

First steps to literacy in Chinese classrooms

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Chinese elementary schools bear the task of teaching the largest number of children in the world to read. Children learn to read and write Roman letters and pronounce Chinese syllables before they embark on the long task of learning Chinese characters. This process is followed in order to construct a national identity in a linguistically diverse country with numerous languages and mutually unintelligible varieties. A central feature in creating this national identity is teaching all first year children to speak Putonghua, China's national language. As children learn to read and write the Roman script used to teach the pronunciation of Putonghua, many become aware of differences between their local speech variety and the national standard. In this process of acquiring literacy, children discover not only their national identity, but also identities linked to global and local contexts as well as gender identities. Through textbook illustrations, children are exposed to gender-based roles that depict social realities instead of social ideals. Yet not all have access to school, particularly children in rural and minority areas, and migrant workers' children in the cities.

In this article, we first describe the process by which children in China become literate in schools. We then interpret the school literacy process in terms of multiple identities. Finally, we illustrate the ways some of the identities are represented in school textbooks. These representations indicate the enormous gap between urban children and the realities of most Chinese children who live in rural areas. The material here is based on the authors' study of classroom observation in two elementary schools in the city of Nanjing between 1990 and 1994, together with recent information on curriculum and access to schools. Since our work was in Nanjing teaching at universities, we sought opportunities there to observe the process of learning to read in school. Our first opportunity was facilitated by the Jiangsu Province Educational Commission. Our second opportunity, as well as our observations in a kindergarten, was made possible through personal contacts. Finally, for two years, we were fortunate to observe the five to seven-week process in elementary (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999).

Many children throughout the world do not have the privilege of learning to read in their native tongue. They have to learn to read in a standard language or lingua franca that is not spoken in their homes. This is because the status of their native variety is either too socially insignificant or politically threatening. In most cases, it is regarded as good economic sense to focus educational energy on learning to read in a more

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dominant variety, even though it may differ a great deal from the child's native language. In these cases, differences are minimized to direct children to learn the standard language. This process of emphasizing linguistic unity in the face of linguistic diversity is called "focussing" by Robert LePage (1964).

In the People's Republic of China, this kind of focussing is the norm: Linguistic differences are minimized for the sake of a common language, Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese). Approximately two-thirds of the population speak varieties of Chinese that are more-or-less intelligible as Mandarin. The remaining third, including many who live in the more prosperous areas of South China, speak varieties that are mutually unintelligible. In this nation of vast regional linguistic differences, focussing is reflected in the schools with the teaching of reading through the standard variety. In China, however, the varieties are not completely ignored. There is some realization of the pupils' non-standard backgrounds. Consequently, a transitional course is offered as a kind of an accommodation. This course, given in the first semester of grade one lasts, on average, six weeks (four hours a week). The course is longer, often up to twelve weeks, for students in areas where the varieties have greater differences, and even shorter in areas where the varieties are more similar (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999).

In this transitional course, children learn the sounds and words of the standard language. They learn to speak properly at the same time they learn to read. Rather than learn Chinese characters in their own vernacular, children are required to learn them according to the sounds of Putonghua. Therefore access to literacy in China is channeled through (or limited to) the standard language. This is done in order to achieve two goals: the ability to read and write, and the ability to speak a standard language. The additional burden of learning to speak the standard language, particularly for children who do not speak the standard at home, puts many Chinese children in a similar position to children in post-colonial societies who attend school conducted in the medium of a foreign language.

The Putonghua Lesson

Nanjing, where we carried out our study in two elementary schools and one kindergarten, the lessons introducing the Roman script, Hanyu Pinyin, and Putonghua do not last very long. At a prestigious and well-funded key school, five weeks were allocated. At a local neighborhood school, the course was six and a half weeks (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999). The shorter time in Nanjing is due to the nature of the local dialect, a variety of Southern Mandarin, which is part of the Northern Chinese dialect group. Seen in the light of China's vast linguistic variation, Nanjinghua is a dialect that does not deviate greatly from Putonghua. The relationship might be compared to the difference between the English spoken among business leaders in downtown Chicago and the English spoken in rural communities in Queensland, Australia. In addition, the Nanjing school teacher can, at least, expect a high degree of linguistic homogeneity in the classroom.

