Recent Trends in Literacy Studies and Their Application to China

Glen Peterson
University of British Columbia

Established views about literacy's role in the making of the modern world have come under increasing attack in recent years by a new scholarship which seeks to relate the literacy "myth" to the actual uses of literacy within a wide array of social and historical settings. In this paper I contribute to the revisionism in literacy studies by applying its main theoretical premises to the greatly neglected subject of literacy in the People's Republic of China. I examine the social construction of literacy in China after the communist revolution in 1949, showing how official literacy ideologies contributed to the formation and reproduction of rural-urban differences in Chinese society.

Récemment, les positions sur le rôle de l'alphabétisation dans le monde moderne sont questionnées par une nouvelle école de pensée qui tente de faire le lien entre le "mythe" de l'alphabétisation aux utilisations actuelles de celle — ci dans le cadre d'un vaste ensemble de réalités sociales et historiques. Dans cet article, je contribue à la révision des études en alphabétisation. Pour ce faire, je reconsidère les principales prémisses de l'alphabétisation et les regarde en tenant compte du fait que l'alphabétisation est un sujet largement négligé en République Populaire de Chine. J'examine la construction sociale de l'alphabétisation en Chine après la révolution communiste de 1949. Je montre comment les idéologies officielles de l'alphabétisation ont contribué à la formation et à la reproduction des disparités, au niveau rural et urbain, dans la société chinoise.

A great wave of revisionism has swept across the field of literacy studies. Cherished beliefs about the role of literacy in the making of the modern world are coming under increasing attack by a new generation of scholars whose aim is to expose the "myth" of literacy as the foundation of progress to the hard test of literacy's actual uses within a wide variety of historical and social contexts. It is this recent emphasis upon the social contexts of reading and writing that is forcing theoretical and conceptual rethinking about literacy.

In this paper I contribute to the growing literature on literacy in society by borrowing its conceptual apparatus to explore the social construction of literacy in the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the Maoist period from 1949 to 1976. I argue that the expansion of literacy per se during these years was not as important, historically, as the way that literacy education was used to foster a social order which was, ironically, inimical in many ways to the interests of those in whose name the revolution in popular literacy was made. Specifically, I show that the expansion of literacy — contrary to what the conventional wisdom tells us and to what China's rulers themselves officially proclaimed — actually worked to strengthen and reproduce major divisions in Chinese society, between countryside and city, villager and urban resident. Since 1976 Mao's successors have initiated a series of economic reforms that have transformed the uses of popular literacy. However, these changes lie beyond the scope of this article.

This essay is, in many ways, a pioneering effort. Literacy in China is a virtually neglected subject in the West. Amazingly, when I began research on this topic more than five years ago, there did not exist a single English-language book on the topic of literacy in the PRC. Indeed, among all the Western languages, there was only one book, Belde's 1982 German-language study of literacy campaigns in the 1950s. The first English-language study of the subject appeared only recently (Seeberg, 1990); however, the subject still awaits the detailed and comprehensive historical and comparative treatment it deserves. This paper is intended to serve as a starting point.

I begin by situating the problem of literacy in China within the wider conceptual and theoretical framework of literacy studies in general. I then use this framework as a point of entry for explaining three central aims which have informed my investigation of literacy in China, and for providing the results. By approaching the subject in this way, I hope that readers will be able to reconstruct the steps of my journey, as I foraged and negotiated my way across the difficult and largely uncharted terrain of what is, by any measure, an enormously complex subject.

The Recent Revolution in Literacy Studies

What makes the study of literacy in China so fascinating is the richness and complexity of the subject: the fact that literacy sprawls across the academy, criss-crossing and intersecting the disciplinary boundaries that divide and compartmentalize the study of human society. As long ago as 1971, educational historian John Talbott observed that education was "so deeply entangled in the life of an entire society" as to make it increasingly difficult to continue to regard it as a separate field of inquiry; it now touched on the concerns of so many (p. 147). Education's "entanglement" with society may be intellectually fascinating, but it can also be a source of frustration and bewilderment to researchers, who are faced with the task of keeping their subject within manageable proportions. In my case, the difficulty was compounded by the fact that there was little China-focused secondary material available to serve as a guide. From the very beginning, therefore, I realized I would have to look outside the field of China studies, where my academic training lay, for the basic theoretical tools and concepts with which to approach China's literacy revolution. Fortunately, the field of literacy studies was then — as it is now — in the midst of its own revolution of sorts, a revolution from which I drew significant inspiration.

