

**Adult Literacy and Adult Education in the Socialist
Modernization of China:
Policy, Performance, Lessons**

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Abstract

This paper was originally presented at the 1990 International Year of Literacy Colloquium in Washington, D.C. The paper contains information to answer three important questions: 1) What is the role assigned to adult literacy and adult education in the socialist modernization of China within the nation's overall development policy? 2) What is the effectiveness of the adult education and adult literacy system in its performance and in implementing stated policy? 3) What lessons can literacy workers and adult educators elsewhere in the world learn from the Chinese experience? In proposing answers, material from personal visits, as well as published material is used.

1. Introduction

What is the role assigned to adult literacy and adult education in the socialist modernization of China within the nation's overall development policy? What is the effectiveness of the adult education and adult literacy system in its performance and in implementation of the stated policy? What lessons can literacy workers and adult educators elsewhere in the world learn from the Chinese experience?*

In trying to answer these questions, I combine historical analysis with an autobiographical detail. I was recently in the People's Republic of China on a UNESCO mission from July 13 to August 6, 1990. I do not claim a sudden rush of *instant expertise* on China during my rather short visit to the country.¹ However, the visit highly enlightened and deeply moved me as the people of mainland China became real to me. I experienced the daily struggles and common joys of men and women, of boys and girls in villages, free markets, shops, bus stations, and town squares.

With this direct personal experience, I combine my modest education about China over the last many years and my own earlier work on adult literacy in China (Bhola 1984, 1989). I also draw heavily on the work done by others in the areas of adult literacy and adult education in China. I begin with two pictures of adult education in China painted by others (China 1990a, Lofstedt 1990).

2. A Scenario from China

The first picture is painted by Lofstedt (1990). Lofstedt is a scholar with deep sympathies for the third world, and particularly for China. He spent many years there as a teacher in the mid-1960s, and has returned many times since in pursuit of his interests in Chinese education. A specialized institute of UNESCO (1990) published his report. Lofstedt writes in a careful style, weighing every word, basing his remarks almost exclusively, if not completely, on statistical data. In his words:

In contrast to higher (general) education, adult education has suffered severe setbacks, at least in quantitative terms, after the *cultural revolution*. Enrollment in literacy classes and in primary education for adults has dropped continuously, and in some cases dramatically, since the 1970s. In the mid-1980s, only a little more than three million adults were enrolled in primary education as compared to more than 127 million ten years earlier. By 1987, the figure had dropped even further to around 1.7 million. Enrollment, in secondary technical schools and tertiary institutions for adults, has also come down in the 1980s. . . [but] . . . are beginning to show a more steady and upward trend again. . . There are also signs that the falling adult enrollment in formal educational institutions has, to some extent, been compensated for by more stress on on-the-job training and short-term courses organized by the work

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¹This trip was not my first encounter with China. My interest in China dates back to the 1950s when, as a student at the Punjab University in India, I studied Chinese history and culture, as well as the politics of its transformation under the leadership of Mao Zedong. I particularly remember reading with great interest the weekly columns written for the *Hindustan Times* by one of India's ambassadors to the People's Republic of China, Dr. K. M. Panikkar, a historian of merit. Since the mid-1970s, as an academic at Indiana University, I have studied the role of education, particularly adult literacy and adult education, in the socioeconomic development of China.

units. It cannot be denied, however, as pointed out earlier, that the new economic strategy which stresses material incentives and increased scope for individuals to engage in income generating activities has had adverse effects on the commitment to education of both adults and children.

The economic reforms have given more decision-making power to the managers of enterprises and, within certain limits, these now have the authority to hire, promote, and dismiss personnel. In their attempts to increase profits, some managers prefer to recruit more skilled personnel from elsewhere, rather than invest money in the upgrading of existing personnel. Some of them also realize that if they do invest in training, they may run the risk of losing workers to other enterprises.