When teachers began their lessons in Putonghua, they exhorted the importance of a common language for China: Putonghua provides the means by which everyone in the nation communicates. The teachers further pointed out that learning Hanyu Pinyin would allow children to recognize print and help them learn Chinese characters. In

addition to these practical benefits of learning Putonghua and Hanyu Pinyin, there is a value attached to the common language. The value is an aesthetic one. Putonghua is *piàoliang* “beautiful” and it is *hǎotīng* “sounds nice”. Nanjinghua, on the other hand, is *bùhǎotīng* “doesn’t sound nice”.

The basic Putonghua lesson can be summarized as follows:

1. Sounds are introduced together with individual letters. Chalkboards, slates, and overhead transparencies are used.
 - a. Pupils see the shapes of letters in a visual metaphor
 - b. Pupils hear the sounds and repeat after the teacher
 - c. The teacher presents the place and manner of articulation by means of a transparency.
 - d. If an overhead projector is unavailable, the teacher introduces a rhyme to help young children remember how the sound is pronounced.
2. Consonants and vowels are linked to make syllables.
3. Tone diacritics are added to the syllables.
4. Together with tone and syllable, examples of vocabulary are elicited.

In the first lesson, for example, the vowels a, i, u, o are introduced. The illustration from the textbook depicts a doctor with a tongue suppresser asking a child to say “a --h”. The teacher points to the letter on the board and then vocally models the sound. Next, the class repeats in a chorus. After that, individual pupils are called on to say a sound. When asked, each one stands up and voices the sound.

It is up to this point that both schools follow the same procedure. However, from here there is a temporary divergence. At the key school, teachers used an overhead projector on a daily basis, thus demonstrating the school’s superior access to funding. After initial repetition of the sound, the teacher would show a transparency depicting the cross section of the mouth indicating the position of the tongue, so that graphically the pupils could observe the point of articulation - much in the same way that pronunciation lessons are conducted in foreign language classes.

On the other hand at the neighborhood school, the teacher quickly explains the place and manner of articulation without visual aids, but then follows the explanation with a rhyme for each sound. Here is an example of the rhyme explaining the manner of vowel production:

3 2 2 zuiba yuan yuan o-o-o	“both lips round round o-o-o”
2 3 4 4 yachi duizhi i-i-i	“up by the teeth i-i-i”
2 3 3 zuiba zhangda a-a-a-	“lips open wide a-a-a”
2 3 3 zuiba bian bian e-e-e	“lips open slightly e-e-e”

Phonemic tone in Hanyu Pinyin is indicated by one of the four diacritic symbols

(1 2 3 4) placed over a vowel in each syllable. When the syllables are taught, the teacher writes the syllable on the board and then elicits vocabulary. It is at this point that correct hearing and production are reinforced. For instance, if the teacher presented the syllable $\overset{4}{ba}$, then individual pupils could offer sample vocabulary by saying:

$\overset{4}{baba}$ de $\overset{4}{ba}$	“ $\overset{4}{ba}$ for $\overset{4}{baba}$, ‘father’”
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Pupils present vocabulary and the teacher judges whether their suggestions are correct or incorrect depending on articulation and tone.

Introducing Chinese characters

From the beginning of Hanyu Pinyin training, the teacher elicits vocabulary. When the teacher introduces a new syllable with one of the four tones over the vowel she asks for examples in context. Until this point, the children had only to contend with pronunciation and tone. Any vocabulary that matched sound and tone was acceptable. When Chinese characters were introduced, the situation changed. In fact, it came as a great shock to the children.

The first Chinese character introduced was the character $\overset{4}{yi}$ 一. The teacher asked the pupils how it was written:

$\overset{1}{yizi}$ $\overset{4}{zheyand}$ $\overset{3}{xie?}$	一字这样写	“How do you write $\overset{1}{yi}$?”
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Using the name of the stroke, the children answered:

$\overset{2}{heng}$ $\overset{2}{heng}$ $\overset{2}{heng}$ $\overset{1}{yi}$ $\overset{1}{yi}$ $\overset{1}{yi}$	“straight across, straight across, straight across, $\overset{1}{yi}$, $\overset{1}{yi}$, $\overset{1}{yi}$ ”
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Next the teacher elicited vocabulary. One child said:

¹ . ⁴ ¹ . ¹
yī jiā fēijī

一架飞机

“one airplane”

Another child said:

¹ . ⁴ . ⁴
yī kuài qù

一块去

“go together”

A further child said:

¹ . ¹
yīfú de yī

衣服₁的₁

“yī, the yī of clothes”

The teacher rejected the example of “clothes”. Until now this type of answer had been appropriate, but with Chinese characters, semantic distinctions must be exercised. Both “one” and “together” are represented by the character, 一. The first two examples were acceptable even though they are not semantically equivalent. The example provided by the third child was unacceptable because it was represented by the character, 衣 not 一. This shift away from pronunciation was not readily understood by the children, at least in the few lessons on Chinese characters that we observed.