The revolution in literacy studies represents an attempt to overturn one of the most cherished conventional myths of the modern world: the belief which equates the spread of literacy with the advance of civilization and the march of progress. For at least 300 years, literacy acquisition has been represented as something akin to the progression from darkness into light, ignorance to enlightenment, primitiveness to modernity. This conception of literacy is rooted in enlightenment notions concerning the nature of history and the positive effects of education. Rejecting the pessimism of previous Western thought, which located the greatest accomplishments in antiquity and conceived subsequent history as a depressing chronicle of decline and decay, enlightenment thinkers posited a radically new philosophy of historical optimism, premised on a confident belief that history consisted of unilinear progress, leading to ever greater degrees of perfection and happiness (Gay, 1969). Societies progressed from a state of

ignorance and superstition to one of science and reason. In achieving this progression — what Weber termed "the disenchantment of the world" (Mommsen, 1989, pp. 133-144) — education was essential, while writing was the very technology that made science and reason possible.

In the 20th century, the association of literacy with progress and modernity has become scientific, with efforts to measure literacy's contributions to economic productivity, gross national product, ability to think logically, facility with abstract concepts, capacity for empathy, openness to change, and a host of other behavioral adaptations which have been said to underlie the entire process of becoming modern (Apter, 1965; Inkeles & Smith, 1974). Yet for all its scientism, modernization theory is essentially a 20th century reincarnation of 18th century social thought, rooted in the same evolutionary philosophy of history.

The problem with efforts to measure literacy's contributions to modernization is not just that they proceed from a questionable philosophical premise. Is there really such a thing as modernization, a kind of global manifest destiny to which all societies are evolving? The problem is also that such efforts routinely promote correlation to causation. Somehow, the correlation of such aspects as literacy with wealth, superior living standards, and higher caloric intake has led to the view that literacy is the cause, rather than the result, of all these good things.

Historian of literacy Harvey Graff (1979) calls this the "literacy myth." Sociologist Kenneth Levine (1982) describes it as a "fond illusion" of many educators and educational planners; his fellow anthropologist Brian Street (1984) terms it the "autonomous model" of literacy: treating literacy as if it were an independent or autonomous variable and then claiming to study its consequences. The literacy myth reifies literacy as a socially and politically neutral tool or "technology of the intellect," and the acquisition of which is said to grant its possessor access to a broad range of cognitive skills and consequently, social opportunities which are otherwise unavailable.

However, literacy is not as socially and politically neutral as the autonomous model implies. Literacy is less a pure and uniform technology than it is a form of social practice, which varies. As a social practice, literacy's meaning and significance derives from the social contexts in which it is embedded. But what does it mean, to see literacy as a form of social practice?

The literacy myth or autonomous model of literacy implies a single uniform technology or literate competence which is more or less freely transferable across intellectual and social space. However, anthropologists and sociologists who have studied reading and writing within specific ethnographic contexts (Street, 1984, among Iranian villagers; Levine, 1982, 1986, among illiterate adults in northern England) have argued that what we call literacy is more properly understood as specific kinds of reading and writing practices. That is, rather than being a uniform technological competence, in its actual social practice literacy normally involves the application by individuals of *specific kinds* of reading and writing skills which are based upon particular, finite bodies of information, and which in turn are related to the performance of established social roles. Thus, we should not think in terms of literacy but rather in terms of multiple literacies. Such literacies are, in Street's words, "socially constructed technologies used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes" (1984, p. 97).

