

# Developing China: A Century of Education

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## High Marks for Literacy

Flip a coin in India, and chances are the other side will land in China. The two nations couldn't be more different as far as their education systems are concerned. One has an education system governed by the people, whilst the other has one imposed by the state. One has achieved almost universal primary education while the other is lagging far behind. No prizes for guessing the former is China.

### *Pre-1949: Shaky beginnings*

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a rising Japan threatened the security of the newly minted Republic of China. The Middle Kingdom saw their neighbour's strength lay in the education of its people and reforms were quickly put in place. At the time, China had an illiteracy rate of 80 percent and a population of 467 million people.<sup>1</sup>

In 1905, Imperial exams were abolished and the task of educating the world's largest population began. People initially viewed education as the sole preserve of the elite and perception didn't change until the mass literacy campaigns of the 1920s and 30s. For the first time, modern education became a reality in mainland China. Schools were built, a national curriculum established and girls received mass education.

After the fall of the Qing Empire in 1912, post Imperial China descended gradually into civil war between Nationalist and Communist forces. Both sides used educational reforms to impress upon the masses the relationship of achieving literacy to national progress. Both sides also realised the critical value of education as a political tool in winning over the support of the peasant underclass to their side.

From the early thirties until 1949, millions of people became literate in education halls, libraries and community centres across the country. The Communist forces in particular invested considerable efforts in rural areas through literacy groups, mass reading campaigns, half-day schools and 'donkey cart libraries' toed from village to village. Communist areas also set up local *minban* or community funded schools throughout China's vast network of unsupported villages, and promoted a level of autonomy there that exists to this day.

By the start of the Second World War, Japan's invasion meant money was running out and educational drives on both sides focused solely on adult education in a bid to improve immediate productivity. By 1949, the Nationalists had lost and the Communists steam rolled into power, but the legacy of the period was to affect China's education system for the next three decades to come.

Whilst universal education campaigns of the 1930s lacked the time and resources to make them more effective, they did create a solid infrastructure of schools and policies for the new Government to build on. Further more, their influence had a huge effect on future policy. Low funds meant that rural communities kept much of

their autonomy in managing local schools and adult education remained the Governments main educational priority for the next 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

### *Post War – 1978: The Mao Era*

In 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had a population of 532 million and an illiteracy rate barely improved since 1900.<sup>3</sup> Literacy was seen as an immediate priority to stabilising the economy and the first mass literacy campaigns began in earnest.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the literacy advancements made during this time won no prizes, the decisions made had a profound influence on Chinese society.

From the start, adult education was given priority. Teaching materials and education programmes were designed to reflect the functional needs of workers and their living conditions in the Chinese economy.<sup>5</sup> Literate farmers were those that could recognise and use 1500 Chinese characters, whilst cadres and city workers had to be proficient in 2000 characters or more. Primarily this was meant to cut costs, though some studies also claim it was a means of keeping social order.

By 1956, efforts were underway to unite the country under a common tongue.<sup>6</sup> The language of choice was a dialect local to China’s capital of Beijing called Mandarin or *putonghua*, (‘common language’).<sup>7</sup> To make Mandarin more accessible to the masses the language was romanised into *pinyin* in 1958<sup>8</sup> and in 1964, the complex nature of Chinese characters were simplified to make them easier to understand.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the fifties and sixties, big Government and its mass campaigns proved a general failure. During the first literacy campaign of the 1950s, plans to achieve five year universal primary education within a decade were quickly dropped as the Government realised it didn’t have the money to meet educational expectations. Further efforts throughout the sixties met similar fates as China attempted to jumpstart the economy through communism’s famous collectivisation of the countryside.

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*Political will is key to finding a solution.*

**Xinsheng Zhang, Education Today, May 2006**

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### *1978 – Present: Capitalist Roaders*

Mao Zedong, the ‘great helmsman’ of modern China, died in 1976 and China entered a new phase. The new enigmatic leader, Deng Xiaoping took charge and China’s ‘open door’ economy rocketed.

