

LEARNING TO READ IN THE CHINESE PRIMARY SCHOOL:
AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

by

KAREN KAY RAYLE

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Dr. Henry Dizney

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This is a study of beginning reading instruction in the Chinese primary school, which examines the environment, learning tasks, teaching methods, content, and attitudes in early literacy learning in that setting. The inquiry, based on review of research, classroom observations, translation of texts, and interviews with Chinese teachers, parents, and students, explores the effect of the Chinese linguistic, cultural, and political context on reading instruction there. The direct teaching methods seen are primarily the outgrowth of the character-based orthography and cultural factors. The content reflects the current goals of the Chinese leadership. Implications were found for beginning reading instruction in the United States.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to several persons on both sides of the Pacific for their assistance in my completion of this thesis. On the U.S. side, I would like to thank my advisers, Henry Dizney and Jan Jipson, for coping with my manic work style, and particularly Dr. Dizney for his solicited and unsolicited advice and opinions on many topics besides the thesis. I would also like to thank my parents, Richard and Lucille Rayle, to whom my China explorations have no doubt caused considerable financial strain and anxiety.

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I chose the topic of beginning reading instruction in the Chinese primary school mainly because I saw it as an ideal way to integrate longstanding interests in elementary education, particularly beginning reading instruction, and Chinese language and culture. I have been pulled between these two fields for a long time, and finally decided to combine them in my studies and hopefully in my future career.

I have always been fascinated by foreign lands, languages, and cultures. As a high school senior, I was invited to run in a friendship race in Guangzhou (Canton), People's Republic of China. I spent only 48 hours there, but was so intrigued by the country that I decided to study Chinese in college, and return for an extended period of time when I could speak the language. Therefore, in addition to my education courses, a large portion of my college career has been spent in the effort to become fluent and literate in Chinese. Like the children in my study, I have grappled with those 3000 characters required for functional literacy in Chinese.

I have also been interested in education, especially beginning reading instruction, for many years. I see teaching someone to read as one of the most precious gifts one can give, and developing literacy and enjoyment of reading in my students will be one of my primary responsibilities as an elementary school teacher.

My goal in doing the research for this thesis was to observe how my counterparts in China deal with a task which will be an important part of my future career. I felt that an understanding of the environment, learning tasks, student-teacher interactions, content, and attitudes involved in beginning reading in another culture would help me to reflect upon and clarify those same aspects in my own culture. In addition, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how the beginning reading process functions as a microcosm of the cultural goals and attitudes of a society.

I completed the observational end of my research while studying in a Chinese language program at Harbin Institute of Technology in Harbin, P.R.C. from September to December of 1989. The bulk of my observations and interviews were of students and teachers at the nearby Fu Hua Primary School. I will describe my observational methodology in detail in Chapter 1, and the school environment in Chapter 2.

Past Research

In his book, Comparative Reading, published in 1973, John Downing, a leading researcher in the field, laments,

Because theory and research on reading developed earliest in countries where alphabetic systems of writing prevail (particularly in the U.S.), non-alphabetic systems have received scant attention. When they are looked at it is usually through ethnocentric alphabetic blinkers.¹

Actually, at the present time a considerable volume of material, both research and descriptive in nature, is available on beginning reading instruction in the Chinese primary school. However, it must be carefully and critically evaluated. Owing to the linguistic and logistical difficulties for Western researchers seeking to conduct studies or extended observations in China, some sources are simply reports of very brief visits made to selected schools, often as a member of an educational tour group, with the aid of an interpreter. While I have occasionally made use of such sources, I have taken as my main sources my own observations, and research carried out by Chinese speakers.

Most research in the field focuses on a very specific aspect of learning to read Chinese. One group of scholars is concerned with the cognitive and linguistic demands of acquiring literacy in different orthographies (writing systems), and examining the possible relationship of the orthography to reading achievement and disability.

Hong Kong researcher Che Kan Leong has focuses on Chinese linguistics, and compares information processing in reading Chinese and English. He concludes that somewhat different cognitive processes may be involved in reading and learning to read in the two languages.

American researcher Marcia E. Sheridan addresses the question of whether it is easier to learn to read in Chinese or English. She compares the information processing involved in reading the two scripts, and concludes that both orthographies and cultural factors play a role in the development of reading disabilities.

Chinese educator Zhang Zhigong provides an excellent inside view of the Chinese writing system as it affects beginning readers, and examines the features of the language which make learning to read difficult for Chinese children, as well as the developmental stages of beginning reading in Chinese.

Harold Stevenson and his colleagues at the University of Michigan have been conducting a large-scale, long-term comparative study of the reading and mathematics achievement of American, Chinese, and Japanese children. In their research, which includes extensive observation by native speakers as well as cross-national testing, they address the nature of the Chinese and English orthographies, the cognitive skills related to acquiring literacy in them, teaching methods, attitudes, and comparative measures of reading achievement and disability. They conclude that the

incidence of reading disability in Chinese and American children is approximately the same, and that cultural factors such as teaching methods, attitudes, and homework are responsible for observed discrepancies in average achievement level in favor of the Asian students.

Other researchers have analyzed the content of the primary readers at various times, focusing mainly on how they reflect the adult society's political goals.

The earliest work I found in this area is Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin's book, The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China, published in 1971. These researchers, who worked with texts in use in the late 1950's through early 1960's, viewed the texts as an outline of qualities which the Chinese leadership considered important in developing its children into "model citizens". While there is some treatment of teaching methods, based on an examination of teacher materials and Chinese writings on educational theory, the main focus is on deducing the political goals of the leadership. At that time, the United States did not have diplomatic relations with China, so the authors' lack of firsthand observations and their narrow focus is certainly understandable.

In 1977, Jonathan Unger translated and analyzed selections from primary school readers in use in Guangzhou, (Canton) immediately after the Cultural Revolution. He identifies political and moral themes in the readers, and examines the use of heroes as models. He includes an

examination of teacher materials, and information on teacher training, teaching methods, and classroom management based on interviews with Hong Kong refugees. He also considers the relationship between memorization and creativity in Chinese language education, and some of the problems of becoming literate in Chinese, especially for speakers of dialects other than Mandarin, the national standard dialect. Of all the research discussed in this section, Unger's comes closest to a comprehensive examination of Chinese reading instruction in its own right. However, texts and teaching methods, as well as the whole of Chinese society, have undergone drastic changes since the end of the Cultural Revolution.

More recently, Chinese-American Julia Kwong examined the revised textbooks of the late 1970's, and found that compared to the Cultural Revolution era texts Unger had translated, they reflected a new emphasis on science, technology, and modernization, and much less stress on class struggle and worship of leaders such as Mao Zedong.

A small amount of material on Chinese teaching methods exists in English. American educator Lillie Pope provides an insightful overview of the Chinese language, problems faced by Chinese children in learning to read, and new teaching methods being experimentally implemented in the P.R.C.

The most detailed information on teaching methods comes from Chinese educational researchers. Most of these sources were found in the English-language edition of Chinese

Education, which publishes translated selections of articles from various Chinese educational journals.

Chinese educators Jiang Shangye and Li Bo describe problems faced by children in learning to read Chinese, and provide an overview of several recent steps toward reform in teaching methods. Ding Yicheng, Li Nan, and Bao Quan'en report on experiments in using phonetically annotated characters, and Mae Chuchang describes another approach, the concentrated character recognition method, also being experimentally implemented in the P.R.C.

Finally, a few researchers, rather than focusing on a specific aspect of beginning reading instruction, have included it as part of a more broadly based inquiry into the socialization of Chinese children. One of the books which most influenced the portion of this study dealing with textbook content was Edward Wilson's Learning to be Chinese: The Political Socialization of Children in Taiwan, which explores the political and moral socialization of Taiwanese children from a variety of angles. Wilson, who has done work in other areas of Asian studies as well, speaks and reads Chinese, and uses this to great advantage in his research. He analyzed the nationally-adopted readers in use on Taiwan in the mid 1960's, and conducted extensive observations at three Taipei-area primary schools in 1965-6. His research focuses on the development of children's attitudes toward authority in the family, school, and political context. Many

of his findings deal with deeply ingrained Chinese cultural patterns, and apply to the mainland as well.