Multiple Literacies in Chinese Rural Society

The Chinese written language is particularly well-suited to the concept of multiple literacies embedded in, and arising from, the social order. Chinese is a nonalphabetic language, comprising tens of thousands of individual symbols, each with its own discrete meaning(s) or grammatical function. The meaning and pronunciation of each character must therefore be individually memorized. A limited amount of guesswork is possible; contrary to what is often believed, the majority of Chinese characters (over 70%) are neither pure pictographs nor pure ideographs (only 3% belong to this category). Rather, they are compound symbols which contain both phonetic and semantic parts (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 84). Thus, readers may

decipher clues as to the meaning and pronunciation of unfamiliar characters by identifying the semantic and phonetic elements within them. Nevertheless, the central distinguishing feature of literacy acquisition in Chinese compared to alphabetic scripts is the absence in the former of a phonetic basis to facilitate rapid word and phrase recognition.

The necessity of memorizing so many individual characters not only means that learning how to read and write Chinese is more complicated and time consuming than an alphabetic language. It also means — and this is most significant for our present purposes — that literacy in Chinese is inherently and permanently limited by both the number of characters and the type of characters learned. Thus, the person who knows 5,000 characters has greater access to written knowledge than the one who has mastered only 1,000 characters. But a farmer who knows 1,000 characters of farming-related vocabulary possesses a qualitatively different *kind* of literacy than the urban shopkeeper who also knows 1,000 characters, but whose written vocabulary consists exclusively of names of goods and accounting methods. Multiple literacies, based on both number and kind of characters, are thus inherent in the structure of the Chinese language, their specificity and discreteness being greatest at the lower end of the literate continuum.

Nobody knows for certain the total number of characters in the Chinese written language. Chinese, like every language, is a living thing, with new characters constantly being born and old ones becoming extinct. But for several centuries at least, the written language has encompassed 40,000 to 60,000 characters. This estimate is based on the number of characters contained in what is generally considered to be the most complete dictionary compiled in premodern times (by the Kangxi Emperor, in the 18th century); as well as on a National Standard code of characters for use in information exchange which was promulgated by the Chinese central government in 1981 which lists more than 56,000 characters (Zhou, 1986, p. 13). If we define full literacy as mastery of all 56,000 characters, few if any would qualify as literate. How, then, are different levels and kinds of literacy socially generated?

Speaking historically, at one end of the literate continuum stood the scholar-official elite of imperial China, whose literacy was based on mastery of the Confucian classical canon written in a complex literary language. Classical literacy was certified by the civil service examination system, success in which conferred society's highest status rank: Mandarin scholar. Classical literacy was thus the supreme arbiter of class status in the old China. Following the abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905, modern schooling in the vernacular replaced classical learning as the basis of elite literacy. Modern statistical surveys of character frequency, first begun in the 1920s, showed that between 4,000-7,000 characters commonly occurred in vernacular newspapers, magazines, and novels aimed at a modern-educated reading public (Chen, 1931). However, the level and kind of reading competence tested by such character surveys assumed formal schooling at the level of middle school or above. Throughout the 20th century, and especially in the countryside, the modern school system reached relatively few.

It would be wrong to equate literacy exclusively with formal schooling, however. There was a social demand for literacy in the Chinese countryside which existed and was satisfied independent of the school. What we see as we move down the social order and into the countryside is a multitude of limited, highly specific literacies, which were usually, but not always, occupationally related. Traditional Chinese rural society sustained a diverse range of literate specialists, whose livelihoods were based, either in whole or in part, upon the provision of various kinds of services involving recourse to written texts: fortune-telling and other forms of divination, performance or advice on community rituals, weddings and funerals, and many other activities involving the written word (Hayes, 1985; Rawski, 1979). A perfect example of such limited, specialized occupational literacies exists in the form of a 300 character fish primer, traditionally used by fishmongers in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong province in southern China. This primer consists entirely of the names of different kinds of fish and numerals. Scholars believe it was probably used exclusively by apprentices in the local fish trade (Johnson, 1985, pp. 63-64).