In 1982, the country’s third national census opened eyes and caused a massive turn around in educational policy. From the path of destruction and turmoil of the past 30 years, the illiteracy rate of China stood at 35.6 percent in 1982, a total of 230 million people, or roughly the same number of illiterates China had had back in 1964.<sup>10</sup>

Although basic schooling, enrollments and girls education had all increased, China had been unable to prevent the creation of new illiterates (primarily children) which

had kept literacy figures largely stagnant for the past 20 years. The quality of schools was also blamed along with the old system's failure to prevent new literates lapsing back into illiteracy through lack of practice.

Suddenly, a second literacy boom began in China, with the focus this time on 'blocking, eradicating, raising;' block new illiterates, eradicate existing ones and raise literacy levels to match the country's new scorching pace of development. As economic freedoms increased for the Chinese people, campaigns once again extolled the benefits of literacy and talk was backed up by a raft of new reforms.

Universal education was made the priority of the new system; funding was sent directly to local councils; community (*minban*) teachers were gradually replaced with trained Government ones (*gongban*) and education was expanded to a compulsory 9 years, with additional funding for poor families who needed it.

Building on the lessons learnt over the last 30 years, post-literacy support was expanded to new literates. Non-formal literacy programmes for adults were continued in collaboration with formal schools and extra reading materials were provided to new literates keen to maintain practice; including magazines, reading primers and literature. Vocational education was also later combined with literacy courses to maximise instruction to adult learners and improve economic productivity.

Throughout the nineties, new laws propagated by the Government spurred literacy along. In 1986, the Government passed a law making 9 years education a legal right, and regulations in 1988 reformed national educational policies to take a stronger hand in setting overall guidance and policy whilst allowing localities to implement it. International organisations such as UNESCO also aided the Government by adding a greater emphasis on science and mathematics into the curriculum.

From 1990 to 1997, illiteracy decreased by 18.8 percent at a rate of 4.8 million per year – above the targeted 4 million. By 2000, a total of 86 million illiterates remained in China's most backwards areas. Throughout the past fifty years, the Government claims to have increased total funding year on year to education, forming 3.4 percent of GNP in 2004, (higher than 3.3 percent for India and 2.0 percent in Pakistan).<sup>11</sup>

Whilst the lessons China has learnt over the past 50 years would be useful to any developing nation, the country now faces its toughest challenge staying on top of it all. Since year 2000, 2 million illiterates per year have been deducted from the bank,<sup>12</sup> yet an additional 30 million have been added to the population as funds were diverted to developing the economy during the nineties.<sup>13</sup>

Today entire regions of the country are unconnected, poor and illiterate and even being able to read doesn't guarantee a high level of education. Minorities are also facing an identity crisis as many attempt to justify learning a language they may never use. There may be a foundation here in China, but there's still a lot left to build.

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*“Education is the cheap defence of nations”*