With the introduction of characters, the pace of the class slowed down for now the children were becoming genuinely literate. Much time was spent in each lesson making sure the pupils were able to write the characters correctly. They began with learning how to identify and write different strokes and single word characters, these being the numbers one to ten. Usually new strokes were presented in each lesson and the pupils practiced writing these together with the new characters. After the numbers, the next set of characters were ones that seemed to be the most pictographic such as the single characters for mountain (山), field(田), and soil(土). The assumption is that these single word characters are more easily learned. The children would be familiar with this emphasis on the visual nature of the character since a similar approach was used to introduce Hanyu Pinyin.

In each lesson, the teacher wrote numerous examples of the new character, every time calling out the correct stroke order. The pupils responded by writing in the air and then in their exercise books. There was much emphasis on the shape and size of the character as well as spatial composition₃₃₄. The teacher continually urged the children to make sure their characters were hao kan, that is, “ they looked good.”

Identities through literacy

Literacy is not just learning to read and write. It is also about acquiring identities. The main identity gained at school is a national identity. Historically, China is the world’s

longest enduring empire. Except for brief disruptions consisting of a century or two, the Chinese empire has lasted for over 2000 years. The unity of the Chinese language was maintained in three ways: (1) Chinese characters (2) Wenyuan, literary Chinese and (3) Guanhua, the speech of the mandarins. Of these three cohesive linguistic forces for national unity, Chinese characters have been historically the most powerful. They still are today. Since the 1911 Revolution, however, there has been a gradual effort to re-prioritize the cohesive forces, that is, to make the spoken language the primary force for unity, not the written language. It is for this reason that Putonghua is taught in schools, and reading and writing are taught in the context of the spoken standard language. This process emphasizes the proximity of the written language to the spoken, and that literacy is acquired through the vernacular. In other words, Putonghua is supposed to be the vernacular through which literacy is accessed. By becoming the means for learning Chinese characters, the most cohesive linguistic force for national unity, Putonghua's role in promoting national unity is strengthened. Indeed, China's Ministry of Education has projected that Putonghua will be used throughout the country by 2010 ("China to popularize Mandarin," 2002).

After the initial weeks of learning Putonghua and Hanyu Pinyin, the teachers announced to the pupils that they would now begin learning Chinese characters. This script is not like foreign scripts. This is China's own script. Moreover, to learn Chinese characters is to be identified as Chinese and true Chinese literacy is literacy in Chinese characters. The teacher's announcement to the class underscored the distinctiveness of this literacy when she introduced the first lesson in Chinese characters:

³ women ⁴ shi ¹ zhongguoren. ² Zhongguo ² de ¹ wenzhi ² bushi ⁴ qita ⁴ guojia ⁴ de ² wenzhi ¹ yiyang. ² ⁴ ² ⁴
We are Chinese. The Chinese writing system is not the same as the writing of other countries.

The acquisition of literacy is participation in the cultural heritage: the learning of the strokes, stroke order, radicals, brush calligraphy, and learning them all precisely. These are segments of a process that constitute a tradition, largely unbroken for over three millennia. To participate in this acquisition process is to participate in a literate tradition which reinforces the notion that knowledge of the script brings access to the entire literary tradition. In addition, by accessing the tradition, a person assumes a greater moral sensitivity. Identifying with the nation's history and its culture presupposes a degree of knowledge about the literary tradition. Consequently, literacy is seen as prestigious.

The motivation to acquire literacy may not only be an attraction to the prestige, but also a fear of shame for having not acquired it or having not acquired it properly. It was not only among elementary school teachers in Nanjing that we observed attitudes towards precision. Newspapers frequently ran articles on prescriptive advice for proper linguistic expression (Zhu, 1991). At Zhejiang Normal University in Jinhua in the Wu dialect group area, for example, every classroom door had a label painted 普通写范字 'speak Putonghua, write standard characters.' There were even billboards with this slogan around the campus to remind students. Another label we observed on the campus was 普通是教言 'Putonghua is the professional language of teachers.' These kinds of reminders indicate that there are degrees of

resistance to standard language forms both in speech and writing (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999).

