this, of course, continues to frustrate Beijing. As recently as June 1988 when Li Tieying, head of the State Educational Commission, toured educational facilities in Guangdong he left feeling compelled to comment on the persistence of Guangdong linguistic parochialism. He
remonstrated that Guangdong people did not make enough effort to learn Mandarin, and he urged that Mandarin instruction be strengthened, beginning with kindergarten.48 A visit to any Guangdong village school in the 1990s will bear witness to this admonition, as Guangdong's linguistic struggle with the state in Beijing continues.
1 Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," pp. 3, 5.


3 The Correct Pronunciation Academies were intended for Guangdong and Fujian examination students who could not understand the spoken Chinese of official China. The academies are discussed in Alexander Woodside, "The Political Inevitability of School Reform in Late Imperial China" paper included in "Rapporteur's Report: Conference on Education and Society in Late Imperial China" (Montecito, June 1989), p. 8.

4 John DeFrancis, Nationalism and Language Reform in China (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 14-28. Robert Morrison, the founder of the Protestant Mission in China in the beginning of the nineteenth century, was an early advocate of romanization. The first attempt to produce a romanized script was actually undertaken by missionaries working among illiterate Chinese in Penang. Around the time of the Opium War two missionaries named Samuel Dyer and John Stronach published *Aesop's Fables* in two closely related dialects spoken along the Guangdong-Fujian border. Matteo Ricci's *Xizi qizhi* (Marvels of Western Writing), published in 1605, was actually the earliest known attempt to transcribe Chinese with Roman letters.

5 DeFrancis, Nationalism and Language Reform, p. 38.

6 Ramsey, The Languages of China, pp. 5-6; DeFrancis (1950), p. 53.

7 The Cantonese vernacular literature movement is mentioned briefly in Ramsey, p. 99 and Moser, The Chinese Mosaic, p. 209. The movement had roots in such works as the famous *Yue ou*, a collection of popular Cantonese ballads compiled and edited by Zhao Ziyong in the mid-nineteenth century. When the vernacular literature movement was revived in Hong Kong in the late 1940s its influence spread rapidly to Guangdong where it came into conflict with the communists' efforts to suppress such writing in favour of the national standard. See Qin Mu, "Guangdong wenhua jiaoyu lunkuo shu," p. 6.

8 Barbara E. Ward, "Regional Operas and Their Audiences: Evidence from Hong Kong" in Popular Culture in Late Imperial China ed. Johnson, Nathan and Rawski.

9 The gwoyeu romanzyh system, based on Roman letters, was adopted by the Guomindang government as a complement to the earlier *zhuyin zimu* alphabet because the former, based on modified characters, could not be used in international communication. The new system was largely the work of the
American-trained linguist and professor of Chinese at Harvard, Y.R. Chao. Unlike the earlier zhuyin zimu alphabet, it included tonal markers as well. The Guomindang government also experimented briefly with character simplification. The Ministry of Education announced plans for the compulsory use of simplified characters and in 1935 issued a preliminary list of 324 simplified forms. These were subsequently rescinded in 1936--on the orders of the Central Political Council of the Guomindang.

10 The material in this paragraph and the preceding one is based on DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, pp. 245-254; Serruys, Survey of the Chinese Language Reform, pp. 57-61; Ramsey, pp. 12-15.

11 On Qu Qiubai's role in early CCP language policy, see Serruys, Survey of the Chinese Language Reform and the Anti-Illiteracy Movement in China, pp. 46-47; and Ramsey, pp. 12-13. Qu was executed by the GMD in 1935. On the early and later career of Wu Yuzhang, see Jinyang xuekan bianjibu, comp., Zhongguo xiandai shehui kexue xuejia zhuanlue, vol. 3, pp. 230-246. A founding member of the Tongmenghui, Wu Yuzhang had a long revolutionary career dating from the turn of the century. Educated in Japan, France and the Soviet Union, he was also a leading founder of the work-study movement in Paris in 1915. Wu Yuzhang died in Beijing in 1966 at age eighty eight.


14 Quoted in John DeFrancis, "Mao Tse-tung and Writing Reform" in Perspectives on a Changing China ed. Fogel and Rowe, pp. 139-142.

15 Charles W. Hayford, "Literacy Movements in Modern China," p. 169.

16 Mae Chu-Chang, "Issues for a Bilingual Population: The Case of China" in Reading in China, ed. June Y. Mei, p. 84.


18 Zhang Xiruo, "Resolutely Promote the Standard Vernacular Based on Peking Pronunciation" in Language Reform in China: Documents and Commentary ed. Peter J. Seybolt and Gregory Kuei-ke Chiang (White Plains, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1979), pp. 65, 66, 68. Also by Zhang Xiruo, see "Dali tuiguang yi beijing yuyin wei biaozhun yin de putonghua" Renmin jiaoyu 12 (1955): 12-15. These aims were formally promulgated in a

19 These state policies represented the culmination of measures discussed and carried out on a limited basis since 1949. The development of the language reform movement from 1949 can be followed in a number of sources, including several major journals devoted to the subject. See Zhongquo yuwen on language issues in general and Wenzi gaige on script reforms. In addition, the Guangming ribao published a special section on language reform on a bi-weekly basis from March 1954 to Oct. 1958 and again from July 1960 until April 1966, as part of its series devoted to presentation of major issues of concern in the social sciences. These materials are collected in Guangming ribao xueshu lun wenji: wenzigaijie 2 vols. (Washington D.C.: Center for Chinese Research Materials, 1972). A valuable compilation of the most important documents in English translation is Seybolt and Chiang, eds., Language Reform in China. The decree to popularize Mandarin throughout the country can be found in Renmin jiaoyu 2 (1956): 21-22; and is reprinted in Zhongquo jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 687-688.

20 On the adoption of pinyin, see the draft outline of the scheme and accompanying explanation in Renmin jiaoyu 2 (1956): 21-22, 30-34; and the article by Wei Ke, "Dali tuixing hanyu pinyin fangan, wei puji jiaoyu chuangzao tiaojijian" Renmin jiaoyu 4 (1958): 20-22. The latter makes the argument that pinyin facilitates literacy and would speed the realization of universal education. On accusations that pinyin was unpatriotic and other attempts to refute this view, see Lin Handa's article, "Relie zhankai hanyu pinyin fangan (caoan) de taolun, jiji tigong xiugai de yijian" Renmin jiaoyu 3 (1956): 25-28.


22 Lin Handa, "Wei shehui zhuyi jianshe kaizhan saomang gongzuo" part 2 Shanghai Wenhuibao 3 Nov. 1955 in Union Research Institute L0364 42222.


24 H. S. Bhola, Campaigning for Literacy, p. 85.


27 "Guangdong renmin zhengfu wenjiao ting yijiu wuling nian wenjiao gongzuo jihua caoan" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 1 2 (June 1950): 5-6. See also "Wei shenmo xuexi guoyu?" Guangdong jiaoyu yu wenhua 2 4 (Feb. 1951): 27-28, which predicted the withering away of Cantonese and all other dialects as part of the "natural evolutionary process" by which one dialect gradually replaces all others to become the "national language." Cantonese opponents, as described in this article, wondered why the government was then still continuing to support dialect literature (in fact, such support was soon withdrawn) and attempting to devise dialect-based phonetic schemes.

28 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 102.


31 Huang Muliang, "Yinian lai wo shi zenyang jinxing putonghua jiaoxue de" Guangdong jiaoyu (Sept. 1956): 26-27; and Huang Heyang, "Wo shi zheiyang yong putonghua jinxing jiaoxue de" Guangdong jiaoyu (July 1956): 29-30. See also Li Shouzhi, "Zenyang zhangwo guangzhou yin he beiying yin de duiying guilu" Guangdong jiaoyu (July 1956): 27-29, on the technical aspects of distinguishing Mandarin and Cantonese pronunciation.

32 "Fu: Shanxi shengwei guanyu zai quansheng tuiguang wanrong xian zhuyin shizi jingyan zhengqu tigian shi shanxi chengwei wumang sheng xiang zhongyang de baoqiao" Guangdong jiaoyu 11, 12 (10 June 1960): 4; and "Dali tuiguang zhuyin shizi zhengqu tigian saochu wenmang" Guangdong jiaoyu 11, 12 (10 June 1960): 5. The latter originally appeared in Renmin ribao.

33 "Zhuyin shizi shi saochu wenmang de jiejing" Guangdong jiaoyu (yeyu jiaoyuban) 2 (15 Aug. 1960): 10-11. See also the criticisms repeated in He Liu, "Tuixing zhuyin shizi, jiakuai saomang sudu: Ji Tanshui gongshe Dongming dadui kaizhan zhuyin shizi yundong" Guangdong jiaoyu (yeyu jiaoyuban) 1 (15 July 1960): 3-4. Compelling proof of the "chicken intestine" theory of the inscrutable nature of
Roman letters can be found in the Guangdong education bureau's journal where the pinyin scheme is reprinted. Many letters are printed upside down and wrong ones are used, indicating that peasants were not the only ones who found it difficult to master pinyin. See "Zhuyin shizi pinyin jiaoxue dagang (chugao)" Guangdong jiaoyu (yeyu jiaoyuban) 1 (15 Jan. 1960): 14-17.

34 "Dali tuiguang zhuyin shizi zhengqu tigian saochu wenmang," 5-6. Even in Wanrong county in Shanxi, the national model for phonetic reading, the method was held up as a model for using pinyin to promote standard Beijing speech. Villagers in Wanrong spoke a sub-dialect of Mandarin, but local officials there claimed that pinyin was "a tree that yielded two kinds of flowers": it helped reading, and also enabled villagers to "correct" their pronunciation by learning proper Beijing speech.

35 "Dali tuiguang zhuyin shizi zhengqu tigian saochu wenmang;" and "Zhuyin shizi pinyin jiaoxue dagang (chugao)."


41 The comments in the following paragraphs are based on my analysis of the explanations which accompanied various dialect schemes when they were published. See above, n. 35.

42 DeFrancis, The Chinese Language, p. 295 n.4.

43 Che Mu, "Wei shenmo yong fangyan zhuyin shizi?"

44 Chen Ziyun, "Dali zhiyuan nongye, jiji kaizhan yi zhuyin shizi wei zhongxin de qunzhong xueyi yundong, wei tigian wancheng saomang he puji yeyu jiaoyu de guangrong renwu er

45 In late 1960 with economic disaster looming Guangdong launched a movement to restore agricultural production. The "three great harvests" (sanda fengshou) movement was aimed especially at boosting grain production in the province, as the spectre of food shortages appeared.

46 "Renzhen zongjie zhuyin shizi de shidian jingyan."


48 "Li Tieying tongzhi guancha zhuhai tequ shi tichu yao dali tuiguang putonghua" Pujiao jianbao (Nanhai county) (3 July 1988): 2-3. See also "Nanhai xian xuexiao tuipu gongzuo qingkuang" Pujiao jianbao (Nanhai county) (20 Jan. 1987): 1-5, which describes middle school teachers in the late 1980s being regularly organized into regular study groups for improving their Mandarin pronunciation.
Did the spread of popular literacy in China's rural communes during the Maoist period bring economic, political and cultural empowerment to production team members or did it merely make possible the opposite, the historically unprecedented entrapment of peasants within the web of bureaucratic modes of communication and control? China's leaders expected it would do both. For them, the creation of a fully literate citizenry was inseparable from the goal of a strong state capable of mobilizing-- and marshalling-- the masses for economic and political tasks.

Literacy is a form of social practice whose social meaning and significance is derived from the social and economic contexts in which it is embedded. In chapter three I looked at the ways in which literacy ideologies worked to reproduce rural-urban differences after 1949. In this chapter I examine how the expansion of literacy paradoxically occurred within the context of the simultaneous contraction of rural economy and society under collectivization. I will use the concept of literacy expansion and socio-economic contraction to explain the ways in which literacy in China's collectivized rural society was economically and socially restricted within the closed units of rural production teams and brigades.
I will focus on the role of the agricultural middle school (nongye zhongxue). The agricultural middle school was the most important educational innovation to arise from the Great Leap Forward in the countryside. It was a prominent fixture in rural education from 1958 until 1966, when it was attacked during the Cultural Revolution.

The agricultural middle school has barely been studied in the West. The one or two scholars who have examined this institution have focussed exclusively on its attempt to combine work and study. Barendson looked at the agricultural middle school primarily as an expression of ideology, the use of the educational system to create persons who were both 'red' and 'expert.' Glassman, on the other hand, saw the agricultural middle schools and the half-work half-study concept in terms of its contribution to the "manpower" needs of rural communes.

My research leads to a different focus and different conclusions about the role of the agricultural middle school. I will argue that the agricultural middle school was intended as an outlet for the literate aspirations of peasants who were excluded from participation in the state school system, where the opportunities for real social advancement lay. The agricultural middle schools were intended to offer peasants the chance for a limited form of social mobility, within the closed confines of the commune. Furthermore, I will argue that China's leaders envisioned the agricultural middle schools as critical centres of
scientific experimentation and innovation that would lead the technological modernization of the communes. This in turn, however, raised the worrisome prospect of the emergence of a new literate rural elite whose source of power and prestige—technical expertise—was independent of the communist party. My research into the agricultural middle schools therefore reveals not only the state's aspirations for literacy in the countryside, but also its fear of new literate elites emerging outside the communist party.

In order to develop this argument, I will first examine the social and economic setting in which literacy was practiced during the commune era. The expectation of a quick transition to universal literacy was shattered with the failure of the Great Leap Forward. But the rural people's communes which emerged from the Great Leap remained intact as the basis of rural Chinese social organization. As such they shaped the construction and expectations of literacy in rural China from 1958 down to the time of their disbandment in the early 1980s.

**Contraction of the Village Under Collectivization**

The revolution in land tenure that began with land reform in 1949 and culminated a decade later with the formation of communes brought about a revolution in Chinese
rural society that went far beyond the immediate economic issues of land ownership and distribution of the agrarian product. It also revolutionized the relationship between villagers and the state in China.