**Edmund Burke, philosopher (1729 – 1797)**

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**Sources:**

1. Source: Population in 1900 – ThinkQuest  
<http://library.thinkquest.org/27629/w1900text.html>  
**Also See:**  
Population in 1949 – Columbia University  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/china/geog/population.htm>
2. This was an important carryover from pre-1949 educational policy when functional literacy was seen as a greater asset to the country than basic education. This policy remained largely in force until 1978.
3. China did increase the gross number of literates prior to 1949, but the rate of increase was presumably less than the population rate meaning the illiteracy rate remained unchanged from 1900-49.
4. Literacy programmes were initially phased in across the country, for the first few years after 1949. The Government saw literacy as a “double-edged sword” in the hands of citizens against national stability, and thus restricted literacy expansion in ‘unstable areas’ until better security had been established there – for example in border regions like Xinjiang and Tibet.  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001461/146108e.pdf> (p11)
5. During China’s early reform periods, literacy was regarded as a means to increase national worker productivity, rather than for individual personal gain. At one stage prior to 1978 all workers belonged to a *Danwei* or ‘work unit,’ responsible for meeting certain production quotas to supply China’s needs. However, *Danwei* were also a way of life for most Chinese. When you worked at the work-unit, you had a job for life, free accommodation, health care, pensions, insurance and an education. On the other hand, the Chinese Government used them to keep its socialist policies on track, including enforcing the one-child rule and universal education for Chinese citizens. Alongside production quotas, work-units had to meet targets for reducing illiteracy among their workforce. Today work-units are in decline, but to an extent some of their latter day functions have passed to private companies, who must still report on employee child numbers and meet Governmental literacy drives.  
**Also see:**  
Washington Council on International Trade (Feb 2000)  
[http://www.wcit.org/topics/china/chi\\_update\\_2\\_00.htm](http://www.wcit.org/topics/china/chi_update_2_00.htm)  
China Work Units (Reprinted from CIA World Factbook, July 1987)  
[http://www.photius.com/countries/china/geography/china\\_geography\\_work\\_units.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/china/geography/china_geography_work_units.html)  
What is a Work-Unit?  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Work\\_unit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Work_unit)  
Danwei or My Way? – Beijing Weekly, Valerie Sartor, (02 July 2007)  
[www.bjreview.com.cn/eye/txt/2007-07/02/content\\_67868.htm](http://www.bjreview.com.cn/eye/txt/2007-07/02/content_67868.htm)  
Chinese Face Epochal Wait For Housing, NY Times, (March 1<sup>st</sup> 1987)  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE5D6113BF932A35750C0A96F948260>
6. Ross (2005) refers to seven topolects in China – said to represent a geographical area rather than a variation of the language. Seven topolects are officially spoken in China; incl. Cantonese (Hong Kong), Hakka and Fujianese. Cantonese is

- famously spoken in Hong Kong movies. “*Topolect underscores the great variation and often mutual-unintelligibility of spoken Chinese languages.*”  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001461/146108e.pdf> (p11)
7. Mandarin or Putonghua is spoken today by 53 percent of the Chinese population according to a 2004 survey. It is national language of China used by many Chinese as their language at work, while they converse in their own tongue at home. The dialect is originally from the region north of Beijing.  
[http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200412/27/eng20041227\\_168739.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200412/27/eng20041227_168739.html)
  8. Pinyin is the 58 symbol Romanized version of Mandarin. Ross (2005) reports that it was heavily influenced by the aid of Soviet linguists in the 1950s.  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001461/146108e.pdf> (p11)
  9. Chinese characters are the symbolic representation of Chinese evolved over 3500 years. There are a total 60,000 characters in existence. In 1964 a popular decision was taken by the Chinese government to simplify the characters to make them easier to learn. Today, the older ‘Traditional Chinese’ is still used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas communities, whilst ‘Simplified Chinese’ is used in mainland China. International Chinese courses usually state that a learner needs 3000 characters to read a newspaper.  
**Also see:** [http://www.logoi.com/notes/chinese\\_symbols.html](http://www.logoi.com/notes/chinese_symbols.html)
  10. Source: UNESCO, Literary Education in China, Tiedao Zhang (2005)  
[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file\\_download.php/3d223c9d29c81169b81dba94ef6a468cZhang\\_T.doc](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/3d223c9d29c81169b81dba94ef6a468cZhang_T.doc)
  11. Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007 - Statistical tables (P211) -  
<http://www.efareport.unesco.org/>
  12. Source: Education Today Newsletter – Three questions to Xinsheng Zhang, (May 2006)  
[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=46268&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=46268&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
  13. Source: Illiteracy returns to haunt the country - China Daily (02 April 2007)  
*“The number of illiterates in China accounted for 11.3 percent of the world's total in 2000, right after India, and 15.01 percent in 2005.”*  
[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-04/02/content\\_841161.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-04/02/content_841161.htm)  
**Also see:**  
 Rural poor skip school, go to work - New York Times, (02 April 2007)  
<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/04/02/asia/AS-GEN-China-Illiteracy-Crisis.php>

### **General Source:**

UNESCO China Country study – Literacy for Life, p6-22 (Heidi Ross, 2006)  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001461/146108e.pdf>  
 (Useful ‘Literacy Timeline’ on p22).