Who, then, speaks precise Putonghua? Although Beijing is the center of government, its residents do not necessarily speak precise Putonghua. There are distinctive pronunciation features that characterize Beijing speech. Yet many Chinese people remark that residents of northeastern China speak Putonghua most accurately. Regardless of these informal observations, precise Putonghua is not marked by a specific region, except that certain regional varieties are seen to have a closer proximity. The precise use of Putonghua remains the domain of media professionals, and elementary school teachers and pupils. As they move up through elementary school, children's Putonghua skills gradually cease to be precise. As literacy increases, the focus of precision shifts from the dual emphasis on speech and writing to only precision in writing. By lower middle school, teachers speak Putonghua with varying degrees of accuracy. When observing Chinese writing classes in an upper middle school in Nanjing, the teacher spoke Putonghua with such a strong local pronunciation, his lectures were almost entirely unintelligible to us. With the tendency of families, neighbors, as well as teachers to speak the local variety, it is natural that children, as they get older, lose their precision in Putonghua pronunciation.

Despite its official status, precise Putonghua is not seen as particularly prestigious. This illustrates a strong tendency toward solidarity. People tend to identify with their locality and thus with the local vernacular. If people speak Putonghua, it is done with local phonological characteristics. In Southern China, people often describe their Putonghua as ²₁³₁⁴ *nánfāng pǔtōnghuā* 南方普通话 'southern Putonghua.' In view of the local characteristics in most speakers' use of Putonghua, the question remains as to the degree to which speakers must code-switch. For speakers of the mutually unintelligible dialect groups of southern China, code-switching to Putonghua is like switching to a foreign language. In contrast, for residents of Beijing and parts of Northern China, code-switching is minimal.

Some areas of China are trying to address the resistance to using standard language forms by offering instrumental motivation. The town of Huaxi in southern Jiangsu Province (also in the Wu dialect group area) has successfully taken advantage of the economic reforms and has become wealthy both in agriculture and industry. To encourage more people to speak Putonghua, they have offered a salary increase for those who can speak it well. The increase is doubled if a person can also speak a foreign language (Fu, 1992). In addition to Putonghua, literacy skills are used as an incentive. In response to increasing numbers of women from the provinces who are marrying Beijing men, city residents are supporting a plan to test these women's literacy skills before they receive their residency permits ("Efforts Made," 1991). These attempts suggest that identities other than a national identity exist.

For children in the grade one classroom in Nanjing, their social and cultural identities were not limited to the Chinese context. On the first day they began learning Hanyu Pinyin, several children pointed out the similarity of Hanyu Pinyin letters to the letters of foreign languages. They also pointed out that the knowledge of these letters would help them learn foreign languages. They further suggested that knowledge of foreign

languages can lead to tangible benefits. In learning a Roman alphabet, the children perceived that they were assuming an identity in the global context.

The Presence of English

This identity in the global context is further strengthened by the fact that many first-graders are already learning English. In one Nanjing classroom, the teacher asked how many children were learning English, and out of a class of 55, 14 raised their hands. In the mid-1990s in Nanjing, English education for children was done privately after school. English lessons were part of the string of extra-curricular activities that were proliferating for the urban only children including piano, ballet, and soccer.

In a recent trip to Shanghai, we found that English has become a part of the city's first-grade curriculum with textbooks published by Oxford University Press. Moreover, we found test preparation books for entrance exams to "famous" elementary schools in Shanghai. According to one book, *Mingpai xiaoxue ruxue ceshi* (Wang, 2003), kindergartners are expected know basic English vocabulary like the names of fruit, household furniture, and appliances, as well as read out poems like the Happy Birthday song: all this in addition to knowing Hanyu Pinyin and most of the first-grade level Chinese characters.

In our classroom observations during the 1990s, we noticed that children offered English words as Chinese vocabulary examples. For instance, when the teacher was teaching the syllable 'lou' and elicited examples from the class, one child said 'hello de lou'. The teacher did not correct the child saying that the word is not Chinese. Instead the child was praised. In contrast, if a child offered a dialect word, the teacher would scold the child and ask for the Putonghua rendition. In the schools, English is acceptable but dialect is not. Although we felt that even though English was not part of the official first-grade curriculum at the time, its presence was evident and the attitude toward it was positive. Consequently, in the design of the cover of *Learning to read in China: Sociolinguistic perspectives on the acquisition of literacy* (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999), we added English as part of the total literacy package for Chinese children: Putonghua – Hanyu Pinyin – 汉字 – English. There is even more evidence today for this four-part description of early literacy in China.