Historically, the state-society relationship in Guangdong was mediated by supra-village networks of economic, religious and political affiliation which were under the control of local economic and political elites. For Guangdong villagers who participated and were affected by these formal and informal networks, they were sources of involvement and identification with wider economic, social and even cultural environments whose boundaries extended well beyond the village.3 For the state, such networks constituted the social tissues through which it had to negotiate or "broker" its authority in local society.4

The elimination of these intermediate economic and social networks and the elites that controlled them was the critical historical development which changed the political economy of rural China in the 1950s. The takeover of schools in the early 1950s deprived former local elites of their control over education which was essential for the reproduction of their economic and political power at the local level. Land reform and collectivization eliminated their economic power at its source.5

The elimination of former local elites through the step by step destruction of the institutions upon which their power was based paved the way for the construction of a new
political economy. Two features of the new political economy stand out. First, the state now confronted villagers directly in their collectives. Second, the social and economic horizons of peasants in production teams were far more narrowly restricted now than under the free-wheeling societies of late imperial and republican China. The liberated Chinese peasant was undoubtedly much less free, economically and geographic mobility-wise, than his forebears. The late imperial state was able to regulate social mobility to an extent through the manipulation of examination quotas and by the very social appeal of the examination system itself. But in a society with a thriving free market in land and extraordinary population pressures, it was mostly powerless to control the geographic mobility of peasants, a fact amply borne out by the late imperial history of internal and external migration. The post-1949 state by a series of extraordinary administrative measures introduced in the 1950s was able to make the rural collective system into a powerful means for controlling not only the social mobility of peasants, but even their geographic movement as well.

The two were linked. In the 1950s the state erected a system of population registration far more stringently effective than the former baojia system used in the late imperial period and resurrected by the KMT government in the 1930s. The population registration system set up by the PRC state assigned residency status on a permanent, inheritable
basis. A system of household registration (hukou) was initially introduced in 1954 as part of the system for rationing grain and other essential commodities. Under this system all households were classified as either agricultural or non-agricultural. Initially the household registration system was used only to determine ration entitlements and not for controlling population movement. In 1958, however, this classification became the basis for enforcing strict residency controls for turning back huge numbers of peasants who flooded into cities during the Great Leap Forward. By 1960 rural-urban migration was virtually non-existent in China and remained that way for the next two decades.

From the state's point of view, the restrictions on residential mobility were intended to avoid the socially undesirable and politically destabilizing effects of uncontrolled rural-urban migration, including urban unemployment and inadequate food stocks, housing shortages, rising urban crime etc. Economically, moreover, a peasantry permanently bound to the land was seen by the state as the best guarantee of a stable food supply.

For Guangdong villagers, however, this system imposed historically unprecedented limits on the nature of their social and economic activity. As explained by Sulamith Potter and Jack Potter on the basis of their research in Guangdong's Dongguan county, villagers were "structurally immobilized in their teams...separated from urban residents by legal restrictions creating a caste-like barrier against
both geographical and social mobility that was virtually impenetrable."6 The result was a form of virtual "bureaucratic serfdom." Under this serfdom, "The Maoist peasant was fixed as firmly in his (production) team as the serfs of feudal Europe were fixed on the manor. By fixing peasants on the land, and having the team control their labour, the Marxist state created a set of serf-like conditions more classically "feudal" than the pre-Liberation society, in which peasants controlled their own labour, and could leave their villages...(under collectivization) villagers were inextricably suspended in the collective social and economic webs spun by the state."7

Other scholars have reached similar conclusions: Helen Siu writes on the basis of her research in Guangdong's Xinhui county that "peasants in the post-revolutionary era found that the world outside their administratively created collectives had shrunk to a minimum. The team, brigade, and commune gradually became their sole source of economic livelihood, social identity, and political status...villages might have retained their physical boundaries, but the social meaning of their existence was being changed from within by the Maoist paradigm."8 Charles Hayford observes that the state after 1949 "reorganized its formal relation with the village in a way that exactly contradicted" the formally stated aim of abolishing the age-old distinctions between city and village, worker and peasant. Instead, Hayford writes, "in the mid-1950s reorganizations, the
villages were assigned communal work, required to deliver an annual quota of grain to the state, expected to submit family decisions for Party approval, and forbidden to leave the village without seldom granted administrative permission."9

Elimination of Traditional Stimuli to Literacy After Collectivization

In pre-1949 Guangdong villages there were at least three types of stimuli for becoming literate. One was the examination system, followed after 1905 by modern schooling for an urban occupation. A second was the rural commercial economy which required literacy, whether one participated on its fringes or as a managerial landlord, moneylender or banker. The third was to join the ranks of the various "literate specialists" in the villages: the geomancers, fortune tellers, and ritual masters whom James Hayes describes as being essential to the daily community life and the transmission of culture in Cantonese villages.10

These traditional stimuli were all eliminated by the mid-1950s. The coterie of literate specialists who formerly serviced the ritual needs of the village were forced to renounce their former "feudal" occupations. Collectivization eliminated the commercial motive by abolishing private commerce except for limited and closely
regulated exchange of household "sidelines" (fuye). State schools, always remote from villagers, were out of the reach of most production team children. As explained by the Potters on the basis of their research in one Guangdong commune, there were three possible means for peasants to break through the "caste-like" barrier which separated them from urban residents: membership in the Party; membership in the army; and through education in the state schools. Out of these three, education was the rarest means of social mobility. In the Guangdong commune studied by the Potters, there was only one instance of social mobility via the state schools in the entire history of the commune. The phenomenon was so rare that commune members recounted this instance as if it were folklore.11

It would be wrong to assume that peasants wanted literacy only as a means of "jumping over the village gate" (tiaochu nongmen). Revolutionary ideology was also a stimulus to literacy. The Revolution spawned many revolutionary idealists who sought to use their literacy to develop their local communities, not escape from them. When they willingly returned to their villages they sometimes encountered resistance from elder generations with more traditional social expectations of education. One Guangdong school graduate who returned to her village with the idealistic aim of establishing a primary school for children in the village was greeted with suspicion and disdain by the villagers. 'She was getting old and had been unable to get
a good job in the city,' they said, so now she was coming back to the village just so she could 'grab a few workpoints in whatever way she can.' In another case, a middle school graduate who voluntarily returned to his Guangdong village was ridiculed as a failure by other villagers and rebuked "day and night" by his parents for causing them to lose face by his desire to return to the village after his schooling. Thus it was not only personal ambition that caused the educated to want to desert their villages; sometimes it was also social pressure from the village as well.

Literacy as a Means of Restricted Social Mobility Within Collectives

Collectivization called into existence two new strata of rural managers. One was the political leadership, composed of team and brigade leaders and party secretaries. The other strata consisted of the administrators and technicians who staffed the collective's bureaucracy. The former group wielded political power, but literacy for them was a less important attribute than other personal qualities for garnering popular support and respect. The communist party tried hard after 1949 to create a new image of the ideal village/production team leader, to replace the image of the effete, leisured scholar with that of the physically
strong, hard-working peasant (nongmin). In my own research in Guangdong villages I found that village leaders were almost invariably marked by their strong physical stature and capacity for hard work. Such leaders were valued for their knowledge of farming, their dedication to the welfare of their communities, but not, evidently, for their literacy.

In fact, ample research shows that in Guangdong this stratum of political leaders was mostly illiterate until the 1970s. Helen Siu, for example, found that in Xinhui the mostly illiterate 'land reform cadres' (tuqai ganbu) who were drawn into the party in the early 1950s succeeded to positions as team and cooperative leaders with collectivization in 1956 and continued to dominate those leadership positions until the 1970s when they were replaced by a new generation of better educated middle school graduates.14 Richard Madsen found that Chen Longyong and Chen Qingfa, who dominated the political life of Chen Village for two decades until the 1970s were energetic, robust and charismatic peasants who were "almost completely illiterate."15 Their ability to dispense patronage and to maintain "good feelings" (gangqing) with team members were the bases of their claims to local leadership. The Potters describe three generations of brigade level cadres in Chashan commune in Guangdong's Dongguan county: the poorly educated activists recruited during land reform and collectivization; the second generation of cadres who were
educated after 1949 and had a primary or lower-middle school education; and educated youth recruited during the Cultural Revolution.16

Some team and brigade leaders did manage to become literate. Wang Guangzu, for example, was an illiterate brigade level party secretary in Guangdong who managed by the early nineteen sixties to attain an educational level equivalent to a junior middle school graduate. His literacy enabled him to 'write notices, compile workpoint registers, and work summaries,' as well as write a family history of his personal transformation since Liberation. Wang Tangmu was also an illiterate brigade leader who attended evening literacy classes long enough to be able to write out production plans, compile work reports and read some of Mao's writings.17 Nevertheless, illiteracy remained a problem among team and brigade leaders. As recently as 1978, for example, 12% of brigade and team cadres (1100 persons) were illiterate in Guangdong's Xinfeng county.18

It was the second stratum of rural managers, however, who were defined by their literate abilities. Collectivization replaced the old village literate order of classically educated scholars, big and small mercantile interests, and assorted fortune tellers, geomancers and the like with a new literate cadre of team and brigade accountants, bookkeepers and workpoint recorders and various other kinds of literate "technical personnel" (jishu renyuan).
The Potters provide an excellent description of the various literate occupations within the bureaucracy of a production team in Chashan commune in Guangdong. Out of the eight key functionaries who administered team affairs, five were predominantly concerned with accounting and record keeping. These were the deputy for finance and economy, accountant, cashier, storehouse keeper and workpoint recorder. Most critical were the accountant and the workpoint recorder, who were responsible for carrying out the literate tasks essential for maintaining the team as a corporate unit. The workpoint recorder, for example, was required to go personally into the fields in order to ensure that tasks were completed according to standards and to enter the appropriate workpoints in his record book for the accountant's use.

It could be argued that socialist systems, by eliminating the private economic sector, foster an especially close motivational link between education and state service. If this is so, then collectivization may ironically have preserved and perhaps even strengthened the traditional notion that the "purpose of study was to become an official" (dushu zuoquan). What is critical is that the state seems to have recognized this and to have deliberately fostered this attitude, as a way of stimulating literacy. Thus, for example, in 1956 the Ministry of Education's journal published an article which applauded the fact that with collectivization young people were becoming
enthusiastic about literacy because they viewed it as an opportunity to "study to become the three kinds of officials" (xuexi danq sanyuan). The three kinds of officials identified were accountants, tractor operators and unspecified technicians. Following collectivization the Youth League branch in a rural township set up a school which it called, significantly, the "Three Kinds of Officials Night School" (sanyuan yexiao) which trained accountants, agricultural machinery operators and technicians for the new collectives. Such efforts represented the attempt to stimulate literacy in the collectives by advertising the prospects which literacy offered for limited social mobility within the new bureaucratic occupational structures of collectives. In this way, said another article, collectivization would solve the problem that had plagued the literacy movement in the past, which was that peasants had regarded literacy as a "dead angle" (sijiao).

The formation of the communes in 1958 expanded the field of opportunities which literacy provided for non-labouring bureaucratic jobs within the closed unit of the commune. Beyond the limited bureaucratic occupational hierarchy of the production team was the brigade, which offered further chances for limited social mobility through literacy. The brigade was the level at which the commune administered its social welfare functions. It thus supported a sizeable literate bureaucracy related to the
running of schools, hospitals, clinics, agricultural research, etc. The commune level itself was also a purely administrative unit. Some commune level cadres were state cadres (guojia qanbu) who, unlike the collective cadres (jiti qanbu), possessed urban residency status and the privileges which accompanied it. The commune level was the point where state bureaucracy and commune administration intersected and where the two "castes" of urban and rural residents came into contact. It was here, in terms of staffing the literate occupational structure of team, brigade and commune, that the new institution known as the agricultural middle school was envisioned to play a critical role.

The Agricultural Middle Schools

The first agricultural middle schools appeared in 1958 during the Great Leap Forward. Established on a basis of one per commune, the agricultural middle schools recruited primary school graduates between the ages of 13-16 for a three year program of courses in politics, mathematics, language and literature, as well as technical subjects like animal husbandry, soil fertilizer, crop planting and crop care, etc. The schools maintained their own experimental plots, provided by the commune, where students were supposed to labour on a half time basis. Ideally, students were to
apply the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to develop innovative solutions for local agricultural problems.23

The agricultural middle schools were envisioned as centres for agro-scientific innovation which would lead the imminent technical transformation of the countryside. The agricultural middle schools were commonly referred to as centres for scientific experimentation (kexue shiyan) and for the production of agro-technical personnel (nongye jishu renyuan); as agricultural technology extension stations (nongye jishu tuiguang zhan); and as the "strongholds" (judian) of village technological expertise. In addition, they would also produce the administrative personnel needed to manage commune affairs.

As envisioned centres of locally-based scientific experimentation and modernization, the agricultural middle schools stood on one side of a debate over how China should be modernized. Lin Liming, the Vice-Secretary of the Guangdong communist party committee, outlined the debate in a speech he gave back in 1956.24 In it he referred to the "new industrial revolution" that was currently sweeping the world and China's urgent need to participate in it. The symbols of this new global industrial revolution for Lin Liming were things like computers, nuclear energy and (writing in 1956) transistors. Lin acknowledged the importance of using state schools to cultivate a corps of highly trained Chinese scientists capable of participating
in this revolution. For most of his speech, however, Lin dwelt on the need for scientists and science to reach downward into the villages. Computers, nuclear energy and semi-conductors were not what was needed to save the village from backwardness; what was needed at the present were enhanced seed varieties and innovative farm implements, better fertilizer and more reliable weather prediction.