Rather than focus on a specific area such as political socialization, Chinese-American Ann-Ping Chin, through the use of semi-structured interviews, allowed Chinese children to tell their own stories. These are recorded in her book, Children of China: Voices From Recent Years. Some of the responses reveal children's attitudes towards primary education and reading instruction which are relevant to my work. Because of shyness, unfamiliarity with foreigners, and wary parents and school officials, Chinese children are often difficult to interview, and Chin's book provides a valuable look into their world from their own point of view.

Methodology: General Comments

Rather than taking the narrowly focused approach chosen by many of the above researchers, I have chosen to present a more comprehensive view of the process of beginning reading instruction in China as a phenomenon worthy of description in its own right. My study has less in common with empirical studies such as those by Stevenson and his colleagues, than with the technique of ethnographic description, often used in cultural anthropology. Ethnographic description concerns itself with describing phenomena as they fit into their cultural context. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains:

Believing that man is an animal suspended in webs of 7
significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be
those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not
an experimental science in search of law but an
interpretive one in search of meaning.²

In conducting my study, I have resisted the tendency of
other researchers to focus narrowly on a single aspect of
the subject, as I feel that some essential meaning is lost
when one narrows one's focus to a single variable one wishes
to observe. Geertz writes:

If anthropological interpretation is constructing a
reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what
happens-from what, in this time or that place, specific
people say, what they do, what is done to them, from
the whole vast business of the world-is to divorce it
from its applications and render it vacant. A good
interpretation of anything...takes us into the heart of
that of which it is the interpretation.³

In this paper, I hope to delve into the "heart" of the
process of beginning reading in the Chinese primary school,
from the point of view of all the participants. I am
unusually suited as an observer to undertake this task.
Because I am not Chinese, I am not a part of the system I
observe, and thus can stand back at an objective distance
from it. However, I can speak, understand, and read Chinese,
which allowed me to talk to parents, teachers, and children,
read texts in their original language, and observe classroom
interactions without the aid of an interpreter. Thus I am
truly "on the outside looking in"; outside the Chinese
culture, and looking in on it through the window of spoken
and written language.

Geertz writes of the nature of ethnographic description:

It is interpretive, and what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse, and the interpreting consists of trying to rescue the "said" of such talk from its perishing occasions...in addition...it is microscopic.⁴

I have applied the approach outlined by Geertz to my subject. The "flow of social discourse" I have attempted to interpret concerns what has been said by a variety of participants in the process of learning to read in the Chinese primary school: teachers, students, parents, textbooks, and educational experts. I have "rescued" this discourse through notes, tapes, questionnaires, and translations. In my interpretation of this "flow of discourse", I have made use of all of these sources, as well as what others have written on the subject.

I have undertaken such a detailed study of this small slice of Chinese culture because I believe that in observing the teaching of beginning reading in China, there is something important to be learned both about beginning reading and about China.

My goals in doing this study were twofold. First, I wanted to gain added insight into the essential nature of beginning reading instruction by looking at how a process with which I was familiar in my native language and culture was approached in a very different environment. I was curious as to what commonalties I might find, and how the cultural, political, and linguistic context would affect the

beginning reading process in another culture. I felt that observing these effects would help me to better understand the influence of these factors on the beginning reading process for the American children I will teach.

My second goal was to gain insight into Chinese culture as a whole through a detailed look at a small slice of it. Primary education is an especially rich source of information about a culture, because it embodies the knowledge and beliefs a society deems important enough to inculcate in the next generation from an early age. Gaining insight into the knowledge and beliefs a society views as important allows us to better understand and more effectively communicate with its members. Geertz writes that "The aim of anthropology is the enlargement of human discourse."⁵ I believe that by examining these beliefs as they are expressed in the primary readers, I have in some way opened up a new window on Chinese culture so we might better understand it.

Background Research

This project began in spring, 1989 with a review of available literature on the subject. To the greatest extent possible, I utilized sources by Chinese speaking researchers who were Chinese natives or who had spent extensive time in the country. Much of my research was done in the journal Chinese Education. This background research continued to a lesser extent while I was in Harbin, as I found several

relevant articles in English and Chinese-language newspapers available there.

Translation of Texts

In spring, 1989, I obtained through a Chinese friend the Chinese textbooks used nationally in the P.R.C. for grades one, two, and three, and spent the spring and summer translating them. As there are large differences between Chinese and English grammar and writing style, my translations focused on preserving the meaning of the stories as opposed to a word-for-word rendering. When I encountered difficulty, which was rare, I consulted my Chinese professor, Lucia Yang. I was also able to check some of my translations against those of the same stories in Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin's book, and found that they matched up very well. I attained copies of the teacher materials corresponding to these texts at the Educational Bookstore in Harbin, and translated the instructional objectives and a sampling of lesson plans for each book.

Classroom Observations

My observations were conducted while I was a student in the China Exchange Travel (C.E.T.) Chinese Language Training Program at Harbin Institute of Technology in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, P.R.C. I studied in Harbin from late August to mid-December, 1989. Program participants lived with a Chinese roommate, and attended a variety of language

classes, including twice-weekly meetings on a one-to-one basis with a professor who aided us in pursuing an independent study project of our own choosing. I worked on my thesis research with Yang Cuan Li, an English instructor at H.I.T. Mr Yang speaks excellent English, and is a professional translator. I had prepared interview questions for teachers, parents, and students over the summer, and Mr. Yang helped me translate these into Chinese. He then arranged for me to visit a nearby kindergarten and primary school.

We visited the kindergarten attached to the Institute four times over a two-week period in October. Mr. Yang was very insistent that I be allowed to see simply the everyday activities at the kindergarten, not the special performances that are usually put on for foreigners, and so I was. Most of the time I sat at the back of the classroom for five and six year olds, taking notes and the occasional photograph. I conducted one interview with a kindergarten teacher.

We visited the nearby Fu Hua primary school eight times over a four-week period in November and December. Five of these visits were for conducting classroom observations of one to three hours in length, and three for conducting teacher interviews of two to four hours in length. During classroom observations, Mr. Yang and I sat on a bench with the students in the back of the classroom. I carried the textbook used by the students, and occasionally chimed in as they read aloud in unison. Most of the time, I took very

rapid notes. If there was something I didn't understand, I whispered to Mr. Yang or wrote him a note. Mr. Yang never actually "interpreted" in the traditional sense of the word. I audiotaped the final lesson I observed, and translated and transcribed the tape with the help of my Chinese roommate in Eugene, Chen Xingping. I also briefly visited a rural school in Acheng township about an hour's drive from Harbin along with the other American students.

Teacher Interviews

I interviewed one teacher at the kindergarten and four teachers at Fu Hua Primary School. Interviewing several teachers was necessary both to get a broad range of input and to get the 105 interview questions answered. An experienced teacher who is now an administrator at Fu Hua was instrumental in coordinating the teachers' schedules and mine to allow me to conduct the interviews, as well as serving as an interviewee herself. The bulk of my observations and interview time was with a very candid first-grade teacher who was undoubtedly selected because she is one of the most experienced teachers at Fu Hua and has won many awards. None of the teachers spoke English, so interviews were conducted entirely in Chinese. I read the question or asked it conversationally, and the teachers answered orally. I did not tape the interviews as I felt this would make my subjects uncomfortable. Instead, I took rapid notes in a sort of bilingual shorthand. In the event

that the teacher did not understand my oral question, she could look at the question sheet, and if I didn't understand her answer, Mr. Yang would rephrase it in simpler Chinese or occasionally English. He also watched my notes to make sure I had understood the teacher's answer. I did not generally record which teacher answered which question, as I often talked with a series coming in to be interviewed on their respective breaks, although I made note of some of the questions answered by the first grade teacher. While our discussions dealt only with teaching, I have omitted their names as a precautionary measure. My interviewees at Fu Hua included the administrator, and one teacher each at the first, second, and third grade levels. I also interviewed at her home a former Fu Hua teacher who now teaches English at the junior middle school level, in Chinese and English at her request. I did not conduct any interviews at the rural school.