What can be said about the literacy of persons who have mastered the 300 character fish primer is that they have "fish literacy." However, this is not the same as the literacy of the urban rice dealer, or the village bean curd seller, or the itinerant fortune teller; certainly it is not the same as the literacy of the former imperial examination candidate or the modern urban university graduate. But it is a socially deployable skill nonetheless.

There are two things to note about the social significance of such popular literacies. First, they can be individually and locally empowering. Fish literacy may enable the fishmonger to corner the market in the fish trade through an ability to monitor fish stocks, anticipate price fluctuations, and generally compete more effectively against others who are less well-versed in the literate aspects of the trade. Second, it is important to realize that such literacies are not all of a kind. They exist in a hierarchy, part of the structure of social relations, intimately bound up with the distribution of power in society and attendant relations of domination and subordination. Levine (1986) puts it this way:

> Having argued that it is necessary to recognize a multiplicity of literacies, it would be foolish to view information as a monolithic entity .... The social and political significance of literacy is very largely derived from its role in creating and reproducing ... the social distribution of knowledge. If this were not so, if literacy did not have this role, then the inability to read would be a shortcoming on a par with tone-deafness, while an inability to write would be as socially inconsequential as a facility for whistling in tune. (pp. 264-265)

The Social Construction of Literacies in Postrevolutionary China

Based on the understanding of the social context of literacy I have built so far, three central aims guided my effort to read the literacy map of postrevolutionary China: first, to illuminate the changing literacy ideologies prescribed by the state for different social groups; second, to see how these literacy ideologies and their practice contributed to the major social divisions in Chinese society after 1949; and third, to analyze the fit, or lack of it, between official literacy prescriptions and popular mentalities or expectations.

With respect to the first aim, any attempt to understand the social construction of literacy in post-1949 China must begin with the central fact that this was an official project, conceived and directed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as part of its effort to transform society. Thus, different literacies were prescribed by the state for different groups according to their designated role in the new social order and planned economy. Such literacy prescriptions are inherently ideological in nature: they can be read as elite statements of the social ambitions that rulers hold for those whom they govern. As Woodside argues, "literacy conceptions may serve as ruling elites' images of what is possible and desirable with respect to the way they and the social classes below them will participate in economic and political life" (1989, pp. 10-11).

The CCP's image of how China's peasants should participate in production and politics was shaped by the party's ideological commitment to a collectivized rural society. The officially stated aim of peasant literacy education was that it should serve the economic requirements of the collective system of agricultural production which was established in the mid-1950s. Thus, in 1956 the central committee of the CCP ordained that literacy for Chinese peasants should be defined as knowledge of 1,500 characters emphasizing local production knowledge, plus the ability to write simple notes and perform basic calculations using an abacus (Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian bianji bu, 1984, pp. 895-897). Preparation of literacy primers was decentralized to local levels in order to ensure that their content reflected the official goal of fostering local economic competence within the collectives. The typical peasant literacy primer consisted first of vocabulary related to the local economic and social environment, such as names of local crops, farm implements, place and personal names, followed by a smattering of official ideology and the names of national leaders and institutions (Hu, 1955, pp. 27-28; Lin, 1955).

Viewed in one way, the effort to make peasant literacy education serve local economic production needs represented an eminently reasonable solution to a problem that, in one way or another, has dogged the modern educational growth of nearly all developing countries with large agrarian populations: namely, the frequent irrelevance of centrally-imposed,

nationally standardized curricula to the genuine educational needs of diverse rural communities. Viewed in another way, however, the official ideology of locally specialized peasant literacies has also contributed to the marginalization of the peasantry as a social class after 1949. In order to grasp how this was so, it is necessary to examine briefly the formidable complex of officially-erected economic, social, and legal barriers which forcibly confined peasants to their collectives and which kept them strictly separated from the socially and economically privileged urban sector of society.

The collectivized Chinese peasant, though theoretically liberated from capitalist and feudal exploitation, was in reality much less free than his or her pre-1949 counterpart. Villagers were bound for life to their collectives, locked in by a complex of administrative controls centered around the rationing of essential foodgrains and a system of household registration (*hukou*) through which rations were distributed and other social opportunities, like employment and education, were assigned. These controls were put in place during the 1950s, but were not forcibly implemented until the early 1960s, in the aftermath of the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958-60).