Yang Xiufeng, one of China's leading educational revolutionaries and one time Minister of Higher Education, was referring to the same problem when he pointed out that the Guomindang government had managed in twenty years to produce a paltry total of 13,183 graduates of agricultural and forestry schools, of which many had never even set foot in a village. New China would have to do better. Yang declared that for the foreseeable future graduates would have to take up jobs in district level agricultural extension stations, in collectives, and in state farms. They would have to take their 'scientific theoretical knowledge' (kexue lilun zhishi) and 'unite' it with the concrete problems of local (dangdi) economic development.25

Leading the march of science into the countryside versus leading it in the direction of the "new global industrial revolution" paralleled, in a very significant way, the difference between the two tracks of the Chinese educational system. As one Guangdong writer on the subject described the situation in 1960, it was the job of the agricultural middle schools and other forms of rural work-
study to equip peasants with locally needed agro-technical knowledge. But it was the task of the state schools to "lead our country's march towards a world class advanced scientific level."26

The agricultural middle schools were thus another part of the bifurcation of the Chinese educational system into two unequal parts. The enshrinement of this social schism as a hallowed principle of state education policy by Lu Dingyi, the Minister of Education, in 1958 was like a political charge waiting to be detonated. It would take about seven years for the charge to explode.27

The architects of the agricultural middle school never envisioned this at the time. They believed that the agricultural middle schools would serve a kind of safety valve function, providing an outlet for rural primary graduates' demands for further education which the state could not afford, and offering graduates of the agricultural middle schools limited social mobility into the ranks of non-labouring literate occupations within the commune structure. Chinese educational planners in the late 1950s often referred to what they called the "tense problem" of primary graduates advancing to further study. This was shorthand for describing the situation wherein between 1952 and 1957 the number of primary school graduates in the country had more than tripled (to just under 5 million), but in 1957 only 44% of graduates went on to junior middle school.28 The growth of middle school education was
particularly slow in Guangdong before the Great Leap Forward. In 1956 there were just 153,000 junior middle school students in Guangdong, only slightly more than the 140,000 in 1949, and about the same as there were in 1946. As Lu Dingyi lamented, "every year, the number of senior primary school graduates is more and more, but the regular middle schools are unable to absorb them all."30

Lu Dingyi saw the agricultural middle school as the ideal solution to this problem. It was ideal because it could be implemented at little cost to the state. As Lu explained in 1958, without the agricultural middle schools and other forms of locally sponsored work-study

Our country would find it very difficult to institute universal primary and secondary education and have no hope at all of instituting universal higher education, because the state has no way of carrying the huge burden of expenditure involved without heavy damage to production.31

In other words, the agricultural middle schools represented another attempt by the state to impose educational voluntarism on the Chinese peasantry, at the latter's expense. This became clear in a subsequent 1960 speech of Lu's in which he compared the costs to the state of educating someone in an agricultural middle school and a state school. It cost the state more than 180 yuan per year to educate someone in a state middle school, said Lu, but only 10 yuan per year in subsidies to educate someone in a locally sponsored agricultural middle school. What Lu did not articulate was how much more the state contributed to educating students in the state schools. According to Lu's
own figures, a peasant family paid 30 yuan per year to educate their child in an agricultural middle school, compared to the state's contribution of only 10 yuan per student per year. But for those privileged enough to attend a state school, the burden on the family was substantially less. Lu Dingyi's figures show that in state schools the state contributed 180 yuan per student per year while the family was required to pay only 100 yuan per year. The agricultural middle schools were thus a deliberate attempt to shift the burden of rural middle school education funding onto peasants, while maintaining lavish state support for urban state schools.

Guangdong's leaders clearly intended the agricultural middle schools to relieve some of the widespread dissatisfaction with the structural inequity of the double track educational system by opening up educational channels for limited mobility within the commune. Guangdong educational officials at provincial and local levels alike heavily promoted this aspect of the schools as a way of enhancing their prestige in local society. Thus, for example, the famous Hetang agricultural middle school in Xinhui county, Guangdong was made the subject of a joint survey by the central Ministry of Education and the Guangdong education bureau in 1965. The widely publicized results of this survey portrayed the school's success in terms which emphasized graduates' ascendance to elite, non-labouring management positions in the commune's occupational
hierarchy. The school had graduated three hundred fifty students since 1958, of whom one fifth went on to higher education. More than half of the remaining two hundred eighty graduates were employed by the commune in non-labouring positions like accountants, workpoint recorders and statistical personnel. Seventeen were reported to have achieved the position of team leader.33

In another instance local authorities compiled a list of the social mobility achievements of the more than five hundred graduates of another school in Xinhui. It was enthusiastically reported that between 1959-64 one hundred fifty five graduates went on to higher education; while a further ninety seven graduates were assigned to work as accountants, as clerks and record keepers in the supply and marketing co-operatives, as managers of pumping stations and other positions. Three hundred graduates had been sent back to their production teams, but forty nine of these had been appointed as accountants, while two became assistant team leaders and one graduate had been placed in charge of the militia.

In Xingtan commune in Shunde county, graduates of the Gulang agricultural middle school were described as forming the "backbone" cadres of the commune. Out of the school's ninety seven graduates between 1958-65 seventy eight returned to work in the commune as accountants, veterinarians, officials in the commune's grain department and in the supply and marketing co-operatives.34
Statistical advertisements like these are ubiquitous in educational journals and other official documents on the role of the agricultural middle schools.

Furthermore, such advertisements appear to have been sanctioned by the highest levels of state authority. Zhang Xiruo, the Minister of Education, in 1957 attempted to allay the apprehensions of middle school graduates destined for rural work assignments by holding out the prospect that they would become "backbone" cadres in the collectives.35 Even Xu Teli, Mao's former teacher and a prominent educational figure in the People's Republic, told middle school graduates that in New China there were plenty of opportunities for real social mobility and cited the career of Chairman Mao as an illustration!36

This aspect of the attempt to promote the agricultural middle schools calls into question the often repeated emphasis that the schools were intended to dissolve the distinctions between mental and manual labour. Closer analysis reveals that the schools were really directed at a somewhat different purpose: providing a limited outlet for the literate aspirations of rural residents cut off from the state schools and the opportunities for real social mobility which they provided. On balance, therefore, the agricultural middle schools did more to preserve and to foster traditional attitudes towards education as a ladder of social mobility and a route to non-labouring bureaucratic jobs than they did to discourage those attitudes.
State Fears of a New Literate Rural Elite Emerging from the Agricultural Middle Schools

The desire to promote the opportunities that agricultural middle schools offered for limited social mobility within communes was offset by a fear. The fear was that the agricultural middle schools would develop into the independent bastions of a new literate elite of managers, technicians, and scientists who were outside the communist party and not controllable by the party. The concern was heightened by the fact that official ideology prescribed a role for the agricultural middle schools as completely self-reliant entities. The agricultural middle schools, it was feared, were in a position to convert their monopoly of technical and scientific knowledge into power over economic and political life.

Statistics show that the communist party's grip on the schools was far from complete in the early stages of their existence. An investigation of 875 agricultural middle schools in Guangdong in September 1959, for example, emphasized the fact that only half of the full time principals in the schools were party members. Perhaps even more disturbing to the survey takers was the discovery that only 3.2% of full time teachers were party members. Even in Hetang agricultural middle school in Xinhui, which was
the site of the national and provincial survey mentioned above, a party cell was not established in the school until 1962.38

Fear that the communist party could end up inadvertently held hostage by the rural intelligentsia it had created led to two constant policies toward the agricultural middle schools. One was the constant emphasis that the agricultural middle schools be completely under the control of the communist party. The party cell should become the "nucleus" (hexin) of every agricultural middle school. Wherever possible, principals of the schools should be chosen from Party secretaries in the commune administration.

The other constant policy toward the agricultural middle schools was that they should be perfectly socially integrated with their surrounding communities. This was the real significance of the insistence that teachers and students in the agricultural schools be 'both red and expert' (you hong you zhuan); that they be 'proletarianized intellectuals with a labouring viewpoint;' and that they be equally capable of performing both mental and manual labour. The Maoist preoccupation that expertness be combined with redness was a search for social solidarity through the interchangeability of social roles. That search was ultimately motivated, however, by fear of new elites arising in the modernization process which were outside of, and independent of, the communist party. As explained by Qu
Mengjue, the Secretary of the Guangdong committee of the communist party, many experts who wielded specialized technical knowledge held the defiant view that "I have my technical expertise and my specialization, and I am not afraid if you (the communist party) don't like it. Technology is like an iron rice bowl. Red is for others who don't have it."39

Popular Attitudes Towards the Agricultural Middle Schools

That such fears of a new technocratic elite arising in the countryside came to focus so intensely upon the agricultural middle schools was testimony to the extravagant expectations that China's leaders held for these schools as engines of modernization. In the final analysis, however, both the fears and the hopes were misplaced. The party's fears with respect to the agricultural middle schools were based on the ideal conception of the schools as centers of agro-scientific innovation in the countryside. In reality their role in rural modernization was a great deal less exalted.

There was a substantial gap between the state's expectations of the agricultural middle schools and popular thought towards them. Alexander Woodside has pointed out that schools are historically among the most heavily ritualized of Chinese social institutions. Furthermore,
says Woodside, in China there was historically a strong "symbolic dissociation" between "schools" and vocational instruction. The heavily ritualized association of "schools" with the examination system and academic learning precluded use of the term "school" to describe educational institutions dedicated to plebeian vocational training. It may not be going too far to suggest that a similar mentalite underwrote popular opposition and indifference towards the agricultural middle schools in the 1960s.

The dissociation between the academic-oriented state schools and the vocational aims of popularly funded institutions like the agricultural middle schools was the post-1949 equivalent of previous such dissociations between "schools" properly conceived and locally oriented forms of vocational training. Guangdong peasants, for example, popularly decried the agricultural middle schools as being, in terms of their social status and in terms of what they taught, "not like real schools" (buru xuexiao). In accordance with the voluntarist principle of building schools "out of nothing" (baishou qijia), many agricultural middle schools were hastily and poorly established in places like abandoned tool sheds and warehouses, unlike the state middle schools which were expected to abide by national quality standards. Differences like these were not lost on peasants. The Baita agricultural middle school in Jieyang county, Guangdong, for example, was established in an abandoned goose shed because that was all that commune
authorities were willing to turn over for the school. The school was disparagingly referred to by local villagers as the "goose hut middle school" (eliao zhongxue). In Guangdong's Puning county the leaders of seven production teams in Meitang commune refused to turn over land to the agricultural middle schools, on the grounds that "these educated youth know a few characters and understand a bit of theory, but they have no experience in farming. We'll be dead without agriculture, how can we risk the team's land by turning it over to these non-practised youth to experiment with." In this instance the schools were valued neither as centres of academic learning nor as vocational centres. Popular acceptance of the agricultural middle schools was therefore a great deal less than the enthusiasm of their official supporters.

Some schools did manage to win the support of the surrounding farming communities. The students of one agricultural middle school in Puning county used their knowledge of chemistry to help local farmers to work out the proper application of an imported ammonia-based fertilizer whose instructions were printed in a foreign language. Before turning to the agricultural middle school, peasants regarded the fertilizer as "poison water" because its misapplication had ended up destroying their crops.

Just as often, however, the agricultural middle schools were disparaged by peasants for their poor results. A 1961 survey of the graduates of Longtian agricultural middle
school in Guangdong's Xingning county revealed that many graduates lacked genuine technical skills and had a poor understanding of the basic principles and practices of farming. Many were unable to perform simple calculations using an abacus or keep accounts. Teachers and students in the school were less interested in scientific experimentation and innovation than they were in growing already established sideline crops which could be freely sold to maximize the school's income.44

A total of twenty three thousand agricultural middle students were recruited in Xingning county between 1958-65. But only 2,200 of these students actually graduated. In 1958-59 many of the schools simply folded in the face of mass dropouts, forcing Xingning county officials to convene a conference at which three questions were asked of the agricultural middle schools: were they inferior to other middle schools as was popularly believed; were they teaching useful knowledge; and were there any grounds to continue their existence. The schools survived with the party's endorsement until 1961, when county educational authorities made plans to close down the schools on the grounds that they were competing for urgently needed agricultural labour. Finally it was decided to spare the schools but to return all of the students over age sixteen to their production teams to engage in food production. In 1963 a debate was again raised over whether the schools should adopt a primarily academic focus and seek to emulate the state
schools rather than focus on local economic development as they had previously done.45

The idea that the agricultural middle schools could be fashioned from scratch by dint of local effort, with just a shed, a few benches, some writing utensils and the dedication of teachers and students, was a product of the CCPs wartime experience, which Mao and others sought to reinvigorate in the late 1950s and 1960s as the "Yanan Spirit" in education. Peasants themselves, however, could see plainly from the inferior quality of the agricultural middle schools, from the fact that they recruited only students who were unable to get into state schools, and from the different career paths of their graduates that the agricultural middle schools were not "real schools" at all.

That the agricultural middle schools were the product of changing elite educational strategies rather than the educational wishes of commune members is shown by the sudden expansion and contraction of their numbers between 1958-65. The agricultural middle schools rose and fell according to the political struggles in Beijing. The number of such schools exceeded 30,000 in 1960, with 2.9 million students. By 1963 the number had plummeted to only 3,700 schools and a mere 240,000 students. When Maoists regained control over educational policy in 1964 agricultural middle schools were again hastily set up. From only 3,700 schools in 1963 their numbers rose to nearly 13,000 in 1964 and over 54,000 in
1965. Enrollment expanded from a low of 240,000 in 1963 to an all time high of 3,160,000 in 1965.46

A similar erratic pattern prevailed in Guangdong. At the end of 1958 there were 1002 agricultural middle schools in Guangdong with a student body of anywhere between 80,000-150,000 students. By 1962 there were only 150 agricultural middle schools in Guangdong with between 11,000-15,300 students. In 1964 the number of agricultural middle school students in Guangdong rose to 84,000. In 1965 there were 200,000 students, and in 1966 the number reached an all time record of 240,000 students. This represented forty percent of all middle school enrollment in Guangdong. In 1972 there were only seven agricultural middle schools that had survived the Cultural Revolution, with barely seven hundred students.47

When the agricultural middle schools were attacked in 1966 as part of the Cultural Revolution, it was not because they had become the bastions of a powerful new technocratic elite. It was because they were accused of consigning the children of rural production team members to inferior work-study education while urban residents and children of the political elite attended the "real" schools maintained by the state.


3 See Siu, Agents and Victims in South China, pp. 3-7, 15-87, which traces in elaborate and admirable detail the historical emergence of such networks in one locale in rural Guangdong and how they shaped the political economy of the region over the course of five centuries. Siu writes (p. 5) of Guangdong's Pearl River Delta region, where such networks were especially rich, "peasants in the delta lived in villages, but village life was enriched by affiliations that extended territorially in terms of marketing, defense, and temple networks, and temporally in terms of genealogies and migration histories going back to mythical origins. Peasant life centered upon year-round festivals and lineage rituals that continued to evoke primordial loyalties and demonstrated cultural linkages."