Parent Interviews

While the main focus of my research was observing what went on in the classroom, I was also curious as to parental attitudes and contributions to the beginning reading process. Therefore, I conducted five parent interviews. The number of interviews I conducted was limited by the small number of parents of school-aged children with whom I felt familiar enough to interview. Three of my parent sources were teachers in the language program. I also interviewed a

clerical worker who was a professor's neighbor, and a cadre (official) I met on the train. Interviews were conducted in a mix of Chinese and English with the professors (typically I asked the question in Chinese and they answered in English), and in Chinese with the worker and the cadre. One of the professors was available to help me interview his neighbor, the worker, and I handled the cadre interview by myself. Responses were recorded in written notes. In the sections in which these parents are profiled, I will refer to them as Professors A, B, and C, the worker, and the cadre.

Student Questionnaires and Interviews

I also gave questionnaires to five primary school students, and interviewed two in person. All but one of these students attended Fu Hua Primary School. Five first grade students at Fu Hua were given a written questionnaire, which was written in both characters and pinyin, the phonetic spelling system that Chinese students are taught in kindergarten and in the first weeks of first grade. The teacher who administered the questionnaire was asked to select a representative sample of students and not to assist them in filling out the form. Students were told they could respond in pinyin or characters, and tended to use a mixture of the two. The Fu Hua sample included three girls and two boys, whose parents were cadres (2), teachers, workers, and meteorologists. I also gave a questionnaire to Professor B,

who took it home for his son to complete. Additionally, I interviewed two students, the son of Professor A and the daughter of the worker, his neighbor, in person. These interviews were, of course, in Chinese, and were conducted at their homes. My total student sample included four males and four females, with an age range from seven to eleven.

NOTES

¹ John Downing, Comparative Reading: Cross-National Studies of Behavior and Processes in Reading and Writing (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1973), p. 148.

² Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

The Chinese Educational System

Most Chinese children begin their formal education at a very early age. At the age of three, the boundary is crossed between the "tuoersuo" or nursery, which provides primarily custodial care, and the "youeryuan" or kindergarten, which offers some educational activities. Kindergartens may be run by local educational authorities, townships, work units, or private individuals, who are often retired teachers. Attendance at kindergarten is not compulsory, but a matter of convenience, since both parents work in nearly all families. Fees for kindergarten are generally taken from the parents' salaries. The availability and quality of kindergartens varies widely, with the best facilities usually found in urban ones run by universities and teacher-training schools.

Children typically enter primary school at age seven, although many urban schools admit "bright" six year olds. Whether a child is considered "bright" may be judged by admissions tests, interviews, or parental influence. Primary school encompasses six years. Attendance is compulsory, and is full-time for urban students. Nationwide, primary schools enroll about 92% of children in the 7 to 12 age group.¹ In the countryside, students usually attend part-time schools. Many do not complete primary school, and most of those who do do not continue beyond that level.

In urban areas, most students continue on to junior middle school. Sixth year primary students take a battery of tests, the scores determining which, if any, junior middle school they will attend. Junior middle school encompasses three years, usually from ages thirteen to fifteen. In the last year of junior middle school, students take tests to determine whether and what kind of senior middle school they will attend.

Nationally, approximately half of the population aged 15 to 18 attends senior middle school.² Depending on test scores and career goals, they may enroll in a variety of specialized senior middle schools. "Regular" senior middle schools focus on preparing students for the highly competitive college entrance examinations. Teacher training schools prepare students to teach at the kindergarten or primary school level. There are also a wide variety of vocational, technical, and agricultural schools which aim to give students specific job skills they can use immediately upon graduation. These specialized or "zhongzhuan" schools also include schools for financial administration and athletics. They are very popular because graduates, although they can rarely enter colleges, are virtually guaranteed good city jobs after graduation. Most recruit from an entire city, county, or province, and provide boarding. They are being promoted as a good way to dampen the demand for higher education, and channel ability into areas crucial to China's economic development.

Graduates of the "regular" senior middle schools take the grueling college entrance examinations, whose scores determine which college, if any, they will attend. Only four percent of test-takers will be able to attend college at government expense.³ Some colleges are beginning to accept self-supporting students with scores that approach their cutoffs on a trial basis, and thousands of students study through radio, TV, or correspondence courses. Of the four percent who are accepted, most will attend local or provincial colleges, with only a tiny handful testing into the most prestigious national institutions, such as Beijing and Qinghua Universities.

The general picture of the Chinese educational system, then, is one of a progressive funnelling process in which students must prevail over increasingly tough competition in order to continue their schooling. This situation is primarily a result of China's huge population and limited resources. Primary school, while it may be the first and only exposure to formal education for rural children, is for urban students such as those at Fu Hua the first entry into a ruthless competition which will involve them for the remainder of their childhood. A Chinese university student interviewed by Ann-Ping Chin explained it this way:

Kids are given more and more tests all the time...So the kind of life they lead is quite rigid. They face entrance exams for junior high and high schools, and there is pressure to get into a "key school". On every level there is an elevator, and you have to get on. It's very hard on them.⁴

Government Schools, "People-Run" Schools, and Key Schools

In both urban and rural areas, schools may be of two types. Government-run schools are financed by government funds, and their instructional schedules and curriculum are regulated by the National Ministry of Education. These are the co-ed neighborhood day schools that most urban children attend. Some operate as boarding schools for rural students and are located in county towns. Admission to government-run junior and senior middle schools is by competitive examination. Government-run schools may charge tuitions, but it is usually quite low, about 1/4 of an average worker's monthly salary per year.

There also exists a second-tier schooling system known as "minban" or "people-run" schools. In urban areas, some of these schools date from pre-Revolutionary times, or originated after the failure of the Great Leap Forward program of rapid industrialization in the early 1960's, which caused severe cutbacks in government funding for education. These schools handle overflows of students from the government-run schools at the primary level, and admit those who did not test into government-run junior and senior middle schools. They have separate exams after the government exams, and most of their students are from fairly affluent families who can afford the higher fees. It is almost impossible for minban school graduates to compete successfully for college admission or good city jobs.

Most Chinese children live in rural villages, and receive their schooling at minban schools financed by local funds and student tuition. The fees may consume a considerable proportion of a peasant family's income, decreasing the motivation to keep children in school. Rural minban schools follow a pared-down curriculum (in some cases only Chinese and math), are generally attended only part-time to allow children to help with farm work, and emphasize preparation for agricultural work rather than further education after leaving primary school. There are many horror stories in the Chinese press of primitive facilities, untrained teachers, and local officials appropriating school funds for their own use. Susan Shirk writes, after observing the rural minban schools: "Because these schools were obviously inferior to full-time schools, it was almost impossible for students to compete successfully with graduates of full-time schools for admission on to the next level."⁵

A special case of the government-run school is the "zhongdian" or "keypoint" school. Keypoint schools (often referred to in English as "key" schools) offer the highest quality of education available in China. They are selected at each level of government (national, provincial, county, city, and district), as a function of the proportion of students they send on to the next level of schooling. Key schools receive preferential funding, and usually have more experienced, better qualified teachers, better facilities,

and audiovisual equipment unavailable in most other schools. They also make more use of new and experimental teaching methods. Criteria for entrance vary, but usually involve a combination of competitive examinations and parental influence. They are seen by the government as the vanguard in the overall development of Chinese education. Shirk writes:

During the Cultural Revolution key schools were condemned as 'little treasure pagodas' which cultivated spiritual aristocrats rather than revolutionary successors. Today, they are praised for fostering talent and helping achieve the modernization of the Chinese economy.⁶

Key schools exist at all educational levels from kindergarten to university, and on scales from local to national. Fu Hua Primary School, where the classroom observations described in this thesis were conducted, is a city key primary school.

Fu Hua Primary School

Fu Hua Primary School is located next to the campus of the Harbin Institute of Technology in Harbin, a city of approximately 3 million and the capitol of the northernmost Chinese province, Heilongjiang. Harbin is primarily an industrial city, not as developed economically as Beijing, Guangzhou, or Shanghai, but better off than most smaller and interior cities in China. The school is surrounded by university buildings on one side, and apartment complexes housing university professors and workers on the other. The

neighborhood seems somewhat above the average standard for Harbin; apartments are fairly new, and many have indoor plumbing.