The Great Leap was a failed utopian experiment to rapidly accelerate economic development. Its most important political and social result was that it left 30,000,000 peasants dead of starvation, and caused tens of thousands of starving and destitute peasants to stream into the cities in search of food and work (Naughton, 1991, p. 237). More than any other event in the history of the PRC, this unprecedented human disaster taught the CCP the importance of keeping agricultural production going and of keeping peasants on the land. By the early 1960s, using the control system described above, geographic and social mobility was virtually eliminated in rural China, and remained so until the mid-1980s when the collectives were disbanded. The result of these controls in terms of physical and social mobility was a kind of "bureaucratic serfdom" in which, in the words of one team of scholars, peasants were in effect "structurally immobilized" within their collectives (Potter and Potter, 1990, p. 97). In this way, the rural-urban split that characterized Chinese society in the past was not just

preserved; under communism it was actually strengthened and solidified in historically unprecedented ways.

The policy of local peasant literacies contributed to the structural immobilization of the peasantry in that local literacies were intended to foster the local self-sufficiency of collectives. Whereas in the past literacy was often valued as one of the few available means of social mobility and escape from a life of farming, the central official purpose of peasant literacy under the collective system was to prepare peasants for a life on the land, without alternatives. The restrictive functions of peasant literacies become clear when we compare these with the social objectives of state schools, which were located mainly in cities and towns. State-run schools and collectively-managed popular literacy efforts were intended to inculcate very different kinds of literacies, and to initiate their learners into two vastly different educational worlds. State schools, with their nationally unified standards and curriculum, sought to place learners on the bottom rungs of an educational ladder leading upward to the full universe of literate knowledge and with that to the most privileged and powerful jobs that society had to offer. Village popular educational efforts, by contrast, were intended to inculcate limited economically and socially terminal literacies (Peterson, 1991). The dual track educational system thus reinforced and reproduced the social divisions between city and countryside.

How did peasants experience this dual system of literacy which mirrored and reinforced the fundamental rural-urban duality of Chinese society? It is crucial to recognize that the expansion of literacy took place in the context of a simultaneous contraction of society and economy under collectivization. Under the collective system of agriculture private property was abolished, commerce shrivelled up, and peasants were locked into their collectives by means of administrative controls. Thus, while the availability of education and the political pressure for it increased rapidly during this period, the motives which had traditionally stimulated rural literacy either disappeared or were driven underground with collectivization.

What, then, were the motives for becoming literate under the new collective order? One was to master the basic survival skills needed for

collective living. Especially important was an ability to compute and record workpoints *(gongfen)*, the basis of the system used to calculate a family's share of the collective dividends. Literate ability was also the means to a restricted form of social mobility within the closed confines of the collective, or, more specifically, the production team (*shengchan dui*). The occupational structure of the team included a stratum of such literate bureaucratic functionaries as clerks, accountants, and bookkeepers. Although possessed of little real power, these literate functionaries nevertheless enjoyed the privilege and relative comfort of nonlaboring occupations within a predominantly agricultural economy. Finally, the division of Chinese education into socially superior, mobility-oriented state schools based mainly in the cities, on the one hand, and decentralized, locally-oriented village education on the other, had an ironic but completely understandable effect on villagers' perceptions of the schools they were offered. Notwithstanding all of the ideological emphasis upon collective self-reliance, many peasants scorned and rejected village schools as not "real" and continued to long to send their children to more highly valued state schools. The reason was simple enough. The state schools were real schools because they offered the only real chance of genuine social mobility, beyond the world of the collective.

Conclusion

Established wisdom tells us that the expansion of literacy is an integrative force, fostering equality of opportunity and greater commonality of values while blurring the distinctions between social classes. Using theoretical insights developed in other contexts and applied here for the first time to the study of literacy in China, I have shown the opposite. The spread of literacy can actually contribute to greater and more elaborate social divisions and may just as easily work to restrict and exclude social opportunity as increase it. If there is a broader lesson to be learned from this it is that we must finally refrain from continuing to regard literacy as something that it clearly is not. Literacy is not a uniform, socially and politically neutral technology of the intellect. Literacy — or, more accurately, literacies — are a form of social practice, rooted in the

structure of social relations. The literacy map turns out to be a map of the class structure.