Textbooks

Although instruction by teachers and values of parents are important in shaping children's identities, images in the media also play a role in reinforcing identities. Selecting one medium, illustrations in elementary school textbooks, we have analyzed not only those that were in use during our study in the 1990s, but we have compared them to recently published textbooks.

The children we observed in Nanjing are part of a privileged elite. This privilege is based on where they are born and live. The textbooks are full of illustrations of this elite. Similar to books on other subjects (Allen & Ingulsrud, 1998; Kwong, 1985), Chinese language textbooks of the 1980s and 1990s are full of images of a happy childhood – but it is an urban childhood. When the books depict life in school, the majority of teachers are women. Women are also shown at home, generally doing housework with help from a daughter. Boys are never shown helping out at home, yet they relax at home by

watching TV, reading, or practicing a hobby. In general, boys and men are represented as active and outgoing, in contrast to women and girls who are portrayed as being more passive.

The new Chinese language textbooks, *Yuwen*, published by the Jiangsu Provincial Education Commission differ in many respects from those of previous years (Zhang & Zhu, 1999). To begin with, better quality paper has been used and the texts are full of colorful illustrations and photographs. Much attention has been paid to the layout of the text, such as a clear contents page and summaries of the new vocabulary introduced in each lesson. There are also changes in content, as throughout elementary school, emphasis is paid to learning how to write correctly, a feature not apparent in the earlier textbooks. In addition to the greater stress on writing, the new series focus on famous Chinese sages, thus drawing attention to the country's cultural traditions.

Yet there is continuity with earlier editions. Women are still shown in their dual roles of housewife and elementary school teacher. They are still doing the housework with the help of the daughter. Illustrations of boys and men continue to outnumber those of girls and women. Young children are still presented with a colorful, happy world of school and home. The new books present an idealized urban world together with occasional illustrations of famous places in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province. This urban world is perhaps as alien and exotic to most of the children who live in the countryside as America and Britain might be their parents. While the children are presented with an idealized, affluent world, it is also one in which the career prospects, together with gender relations and population proportions are carefully and realistically depicted. In education, idealizations of the world are expected. However, the social relations of Chinese society are accurately presented in the elementary school language textbooks. The fantasy world of the illustrations is bounded by the reality of the future roles the children are expected later to fulfill in society (Allen & Ingulsrud, 1998).

The illustrations in the textbooks reinforce traditional gender-role identities together with the positive value of possessing an urban identity. For most children in China, however, acquiring gender-role identities is more accessible than an urban identity. In the section below, we describe how bureaucratically assigned identities can even bar access to schooling.

Those left behind

In China, the privileged urban social class is set apart from the rest of the population by the fact that it is part of the non-agricultural urban class, as defined by the household registration system, the hukou. The hukou determines a person's place of residence and socio-economic status, this being either agricultural or non-agricultural. Initially established in the cities in 1951, the hukou system was then extended to the whole of China and still remains in force. The hukou system was not just a means of controlling population migration, but also ensured that the urban non-agricultural population had privileged access to food, housing, education, medical care, work, and social welfare programs, all at the expense of the majority, the rural agricultural population.

Despite a few alterations over the years to the hukou system, "the essential features of the hukou system remain basically unchanged. Socio-economic eligibility is still linked with hukou status" (Chan & Li, 1999, p. 841). In the past when population movement was more restricted, the disparities of this social system were not apparent to those in the rural areas. However, with the economic reforms of the 1980s, cities, especially those on the eastern seaboard, have prospered and so attracted a "floating population" that experts guess ranges from 80 to 100 million (Chan & Li, 1999; Li, 2002; Mallee, 2000). Terms such as "floating population," "blind vagrants," "excess birth guerrillas," and "stinky peasants" emphasize the separateness of these migrants. Although the socio-economic circumstances of the migrants vary as some are private entrepreneurs, the majority consists of peasants. The migrants do not have the key to urban status, the non-agricultural hukou. Without this certificate, they do not have access to urban benefits, in particular, they are unable to send their children to school or take part in higher education. When groups of migrants living in the cities try to circumvent the system and even set up their own schools with teachers from their hometowns, the police and city authorities have periodically tried to destroy these illegal villages. Such incidents in Beijing occurred in 1986, 1989, 1990, and 1995 (Li, 2002; Mallee, 2000). The Chinese media recently have acknowledged the existence of these schools and have raised the problem of school access, as well as the persistence of the hukou system ("China makes schooling," 2002). Still, there is no evidence of official rectification of the situation on a national scale.