The falling enrollment in primary education and literacy classes to only a few percent of the peak enrollment in the 1970s is also serious since nearly 30 percent of the total population and more than 40 percent of the rural women are illiterate. There are also signs that illiteracy, or at least semi-literacy, is in fact increasing because of diminishing participation of children in regular primary schools and increasing drop-out, especially in more remote rural areas and in some rapidly developing areas where there is a shortage of labour.

The agricultural sector is lagging especially far behind in the provision of adult university education. Whereas workers and staff constitute about 25 percent of the work force, they have around 340,000 adult students enrolled in workers' universities compared to an enrollment of about 1,100 in peasants' universities in spite of the fact that the latter have nearly 75 percent of the work force.

This is a picture of contractions of programs and contradictions in effects. It is possible to take the assertions above, one-by-one, accept some, question and qualify others, and contextualize most of them. This makes the picture look much less severe than it does now. First, look at another picture that presents quite a different reality of adult literacy and adult education in China.

3. The Chinese Government Picture

The second picture of the policy and performance of adult education and adult literacy in China, like Picture One above, is also a freshly painted picture. Chinese policy makers painted it themselves and completed this picture during July–August 1990 for presentation at the Forty-second Session of the International Conference on Education, organized by UNESCO International Bureau of Education, Geneva, September 3–8, 1990.

This is a responsible formulation by officials speaking for their government at an international forum. It is based on the latest data available to these officials. While Picture One was based on quantitative data, Picture Two uses quantitative data and qualitative statements on the ideological-political and socioeconomic contexts of adult education and adult literacy. It makes claims about changes that adult education and adult literacy may have wrought in the lives of the Chinese people.

The pages that follow summarize the section on adult literacy and adult education included in the Chinese government report referred to above (China 1990a). The original material is reduced to about one-fourth its original size. It retains, as far as possible, the language of the original report. Minor changes in style aid readability.

3.1 The vital role played by adult education

Adult education plays the vital role of improving the quality of in-service personnel and of promoting social and economic development. In the 1980s, the field of adult education made impressive progress. A systematic structure came into being that includes all levels of education: primary, secondary, and higher learning. Certified courses run parallel with noncertified courses. The forms of running a school and of teaching adults are diversified. This structure is well-coordinated with general education.

3.2 Many forms, many settings

Adult education in China covers higher learning, secondary and primary education, and literacy teaching. Forms of learning include full-time classroom teaching, self-learning with audio-visual

materials, full-time, and part-time or spare-time learning. Certified education for adults includes one-year university courses, short-term special college courses, specialized secondary schools and general secondary schools. Noncertified education for adults includes a literacy program, the training of applied technologies in the rural areas and continuing education.

Despite the dramatic growth of adult education, some problems arose in the 1980–85 period. The *Decisions of the State Education Commission Concerning the Reform and Development of Adult Education*, approved by the State Council in June 1987, clarified priorities and major tasks of adult education in the 1990s. It identified post-training, or in-service training, as the top priority item on the adult education agenda.

3.3 Achievements during 1988–89

During the period 1988–89, the following achievements were recorded:

3.3.1 Adult higher education

Number of independent institutes of higher learning for adults: 1,333 (a decrease of 66 from 1987).

Regular institutions of higher learning that run correspondence courses or night schools for adults: 634 (a small increase over 1987).

Total enrollment in adult higher education: 1,741,100 (a decrease of 116,800 from 1987).

3.3.2 Adult secondary education

Total number of secondary schools for adults: 56,339 (an increase of 4,771 over 1987).

Specialized secondary schools: 4,970 (an increase of 228 over 1987).

Secondary schools: 9,837 (a decrease of 3,135 from 1987).

Secondary technical training schools: 41,982 (an increase of 7,678 over 1987, 74.5 percent of total secondary schools, but a slight discrepancy here in the figures).

Total enrollment of adults in secondary schools: 15,411,100 (an increase of 4,490,700 over 1987).