In the end history may well decide that the greatest significance of the revolution in peasant literacy that took place in China under the collective system lay not in any officially proclaimed liberation of Chinese peasants from their past. Instead, it may be concluded that the greatest significance of peasant literacy education during this period resides in its contribution, along with food rationing, residential controls and other mobility-terminating measures, to the "pinning down" of the Chinese peasantry to the land where they were required for the continued production of China's precious food supply.

Note: This article grew out of research I undertook as part of my Ph.D. thesis on literacy in the People's Republic of China. See G. Peterson, *The Chinese struggle for literacy: Villagers and the state in Guangdong, 1949-1976* (University of British Columbia, 1992). I would like to thank J. Donald Wilson, Alexander Woodside, Edgar Wickberg, Graham Johnson, and Charles Hayford for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. I would also like to acknowledge the generous financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the International Development Research Centre (Ottawa).

REFERENCES

Apter, D.E. (1965). *The politics of modernization.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Belde, K. (1982). *Saomang: Kommunistische alphabetisierungsarbeit.* Bochum, Germany: Brockmeyer.

Chen, H. (1931). *Yuti wen yingyong zi* (Characters for use in vernacular writing). Shanghai: Commercial Press.

DeFrancis, J. (1984). *The Chinese language: Fact and fantasy.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Gay, P. (1969). *The enlightenment: An interpretation.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Graff, H.J. (1979). *The literacy myth: Literacy and social structure in the nineteenth century city.* New York: Academic Press.

Hayes, J. (1985). Specialists and written materials in the village world. In D. Johnson, A.J. Nathan, & E. Rawski (Eds.), *Popular culture in late imperial China* (pp. 75-111). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hu, Y. (1955, November 16). Guanyu nongcun saochu wenmang gongzuo (Concerning village anti-illiteracy work). *Renmin ribao,* p. 1.

Inkeles, A. & Smith, D.H. (1974). *Becoming modern.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Johnson, D. (1985). Communication, class and consciousness. In D. Johnson, A.J. Nathan, & E. Rawski (Eds.), *Popular culture in late imperial China* (pp. 34-72). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Levine, K. (1982). Functional literacy: False illusions and false economies. *Harvard Educational Review, 52*(3), 249-267.

Levine, K. (1986). *The social context of literacy.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Lin H. (1955, November 2, 3). Wei shehui zhuyi jianshe kaizhan saomang gongzuo (Develop the anti-illiteracy movement in order to build socialism). *Shanghai Wenhuibao*, p. 1.

Mommsen, W.J. (1989). *The political and social theory of Max Weber: Collected essays.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Naughton, B. (1991). The pattern and legacy of economic growth in the Mao era. In K. Lieberthal, R. MacFarquhar, & F. Wakeman (Eds.), *Perspectives on modern China: Four anniversaries* (pp. 226-254). Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Peterson, G. (1991). *The Chinese struggle for literacy: Villagers and the state in Guangdong, 1949-1976.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

Potter, S.H. & Potter, J.M. (1990). *China's peasants: The anthropology of a revolution.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rawski, E. (1979). *Education and popular literacy in Ch'ing China.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Seeberg, V. (1990). *Literacy in China: The effect of the national development context and policy on literacy levels, 1949-1979.* Bochum, Germany: Brockmeyer.

Street, B.V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Talbott, J. (1971). The history of education. *Daedalus, 100*(1). 133-150.

Woodside, A. (1989). *Real and imagined continuities in the Chinese struggle for literacy.* Unpublished manuscript.

Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian bianji bu. (Ed.). (1984). *Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian, 1949-1981* (Chinese educational year book). Beijing: Zhongguo dabaike quanshu chubanshe.

Zhou, Y. (1986). The modernization of the Chinese language. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 59*, 7-23.