6 Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 97. The various statutes which embodied these restrictions are discussed on pp. 300-302. The assignment of residency status through the mother is extremely significant, especially in view of the fact that China remained in every other respect a patrilineally organized society after 1949. Residential status was assigned through the mother presumably in order to prevent individuals from changing status on the basis of changes in the status of their fathers, since males were more likely to achieve upward mobility than females.

7 Potter and Potter, China's Peasants, p. 97.

8 Siu, Agents and Victims in South China, pp. 6, 168.

9 Hayford, To the People, pp. 231-232.

11 Potter and Potter, China's Peasants, pp. 306-311.

12 "Yige zhansheng chongchong yinnan banhao gengdu xueiao de nu jiaoshi" Doc. no. 21 in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu huiyi ziliao (n.p. 1965), pp. 1-4.

13 "Zai saomang gongzuo shang duanlian tigao ziji" in Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang jiji fenzi daibiao dahui huikan (Guangzhou: Guangdong sheng saochu wenmang jiji fenzi daibiao dahui mishu chu, 1958), pp. 81-82.

14 Siu, Agents and Victims in South China, pp. 135, 122-123, 166-167, 305 n.15.


16 Potter and Potter, China's Peasants, p.277.


18 Xinfeng xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 103.


23 On the organization and purpose of the agricultural middle schools see for example "Cong shiji chufa wei dangdi shengchan fuwu: xingning longtian nongzhong de yixie banxue jingyan" in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu huiyi ziliao, pp. 1-6, which describes the curriculum of Longtian agricultural middle school, a model school in Xinning county, Guangdong. See also "Guzu ganjin daban nongye zhongxue, jiji zhiyuan nongye jishu gaizao" Guangdong jiaoyu 7 (April 1960): 4-8; and "Daliang fazhan nongye zhongxue" Guangdong jiaoyu 1 (Jan. 1960): 26. The work-study formula was not limited to agricultural middle schools. In 1958 middle school students across the country set up farms and factories, as productive labour requirements were instituted in schools at all levels. In May 1959 these requirements were codified: 8-10 hours per week for senior middle school students; 4-6 hours per week for junior middle school students; and 4-6 hours per week for primary school children over the age of eight. In practice, there was considerable local variation in the
emphasis placed upon manual labour, and the amount of class
time devoted to it was often tiny compared to the much
greater emphasis still placed on basic literacy instruction.
Xinxing county primary schools, for instance, introduced a
compulsory agricultural knowledge course in 1958 for
students in the fifth and sixth grades, amounting to one
class each week, compared to ten classes per week of
language. Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 71.

24 Lin Liming, "Guanyu dangqian jiaoyu gongzu zhong de jige
wenti," pp. 3-6.

25 Yang Xiufeng, "Peiyang nonglin zhuanyin rencai yaozou
ziji de lu," pp. 44-45. Yang's own career was much more
cosmopolitan than the one he advocated for Chinese youth.
After graduating from Beijing Teachers' College in 1921 Yang
taught at several colleges and universities until 1929 when
he left China for Paris. In France Yang joined the French
Communist Party and spent the next three years in France,
Germany, England, the Soviet Union and Japan before
returning to China in the early 1930s.

26 "Quanri zhi xuexiao bixu yi jiaoxue weizhu" Guangdong

27 Lu Dingyi, Education Must be Combined with Productive

28 Guojia tongji ju, ed., Zhongguo tongji nianjian, 1987
(Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1987). See the table
on p. 764. Altogether more than two million primary and
middle school graduates, mostly the former, were sent back
to their villages to work between 1955-57. Some worked as
teachers; others returned to agriculture. "Youxiu de yiwu
minxiao jiaoshi" Renmin jiaoyu 11 (1955): 38-39; Zhongguo
jiaoyu nianjian, p. 416.

29 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 76.


31 Lu Dingyi, Education Must be Combined with Productive
Labour, p. 8.

32 Lu Dingyi, "Nongye zhongxue chuangban er zhounian"
Guangdong jiaoyu 6 (16 Mar. 1960): 3. This article
originally appeared in Renmin ribao.

33 "Jianchi jieji douzheng, jianchi bannong bandu de banxue
fangxiang: guanyu xinhui hetang nongye zhongxue de diaocha
baogao" in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu
huiyi ziliao, pp. 1-14.

35 Zhang Xiruo, "Guanyu zhong xiaoxue biye sheng sheng, jiyue he xuesui ertong ruxue wenti" Renmin jiaoyu 4 (1957): 4-7.

36 "Xu Teli tongzhi jieda guanyu jiaoyu fangzhen de jige wenti" Renmin jiaoyu 4 (1958): 8-10. In areas where there were no agricultural middle schools, primary schools sometimes attempted to attract popular support with similar claims, like the Changpo primary school in a remote part of Xinyi county, Guangdong which compiled a journal of the social mobility achievements of its graduates in order to prove that there existed a "wide field of opportunities" for graduates within the village itself, as record clerks, team leaders, health officers and other non-labouring positions. Tao Zhan, "Mianxiang nongcun, wei nongye fuwu de Changpo xiaoxue" Guangdong jiaoyu 6 (11 June): 14-16.


38 "Jianchi jieji douzheng, jianchi bannong bandu de banxue fangxiang: guanyu xinhui hetang nongye zhongxue de diaocha baogao," pp. 5-7.

39 Qu Mengjue et al., Hong you zhuan (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1958, p. 6. On another occasion Qu described graduates of the agricultural middle schools as possessed of both literary (wen) and martial (wu) qualities (in traditional Chinese political philosophy the two were always juxtaposed), capable of any kind of labour. Qu Mengjue, "Cong xinhui xian de banxue shijian kan bangong (nong) bandu de jiaoyu zhidu" Guangdong jiaoyu 11 (Nov. 1964): 5-6. The concern extended to teachers as well, especially that the traditional deference students owed to their teachers be replaced with bonds of equality. Thus, for example, teachers in one school in Xinhui were required to work alongside their students on the school's experimental farm in order to prevent a situation of teachers overseeing their students' labour like "officers patrolling the fields." "Xinhui nongye jishu xuexiao de chengji he jiben jingyan" in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu huiyi ziliao, p. 3. On teachers in the agricultural schools see also He Weijun, "Bannong banjiao neng cushi jiaoshi youhong youzhuan" Guangdong jiaoyu 12 (Dec. 1964): 3.

40 Woodside, "Some Mid-Qing Theorists of Popular Schools: Their Innovations, Inhibitions, and Attitudes Toward the Poor," pp. 26-27. As an illustration of the symbolic dissociation of schools and vocational instruction Woodside
relates the efforts of the famous eighteenth century popular educational reformer Chen Hongmou to spread sericulture techniques among Shaanxi peasants. Chen arranged for peasants to be taught these techniques not in schools but in special "silkworm bureaus" (canju) and not by teachers but by special "silkworm chiefs" (canzhang). Woodside contrasts this with the situation in other eighteenth century countries like England and France where the term "school" was liberally applied to a range of educational institutions not limited to academic learning only.


43 "Jishu yexiao yu xinren." In another example, the Zhongfeng agricultural middle school in Lianyang county, Guangdong claimed to have designed a new rice transplanting device, seed drill, vine cutter and water-dispensing mechanism for chicken coups. Ouyang Shuiwang and Lai Wanjin, "Banbao nongye zhongxue de yixie jingyan" Guangdong jiaoyu 7 (1 April 1960): 9-10.

44 "Cong shiji chufa wei dangdi shengchan fuwu: xingning longtian nongzhong de yixie banxue jingyan."

45 "Xingning xian nongye zhongxue banxue qinian" in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu huiyi ziliao, pp. 1-10.

46 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 180-181. Regular middle school enrollment in 1965 was over nine million.

Chapter 9
THE DECLINE OF LITERACY FROM THE EARLY 1960s UNTIL 1976

This chapter traces the decline in literacy in China from the first half of the 1960s until the death of Mao in 1976 which heralded the beginning of a new era in Chinese literacy education. As examined in this chapter, there were two aspects to this decline. One was the shift in focus of literacy strategy in the early 1960s from adult literacy campaigns to the popularization of school education under commune responsibility. The shift showed a recognition by China's leaders that adult literacy campaigns were in the final analysis a rear guard action, and that the only long term solution to illiteracy was universal schooling. But the state still lacked the fiscal resources to implement a universal school system. Thus even though expansion of commune-based schooling became a heightened political priority after 1962, the commune schools were chronically plagued by poor funding and management, and by inadequate supply and quality in the teaching corps.

Mao's Cultural Revolution launched a wholesale attack on the "double track" educational system of superior, urban, academic state schools and inferior, rural, vocationally oriented people's schools, which had been a simmering source of tension in the Chinese educational system for more than a decade. But the solution that Mao proposed to resolve this
tension-- complete devolution of responsibility for rural education to communes, in effect obliterating the state system and making all schools 'minban'-- in the end only exacerbated the rural illiteracy problem because the communes were ill-prepared organizationally and fiscally to assume this full responsibility. The heavily politicized curriculum in the schools also contributed to the decline of literacy. Consequently, the accomplishments of the 'Cultural Revolution model' of rural school popularization, as it has been called, were probably less than some scholars have imagined.1

The other aspect of the decline of literacy after the early 1960s was the Cultural Revolution itself, which brought administrative collapse and disruption to adult literacy as well as to school education. In the fifteen or so years which followed the economic crisis created by the Great Leap Forward, adult literacy education in China was alternately stopped completely (from the early 1960s until 1964 and again from 1966 until the early 1970s) and, at other times, reduced to ideological sloganeering (during 1964-65 and again from 1973 until 1977). The decline in literacy was not reversed until the death of Mao and the rise of a new leadership whose economic policies stimulated literacy in new ways-- and discouraged it in others.
Contraction of Literacy and Mass Education From the End of the Great Leap Forward to the Socialist Education Movement

The context for understanding the decline of literacy in China during the early 1960s was the combination of massive famine, economic collapse and widespread natural disasters that afflicted China between 1959-61. The crisis resulted in a huge decline in rural primary and middle school enrollment from the record numbers announced during the Great Leap. It also resulted in a near complete abandonment of sparetime adult literacy education for about two years from 1960-62. Thus, for example, primary enrollment fell by over twenty million between 1959-62, from over 91 million to only 69 million. The number of persons made literate fell from an all time record of 40 million in 1958 to a paltry low of only 167,000 in 1962. Literacy education appears to have all but completely ceased during this period. As Seeberg says, there is virtually "no further mention" of literacy campaigns in major PRC publications from June 1960 until 1962.

Although Guangdong was not hit nearly so hard as other parts of the country by food shortages and economic collapse, education in Guangdong also suffered a massive decline during this period. The 1986 Guangdong educational yearbook records that from the second half of 1960 literacy and sparetime education for peasants began to founder in the face of a mounting economic crisis, and in some areas ground
to a halt.5 According to the Xinxing county educational history, for example, published in 1978, literacy education came to a complete halt in the county for two years from 1960 to until the fall of 1962.6

Primary school enrollment in Guangdong declined from a reported 86% of school age children in 1960 to only 69% in 1963. Between 1960-61 a total of 170,000 primary school students in Guangdong were taken out of school and sent back to their production teams in order "to reduce the number of persons dependent on commodity grain."7 In Jiangping commune on Manwei Island near Zhenjiang, an area populated by Han and members of the Jing minority, the percentage of children attending primary school in 1963 had fallen below what it had been in 1954 and was continuing to drop.8 As will be shown below, the precipitous decline in primary school enrollment in 1963 provoked a serious response from the government.

A similar contraction took place in Guangdong middle school education in the aftermath of the Great Leap. As previously mentioned, the number of commune-supported agricultural middle schools fell from 1002 schools and nearly 150,000 students in 1958 to 150 schools and 15,300 students in 1963. Enrollment also fell markedly in the state middle schools. Between 1960-61 the number of middle school students in Guangdong fell by more than 122,000, from over 297,000 to 175,000.9 In Taishan county, where middle school education was historically well developed due to the
infusion of overseas remittances, middle school enrollment was halved from 22,000 to 11,000 between 1960-61.10

Within the same period an interesting shift in provincial educational spending occurred. Between 1960-62 total provincial spending on state schools declined sharply from almost 20 million yuan to 310,000 yuan. This reflected the sharp contraction in enrollment figures noted above. At the same time, however, while the total provincial spending budget fell from nearly 1.82 billion yuan in 1960 to 698 million yuan in 1962, the proportion of provincial spending dedicated to education actually rose, from 7.86% in 1960 to over 18% in 1962.11

This pattern reflected the decision to increase state support for a select number of state schools, especially middle schools, in order to re-supply the economy and bureaucracy with needed skills. In contrast to the approach of Mao, who wanted to catapult China towards modernization by means of "leaps forward" in mass education, the Liu Shaoqi-Deng Xiaoping group which wielded the levers of state educational policy in the early 1960s sought to "jump-start" the economy by means of injections of high level talent in critical sectors. Thus, for example, in July 1960 the Guangdong government decided to set up fifty two "keypoint" (zhongdian) middle schools in the province where the best students, teachers and resources would be concentrated in order to train "talent" for the economic recovery. The following year in 1961 a further measure along these lines
was taken. State middle schools were divided into two categories. Category one middle schools would operate on a full time basis, year round. Category two state middle schools would only operate for six months of the year. This was a way for the state to accomplish several measures at once. Students in category two schools would become labourers for six months of the year, thus helping to restore the food supply. At the same time, the state's savings from not funding category two schools on a permanent year round basis could be concentrated on improving quality in the category one schools.