Enrollment in secondary technical training schools only: 12,635,300 (an increase of 5,272,700 over 1987, 82 percent of the total enrollment for secondary schools).

3.3.3 Adult primary education

Number of primary schools for adults: 214,300 (an increase of 39,500 over 1987).

Enrollment in adult primary schools: 19,461,100 (an increase of 5,943,200 over 1987).

Participants in literacy classes: 3,955,500 (an increase of 1,477,100 over 1987).

Successful graduates of literacy programs: 2,000,000 (an increase of 480,000 over 1987, in 1989 a 38.8 percent increase in the number of neoliterates over 1988).

3.3.4 Self-learning examination systems, higher education

Number of subjects offered: 97 (an increase of 27 subjects over 1987).

Recorded participants (earning at least one single subject qualification certificate): 3,000,000.

Those earning diplomas from regular universities or special colleges: 400,000.

3.3.5 *Specialized secondary schools*

Number of subjects offered: 50.

Recorded participants: 430,300.

Those earning diplomas: 64,600.

3.3.6 *Training in applied technologies in rural areas*

Peasants participating in training of applied technologies of various kinds since 1986:
150,000,000.

3.3.7 *In-service training*

Workers who have had fifty class hours of in-service training: 29,540,000.

Workers receiving in-service training as percentage of the total work force:

1986	16.4%
1987	17.9%
1988	29.9%

Directors, economists, engineers receiving in-service training: 20,000.

Percentage of total target group: 40 percent.

Heads of workshops or working groups in enterprises receiving in-service training: 1,980,000.

Percentage of total target group: 42 percent.

3.3.8 *Television universities*

Number of television universities: 40 (1 at the central, 39 at the provincial level).

Teaching classes: 30,000.

Enrollment: 417,400.

3.4 *Size of the nongovernmental effort*

The above statistics do not reflect adult education services offered by nongovernment organizations. The size and scope of the nongovernmental effort can be surmised from an enrollment of as many as 3 million adults in 3,000 schools in only twelve of the big cities, including, Beijing, Tianjing, and Shanghai.

3.5 *Objectives and strategies in the eradication of illiteracy*

From 1949–89, 165,000,000 people became literate, an average of four million a year. The illiteracy rate dropped from over 80 percent to about 20 percent. Over half of the counties (townships) achieved universal primary education. Illiteracy among young people was basically eradicated. In the fifteen to forty age group, more than 30 percent have an education level of junior or senior secondary school. Neoliterates and those with a level of primary education account for 50 percent. Illiteracy and semi-illiteracy dropped to below 20 percent. China is no longer a land of illiterates. The number of illiterates is still too high. Therefore, efforts in literacy and post-literacy education must continue.

The State Council issued the *Regulations on Literacy Programme* in 1988. It requires that illiteracy and semi-illiteracy among the fifteen to forty age group be eradicated by the end of the year 2000, or a bit longer. By the end of this century, at least half of the present 72 million young and middle-aged illiterates should become literate. The word *basically* means that in the fifteen to forty age group, the

literacy rate should be over 85 percent in rural areas and over 90 percent in enterprises, institutions, and townships. In those regions, or units, where this target has already been reached, efforts should continue to lower the illiteracy rate in that age group to 5 percent.

3.6 Planned regional differentiations

Three regional realities have been accepted to accommodate flexible targets and strategies.

A. The first reality is the advanced and parts of the relatively developed regions, including municipalities, counties, and districts. These have achieved universal primary education and basically wiped out illiteracy. These must continue to eradicate the remaining illiteracy and achieve a 95 percent literacy rate among the population aged fifteen to forty. Efforts must also be made to improve the literacy rate in the population over the age of forty.

B. The second reality is the relatively developed regions, including municipalities and counties (districts), which have yet to achieve basic literacy. These regions must achieve basic literacy through universal primary education. Among the young and middle-aged population between 1990 and 1995, they must achieve a literacy rate over 85 percent. Further efforts must be made on this basis to eventually achieve a 95 percent literacy rate.