Slightly more than half of the students at Fu Hua come from homes where at least one parent has graduated from senior middle school or higher. Many of them are children of teachers at Harbin Institute of Technology. The rest come from homes where neither parent has an education higher than the junior middle school level.

A total of 1769 students attend the school, with 977 boys and 792 girls. There are five to six classes at each grade level. The average class size is 65 to 70 students. Class sizes tend to be slightly smaller, 50 to 60 students, in the early grades. Some teachers feel that the class sizes are just right; others indicated to me that they would like smaller classes of 30 to 40 students, so they could make more home visits and better meet students' emotional needs. Within grades, students are assigned to the class of a particular teacher arbitrarily, although it appears that parental requests may be granted occasionally via the "back door" method of bribes and personal connections.

Classes are so large, in part, because Fu Hua is a key school. All students from the surrounding neighborhood are theoretically eligible to attend, although they may be "pushed out" by extra students from other parts of Harbin whose parents can go through the back door. Work has begun on developing an entrance test to rectify this situation.

The physical facilities at Fu Hua are quite adequate, and appear comparable to a typical school in a lower middle-class area in the United States. The office for the principal and vice principals is furnished with a carpet, comfortable chairs, desks, and telephones. Administrators work at desks in the same room rather than separate offices or cubicles. There is also a teacher's room with chairs, tables, and educational journals, as well as several meeting rooms of various sizes. Most of my interviews were conducted in these areas.

Classroom size is comparable to that in the U.S., although they are more tightly packed because of large class sizes. Students sit at desks on wooden benches nailed to the floor. The desks are connected horizontally in groups of two or four. There are usually 7 to 9 rows of desks, at which students sit boy-girl-boy-girl. Desks in some classrooms have blue cloth covers, and appear old although the school building is very new. Students keep a pencil box, textbooks, and a water bottle or canteen at their desks. The teacher has a desk, and there are one or two large filing cabinets for storage.

The classrooms appear less visually "cluttered" than U.S. classrooms, but not sterile or uninviting. Those I visited all had some inspirational message in cut-out characters above the chalkboard. A favorite is "Study Hard, Be Ambitious, Be Honest, Observe Rules". There are blackboards at the front and back of each classroom. The

front board is the one used for teaching, and in some rooms is equipped with a ladder-like holder for flash cards and a large abacus. The back board is decorated with colored-chalk pictures made by the teacher and/or students, and is used for announcements and (at third grade and up) a class newspaper. These boards, often elaborately prepared, may be seen in nearly all Chinese work and residential units. Some classrooms have posters showing proper study and health habits, and "Little Red Flowers" displays. (Children earn these for academic effort and good behavior.) Most are decorated with teacher- and commercially-made pictures (The Gate of Heavenly Peace and the Great Hall of the People were favorites), calligraphy scrolls, and potted plants. I saw no pictures of Mao or other political figures displayed.

The building as a whole is clean, well-ventilated, and lit by florescent lighting. Classrooms are cool, but not cold in winter, and students keep warm by wearing their coats or heavy sweaters. The playground is a large dirt expanse behind the school, and is bare except for two fiberglass soccer goals and a tree swing. In the winter, part of the field was flooded to make a skating rink. There was an asphalt basketball court and swings at the rural school and the local high school, so the lack of playground facilities at Fu Hua may be due to the newness of the building, completed in 1988.

Students attend 216 days per year, in two terms of 18 weeks each. School is in session six full days per week.

There is a winter break from mid-January to the beginning of March (centered around Chinese New Year), and a summer break from mid-July to late August. Teachers report that these breaks do not affect student progress because extensive review homework is assigned at this time. Before vacations, students get a packet or booklet for most academic subjects. All students, even first-graders, have vacation homework for Chinese and math. Upper grade students also have history and geography homework. This homework may include reading selections and answering questions, solving problems and puzzles, reading supplementary books, and writing diaries and compositions. In addition, the school and the Young Pioneer organization often host movies, presentations, and field trips during vacations.

During the school year, the daily schedule for the school as a whole is as follows: Students report for their first class at 8:00 AM. Class periods are 45 minutes long, with ten-minute breaks between classes. Morning classes are usually the "primary" subjects, Chinese and math. There are four morning classes. Students have a lunch break from 11:30 to 12:30. During this time, a few who live nearby return home for lunch. Others carry their lunch to school and eat there, or buy bread, peanuts, and fruit from a nearby store. During lunch hour, students can eat, play outside, or read or watch TV in the school until 12:30, when school resumes with a 25 minute schoolwide calisthenics session. There are three afternoon classes, with one of the class breaks being

devoted to eye exercises which are believed to prevent nearsightedness. At 3:35, school is technically out and students are free to go home, but most stay at school for sports or clubs, Young Pioneer activities, tutorial classes, or to do homework with friends. Most parents don't get home from work until 5 PM or later, and don't want children home alone. Teachers appear to rotate after-school duty. Some children and teachers don't leave school until 7:30 PM.

First graders study Chinese and math daily, music, art, and physical education twice a week, and conduct, common sense, and labor once a week. "Chinese" encompasses several classes at each grade level, including textbook reading, supplementary reading, speech, composition, and calligraphy. "Common Sense" incorporates elements of health and basic natural science, focusing on personal hygiene and observation of natural phenomena such as plants and insects. "Labor" in the early grades focuses on self-sufficiency and helping parents at home, teaching skills such as washing socks, cooking rice, and making covers for textbooks. In later grades, children do simple assembly tasks, and in rural areas may raise animals or grow a vegetable garden. "Conduct" includes some political content, but focuses mainly on study habits and social skills.

Students at the second year level and above do not have Common Sense class, and instead study Natural Science, History, Geography, and Politics. Sixth- graders begin to study English.

Each class at every grade level has a homeroom teacher, who instructs them for Chinese and math, and is responsible for home visits, class meetings, Young Pioneer activities, etc. for that group. For art, music, P.E., history, geography, science, and politics, there is one teacher for every one to two grades. Students remain in the same group throughout the day, but are taught by different teachers. Each teacher has twelve to fifteen classes per week. The manner in which teachers are assigned to classes (self-contained, departmental, moving teacher or moving class) varies from place to place in China as it does in the United States. However, ability grouping is rarely, if ever, seen at the primary level. It is not used at Fu Hua.

The teachers at Fu Hua come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds, reflecting the changes in the field in recent years. The first grade teacher I interviewed most extensively has been teaching for 32 years. She entered the teaching profession in a time of desperate shortages. After graduating from junior middle school, she attended an accelerated teacher training program in which she observed and worked with experienced teachers for several months. She and the other teachers have periodically returned to school for continuing education courses, and most are now at a senior middle school graduate level. Many of the older teachers at Fu Hua had similar preparation. Today, the typical preparation for an urban primary school teacher consists of three years in a special teacher-training senior

middle school. A few of the younger teachers at Fu Hua are college graduates, although this is much more common at the middle school level than the primary level. All the administrators and teachers I encountered at Fu Hua, except for the P.E. teacher, are women.

This chapter has introduced the context of the Chinese educational system of which Fu Hua Primary School is a part, and drawn the reader into the environment in which the teaching of reading takes place. The next chapter will examine the nature of the learning tasks which face children as they begin to acquire literacy within that environment.

NOTES

- ¹ John N. Hawkins, Education and Social Change in the People's Republic of China (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), p. 45. (Statistic from World Bank estimate, 1982)
- ² Ibid., p. 43. (Statistic from World Bank estimate, 1982)
- ³ Ibid., p. 39. (Statistic from interview with Minister of Education Jiang Nanxiang, 1980)
- ⁴ Ann-Ping Chin, Children of China: Voices from Recent Years (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 29.
- ⁵ Susan Shirk, Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 34.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

Objectives for Primary School Language Instruction

Goals and objectives for all levels of education in China are determined centrally by the National Ministry of Education. Specific programs and materials are developed by various groups working under the Ministry's direction. From the quote below, taken from the 1985 proposal for the revised edition of primary school texts currently in use in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Zhejiang Province, it is clear that primary school language instruction is intended to serve the dual purpose of ideological education and literacy development:

Elementary school language teaching must take on the responsibility of molding a new generation of young people and utilizing the spirit, thought, and morality of communism to educate the new generation. Because of this, we emphasize ideological education in our teaching.....The goal of elementary school language instruction is to develop in the children the ability to recognize characters, read, and write compositions, and to begin to develop at a very elementary level a fresh, lively, and accurate style of writing.¹

In other words, the task facing the Chinese primary student is not merely to acquire literacy but to receive a firm ideological and moral grounding in those qualities which the Communist Party leadership desires in its citizens.