The sudden contraction of education in the early 1960s must be seen against the background of the equally sudden expansion of education during the Great Leap Forward. Many of the schools established during the Great Leap Forward were, as we have seen, poorly set up and had little chance of surviving without infusions of state capital and trained teachers. Still, declining enrollments provoke political reactions that increases in enrollment do not, especially if those decreases are being felt among the already most educationally impoverished sectors of society. By 1962–63 just such a political reaction was beginning to take shape in China, which led directly to the Cultural Revolution in education.
Rise of the Half-Ploughing Half-Study Primary Schools in the Countryside

According to the Guangdong educational yearbook, in May 1964 Guangdong began to implement "Liu Shaoqi's directive on the large scale establishment of half-ploughing half-study primary schools (bängeng bàn du xiaoxue)" in the countryside.13 The revival of terminal work-study schools in the countryside is attributed to an attempt by Liu Shaoqi in 1964 to reaffirm the principle of the "double track" system of education whereby academic state schools were reserved mainly for urban residents and rural residents would finance their own vocational education. Attributing this policy exclusively to Liu Shaoqi represents, however, a distortion of the view held by the majority of China's state leaders right up to the eve of the Cultural Revolution. As Suzanne Pepper has shown, Mao and his supporters were also originally in support of the idea of a "two track educational system" (liängzhōng jiàoyù zhīdù) consisting of superior full time state schools and work-study schools in the communes. It was not until the Cultural Revolution that Mao and others turned against this system and then scapegoated Liu Shaoqi as its chief architect and perpetrator.14

The reason for the extension of the half-work half-study concept to rural primary school education in the early 1960s in the form of so-called half-ploughing half-study
schools had to do with the severe contraction of rural primary enrollment following the Great Leap Forward. The half-ploughing half-study primary schools were seen as a way of redressing the problem of declining primary enrollment in the countryside, without cost in the form of lost funds for state schools. Operating on the principle that the rural communes should be self-reliant (zili gengsheng), China's leaders in the early 1960s were agreed that peasants should finance their own educational expansion.

Starting in 1963 the Chinese press at both the national and Guangdong level began to publish a large number of surveys and reports which showed that in addition to a declining rate of primary school attendance overall, the primary school attendance and drop-out rate was particularly bad among those peasant families who had been classified during the land reform as the "poor and lower middle peasants" (pinxia zhongnong). For instance, a 1964 survey of primary school attendance of Dongan commune in Guangdong's Gaozhou county claimed to show that only 51% of primary school age children were attending school. But of those not enrolled, 84% were said to be poor and lower middle peasants.15 The half-ploughing half-study primary schools were supposed to reverse this trend by providing educational opportunities to the majority of rural children.

In 1964 the central government praised the half-ploughing half-study schools as paving the way for the quick realization of universal primary school education. In
Guangdong it was claimed that since the decision to establish work-study primary schools was taken, primary school enrollment in the province had risen to 91% of school age children, up from only 63% in 1963. This figure was even higher than the 86% enrollment rate claimed at the height of the Great Leap Forward. As of September 1965 a total of 1.3 million students were enrolled in half-ploughing half-study primary schools, equivalent to 17% of all primary enrollments in Guangdong.16 By 1966 most production teams supported at least one of these schools.

In Zhenjiang special prefecture, the movement to set up half-ploughing half-study primary schools resulted in a 60% increase in primary enrollment in two years between 1963-65. By 1965 45% of all primary school students in the prefecture were enrolled in minban schools run by communes, of which 29% were students enrolled in half-ploughing half-study primary schools. The rest were in full-time minban schools.17

As was the case with work-study schools during the Great Leap, half-ploughing half-study primary schools were set up on an ad hoc basis, wherever space could be found. Students worked and studied according to formulas decided upon by local authorities. Working often involved performing team tasks which would otherwise be done by adult labourers, such as tending cattle, child care, cleaning and the like.
There was no standard curriculum; the aim of the schools was to impart rudimentary literacy of the kind used in daily team life. Thus students were taught how to read work assignments, workpoints, and to recognize a limited number of characters. In one such school in Zhenjiang prefecture after seven months of study 40% of the students were able to recognize four hundred characters, more than the students in any of the other schools of this type in the commune. In a school in a mountainous area of Xinyi county students' families all held sideline contracts with one of the commune's brigades to produce bamboo hats. In the language and literature class of the school, therefore, students learned only contract vocabulary.

Many peasants apparently reacted with skepticism to these new schools, believing that they were another "temporary wind" (zhenfenq) from the north which would subside. Teachers were poorly qualified and, in the hard economic times of the early 1960s, often resented. Some complained that "with illiterates teaching other illiterates the students are bound to be mistaught." Others accused the teachers of eating "handout rice," and snatching up workpoints for nothing. Sometimes such schools were established simply for the purpose of freeing up adult labour for more productive tasks. This was the case, for example, with respect to the half-ploughing half-study primary school set up in the Niaoshi state farm in Raoping county. Rather than expending adult labour power on tending
the farm's eighty head of cattle, the farm manager decided to set up a work-study primary school. Twenty three students were selected to attend, against the wishes of their parents. The students were assigned to tend the farm's cattle and during lunch hour they received lessons. In a year they learned 300 characters. In addition they learned how to use an abacus, and were taught how to tend cattle. The students were also paid 12-13 yuan per month, as encouragement to the families to keep their children in the school.22

Criticism was also expressed by officials who charged that the practical component of the schools' curricula was a sham and a waste. Qiu Tian, a member of the teaching research office in the education department of Jiaoling county wrote in 1965 that practical subjects taught in the schools consisted of common farming knowledge such as any peasant youth would acquire in the normal course of the socialization process. He cited the teaching manuals of some schools which instructed children on how to become familiar with the shape of a hoe, its purposes, and how to operate it. This, said Qiu, was pure "formalism;" any child growing up in a commune knew these things from practice and did not have to receive classroom instruction in them.23 In this case, the efforts of well-meaning intellectuals to bring education and the life of farming closer together simply betrayed how little the intellectuals understood about the lives of farmers.
The Socialist Education Movement and the Revival Of Literacy Education in Guangdong Villages

The revival of the work-study movement in primary education beginning in 1963 signalled the return of a more overtly politicized approach to peasant education. In Guangdong from 1960 to 1962 responsibility for peasant education was taken out of education departments and placed under the provincial agriculture department and the agricultural work department of the Guangdong committee of the communist party. The former was concerned with agricultural production; the latter was also committed to restoring agricultural production after the Great Leap. Beginning in 1963-64, however, Mao and others sought to return politics to peasant education, and to make the countryside the focus of an ideological struggle over the values of a socialist society. The vehicle for enacting this struggle was the Socialist Education Movement.

An editorial published in the Guangdong bureau of education's journal in 1962 noted that every year about 100,000 school graduates were being returned to their production teams to work, and it suggested that these returning students might be used to revive Guangdong's flagging literacy movement. In June 1963 the central committee called for mobilizing urban primary and middle
school graduates to "go up into the mountains and down into the countryside" to join commune production brigades and state farms. Furthermore, the central committee called upon all provinces to submit fifteen year plans for carrying out the large scale population transfer of educated urban youth to the countryside. Between 1962-63 partial figures from sixteen provinces recorded that nearly 100,000 urban educated youth were relocated in rural production brigades. In 1964 a total of 300,000 urban educated youth were relocated to the countryside.

A 1964 editorial in the Guangdong education bureau's journal identified the struggle of the Socialist Education Movement as the struggle between the "small morals" (xiaode) around which peasant community life revolved-- by which was meant Confucian moral values of respect for superiors, deference to authority, family honour, maintenance of "good feelings" between persons and so on-- and the "big morals" (dade) which the central committee and its urban educated youth messengers were attempting to instill in peasants. The "big morals" were those that pertained to the ideology of class struggle. The "big morals" of class struggle were those which, in Madsen's words, pitted individual farmers as participants "on various sides of vast struggles that would change the shape of Chinese and indeed world history." Classes, in this conception, were "like great modern armies," "knit together like a huge machine" and engaged with one another in a "titanic military struggle."
Madsen points out, this conception of class was considerably different than that of the villager, where having a good class label was like having an extra supply of money in the old society. One could use it to extend one's influence within the community, to provide security and honor for one's family, and perhaps to help one's whole community to prosper and thus ensure that one's heritage would be gloriously remembered for generations to come.28

Thus the "small morals" of the village community infiltrated and transformed the "big morals" of the central committee.

It was the struggle to inscribe and enshrine the "big morals" pure and uncontaminated in the consciousness of production team members that constituted the central driving force behind the sudden resurgence of literacy and mass education work in Guangdong in 1964-65 after a four year hiatus. In 1964 Guangdong educational authorities set a target of one million persons to be enrolled in rural sparetime education in 1964, three quarters of whom were to be between the ages of 14 and 30 years. And in areas where the Socialist Education Movement had not yet begun, local authorities were instructed to prepare for it by stepping up literacy work among uneducated rural youth.29 Subsequent statistics record a total of nearly 1.5 million enrolled in literacy and sparetime education classes in 1965, up from almost none in 1962.30 In Panyu county, enrollment increased from 6000 in 1962 to 25,000 in 1964 with the launching of the Socialist Education Movement. In Xinjing county, enrollment in literacy and sparetime education
classes increased from none to 54,000 with the start of the Four Cleanups campaign.31

The Socialist Education Movement was divided into two parts.32 The first part, called the Four Cleanups campaign, had the ostensible aim of eliminating corruption and abuse related to use of collective property. But as the above example shows, it had a moral purpose as well, to "purify the class ranks" by condemning the ideology that allegedly led to such malfeasance and exhorting commune members to recognize and to embrace the "correct ideology." The second part of the Movement involved organizing production team members into ad hoc literacy classes and recitation groups for the purpose of studying and chanting quotations from Chairman Mao and other models of revolutionary virtue, such as the legendary PLA soldier Lei Feng. Among the most widely used texts in these sessions was the group of essays by Mao which were known as the "three constantly read articles": "Serve the People," "In Memory of Norman Bethune," and "The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains." Illiterates who could not read these articles were led by others in mantra-like chanting sessions.33

The Chinese novelist Gu Hua provides a fictionalized description of one of these sessions based on his own experiences. His description is worth quoting at length for it shows the depth of passion and emotion that such sessions sometimes aroused.

Now, comrades, all hold up your little red books and stand facing the red sun!" Wang boomed,...
then gave a demonstration. Standing to attention, chest out and head thrown back, he gazed into the distance, his left arm at his side, his right elbow bent to clasp the little red book to his heart. He then stood sideways looking at the glorious image and recited: "First we salute our most respected and beloved great leader, great teacher, great commander-in-chief, great helmsman, the red sun in our hearts—long life to him! May he live forever!... Wang had raised his little red book level with his head to wave it rhythmically during this incantation...Carried away by his own splendid performance, his throat hoarse, his eyes filled with hot tears, he felt boundless strength and pride. He exulted like a votary who has long cultivated virtue and finally mastered the Way. At that instant, if required to, he would not have hesitated to climb a hill of swords, plunge into a sea of fire, dash his brains out or shed his hot blood....Next he made an impassioned speech urging the revolutionary masses and cadres to go straight into action to prove their loyalty. Each production team must hold a ceremony every morning and evening, to turn Hibiscus commune into a splendid revolutionary school...34

Sparetime evening schools set up in the production teams became known as "battlegrounds" (zhendi) of the Socialist Education Movement. In Huazhou county such schools were known as "night schools for communism" (gongchanzhuyi yexiao).35 An example of such a school during the Socialist Education Movement was the Promote the Proletariat and Exterminate the Capitalists Sparetime School (xinqwu miezi yeyu xuexiao) established by a rusticated youth named Lu Yubiao in Shanggang village, Sihui county, Guangdong in 1964. Lu set up the school to promote struggle against the "incorrect" ideology of fellow village youth Luo Tianrui whom Lu accused of attempting to seduce village youth with "pornographic" books from the old society. The editorial writer who brought the Promote the Proletariat
Exterminate the Capitalists Sparetime School to public attention in early 1964 proclaimed that "we need thousands upon thousands of class struggle warriors like Lu Yubiao and thousands upon thousands of class struggle battlegrounds like Shanggang village's sparetime evening school.36

In another instance, Hechun commune in Lianjiang county, Guangdong county was selected as a keypoint area for the Socialist Education Movement. Over 1500 rural youth were organized for sparetime study in 1964 (compared to only 500 before the movement). First the sparetime schools were used to "organize the class troops" for struggle and purification. Family histories (jiapu) of the students were compiled for the purpose of identifying living embodiments among the students of symbols of good and evil."37 Much emphasis was placed on comparing the past with the present and, in the case of Guangdong, comparing life in the "stinking harbour" of Hong Kong with life in socialist Guangzhou. In one particularly pungent irony, students were urged to observe the world of difference which existed between Kowloon and Shenzhen, even though just a thin river separated the two.38

Rusticated urban primary and middle school graduates played the central role as initiators and teachers in the Socialist Education Movement. Groups of urban school graduates were appointed by county work teams to descend into the production teams as self-styled 'Mao Zedong Thought Counsellors' (Mao Zedong sixiang fudao yuan). As Richard
Madsen says, under the influence of the thought counsellors "Mao's Thought was becoming not only an important guide to correct political action but a sacred Word, awesome and magically powerful." As literate moral teachers endowed with a superior knowledge of the canonical writings, the thought counsellors were in a powerful position during the Socialist Education Movement. Madsen explains that "The Maoist paradigm for moral discourse can lead to coherent moral discussion only if all members of a group are intimately familiar with the details of the authoritative teaching. Such a system, then, works best among people who are literate and have the time to study the authoritative writings thoroughly. The way is then open for such people to claim that they form a moral aristocracy within communities of illiterates." In the Guangdong village studied by Madsen, only "a few adult men of poor and lower middle peasant background were semiliterate" at the time of the Socialist Education Movement.39

The Socialist Education Movement died in 1966 as a result of two developments. First, the Mao Zedong Thought Counsellors could not agree on standard interpretations of the canonical writings, and so descended into warring factions which destroyed their credibility as a "moral aristocracy" among communities of illiterates. Second, the Cultural Revolution itself formally erupted across China in the spring of 1966.
Collapse of Literacy Education During the Cultural Revolution

The literacy movement collapsed on three separate occasions in the history of the PRC. The first was between 1953-55 as a result of the failure of the short-lived accelerated literacy method, which had briefly been touted as a panacea for China's illiteracy problem. The second time was in 1960-62, following the failure of another utopian attempt to eradicate illiteracy. The third and longest interruption of literacy efforts occurred during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 until 1973.