C. The third reality is the less developed regions which must gradually wipe out illiteracy among the young and middle-aged population by universal primary education. An 85 percent literacy rate in the fifteen to forty age group is expected between 1995 and 2000. The extremely poor and difficult regions must create the necessary conditions to gradually carry out literacy education. Priority will be given to youth and children, so every peasant family can have at least one member with literacy skills. Literacy programs targeted at the young and middle-aged population will follow. Basic efforts will be made to wipe out illiteracy by the early part of the next century.

3.7 Literacy with functionality

As a new development in literacy education in China, literacy is integrated with teaching of skills to promote a commodity economy in rural areas. Literacy teaching combines with teaching of economic skills to enable people to become *rich*. Different literacy standards are tolerated. For peasants, the criteria for individual literacy is the recognition of 1,500 Chinese characters. Employees in urban enterprises and urban residents must recognize 2,000 characters. They also must show that they can read simple newspaper articles, keep basic accounts, and write simple pieces for practical purposes.

Primary education plays a role in the eradication of illiteracy. In this regard, the National People's Congress enacted the Law on Compulsory Education of People's Republic of China in 1986.

3.8 Administrative responsibility system for literacy

An administrative responsibility system has been introduced under which literacy achievement is part of the evaluation of administrators and leaders at various levels. A contract system among stakeholders introduces and sustains incentives and rewards to overcome the deficiencies of equalitarianism in the past. Funding for adult literacy work comes from funds raised by village and township governments, urban communities, and other organizations. Funding also comes from expenditures for staff training and education in enterprises and state organizations and an earmarked sum of the rural education levy. Local governments at all levels must provide necessary subsidies. In addition, social forces and individuals are encouraged to give financially on a voluntary basis.

The slogan for literacy eradication in China is: Prevention, Eradication, and Upgrading. Post-literacy work is an important part of the plan for the eradication of illiteracy. Peasants' Schools for Culture and Technology fit in here admirably. These are one mode of post-literacy education. China has over

3,600 peasants' schools run by county authorities, 33,200 peasants' cultural and technical schools run by town and township departments, and over 180,000 village peasants' spare-time schools.

While Picture One may be a bit pessimistic, Picture Two can be seen as too optimistic. While the first may be too cautious and severe, the second may be too harmonious and self-congratulatory. What is the true picture of the Chinese reality?

4. Toward a New Construction of Adult Literacy and Adult Education in China

The one and only *true* picture of adult literacy and adult education in China, with the right *numbers* and the right *meanings*, is impossible to construct. It is possible, however, to work toward a description that presents the best approximation to the reality in the sense that such a description is relatively more compelling, more coherent, and more credible to more people with diverse value positions. More important, it is possible to gather from such a description, useful theoretical and practical insights, and learn some useful lessons without getting lost in details of numbers, definitions, criteria, and evidence. Such a picture, I hope, is in the book on adult education in China that is now being written. It is not possible today to present the full picture within the scope of this presentation, but I will talk of the two bold strokes of paint that will be used in this future picture. One is a stroke made with the *paint of theory*, and the other is a stroke made with the *paint of practice*.

4.1 The stroke of theory

My theoretical filters tell me that social change is a value enterprise and hence, an ideological project. It follows that evaluative judgments on adult literacy and adult education programs in China should be made within the framework of the ideology and the political culture of the Chinese people. This is not the impossible invitation to separate *facts* from *values*, or the invitation to surrender one's own political values to adopt the Chinese socialist ideology. Disagreements in ideology must be faced, but not allowed to confound judgments on the calculus of policy and performance within their particular setting.