This emphasis on ideology and morality is not unique to the communist era, but has characterized Chinese education since ancient times when education consisted largely of memorizing the Confucian classics. What is new is the

content which, in typical Chinese fashion, is expressed in a series of lists. Ideological goals for primary education focus on the inculcation of the "Five Loves", "Four Stresses", and "Four Beauties". The "Five Loves" are love for the motherland, people, labor, public property, and science and technology. The latter reflects the current "Four Modernizations" drive. The "Five Stresses" are decorum, manners, hygiene, discipline, and morals. The "Four Beauties" are beauty of mind, language, behavior, and the environment.² An detailed analysis of how the goals of the leadership are reflected in the current Chinese primary school readers will be presented in Chapter 5.

Literacy is of course also an important goal of language instruction. Upon completion of primary school, students are to be able to 1) use pinyin (a phonetic spelling system described later in this chapter) as an aid to the learning of characters and the study of the standard national language; 2) read, write, and understand the meaning of approximately 3000 characters and many of the words formed by those characters; 3) write skillfully with pencil, pen, and brush; 4) use a dictionary ; 5) understand and tell the main ideas of broadcasts and speeches, and verbally express their own ideas and narrate events sequentially; 6) read, understand, and analyze at an appropriate developmental level children's books and publications; 7) write a smooth and complete sentence; and 8) write short, simple narratives and common practical

writing with sound thought, a clear central focus, specific content, a clear sequence of development, and correct use of ten common types of punctuation.³

A true understanding of the tasks Chinese children face in becoming literate requires some elementary knowledge of the nature of the Chinese language. Following is an introduction to the principal features of spoken and written Chinese, and an examination of the challenges these characteristics present to children as they acquire literacy. The discussion is intended to provide non-Chinese speakers with the background needed to understand the chapters that follow. Readers familiar with Chinese linguistics may wish to skip over some sections.

Spoken Chinese: Regionalects, Dialects, and "Common Speech"

Many foreigners are unaware that the term "Chinese", when used broadly to refer to the language spoken by majority nationality citizens of China, encompasses at least eight mutually unintelligible regionalects. These regionalects are different enough from one another to be considered languages in their own right by some scholars. One such regionalect, that native to a large region of North China, including Beijing, and historically the language of government affairs, was originally called Mandarin. Today it is being promoted as the national language of the P.R.C. under the name of Putonghua, or "Common Speech". There are approximately 715 million native speakers of Mandarin in the

P.R.C. today, and millions more who have learned it as a second language to varying degrees of proficiency. Another major regionalelect is Wu, spoken by 85 million in Shanghai and the provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang along the central coast. Cantonese or Yue is spoken by 50 million in Guangzhou (Canton) and the surrounding Guangdong province, as well as by many Chinese in Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and North America. The Hunanese or Xiang regionalelect is spoken by 48 million in and around Hunan Province in Central China. Hakka is spoken by 37 million, mainly highland dwellers in South China. Gan is spoken by 24 million in Jiangxi Province in South China. Finally, the Southern Min regionalelect claims 28 million speakers in southern Fujian Province, Hainan Island, and Taiwan, and the Northern Min another 13 million in northern Fujian Province.⁴

These regionalelects differ from one another as much as French, Spanish, and Italian.⁵ Recent estimates suggest that among the various regionalelects there are variations of 20% in grammar, 40% in vocabulary, and 80% in pronunciation.⁶ In other words, it is possible for speakers who have not learned another regionalelect to catch the occasional word or phrase in it, but nearly impossible to converse with a speaker of the regionalelect.

In addition to speakers of the eight major regionalelects, 50 to 60 million Chinese citizens are members of minority nationalities which speak non-Chinese languages. These include Tibetan, Mongolian, Uighur and the other

Altaic languages of Central Asia, and tribal languages related to Khmer, Vietnamese, and Tai.⁷

Even within the major regionalect groups, there exist many local dialects which often make mutual intelligibility difficult. These differences reflect the limited opportunities for most people to travel and communicate with people outside their village or city, a situation which is only beginning to change. Such differences are particularly strong today among older people, and in rural areas. For example, a different form of the Wu regionalect is spoken in Shanghai and Suzhou, a 90 minute train ride apart. Given this linguistic diversity, it is not surprising that the development of a unified system of oral and written communication, through promotion of Putonghua and literacy, has been a major educational goal for the Chinese.

The Mandarin regionalect, since it claims the greatest number of speakers, was a natural choice for a national language, and the Beijing dialect, the traditional language of state affairs, was selected as the standard for the new national language, Putonghua. National television and radio broadcasts are in Putonghua and, officially, all children are taught to understand, speak, read, and write it in school. As of 1958, all teachers were to conduct their classes in Putonghua. Linguist John DeFrancis writes of the results:

To date, more than a quarter of a century later, this 36
objective is so far from being achieved that one can
only marvel at the obtuseness displayed in regard to
the obvious difficulties involved in achieving such
unrealistic goals.⁸

This is often due to the unavailability of local teachers who can provide good models of Putonghua. In short, for nearly one in three Chinese children, the literacy learning task requires that they simultaneously acquire a second language. The obstacles to literacy learning faced by such students are well known to both Chinese and American teachers.

The Fu Hua students observed in this study are fortunate in being native speakers of a Mandarin dialect very close to that of Beijing, on which the language of the readers is based. Harbin residents are so well known for their clear Putonghua that many of China's television and radio announcers are drawn from there, and it is considered a good place for foreigners to learn Chinese. The differences between the Harbin and Beijing dialects are quite minor, about like those between Boston and Chicago accents in American English. Differences I observed included a tendency to add an "r" to the end of certain words, a blurring of the distinction between z, c, s and zh, ch, sh, and some distinctive local terminology and slang. Although I observed a few instances of teachers trying to standardize children's pronunciation, and one case in which a teacher had to identify a farm implement using a local term, the dialect differences didn't seem to pose more serious

obstacles to literacy learning than they do for white, middle-class children in various regions of the United States.

Spoken Chinese: Tones, Syllables, and Words

Putonghua, like other forms of Chinese, is a tonal language in which the meaning of a syllable varies according to the tone in which it is pronounced. These tones are not absolute, but vary according to the voice range of individual speakers. Tones in Putonghua are high level (first tone), high rising (second tone), low dipping (third tone), and high falling (fourth tone). Neutral tones may also occur in the second syllable of words. Tones present the most difficult challenge for foreigners learning to speak Chinese, and may present problems for Chinese children as well. Parents correct young children's tones like American parents correct grammar, and a teacher told me that many children can't accurately discriminate tones until they are nine or ten years old.

Tones are an essential part of the Chinese language because they distinguish what would otherwise be an enormous number of homonyms. Compared to over 8000 syllables in English, there are only about 400 in Mandarin Chinese, the exact number depending on whether exclamations are counted and which dialect is examined. The Chinese syllable, minus tone, contains a maximum of four phonemes as opposed to seven phonemes in English.⁹ There are 21 initial consonant

phonemes, including 18 represented by single letters and 3 by two letters, zh, ch, and sh. There are no consonant clusters such as the "st" in "states". Most syllables in Mandarin end in vowels, with n and ng being used as final consonants. There are six simple vowels and 13 compound ones.

Chinese grammar would seem to pose fewer obstacles to beginning readers than that of English. Verbs do not undergo internal change to indicate tense, as in "has" and "had" in English, nor do nouns undergo internal change to become plural, as in "house" and "houses". There are a limited number of grammatical particles which may be added to indicate tense, possession, passive voice, or adjectival or adverbial phrases.¹⁰ The grammar of written Chinese, especially literary works, is somewhat more formal than that of the spoken language. The reading textbooks begin with very colloquial language, and gradually introduce more complex constructions, culminating with the study of classical Chinese in middle school. The relatively small number of grammatical particles needed to read colloquial Chinese allows initial reading vocabulary to consist largely of meaningful nouns and verbs.