Official sources are unequivocal about the complete collapse of all forms of literacy education in China during these years. The authoritative China Educational Yearbook (1984), for example, states that "during the ten years of chaos anti-illiteracy work basically stopped, and the phenomenon of relapsing into illiteracy appeared." In a publication prepared for UNESCO Chinese educators in 1984 stated that "From 1966 to 1975, due to the effect of the 'ten-year turbulence', literacy work was suspended", not to be revived until 1978.

These claims are not completely accurate. As will be shown, literacy education for peasants was revived in a limited way in the early 1970s with a content consisting heavily of Cultural Revolution political themes.
Nevertheless, it is true that the bureaucratic structures which had been responsible for the literacy movement were all destroyed in 1966 and in most cases were not restored until more than a decade later. The Ministry of Education was disbanded in 1966 and not formally reconstituted until 1975. The national anti-illiteracy association was dissolved.

Guangdong followed the national pattern. The Guangdong educational yearbook (1986) writes that in Guangdong the administrative structure for literacy and sparetime education was destroyed and its personnel transferred to other areas. Local sources confirm this. The Xinxiang county educational history (1978) says that during 1966-71 only one commune in the county was engaged in literacy education. Shuitai commune operated six Red Evening Schools which enrolled 270 youth to study Mao's works. In Panyu the bureaucracy for peasant education was disbanded and its personnel transferred to other jurisdictions. The organizational structure for peasant education was not reconstituted in Panyu until 1977. In Xinfeng county in 1966 educational officials adopted the position that "there was no harm in being illiterate" (wenman wuhai); that "study was useless" (dushu wuyong); and that "the more knowledge, the more reactionary one becomes" (zhishi yueduo yue fandon).
The Destruction of the Two Track Educational System and the Cultural Revolution Model of Mass Education

In the early 1950s the Chinese state had attempted to abolish the bifurcation of school education into two unequal tracks— one state-funded, academic oriented and urban, the other locally funded, vocationally oriented and mainly rural— by means of an unsuccessful attempt to bring all schools under state control and funding. The organizational and fiscal inadequacy of the Chinese state soon ruled out the feasibility of this measure. For the next fifteen years the double track system of education continued to develop, with official support and encouragement. It was defended on grounds that it was the only feasible means whereby China could universalize school education within a reasonable amount of time, given the size of the population and the scarcity of state funds. Besides, there was a tradition of CCP educational thought, dating back to the Yanan period and before, which supported educational decentralization in order to make schooling more responsive to local conditions.

Mao's quest to revive what he and others called the "Yanan Spirit" in education— decentralized, popularly run schools with flexible curricula adjusted to local needs— began with collectivization and especially the Great Leap Forward, and climaxed during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's opponents in PRC educational circles disparaged the "Yanan Spirit" in education as an outmoded "guerilla warfare habit"
which was unsuited to the requirements of building a modern, scientific socialist society. For that, formal school systems were required, with strong academic cultures of examinations, standard curricula, degrees and graded promotions up the academic ladder to encourage excellence among students and to maintain the quality of the system as a whole. Mao's formula of mixing manual labour with classroom learning as moral training and as the inculcation of practical skills had little place in this other tradition of CCP educational thought.

In the late 1960s Mao abolished the two track educational system which imparted academic education to urbanites in state schools and rudimentary vocational training to peasants in locally funded schools.46 But the solution that Mao attempted to implement in the late 1960s was not the one that had been tried, without success, in the early 1950s, making all schools part of the state system. Mao's solution to the two-track system in the late 1960s was the opposite: to abolish the privileged state-run academic track and make all schools "people-run." In practical terms, that meant transferring administrative and financial responsibility for state primary and middle schools downward to production teams and brigades.

This took place starting in 1969 after schools had been closed for two-three years on Mao's orders in order to allow students to participate in the Cultural Revolution.47 When Mao decided it was time to "resume classes in order to stir
up revolution" (fuke nao qeming), the administration of schools was revised. In Guangdong as elsewhere primary and middle schools were placed under the management of so-called "poor and lower middle peasant" management committees in brigades and teams. In Xinxing county, for example, in 1969 all former state primary schools (gongban xuexiao) were transferred to commune brigades and remained under brigade responsibility until 1971. This was the pattern throughout Guangdong and across China.

Curriculum was also revolutionized. Franz Schurmann has noted that in China periods of administrative decentralization have paradoxically been the periods when political struggles at the top of the polity have penetrated most deeply into peasant communities. When primary and middle schools were placed under poor and lower middle peasant management committees the 'old' curriculum was abolished and replaced with Cultural Revolution tracts. Thus, for example, in Xinxing county the new management committees issued decrees which prohibited the use of former textbooks and stipulated that Cultural Revolution editorials would be the main foundation of the primary school curriculum. In Huazhou county, the new primary school curriculum consisted of locally compiled Worker-Peasant-Soldier Textbooks (gonganqing qiben) in accord with Mao's principle that educational priority be given to these groups. In Huazhou, as elsewhere, entrance examinations and pass/fail criteria were abolished in favour of a system of
recommendation in which "redness" counted most. Schools set up farms and factories or attached themselves to existing ones to promote "open-door schooling" (kaimen banxue). In Huazhou, as across China, primary school was reduced from six to five years.52

The placing of all schools under commune jurisdiction made possible perfect control over the residential and therefore the social mobility of school graduates. In Huazhou and Xinfeng counties in Guangdong, for example, new regulations prohibited geographic mobility within the commune on the basis of educational level. "Those that attend senior middle school do not leave the commune; those that attend junior middle school do not leave the brigade" (shanq gaozhong buchu gongshe; shanq chuzhong buchu dadui).53 In this way, the "caste-like" barrier which separated persons of different household registration was made virtually impenetrable through education during the Cultural Revolution.

Among those most affected by the transfer of schools to commune authority were teachers who taught in the formerly state schools. These teachers suffered because, as state employees, they lost their coveted urban resident status. With the transfer of state schools to commune jurisdiction teachers in state schools had their official residence (hukou) changed from urban resident to peasant. This meant smaller food rations, lesser salary, restrictions on mobility, and a host of other implications, from housing to
the type of school one's children were entitled to attend. Teachers in commune schools during this period were also paid in workpoints, not salaries. Thus their earnings were not guaranteed, but fluctuated according to the fortunes of the collective. In Guangdong, between December 1968 and May 1969 virtually all of the province's state primary school teachers were sent to the communes to "make workpoints" (jigongfen). Interviews by this author with former commune school teachers showed that in the 1970s the primary social distinction among commune teachers was still between those who held urban household registration and were temporarily "sent down" to the commune, and locally recruited school teachers who held rural registration. The former received additional rice rations and, most importantly, stood a chance of eventually leaving the commune.

The Cultural Revolution represented the darkest days in the history of the PRC for Guangdong primary and middle school teachers. Identified as the "stinking ninth category" (choulaojiu) behind eight other "reactionary" social groups, teachers received much of the blame as the transmitters of the 'old' education. Altogether some 29,000 primary and middle school teachers in Guangdong were persecuted and dismissed from their jobs between 1966-76. They represented a small proportion of the total number of teachers, but this does not detract from the suffering they endured nor the fear that was struck in most. In Zijin
county, for example, the dossiers of persecuted teachers were re-opened in 1986. Out of 1106 teachers persecuted and dismissed, most during the Cultural Revolution, the original verdicts were retained in only 55 cases. A total of 817 teachers were rehabilitated, 668 were reinstated to their former jobs, and 230,000 yuan in retroactive wages were paid out.56 In Xinfeng county some 250 primary and middle school teachers were "criticized" during the Cultural Revolution, of which 190 were severely "persecuted." Eight teachers were killed.57

The transfer of state schools to production teams and communes placed an onerous burden on these units, which lacked both the finances and the management personnel to implement the change. In later years this became part of the critique of Maoism. The state had used revolutionary slogans like self-reliance and local control to shirk its responsibility for public service expenditures on schools and foist these expenditures onto the backs of local communities.58 Quality declined massively as a result. By the early 1970s, due largely to Zhou Enlai's efforts to restore normalcy in the education system, the state began to recover many of the schools it turned over to communes.59 The double track educational system was thus restored.
Revival of Literacy Education in 1973

By the close of the Cultural Revolution in 1975 approximately five million Guangdong peasants had "relapsed" into illiteracy since 1966 when the organizational structure for adult literacy was demolished and its personnel dismissed. The illiteracy rate in Guangdong was estimated to have risen within this period to at least 25% of all persons between the ages of 12 and 40 years, up to 60% in some localities. A survey of the former base area Lufeng county revealed that of 1,943 persons in the 12-25 year age group selected from six brigades in six different communes, 1,590 or 82% were illiterate or semiliterate. In one brigade, 303 out of 305 young women sampled could not read or write.60

In fact by 1975 the organizational structure for literacy education had already been revived in some places in Guangdong for two-three years, although the content of literacy education was heavily influenced by the continuing politics of the Cultural Revolution. Evidence shows, for example, that in Xinxing county a county level organizational structure for literacy education was reestablished in March, 1973 after a seven year hiatus. In that year 6000 Xinxing peasants were recruited for study in 129 "political evening schools" (zhengzhi yexiao) across the county. The main subjects in these schools were "taking
class struggle as the key link" and "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat." A 1974 survey of 97 cities and counties in Guangdong showed that of a total of nearly 1.5 million staff and workers surveyed, nearly 8% were engaged in sparetime study to improve their educational level.

In 1975 the Guangdong provincial education bureau convened a conference to discuss the "three nothings" (sanwu) of literacy education in Guangdong: no organizational structure, no personnel, and no activity. As a result of this conference literacy enrollments reached 232,000 in Guangdong by the end of 1975.

The curriculum was a mixture of Cultural Revolution slogans and politically neutral common knowledge. The following pages show extracts from two literacy primers used during this period. One, from Guangdong, was designed for the Yunfu Red Evening Schools in Yunfu county near Zhaoqing in 1972. Lessons included pithy quotations from Mao ("The fundamental way out for agriculture lies in mechanization") placed alongside illustrated glossaries of tractors, pumps and vegetable oil presses; exhortations from Mao to increase hog production and the number of domestic animals alongside illustrated glossaries of these animals; names of household utensils; and names of crops. The other literacy primer, from Shandong, was provincially prepared in 1973 for use by commune members. In addition to quotations from Mao, a biography of Chen Yonggui (leader of the Dazhai commune
据看天下谁能敌？
李凤因缘加一人，
李凤因缘尽小山。
李爱民，民相牵。

52 无尘居士
54 毛主席语录

三大纪律如下：
（一）一切行动听指挥；
（二）不拿群众一针一线；
（三）一切缴获要归公。

八项注意如下：
（一）说话和气；（二）买卖公平；
（三）借东西要还；（四）损坏东西要赔；
（五）不打人骂人；（六）不损坏庄稼；
（七）不调戏妇女；（八）不虐待俘虏。

55 毛主席语录

时代不同了，男女都一样，
男同志能办到的事情，女同志也能办得到。
59 家具名称

筷子、碗碟、匙羹，
水桶、水缸、水壶，
锑煲、云鼎、铁镬，
柴刀、火钳、菜刀，
柜台、椅凳、架床，
人人勤俭持家，
不要铺张浪费。

石——碗碟

60 百货用品

日用百货，多种多样，
口盅牙刷，毛巾手帕，
牙膏肥皂，雨披雨帽，
蚊帐被服，鞋袜衫裤，
时钟电筒，茶杯水壶，
生活改善，不忘节省。

货 盆牙刷 帽 虫 皂 雨 披 被
蚊帐 袜 袜 袜 裤 钟 筒 杯 壶

source:
Yunfu hongyexiao wenhua keben
(Yunfu red evening school cultural
primer Yunfu county, Guangdong, 1972)
十三、毛主席语录

时代不同了，男女都一样。男同志能办到的事情，女同志也能办得到。

在生产中，必须实现男女同工同酬。

练习
一、背诵课文。
二、听写。
在生产中，必须实现男女同工同酬。
三、抄写生字。

时代了男女都办到
事情也必须实现酬

十四、棉花进城布下乡

棉花进城布下乡，
社员穿起新衣裳。
穿衣想着织布人，
多把棉花送工厂。

花布下乡棉进厂，
工人姐妹织布忙。
织布想着种棉人，
花布越织越漂亮。
三十三、计划生育
计划生育是大事，结婚以后要注意。
生育子女有计划，两个小孩最相宜。
封建残余要去掉，儿女不是“命”定的。
妇女能顶半边天，重男轻女要改变。
计划生育搞得好，革命生产大有益，
有利备战和备荒，有利工作和学习。

练习
一、说一说计划生育的好处，批评各种封建思想残余。
二、听写。
注意 两个小孩 最相宜 去掉封建残余
重男轻女不应当
三、把“重”字的两种读音和用法，用两个词表示出来。

后 注 孩 最 宜 封 残 掉
顶 重 轻

三十四、讲究卫生
人人注意讲卫生，普通常识记心中。
屋子里外常打扫，消灭四害少生病。
衣服勤洗勤晒，吃饭喝水要干净。
生病不要信巫婆，迷信思想要扫清。
传染疾病早隔离，病人碗筷不乱用。
及时注射防疫针，治病吃药找医生。
讲究卫生体质强，革命生产打先锋。
三十二、伟大的社会主义祖国（一）

我们伟大的社会主义祖国——中华人民共和国，位于亚洲的东部，太平洋的西岸。我国的陆界有两万多公里，同我国陆上相邻的国家，东面是朝鲜民主主义人民共和国，南面是越南民主共和国，老挝、缅甸，西南面和西面的一部分是不丹、锡金、尼泊尔、印度、巴基斯坦和阿富汗，北面是蒙古，东北、西北面和西面的一部分是苏联，同我国隔海相望的有日本、菲律宾和印度尼西亚。全国面积有九百六十万平方公里，和整个欧洲的面积差不多相等。

我国有河北、山西、黑龙江、吉林、辽宁、山东、江苏、安徽、浙江、江西、福建、台湾、河南、湖南、湖北、广东、四川、贵州、云南、陕西、甘肃、青海二十二个省和西藏。
promoted as an example of self-reliance) and Mao's essay "In Memory of Norman Bethune," this two volume primer also included lessons on kinship terms, common surnames, how to write a letter, how to use a dictionary, instructions on growing millet, and names of agricultural machines and crops. There were also lessons on family planning and household sanitation, exhorting increased cotton production, the launching of China's first satellite and lessons on Chinese geography and history. The conflation in the same literacy primers of Maoist political slogans and lessons on traditional kinship terms of address bears witness to the uncertainty of literacy education in this period, as the Cultural Revolution drew to a close.