Social change is complex, involving invention and restructuring of new social, economic, and political patterns and institutions. Social change—and adult literacy promotion as both an instrument and an instance of social change—is, therefore, very slow. It is dialectical, sometimes producing results opposite those expected. Social change is an experiment involving approximations more than certainties. Social change cannot be spread instantly and evenly over the whole system, certainly not all over a country of continental size like China. The initial set of historical conditions may make unavoidable strategies that initially may start from the center and then move to the periphery. Balancing the need for equality and provision of incentives is not an easy task. In the process, disparities may be accentuated in the short run. More is not necessarily better. Ever-increasing numbers may mean that the circle of mediocrity expands. Decreasing numbers, on the other hand, may be good news because the quality of instructional experiences may improve or missions and objectives of programs may be reviewed and reformulated. Overall progress should be judged by inter- and intra-comparisons. Without evidence, leaderships need not be attributed malfeasance or conspiratorial intents.

4.2. The stroke of practice

The other bold stroke of paint used in my composite-in-the-making is what I saw in practice in Chinese adult education, especially in the area of peasants' schools of culture and technology, and the effects such schools have on people's material culture. It is a bright and optimistic stroke of paint in the emerging picture (China 1990b).

4.3. The overall tone of the emerging picture

The overall tone and mood of my emerging picture is sympathetic, optimistic, even enthusiastic. My earlier description of Chinese literacy campaigns in the 1950s to the 1980s (Bhola 1984) were characterized as laudatory (Hayford 1987). Some of my friends considered my personal accounts of my recent visit to China as surprises, and by one as evidence that the Chinese surely *got* to me. I still consider that China today is conducting the world's largest and most promising experiment in using adult education in social change.

That does not mean that the Chinese system is faultless and their experience without blemishes. Indeed, I see problems in the reduction of national aspirations by the Chinese for literacy promotion. They now focus only on the fifteen to forty age group and, by statistical fiat, make the illiteracy problem shrink to one-third of its real size. I worry about the emphasis on becoming *rich* and the comparative neglect of what the Chinese adult educators call *the spiritual culture*. I worry somewhat about the over-institutionalization of adult literacy and adult education work. Finally, I saw an important and urgent need to educate the adult educators who show little interest in the dynamics of change processes or in the diagnosis of instructional problems.

4.4. Understandings from the Chinese experience

There is much that we can learn from the Chinese. It is to these basic understandings from the Chinese experience to which I now turn, with two caveats.

4.4.1 *Knowledge is contextual*

Knowledge is contextual. Facts cannot always be separated from values. Neither policies and plans, nor institutional and professional solutions can be carried out without adaptation from one political culture to another. Indeed, what we can take from one context to another are not ready-made solutions, or generalizations, but general understandings and promising insights.

4.4.2 *One-party states make coordination easier*

This is important to keep in mind as people seek to learn from China. Two more points are especially germane. First, China is a socialist society and a one-party state. Within such a political culture, clear articulations are possible between Marxist ideology, state policy and planning, and between the structure and content of programs of economic reform and education. Second, because of the national registration system, there is very little unauthorized movement of population and change of abode. Local communities, therefore, are relatively stable. Since most employees in China are state employees assigned to their jobs and stations by the state, the cadres responsible for development and education are relatively stable within their communities.

5. Conclusion: Lessons Learned from China

Though the above conditions may not be as pervasive in other countries, adult educators, particularly in the third world, can acquire useful understandings and learn useful lessons from the Chinese experience. The first lesson, especially for third-world adult educators, is the need for *political commitment*. They need commitment, first to social reform in the interest of people, and commitment to the role of adult literacy and adult education in actualizing overall reform. The Chinese commitment to adult education and adult literacy follows from their larger commitment to the socialist ideology. It need not mean, however, that socialism is the only such ideological source of commitment, and that nonsocialist ideologies cannot become sources for similarly deep commitments.

There is another important lesson about development processes to be learned from the Chinese experience. The lesson is that it is possible to bring development to rural areas; if not first, then at least concurrently with developments in urban areas. The simultaneous development of the urban center and the rural periphery in the Chinese setting is truly inspiring. The peasantry is not left to

suffer in poverty while the urban populations begin to consume more of the national wealth. Indeed, the peasantry may be half a step ahead of the urban laborer.