Recent studies on poverty in China have not examined the floating population and so have underestimated urban poverty, as well as the overall national poverty rate (Gustafsson & Zhong, 2000). Despite this major reservation, the studies have found that poverty in China is linked to location. It tends to be concentrated in the rural areas, especially in the mountainous regions of the west where many minority groups live. For these people, poverty has increased, "although the overwhelming proportion of China's poor ... belong to the majority population" (Gustafsson & Zhong, 2000, p. 992). In addition to the burden of poverty, many of the minorities struggle with issues of bilingualism, illiteracy, and schooling. Recent reports indicate that the Chinese government has pledged over \$600 million over a three year period to promote nine years of compulsory education in the rural areas ("China expands compulsory education," 2002). At the same time, there is debate in the media as to how funding for this education program can be maintained ("Who should pay," 2002)

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the constitution has guaranteed respect for minority languages. However, the varying language policies over the years have meant that this respect has not always been granted. Some minorities have had success in becoming literate in their own language and Putonghua whereas others have not ("Our language is still alive," 2002; Zhou, 2000). Even where there are bilingual schools, many parents have been reluctant to send their children to these schools since they believe that knowledge of Putonghua is more critical for their children's future (Hong, 1998).

In comparison with the urban areas, access to education in the rural areas is limited and differs greatly in quality. Many rural families struggle to find the money to pay for schooling as often schools have illegally imposed extra fees just as local authorities have levied illegal taxes (Chan, 2002; Li, 2002). To alleviate this problem, the Ministry of Education has ordered all school fees to be publicized to increase transparency ("Chinese schools," 2002). Even with greater transparency, the fact remains that compulsory education is not free and places a drain on the family income. One way to make ends meet is to send a family member to find work in the cities. As a result of all these difficulties, females have the highest rates for dropouts and illiteracy. "80 percent of the 2 million new illiterates each year are females" (Hansen, 2001, p. 405).

Areas of future research

The teachers we interviewed in Nanjing were forthright in pointing out that children cannot achieve the goals of literacy acquisition simply by relying on classroom instruction. If they are to be successful in terms of the curriculum and among their peers, children need help from home (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999). Our observations in the neighborhood school, even with the demographic advantages, lead us to conclude that assistance from home is very much a case-by-case situation. Some children are neglected while others are pampered with attention. Despite the variety of family environments, teachers report that the majority are receiving some kind of help. However, family literacy and adolescent literacy are two areas that have not been researched.

Another area of research is describing school literacy in rural China. Our study was in the urban areas, and although we compared two different kinds of schools, they were both good urban schools. How the rural areas are coping with the task of literacy is a question about which there is very little information. Moreover, how the migrant population deals with their children's education is an area that needs to be explored.

Conducting research, particularly qualitative research in China continues to be very difficult. Many of the questions, whether they are about rural literacy or family literacy, invariably carry a political edge. The results could be less than complementary to the authorities. To what extent the authorities can tolerate criticism is the researchers' constant calculation and gamble.

Conclusion

We have described literacy in terms of the task, as well as social and cultural identity. The three areas are interrelated, that is (a) the standard norms of writing carry the most prestige, (b) the standard spoken language is used in the acquisition of literacy to insure

that speaking Putonghua will be learned and finally, (c) participating in the literacy is seen as an act of national identity. At the same time, since a roman alphabet (Hanyu Pinyin) is used to learn Putonghua and Chinese characters, children have noticed that studying the letters of Hanyu Pinyin is similar to learning the letters of foreign languages. In this process, the children begin to acquire an identity in the global context. This identity is further strengthened by the popularization of learning English, which is already part of the curriculum in many urban schools.

The media also play a role in shaping identity. In our study of textbook illustrations, urban living is promoted and traditional gender roles are reinforced. These images are in stark contrast to the social realities of the majority of the population that lives in rural areas. We also raised the issue that not all identities are learned or freely chosen. Some are imposed through an intricate system of household registration. As long as people remain where they are registered, children can have access to varying levels of education and healthcare. Migration for economic purposes is unofficially condoned, but right of abode is not granted and thus access to schooling is denied. Therefore, a person's identity in terms of household registration can affect even access to literacy.

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