Pinyin Romanization

The information about the phonetics of spoken Mandarin implies that it can be and is represented by letters of the Roman alphabet, as well as by the traditional characters.

This is indeed the case. Since the vernacular writing movement in China beginning in 1917, several romanization schemes have been designed and implemented on various scales. The one currently in use in the P.R.C. is pinyin, a phonetic spelling system based on Putonghua. Pinyin uses all the letters used in English except for v, and with the addition of u with an umlaut. Sound values for most consonants are quite similar to those of English, while those for the consonants q, x, z, c, and r and for the vowels are different. Tones are indicated with marks above the vowel sounds which mimic their contours in speech (-, /, \, ^, \).

The current uses of pinyin include indicating character pronunciation in dictionaries and textbooks for Chinese and foreign students, labelling of commercial and industrial products, signs for streets, post offices, railway stations, and some stores, inputting Chinese into computers, and official transcriptions of Chinese person and place names overseas. "Beijing" and "Mao Zedong" are pinyin spellings, replacing the spellings "Peking" and "Mao Tse Tung", which resulted from earlier romanization systems. (All personal and place names from the P.R.C. in this thesis are in pinyin, and other Chinese names, such as those of Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese, are spelled according to their spelling in the source.)

Pinyin also plays a role, the extent of which has been a subject of considerable dispute, in teaching children to

read Chinese. Urban children often learn pinyin even before first grade, from parents, in kindergarten, and from a television show called "Children Learn Pinyin". Books and magazines aimed at young children which are written in pinyin-annotated characters or pinyin only are readily available at state-run bookstores and private stalls on the street. In first grade, the first six weeks of reading instruction are devoted to pinyin before instruction in characters is begun.

Pinyin is much more phonetically regular than English, and teachers report that few children have difficulty mastering it in the allotted time, although it is difficult to teach in an interesting manner because it is abstract. The task is simplified in that most pinyin reading materials for children are printed with syllables separated from each other, because each syllable is represented by a character. This limits the need for blending and facilitates eventual sight recognition of the syllables, of which, as noted previously, there are only about 400.

After mastering pinyin, children are able to read and write any word in their oral Putonghua vocabulary. Early mastery of pinyin allows children to begin putting speech into writing through dictation exercises and keeping diaries. As they learn characters, they may use pinyin when they have not yet learned the character for a word they wish to write in their diaries. (The questionnaires I gave to the primary students were written in both characters and pinyin,

and students were asked to respond as they felt most comfortable. Most of the first-graders used a combination of the two. While their pinyin spelling was not flawless, none had trouble clearly conveying their meaning with it.)

Throughout primary school, pinyin is used to indicate the pronunciation of new characters in textbooks. In the first and second grade readers, it is printed directly above the new character the first time it is introduced, and in subsequent readers is paired with the new character in a reference list at the end of the selection. It is also used to a limited extent to indicate the pronunciation for characters students have not yet learned. This allows stories to be more interesting and less restrained by rigid vocabulary control, and avoids burdening children with learning characters of limited use, such as those used to indicate the sounds of foreign names. In addition, the first and second year readers contain several stories written entirely in pinyin-annotated characters, and students at some schools, including Fu Hua, study supplementary texts in which pinyin is printed beneath each character. These classes, of which I observed two, focus on comprehension skills rather than character recognition.

Given the ease of learning pinyin, the obvious question that arises is why Chinese characters have not been abandoned, or at least relegated to a more limited role, in favor of using pinyin as a means to mass literacy in China, a largely rural developing country in desperate need of an

educated work force. This has in fact been a subject of periodic discussion ever since 1917, and one which has waxed and waned with the political climate. An argument often advanced by conservatives is that the characters play an important role in giving cultural unity to a large, ethnically and linguistically diverse nation. After all, they argue, Chinese speaking mutually unintelligible dialects can communicate with each other in writing, and the works which are the backbones of ancient and modern Chinese culture, such as the Confucian classics and Mao's works, are written in characters. Additionally, poetry and calligraphy based on characters have been highly regarded art forms for thousands of years. There is also considerable nationalistic sentiment against replacing a writing system developed in China with one from the West. As Mao Zedong, who at one point was actually in favor of doing so, pointed out perceptively, "If the Latin alphabet had been invented by the Chinese, probably there would not be any problem. The problem stems from the fact that the foreigners did the inventing and the Chinese did the copying."¹¹

Not only the leadership but much of the populace would probably oppose such reform as well. For thousands of years, literacy has been equated with mastery of several thousand characters. John Downing quotes Cheng Chiao, a Song dynasty encyclopedist: "The world is of the opinion that those who know characters are wise and worthy, whereas those who do not know characters are ignorant and stupid."¹² Combined

with the traditional Chinese reverence for education, this has led to a situation in which "The general feeling that only literacy in characters is real literacy has led parents to object to their children learning pinyin."¹³ DeFrancis cites evidence suggesting that this is the case even for peasants, among whom there is a high rate of illiteracy.¹⁴

Perhaps the greatest barrier to expanding the use of pinyin today lies in the attitudes toward reform of both leaders and much of the populace. In 1984, DeFrancis wrote:

The prevailing mood appears to be one of widespread cynicism, battle fatigue, and me-firstism that has diminished the interest of many who are already literate in supporting language reform along the lines of earlier years.¹⁵

The events of 1989 no doubt strengthened a growing concern with stability rather than potentially destabilizing reforms on the part of the leaders, and possibly many citizens as well. In contrast to the renewal of the language-reform debate during the early 1980's, the quote below from the October 22, 1989 Harbin Daily newspaper succinctly expresses the Chinese government's current attitude toward language reform:

A few days ago, the Society for Research on the Modernization of Chinese Characters, the Beijing Xiaoyuan Institute for Language and Cultural Science and Technology, and other units met for a discussion meeting in the capitol. The experts at the meeting pointed out that "The era of the theory that Chinese characters are backward has passed; the 21st century will be an age in which Chinese characters will be a powerful force." Mr. Yuan Xiaoyuan, a dedicated researcher who has made great contributions to research on China's language and script, feels that the view that "Chinese is backward and difficult to learn; the Latin alphabet is universal" has no foot to stand on.¹⁶

Since the Chinese press is essentially a spokesperson for government opinions, it is apparent that any move away from characters and toward increased use of pinyin is, for the moment at least, a dead issue. In other words, for the time being, the literacy learning task will continue to be seen, as it has always been seen, as a matter of mastering the Chinese character-based writing system.

Chinese Characters: A Brief Introduction

Given that learning to read in China today consists largely of learning to recognize and write characters, important considerations for literacy education include how many characters must be learned for functional literacy, and how those characters convey meaning. The most complete listing of characters in existence, the Kangxi Dictionary from the 1700's, contains about 47,000. Most of these are no longer used today, and many were rare at the time the dictionary was compiled. Most dictionaries today contain about 8500, with 6300 being the top number of characters employed in a current publication. Of these, 2400 make up 90% of the characters, and the standard for functional literacy is usually set at 2500-3000 characters.¹⁷ At this level, at which I am currently, one can get the gist of most articles in a general-interest newspaper or magazine such as People's Daily or the Chinese edition of Reader's Digest and read light fiction. However, reading technical, scholarly,

or literary works is a laborious task requiring frequent reference to a dictionary. Chinese students are expected to be able to have attained this level of functional literacy upon graduation from primary school, and secondary graduates to be able to read 4,000 to 5,000 characters. The current, nationally adopted reading textbooks introduce a total of 571 characters in first year, 767 in second, 535 in third, 295 in fourth, 231 in fifth, and 173 in sixth, for a total of 2,572.¹⁸ As children reach the upper grades, they must also acquire recognition knowledge of many characters introduced in their content-area textbooks, bringing their total reading vocabulary to around 3,000 characters. From these figures, though, it can clearly be seen that the most intensive instruction in character recognition and writing takes place during the first three years of school. Not surprisingly, the teachers I interviewed uniformly said that these years were the most difficult for children in Chinese class.