The Chinese case shows that education is a political process, and then goes on to show that to succeed in education, the politician must serve education. The politician and the educator in China are yoked to the same plow. The politician is responsible for the success of educational initiative, while the professional educator takes charge of the curricular and instructional aspects of education.

Connected with this is another lesson. Economic structures and educational structures must be in congruence with each other if education is to play a role in economic reform. Too often within the capitalist-liberal context, educators and owners of productive resources have opposing interests and, in the name of individual freedom, pull their weight in different directions. While in the capitalist-liberal context, centralized control over these structures cannot be assumed nor imposed; some obvious distortions and disparities can be removed.

The Chinese experience shows the need to have clear-cut policy and to disseminate it among the people with slogans and catchy phrases. Being *rich* has become the goal of *all* the Chinese people today. Everybody knows that anti-illiteracy work must involve three approaches: prevention, eradication, and consolidation. There are many examples of how national policy statements were translated into common sense slogans that became current coins of discussion at all levels of the system.

The Chinese experience shows the need to *institutionalize* adult education initiatives to be sure that adult education work can continue to be done systematically and with some expectation of continuity. Adult educators must stay alert to be sure that adult education institutions do not become hardened and unresponsive, but continue to be outward looking and stay engaged in extension roles. Institutionalizing the delivery of adult education services must not be rejected out of hand.

The Chinese experience tells us that institutions need not be either dedicated to formal education or to nonformal education. They can be designed to serve both purposes. Educators must guard against the *edifice* complex and not allocate unduly large resources to construct buildings.

The Chinese case shows the need for openness and not to be dogmatic. We must allow for a dialectic between opposites: the dogmatic and the pragmatic, the local and the global, and the part and the whole. The Chinese case of socialist modernization repeats a lesson that economists in capitalist-liberal context have long sought to teach: the need to create incentive structures that release the latent energies of individual farmers (Schultz 1981).

Related to this lesson is that without scientific and technological knowledge, modernization is impossible. Traditional knowledge that was good enough for subsistence is not enough when the few must produce for the many. Note that the Chinese gave the leadership of adult education institutions to agronomists and engineers, not to adult educators from the *humanist culture* who often are *scientifically illiterate*.

There is a negative lesson to learn from the above. When culture and technology are mixed in the curriculum, culture is often neglected in societies of widespread economic deprivation. In the Chinese situation, culture is relatively neglected, while scientific and technological knowledge is predominant. Special efforts must be made to give due attention to the *spiritual culture*.

Other countries can learn from China's program of linking adult literacy with adult continuing education. Adult literacy is taught first, and adult education follows. Adult literacy is functional, but it is considered to be no more than a starting point for rural and vocational education that must follow. There has been a remarkable redefinition of aspirations in adult education; that is, a wanting of knowledge equivalent to nine years of basic education.

The third world should learn from the Chinese how to make *production* central to the educational enterprise. Adult educational institutions in China, at their best, are neither merely educational nor merely production sheds. They are both. The production level of some of the peasants' schools of culture and technology are truly impressive. For instance, some of them make annual net profits running into millions of yuans (one dollar was equivalent to 4.71 yuan in mid-1990).

The need for training of personnel for effective delivery of programs is a recurrent theme of the Chinese experience. This is particularly challenging in China because they talk of training cadres in both (1) science and technology and (2) the process of adult education. If anything, their emphasis is on training in the scientific sector, rather than in the cultural sector.

There is another negative lesson to be learned. Despite the good intentions of adult educators and literacy workers, minorities and women can remain underserved. Bold and brilliant efforts are needed to serve these excluded groups.

Finally, David Apter's vision is that in all societies, socialist and capitalist, socioeconomic development will bring *choices* to the people and, ultimately, *democracy*. The Chinese may not create a western-style democracy, but as economic deprivations are redressed, peoples invent special Chinese-style structures and patterns in which individual and communal choices can be made.

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