Dawn of the Deng Xiaoping Era

Following the death of Mao in 1976 the organizational structures for literacy education in the PRC continued to be restored and revived (huifu). Hua Guofeng, imitating Mao, stated that it would be "impossible to build communism in a country congested with illiterates." In December 1978 at the dawn of the Deng Xiaoping era the state council renewed the 1956 decree on the elimination of illiteracy and called for the complete eradication of literacy in China within four years by 1980-82 "or perhaps a little longer" in some areas.
Already in September 1978 the Guangdong Revolutionary Committee (the Cultural Revolution name for the provincial government) had issued its own "Opinion Concerning Opening Up Literacy and Sparetime Education Work," in advance of the state council decree. The Guangdong document called upon all localities to cooperate with mass organizations in order to reinvigorate anti-illiteracy work.67

Thus was the literacy campaign in Guangdong born again in the late 1970s. The political content of literacy primers in the late 1970s focussed on vilifying the Gang of Four. As in the past, literacy education was used by the victors of political struggles in Beijing to marshall public opinion on their side.

By 1979 twenty five counties and cities in Guangdong had declared themselves officially "illiteracy-free" according to the November 1978 state council decree. The first to declare themselves free of illiteracy were Dingan county, located in a poor part of Hainan island, and Conghua county, near Guangzhou. In 1981 Conghua became a focus of a World Bank survey of China's progress in eliminating illiteracy.68 In 1982 the United Nations picked Guangzhou as the site of a regional conference on organizing on-the-spot inspections of anti-illiteracy projects in the Asia-Pacific.69 By 1985 a total of 104 counties in Guangdong had declared themselves illiteracy-free, with a further six counties awaiting verification. A total of 95% of counties in Guangdong were now officially illiteracy-free by
1985.70 Guangdong thus became, for the second time in its history, an officially "literate" province in China.

2 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 1021, 1037.

3 Seeberg, p. 171.


5 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 105.

6 Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 142.

7 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 24.

8 Zhenjiang zhuanshu jiaoyu ju, "Daban gengdu xiaoxue duokuai haosheng de puji nongcun jiaoyu" Guangdong jiaoyu 7 (July 1965): 8-10.

9 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, see the table on p. 133 for the contraction of middle school enrollment in state schools; p. 79 for the decline in agricultural middle school enrollment.

10 Taishan xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 100-101.

11 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, see the tables on pp. 31, 36.

12 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 78. The keypoint schools did not originate in this period. They were in existence since the early 1950s and even before that in the wartime base areas. However they were not promoted in a systematic fashion until 1959.

13 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 52.


16 Guangdong jiaoyu, pp. 52, 54, 56.
17 "Daban gengdu xiaoxue, duokuai duosheng de shixian puji nongcun jiaoyu" in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu huiyi ziliao (Guangzhou: n.p., 1965), pp. 1-12.

18 "Daban gengdu xiaoxue, duokuai duosheng de shixian puji nongcun jiaoyu," p. 3.

19 Tao Zhan, "Mianxiang nongcun, wei nongye fuwu de Changpo xiaoxue."

20 "Yige zhansheng zhongzhong kunnan banhao gengdu xuexiao de nu jiaoshi" in Guangdong sheng nongcun bannong bandu jiaoyu huiyi ziliao, pp. 1-4. See also Shi jiaoyu ju Wan Maji fuzhang zai shi nongcun yeyu jiaoyu he jiji fenzi daibiao dahui shang de jianghua (neibu) (Guangzhou? n.p., 1964). This document was distributed to brigade-run sparetime schools.

21 "Daban gengdu xiaoxue, duokuai duosheng de shixian puji nongcun jiaoyu," p. 3.


23 Qiu Tian, "Dui xiaoxue shougong laodong ke de yijian" Guangdong jiaoyu 6 (June 1965): 24-25.


25 The movement to relocate urban primary and middle school graduates in the communes from the early 1960s has been well-studied. See, for example, Thomas P. Bernstein, Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

26 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 469.


28 Madsen, Power and Morality in a Chinese Village, pp. 73, 75-76.


30 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 16. For estimates from other provinces, see "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu bu guanyu yinfa nongmin yeyu jiaoyu huibaohui jiyao de tongzhi"
in Gongnong jiaoyu wenxian huibian (nongmin jiaoyu), pp. 112-120.

31 Panyu xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 15-16; Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 142.


33 Great, supernatural feats were attributed to those who "armed" themselves with Mao Zedong Thought. As an example, the Guangdong school teacher Li Wenhui claimed to have experienced extraordinary results in growing vegetables after reading Mao's essay "In Memory of Norman Bethune." On the other hand, not everyone was convinced of the power of Mao's Thought. Another peasant in Meixian let it be known that he thought that reading Mao's works to solve practical problems was "more useless than taking a correspondence course." Shi jiaoyu ju Wan Maji fuzhan zai shi nonqcun yeyu jiaoyu he jiji fenzi daibiao dahui shang de jianghua (neibu), p. 2; "Women shi zheyang jianchi xuexi Mao zhuxi zhuzuo de" Guangdong jiaoyu 12 (Dec. 1964): 10-11. For further examples of the miraculous powers attributed to Mao's Thought in this period, see George Urban, ed., The Miracles of Chairman Mao (London: Tom Stacey, 1971).

34 Gu Hua, A Small Town Called Hibiscus trans. Gladys Yang (Beijing: Panda Books, 1983), pp. 149-150. Gu Hua termed these beliefs and ceremonies, which were clearly meant to appeal to peasants' religious sensibility, the "modern superstitions" of New China, a "new variety of the benighted feudal ideas which had prevailed in China for thousands of years." See p. 151.

35 Huazhou xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 8-9.


38 "Yunyong duozhong duoyang de xingshi dui xuesheng jinxing jieji jiaoyu" Guangdong jiaoyu 10 (1963): 5-6.


40 Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 578.

41 Literacy Situation in Asia and the Pacific Country Studies: China, p. 5.

42 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 16, 105.

43 Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 142.

44 Panyu xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 16-17.

45 Xinfeng xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 103.

46 The primary document for this view as it was expressed in the Cultural Revolution is "Chronology of the Two Road Struggle on the Educational Front for the Past Seventeen Years" Jiaoyu geming (6 May 1967), translation in Peter J. Seybolt, ed., Revolutionary Education in China: Documents and Commentary (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1971).

47 For a useful chronology of the Cultural Revolution in education written with the benefit of subsequently available sources, see Suzanne Pepper, "Chinese Education after Mao: Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Backward and Begin Again?" China Quarterly 81 (Mar. 1980): 1-65. See also Zhou Yixin, Woguo nongcun jiaoyu de huigu yu sikao (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue nongcun jiaoyu yanjiu shi, 1988). My thanks to Professor Zhou for providing me with this document.

48 Pinxia zhongnonq ban xuexiao (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1973). In practice the committees were set up according to the "three in one" formula of Army, Party cadres and representatives of mass organization, the same as the revolutionary committees set up as new governing bodies at all levels of administration in 1969. The regulations governing the management of rural schools by poor and lower middle peasant committees were set out in a document entitled "Draft Program for Primary and Middle Schools in the Chinese Countryside" originally prepared by a revolutionary committee in Jilin and subsequently reprinted in Renmin ribao 12 May 1969. Translation in Hu Shiming and Eli Saifman, eds., Toward a New World Outlook: A Documentary History of Education in the People's Republic of China (New York: AMS Press, 1976), pp. 230-236. The policy is said to have originated with a personal directive from Mao to Yao Wenyuan in late August 1968 in which Mao is reputed to have
told Yao simply that "In the countryside, the schools should be managed by the poor and lower middle peasants-- the most reliable allies of the working class." The directive was subsequently published in Hongqi 2 (1968). See Marianne Bastid, "Economic Necessity and Political Ideals in Educational Reform during the Cultural Revolution" China Quarterly 42 (April-June 1970): 16-45.

49 Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 66.


52 Huazhou xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 13.

53 Huazhou xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 13; Xinfeng xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 76.

54 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 52.

55 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 18.

56 Zijin xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 63.

57 Xinfeng xian jiaoyu zhi, pp. 77, 126. In 1979 the teachers who were killed were officially exonerated and employment was arranged for their children.


59 Pepper, "Chinese Education After Mao."

60 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 105.

61 Xinxing xian jiaoyu zhi, p. 142. The rise of literacy education in the early 1970s was associated with Zhou Enlai's efforts to restore education with the plea that "cultivating future educated generations is a hundred year undertaking, which cannot be neglected." The politicization of literacy education by 1973 reflected the triumph of the Gang of Four over educational policy. See Zhou Yixian, Woguo nongcun jiaoyu de huigu yu sikao, pp. 7-8.
62 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 105.

63 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 105.

64 Yunfu xian weiyuanhui zhenggong zu jiaoyu geming bangongshi, Yunfu xian hongyexiao wenhua keben (n.p.: 1972).


66 "Guowuyuan guanyu saochu wenmang de zhishi (zhailu)" 6 Nov. 1978 in Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, p. 900.

67 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 106.

68 Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, p. 106; "Jiakuai bufa zhuajin saomang" Guangdong jiaoyu 3 (1979): 4; Dingan xian geming weiyuanhui, "Fadong gunzhong huli saochu wenmang" Guangdong jiaoyu 3 (1979): 5; Conghua xian geming weiyuanhui, "Woxian kaizhan saomang gongzuo de yixie zuofa" Guangdong jiaoyu 3 (1979): 6; Nat Colletta, "Worker-Peasant Education in China."


70 "Nuli fazhan saomang chengren jiaoyu" Guangdong jiaoyu 7, 8 (1985): 93.
Revolutions seek to transform society, but the results often reflect the political and economic map of the old society as much as the intentions and efforts of the revolutionaries. I began at the outset of this thesis by raising Fudan demographer Dai Xingyi's analysis of national literacy zones. Dai described Guangdong as a Zone A province in China in terms of literacy. What he meant was that on the basis of a 1987 one percent cross section sample of China's population, Guangdong had succeeded more than most Chinese provinces in achieving the state's formal literacy requirements for peasants and workers, as set down by the state council in 1956 and reiterated in 1978. Dai's demographic 1987 sample includes the effects on literacy of the reforms undertaken since 1978. So the situation in the mid-1980s cannot be explained entirely by what happened during the years covered by this study. Clearly, however, the Maoist period was the major formative influence on Chinese literacy patterns into the 1980s. If Dai was right about Guangdong being a Zone A literacy province, what does this study suggest were the main causes?

Regional and local literacy patterns in Guangdong shed important light. In 1986 the Guangdong Education Bureau published a mini Guangdong version of Dai Xingyi's national literacy patterns. The Guangdong literacy map was based
largely on the 1982 census. It divided Guangdong into three literacy zones. The Pearl River Delta and suburban counties were the zone of highest literacy in Guangdong. Equivalent to one quarter of the province's population, illiteracy was basically eliminated in the high zone. The middle literacy zone encompassed the rest of the province outside of the Delta, excluding mountain and coastal areas. The middle zone was characterized by an "average" level of cultural development by national standards as revealed in the 1982 census. About half of the Guangdong population resided in the middle literacy zone. One quarter of Guangdong's population belonged to the zone of least literacy, which consisted of minority areas, remote mountainous parts of the interior, and the poor coastal regions. Literacy and immediate post-literacy work remained the most urgent task in the zone of least literacy.2

County by county literacy results from the 1982 census confirm this pattern (appendix A). What the census showed was that literacy education in Guangdong after 1949 fared best in those parts of the province where it was traditionally highest and remained low in areas where it was traditionally low.

Literacy was highest in two areas: the Pearl River Delta region, writ large to include the greater Foshan-Guangzhou commercial region; and in Meixian county in northeastern Guangdong. The greater Foshan-Guangzhou region accounts for nearly sixty percent of the total Guangdong
population. Together with Meixian, the greater Guangzhou-Foshan region is what pushed Guangdong to the top of Dai Xingyi's national literacy profile.

The fact that both Meixian and the Pearl River Delta are high literacy zones in Guangdong is significant, because it rules out the possibility of any simple and unidirectional correlation between level of economic development and literacy attainment. The Pearl River Delta region historically has been the commercial and political centre for Guangdong, perhaps making its relatively high literacy level come as no surprise. But Meixian has historically been one of the poorest region, populated mainly by Hakka 'guest people.' Why has literacy fared best in Meixian?

The historic motive for education in Meixian was bureaucratic not economic. The poverty of the economy led the mainly Hakka population of Meixian to develop a historic reputation in Guangdong for commitment to education as the only available means of wealth and social mobility. The attitude is summed up by Meixian's popular saying, "there are no (economic) outlets, so we study" (meiyou chulu suoyi dushu). In imperial times that commitment manifested itself in the fact that Meixian produced more than its share of imperial examination graduates. In more recent times, the measure of Meixian's educational striving can be seen in its high rates of literacy. Thus illiteracy rates in Meixian according to the 1982 census were among the lowest in the
province. They were about the same or lower than the illiteracy rates in most counties in the Pearl River Delta. The illiteracy rate in Meizhou city, for example, was the lowest in the province at only 9%, well below Guangzhou's 14.2% illiteracy rate and Foshan's 14% illiteracy rate.3

If poverty was a stimulus to literacy in Meixian, what factors influenced the literacy success of the Pearl River Delta after 1949? The Pearl River Delta was traditionally the heartland of clan-sponsored schooling in Guangdong. This benefitted post-1949 literacy in two ways. First, the tradition of clan sponsorship bequeathed a rich legacy of well-established schools, some with histories stretching back several centuries. We noted how most of the "keypoint" and "central" schools set up in the 1950s began originally as clan and official-sponsored academies during the Qing period. So the heritage of clan schooling bequeathed an institutional legacy upon which to build an effective modern school system. In the early twentieth century clan schools in Guangdong followed state decree and the changing times and converted themselves into government primary schools with amazing rapidity; and county educational histories show that clans, fuelled by commercial wealth and overseas remittances, led the way in establishing modern primary schools after the abolition of the examination system. After 1949 these schools formed the basis of a well established school system in the Delta. Though difficult to demonstrate, the institutional heritage of clan schooling
may have helped post-1949 literacy in another way as well, by fostering a school culture which did not exist to the same extent in other regions, except for Meixian.