It is a common misconception that a character is analogous to an English word, and that because each character represents one syllable, Chinese is a monosyllabic language. This misconception contains a grain of truth, as written Chinese is overwhelmingly morphosyllabic. This means that each character is pronounced as a single syllable and represents a single morpheme, a morpheme being the smallest meaningful unit of speech. A morpheme in any language, however, is not necessarily a "word" representing an object

or idea. About 44% of Chinese characters represent unbound morphemes, which are meaningful in isolation and may be considered words although they are often combined with other characters to form more words. An example in English would be "work". Another 45% represent semibound morphemes, which always occur in combination with other morphemes, but can be used with a variety of them. An example in English would be grammatical endings such as "ing". Finally, 11% of characters represent completely bound morphemes which are meaningless in isolation and always occur as part of an expression of two or more characters.¹⁹ (For example, "pur" and "ple" in the English word "purple".) "Words" in Chinese may be composed of one to four characters, although all characters are spaced at equal distances in text. Because so many characters are unbound or semibound, it is possible to create many words with a relatively small number of characters.

The manner in which Chinese words are composed has a number of implications for the process of learning to read in that language. In modern Chinese, two-character words predominate, so that a reader who recognizes one character may be able to use context cues and draw upon spoken vocabulary to guess the other character. Research has shown that readers can use this strategy to comprehend material containing up to 150% of the characters they recognize by sight.²⁰ This process may be quite difficult for beginning readers, however, as most characters have no single,

absolute meaning, but a variety of classical and modern meanings. Which meaning applies varies from word to word.

In addition, finding where the word boundaries lie may be a problem, as there are no indicators of this in Chinese script. Lee, Stigler, and Stevenson write:

Segmentation is clearly a problem for the novice trying to decode Chinese characters. In English, segmentation is of phonemes within a word; in Chinese, it is segmentation of strings of characters into words.²¹

Teachers I interviewed said that this characteristic of the written language contributes to a tendency for children to "call characters" and read in an unnatural sing-song, rather than read for meaning.

The basic unit of all Chinese characters is the "stroke", a mark made with a continuous motion of pen or brush. Traditional Chinese characters contain from one to 64 strokes, with an average of 9.15 strokes per character. Some of the traditional complex characters were simplified in the P.R.C. by government decree in 1950, reducing the average number of strokes to 7.67.²² Whether this actually simplified the task of character recognition for young readers is debatable. Studies by Hong Kong linguist Che Kan Leong found that the optimum stroke number for character retention was eleven or twelve, plus or minus four strokes. Children had more difficulty remembering characters with fewer than seven strokes, possibly because the number of contrastive elements had been reduced.²³ Strokes include various kinds of dots, lines, and hooks. There is a proper

order and direction in which to write the strokes of a character, and a way to balance and position the various elements of a character within uniform spaces. A single stroke often changes the meaning of a character, or renders it meaningless. Correct writing of characters demands a strong visual memory, attention to detail, spatial sense, and visual-motor coordination. Teachers note that children's ability to recognize characters is often far in advance of their ability to write them correctly from memory.

Another popular misconception about Chinese characters is that the shape of each of the several thousand which students must learn is completely arbitrary and bears no discernible relationship to its sound or meaning, or that all Chinese characters are "pictographs" or "ideographs". This is not, in fact, the case for the vast majority of characters. Approximately 1.3% of characters may be classified as pictographic. Pictographs are based on pictures of objects which have become stylized over time. The meaning of such characters can sometimes be guessed without prior study, but still needs to be memorized. Another 0.4% are classified as "simple indicative" characters. These use conventionalized designs to convey an abstract idea such as "one" or "up", and are sometimes called "ideographs". Another category is the "compound indicatives", which comprise 1.3% of characters. The meanings of these characters are derived from the

combination of their constituent parts. For example, the pictographs for "sun" and "moon" combine to form the character for "bright". A very small number of characters are derived from the phonetic loan principle, in which a word is represented by a picture of an object whose name resembles the word when spoken. Most significantly, 97% of modern characters are phonetic compounds, which contain both a phonetic element based on the phonetic loan principle which provides a key to the character's pronunciation, and a pictographic or ideographic semantic element, which provides a clue to the character's meaning.²⁴

Neither of these elements usually provides more than a helpful hint to the character's modern pronunciation or meaning. DeFrancis judges the relationship between the semantic component and the meaning of the character as a whole to be identical in 1% of phonetic compound characters, "clear but imprecise" in 22.3%, "less clear and even less precise" in 27.1%, and "none or obscure" in 46.6%. He judges the relationship between the clue provided by the phonetic component and the actual pronunciation of the character to be identical 24.2% of the time, "identical except possibly for tones" 16.5%, "useful similarity for segmental phonemes" (syllables disregarding tones) 23.3% and "no useful similarity" 33%.²⁵

Once one understands how most Chinese characters represent sound and meaning, it becomes easier to view reading Chinese as a psycholinguistic guessing game much

like reading English. The skilled reader identifies most characters on sight, and uses syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic clues to guess unknown ones. The process, as I've experienced it, is as follows: The first strategy is to guess the meaning from the context of the word, sentence or text. If context cues are insufficient, the reader goes to the phonetic and identifies it, asking "Do I know a word that sounds like "____" that would make sense here?" The reader can also make use of the radical and ask "Do I know a word that has something to do with _____ and sounds like "____" that would make sense here?" Chinese college students told me that this was the strategy they used in guessing unknown characters, but it is a difficult one to use until one has a strong grasp of the structure of the written language and a large oral vocabulary. DeFrancis concurs:

Skilled native speakers and readers of a language will naturally enjoy a huge advantage in this elaborate guessing game in comparison to unskilled native readers and struggling foreign students, whose limited knowledge of vocabulary, structures, content, and other aspects of written matter means that for them redundancy may be minimal or nonexistent.²⁶

The ability to play this game, crucial to becoming an independent reader in any language, develops gradually during the primary years. Several studies, such as that conducted by Rozin, Poritsky and Sotsky in 1971, have suggested that initial learning of Chinese characters may be easier for young children than English words or letter

sounds.²⁷ This is particularly true if the characters are visually distinct and highly meaningful. An advantage of Chinese for young learners is that each written symbol maps to a spoken syllable rather than a single phoneme as it does in English. Sheridan cites studies which indicate that although five and six year olds can easily count the number of syllables in a word, many cannot count the number of phonemes in a word, or identify rhyming words. This is significant for those interested in reading instruction in English:

The emphasis on phonics as a means of beginning reading instruction requires a metalinguistic ability to reflect on the isolated sounds of a language apparently beyond the developmental or conceptual abilities of some young learners.²⁸

Chinese parents show an intuitive grasp of this. None of those I interviewed indicated that they began home instruction of their preschoolers with pinyin, but with simple characters representing concrete objects from their daily lives.

The advantages of Chinese for the young learner break down as the child is required to learn an ever-increasing number of characters, including those with confusing visual and phonetic similarities. The following are responses given by the Fu Hua teachers in response to the question: What is the most difficult aspect of Chinese for beginning readers? The same character may be pronounced in different ways and have different meanings depending on the context. A character with a single pronunciation may have several

meanings, the relevant one of which must be deduced from the context. Different characters may have the same pronunciation but different meanings. Characters may differ visually from each other in ways difficult for young children to distinguish.

Confronted with increasing character loads and the abstract nature of the Chinese writing system, children can no longer rely on rote memory, but must develop new learning strategies which depend on an awareness of the structure of the language. It is not surprising that this is difficult for some children. Stevenson's cross-cultural comparison of reading achievement found that similar percentages of fifth-graders in Taiwan, Japan, and the United States were at least two years behind grade level (7.5%, 5.4%, and 6.3%, respectively).²⁹

Until children have grasped these new strategies, their rate of character acquisition is quite slow, usually three or four characters a day for first graders and five or six thereafter. This necessitates material written with tight vocabulary control. Zhang Zhigong comments poignantly on this situation:

Before they surpass the 500 character threshold, children have to read materials that are very poorly written and far below their language ability, their intelligence, their desire to learn. The content of this reading is not only uninteresting to children, but a disaster...During this period, the frustration experienced by the poor children in terms of their psychological, personality, and intellectual development is both difficult to observe and beyond measure.³⁰

Many of the teaching methods described in the following chapter, particularly the increased use of pinyin in beginning reading, are attempts to resolve this problem. Ultimately, however, the only way to attain full literacy in any language is to gain a working knowledge of the structure of the written language. As will be seen in the next chapter, primary school language instruction is explicitly directed towards familiarizing children with the "vocabulary, structures, content, and other aspects of written matter" needed for them to become skilled players of the psycholinguistic guessing game of reading for meaning.