The tradition of clan sponsorship of education in the Delta also made for an especially rich proliferation of village sishu in this region. We saw how in the early 1950s the CCP's efforts to crush the sishu met with strong popular resistance. But subsequently established minban schools, set up by single lineage production team-villages, may have drawn on the tradition of clan-sponsored village schools which was already well-established in this part of Guangdong. Overseas remittances, though reduced, continued to fortify schools in the overseas home areas.

But the schools themselves cannot account for all of literacy success of the Delta region. As Furet and Ozouf write, "The school is not the substance or the heart of the literacy process, but merely its form"; what is more significant are the "social pressures" in favour of it. In the Pearl River Delta examination competition stimulated the establishment of clan schools, but commerce was perhaps the greatest stimulus to popular literacy. The commercial heritage continued to stimulate literacy after 1949 in two ways. One was at the level of the collective. The commercial activity that traditionally stimulated localized literacies in the Delta was all but eliminated under the cellular economy of the commune period. Collectivization severed the rich commercial networks which linked the Delta
economically to regional market towns, cities and even beyond, via Hong Kong, to the world market.

But although the commercial economy shrivelled up under collectivization, the literate practices which had enabled it to prosper may have continued to play a role. Brian Street has argued on the basis of his research on an Iranian fruit growing village in the 1970s that "maktab literacy" traditionally taught in village Islamic schools (called maktabs), enabled villagers who possessed it to adapt easily to a new form of commercial literacy necessitated by the village's growing participation in the national and world economy. Rote memorization of Islamic texts instilled in students a consciousness of the format and exact positioning of words on a page, a learning trait which in Street's view was easily transferable to the new tasks of accounting and record-keeping. In a somewhat similar and more direct way, pre-1949 commercial literacy in the Pearl River Delta, in the form of abacus training and basic accounting and numerate skills learned in the village sishu, may have eased the transition to workpoint literacy in the semi-economy of the collectives.

In order to understand the other way in which the commercial heritage of the Delta may have continued to influence literacy patterns in the Maoist period, we need to examine a different level of the marketing hierarchy. If, as Jean Oi and others have shown was the case, local commerce shrivelled under state socialism, in our view
thereby eliminating a traditional local stimulus to literacy, we might expect that commerce nevertheless continued to directly stimulate literacy at higher levels of the marketing hierarchy, in places such as regional hubs which continued to fulfill their traditional role as centres for redistribution and transfer of surplus. Literacy figures from the 1982 census lend support for this view. The lowest illiteracy levels in the Pearl River Delta in 1982 were in Jiangmen (13%) and Foshan (14%)—the traditional commercial hub for the Delta. This has implications for Skinner's argument concerning the continuity of traditional marketing patterns and post-1949 socio-economic units.

Skinner argued that PRC policies worked best which built on "natural" socio-economic units based on traditional marketing patterns.6 Skinner pointed out that the collective units into which Chinese rural society was parcelled after 1956 rested on a historical foundation of marketing arrangements with deep roots in the economic geography of the countryside and in the social and cultural life of the peasantry. My analysis adds an important educational dimension to this argument. It suggests the traditional link between commerce and literacy was severed and transposed into "workpoint literacy" at the level of the commune-standard market, but survived intact at the level of regional marketing centres.
If the post-1949 successes of literacy education in Guangdong have been strongly historically based, so too have the failures. Literacy education has fared worst in the minority people regions of Guangdong, making Guangdong a microcosm of all China in this respect. In Liannan and Ruyuan, Yao counties in the Shaoguan district of northern Guangdong, illiteracy was 30% and 35% respectively at the time of the 1982 census. In Hainan, which is now its own province, numerous minority counties approached 40% illiteracy. In the mid-1980s the illiteracy rate in some minority areas of Guangdong approached an astonishing 90%. In the poor mountain regions of Guangdong, some of which are populated mainly by minority peoples, literacy attainment has similarly fared poorly. One Chinese scholar has recently put the percentage of persons with primary school education and above in the poor mountainous counties of Guangdong at more than 10% below the figure in the Pearl River Delta (63% compared to 53%). Illiteracy on average is over 18% in the mountain regions, compared to less than 11% in the Pearl River Delta.

It is not only in the regions that successes and failures of literacy education appear to have been influenced by historical attributes which pre-dated the Revolution but which continued to affect it. Female illiteracy in Guangdong is somewhat of an anomaly compared to other parts of China. Overall Guangdong's female literacy rate was significantly higher than the national
average according to the 1982 census: 63% in Guangdong compared to only 55% nationally. But there is an anomaly which lies in the ratio of female to male illiterates in Guangdong compared to other parts of the country. What Jacques Lamontagne calls the "Female-Male Inequality Ratio" is higher in Guangdong than in any other Chinese province. Whereas the rate of female illiteracy in Guangdong was 37%, the rate of male illiteracy in Guangdong was only 9%. This means the Female-Male Inequality Ratio in Guangdong was 4.11, compared to a low of 1.36 (in Tibet) and less than 3.0 in most provinces. The only other provinces with Female-Male Inequality ratios approaching that of Guangdong were the other Lingnan provinces of Guangxi and Fujian, as well as Shanghai.

Guangdong females also appear from the 1982 census to have been relatively disadvantaged in terms of primary schooling compared to other provinces. Lavely et al have observed that the rise in female education in China from 1949 to 1982 was mainly due to expanded opportunities at the primary level. However, the Chinese demographer Peng Xizhe reports "clear evidence" of a stronger educational preference for male over female education in Guangdong compared to other provinces. Peng noted that in Guangdong, by the late 1980s, over 88% of school age males were enrolled in primary school, compared to only 66.4% of school age females in Guangdong. This was not the same as in many
other provinces, said Peng, where differences in school attendance by sex were minor.

Some of the other provinces which had high gender differences in school attendance besides Guangdong were Anhui and some of the western provinces. But the latter, Peng observed, were commonly regarded as more "backward" and slower to implement national policies. Guangdong was an advanced province in China economically, so why did it lag behind the rest in female educational equality?

In Peng Xizhe's view, Guangdong's relative "backwardness" in this and other gender-related policy issues like family planning (Guangdong was the first province in China officially to sanction a second child if the first one was a girl) was the result of the influence of Guangdong's "little traditions" and its "special institutional settings." Specifically, Guangdong's "very staunch resistance" to national policies since 1949 was due to the persistence of "feudal" ideologies of "clan superiority" which valued males more than females. Such ideologies persisted in Peng's view because of the continuing influence of overseas Chinese, and because of Guangdong's "special political history," by which Peng presumably meant Guangdong's tradition of tension with and opposition to states in Beijing.13

What all of this suggests is that historical endowments have been a more powerful determinant of Guangdong literacy patterns since 1949 than the efforts of the Revolution.
Just as the Pearl River Delta and Meixian emerged from the Maoist period as the most literate regions of Guangdong, so the minority areas and the poor mountain and coastal regions have remained the most illiterate. In other words, the Revolution could build upon, but was unable to alter, the deep structure of historic literacy patterns in Guangdong.

This study belongs to a tradition of works on peasant-state relations in the PRC. Most of the recent work on peasant-state relations in the PRC, however, has focussed on economic policy and the capacity of the state to achieve compliance through local leaders. Literacy enforcement is also a matter of achieving compliance, but I have tried to show literacy's significance for the state-society relationship in other ways as well. What I have tried to show is that when we analyze the role of the state in promoting literacy and examine the social response, it is not enough simply to add up the figures of numbers of persons made "literate." Literacy education after 1949 was crucially involved in the creation of a particular social formation in China. We need to understand what it means, socially, politically, economically and culturally, to be "literate" in rural China in the sense of knowing 1500 characters and living in a rural production team.

What I have showed is that the expansion of literacy after 1955 occurred alongside-- and was in fact a key part of-- the contraction of village economy and society under
collectivization. Within the resulting cellular "honeycomb" polity, as Vivienne Shue has termed it, the ideology of localized literacies promoted development of the collective. But it also served a much broader social and political function as well. Localized, terminal literacy for peasants was a crucial element in the "caste-like system" which separated urban and rural residents in collectivized China. It is critical to understand how literacy ideologies undergirded this caste structure. With a single national public school system, the caste-like barriers which divided urban from rural residents would have been impossible to enforce: the opportunity for social and occupational mobility through schooling would have to be acknowledged as something that was open to all who participated in the school system. It was precisely the concept of different literacy ideologies for different social groups which therefore made the barriers of social "caste" virtually impermeable for rural residents. Ration cards and residence permits were the surface glue which reinforced the caste structure of collectivized China. But undergirding the system of rationing and household registration were different educational ideologies and different educational systems which reproduced the rural-urban caste structure over time.

How then, one might ask, has decollectivization altered the social demand for and uses of literacy in Guangdong? The results, as might be expected from this thesis, have
been anything but uni-directional. The first impact of
decollectivization in education was to cause the collapse of
many rural schools formerly run by collectives, as the
corporate resources which previously sustained team schools
were eliminated with nothing immediately to replace them.
But decollectivization and the return of entrepreneurial
farming also enlivened the rural economy of Guangdong
remarkably, and here the impact on education has been
instructive and critical.

On the one hand, the enlivening of the rural economy
has made the two track educational system less of a pressing
social issue, since there are now growing opportunities for
real social and economic advancement through literacy, which
did not exist under the collective system. Under the
collective system, workpoint literacy offered limited
opportunities for restricted advancement within the closed
occupational structure of the collective bureaucracy. Now,
literate ability is the key to participation in a wide array
of different kinds of wealth-making opportunities.

Under the collective system, abolition of the private
economy had the ironic effect of reinforcing traditional
bureaucratic motives for education: the notion that one
studied in order to become an official (dushu zuoquan)
fLOURished under the collective system. Abolition of the
collective system and restoration of private economic
activity, by enlarging the potential uses of literacy, is,
ironically, what is now contributing to the erosion of this
value which the Party condemned repeatedly after 1949. It took the creation of an economic sphere outside the Party-state to bring it about.

But if the economic reforms of the 1980s have stimulated literacy in Guangdong in some ways, they have also discouraged it in others. The problem of the "new illiterates" (xin wenmang)-- those who fail to attend school or else drop out-- is especially severe in Guangdong, and it is most severe in the Pearl River Delta, where the economic reforms have been most "successful." Here, developments appear to be following a pattern seen in other early industrializing societies. Furet and Ozouf, for example, found that in France "literacy had been dragging its feet" in areas experiencing "sudden, wide-scale industrialization."14 Parents wanted their children to take advantage of factory job opportunities. Child labour (tonggong) has become a serious problem in Guangdong in recent years. Female education has been in decline since the early 1980s because, as elsewhere in Asia, young unmarried women are the preferred workers in the textile and electronic assembly factories set up to take advantage of cheap labour costs. According to an internally circulated county education bulletin, by 1988 primary school classes above fourth year in some counties in rural Guangdong were being referred to as "male student classes" (nanshengban) because they were devoid of females. In Dongguan, one of the "four little dragon" counties of the Pearl River Delta,
there were more than fifteen hundred school dropouts in 1986, 70% of them female students. Altogether between 1980-85 there were 707,000 primary school dropouts in Guangdong, and the number has continued to increase every year since then.15

Thus the struggle for literacy in Guangdong continues, under a changed set of circumstances. I plan to address these recent changes in a follow-up study to this one. Research into the recent aspects of this still enormously neglected subject will add perspective and should throw further light on the legacy of literacy under Mao.
1 Dai Xingyi, "Qianxi woguo de wenmang renkou wenti."


3 Disanci quanquo renkou pucha shougang huizong ziliao huibian vol. 5, Renkou wenhua chengdu, pp. 122-129, which lists educational levels county by county for all Guangdong counties. See also Disanci renkou pucha ziliao huibian vol. 2 (Guangzhou: Guangdong sheng renkou pucha bangongshi, 1984, pp. 328-355, which gives slightly different figures for the same counties. My thanks to the staff of the Zhongshan University Population Research Centre for providing me with a copy of this latter source.

4 Furet and Ozouf, Reading and Writing, p. 149.

5 Street, Literacy in Theory and Practice.


7 Disanci quanquo renkou pucha shougang huizong ziliao huibian vol. 5, Renkou wenhua chengdu, pp. 122, 126.

8 See Guangdong jiaoyu nianjian, pp. 51-52.

9 Wen Yinggan and Liao Liqiong, "Zhenxing shanqu jingji de zhongyao huanjie: lun Guangdong shanqu de zhili kaifa."

10 In this section I am using figures provided in Jacques Lamontagne's "Education and Employment in China: Variations According to Gender, Region, Ethnicity and Age" paper presented to the Canadian Learned Societies Conference, Hamilton, 1987. The basic figures are from the 1982 census report; Lamontagne makes extrapolations based on these. The Female-Male Inequality Ratio in illiteracy represents the percentage of female illiterates and semi-literates divided by the percentage of male illiterates and semi-literates. My thanks to Professor Lamontagne for allowing me to use his figures.

11 Edgar Wickberg has pointed out to me that this pattern suggests possible overseas Chinese home area practices as an influence. I plan to investigate overseas Chinese influences on local literacy patterns in future research.


14 Furet and Ozouf, *Reading and Writing*, p. 218.
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"Guowuyuan guanyu tuiguang putonghua de zhishi" 国务院关于推广普通话的指示


Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 "Guanyu nongcun saochu wenmang gongzuo" 关于农村扫除文盲工作

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association to the state council concerning draft plan for
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## Guangdong Educational Levels by District, City, County, 1982

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<th>Locality</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Junior Middle</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Illiterate</th>
<th>Illiterates over 12 years</th>
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<td>24,086,232</td>
<td>24,747</td>
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Source: Disuanci guanguo renkou pucha shougong huizong ziliao huibian vol. 5. Renkou wenhua chengdu (Beijing, 1983)
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