NOTES

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- ² Jan L. Tucker and Eugene Gilliom, "Education in China Today: Social and Moral Preparation for the Year 2000," Social Education 48 (May 1984):314.
- ³ Shanghai, Zhejiang, Beijing, and Tianjin Joint Writing Group for the Design of Educational Materials, "Six-Year Elementary School Language Program," p. 88.
- ⁴ John DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 34, 67.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 66.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 65.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 211.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 42.
- ¹⁰ Zhang Zhigong, "Chinese Characters and Reading: An Outline," Chinese Education 18 (1985):45.
- ¹¹ DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 263.
- ¹² Downing, Comparative Reading, p. 105.
- ¹³ DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 273.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 273.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 274.
- ¹⁶ "Hanyu Hanzi Jiang Zai Ershiyi Shiji Fahui Wuli," [Chinese Language and Chinese Characters Will Be a Powerful Force in the 21st Century], Harbin Ribao [Harbin Daily], 22 October 1989.

- 17 Shanye Jiang and Bo Li, "A Glimpse at Reading Instruction55 in China," Reading Teacher 38 (March 1982):764.
- 18 Obtained from the new character lists at the back of each reader.
- 19 DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 185.
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- 22 DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 260.
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- 24 Figures from DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 129.
- 25 Ibid., p. 129.
- 26 Ibid., p. 130.
- 27 Paul Rozin, Susan Poritsky, and Raina Sotsky, "American Children with Reading Problems Can Easily Learn to Read English Represented by Chinese Characters," Science 171 (March 1971):1262-1267.
- 28 Marcia E. Sheridan, "Reading Disabilities: Can We Blame the Written Language?" Journal of Learning Disabilities 16 (February 1983):83.
- 29 Harold W. Stevenson et al., "Reading Disabilities: The Case of Chinese, Japanese, and English," Child Development 53 (October 1982):1173.
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Classroom Management

One of the most striking aspects of a Chinese primary classroom to the Western visitor is the apparent rarity of serious discipline problems and the disciplined and businesslike but cheerful atmosphere which pervades the classrooms of skilled teachers there. A well-managed classroom in which both teachers and students can focus their energies on learning rather than discipline and procedural matters is crucial to the success of any teaching strategy. I was curious as to how my Chinese counterparts viewed classroom management, so several of my interview questions dealt with this topic.

The physical setup of the room often gives a clue to a teacher's attitudes about learning and management. All of the classrooms I saw in China featured minimal, simple decorations, in contrast to the multiplicity of bulletin boards, posters, maps, shelves, and learning centers commonly seen in U.S. classrooms. It was clear that the visual focus of the room was the front, where the teacher stood.

Teachers make extensive use of the peer group for reinforcement and management purposes. Two children are selected as class leaders during the weekly class meetings, and they are responsible for leading greetings and farewells to the teacher, and quieting the class at the beginning of a

lesson. There are also row leaders who are responsible for seeing that their group is ready to begin the lesson. Class leaders meet with the teacher to discuss any problems perceived by teacher or students, and these are resolved through a discussion with the leaders and the students involved, or at a class meeting.

The primary use of the peer group in management, however, is to provide reinforcement for appropriate behavior and academic achievement. Teachers often ask their class to respond in unison to the question, "Did he/she answer correctly/well?" This is almost always used to reinforce correct answers, rather than draw undue attention to incorrect ones. Teachers also encourage students to praise peers who have made academic or social progress. Catherine C.S. Lewis, writing about the similar use of peer-group management in Japanese schools, theorizes that peer reinforcement reduces the need for teachers to make behavioral demands on students, allowing them to appear as more benevolent figures, and acts as a "natural consequence" to facilitate positive behavior change, while peer criticism poses less of a threat to a child's identity as a good child, thus enhancing the child's willingness to obey rules.¹

Teachers themselves deliver a lot of praise as well. The first grade teacher told me:

Praise is much more effective than criticism. I give lots of praise, to the whole class as well as individuals. Praising very good answers makes students happy, more willing to think hard and volunteer to answer questions. I give them Little Red Flowers for the best characters they write in their homework. I especially praise progress. Children who have made progress in schoolwork or behavior are praised during class meetings. I also write notes to parents. The whole family and often the neighbors know that the child is making progress, so he feels very good about himself.

When praise fails, teachers have a variety of techniques to fall back on. Some inappropriate, nondisruptive behavior is simply ignored. Teachers may call upon, walk in front of, or give "the look" to an inattentive or disruptive student. Songs and clapping games are used to focus restless classes. Students who fight on the playground are separated, often by the P.E. teacher, then must discuss their problems with a teacher and be, as a teacher told me, "reeducated".

Teachers also make some use of competition to motivate children academically and behaviorally. A standard item in the Chinese school is the Little Red Flowers chart. These are awarded to individual children in a classroom for academic effort and good behavior, and to classes for cleaning duties, enthusiastic participation in activities, and other desirable group behaviors. Formal and informal competition over Little Red Flowers takes place.

Membership in the Young Pioneers is also a motivation for children to behave well and progress academically. Members are chosen for working hard at their studies, having a positive attitude, and helping others. About half of the

students in a class are selected by the end of first grade, and nearly all by the end of third grade. There are small group, class, and schoolwide Young Pioneer activities. In small groups and classes, Young Pioneers study revolutionary history and traditions, and contribute their own abilities through service projects. Groups also prepare songs, dances, and decorations for holidays such as National Day and Teacher's Day. The whole school participates in activities such as Art Day, Calligraphy Day, Games and Sports Day, field trips, and labor projects like sweeping snow or moving cabbages.

Competition is used to varying degrees to motivate academic achievement. In all the classrooms I visited, a common exhortation was, "Let's see who can read/write/speak the best!" In only one case did I see this followed up by a judgement on who had actually been the best. At the rural school, achievement charts with students' marks for each subject were prominently displayed in each classroom, as well as in the teachers' room. The first grade teacher told me that this was formerly done at Fu Hua, but it discouraged the poor students and the practice was discontinued. Sometimes, though, she writes the names of students who get 100% on their homework on the board. Percentage-based grades for academics, behavior, and "thought", as well as class rankings are computed twice each term and given to parents. All the children I talked to knew theirs well, so there is

no doubt competition in this sphere, whether or not teachers directly encourage it in their classroom.

The use of competition as a motivator is in contrast to more cooperative techniques also used, such as peer tutoring and group reinforcement for correct answers. Because students are required to cover curriculum at a uniform rate, there is some sense that everyone is "in it together". However, cooperative activities such as those typical of Japanese primary schools were not observed. With the renewed interest in science, technology, and economic development, and the opening of new opportunities for a limited number of students in these fields, the cooperation is only a thin veneer over the ruthless competition which prompted one Chinese child to tell Ann-Ping Chin: "I don't really have any good friend. I feel the competition in our school has an effect on friendship."²

Teaching Methods: General Comments

Teaching methods for reading and other subjects in the Chinese primary school are strongly influenced by traditional views of education, centrally determined standards for curriculum, and large class sizes. As a result of the need to move through a set curriculum at a prescribed pace, Chinese students spend much more time than U.S. students do in teacher-led activities, especially receiving information from the teacher. In Stevenson's study, Chinese students were engaged in teacher-led activities more than

90% of the time, and spent 26 hours per week receiving information from a teacher, compared to less than 50% and 6 hours for American students.³

Despite having less input into curricular decisions than their American counterparts, some Chinese teachers do push themselves to present the material imaginatively in ways relevant to the students' lives and interests. Teachers are free to follow the detailed teacher's guide provided with each textbook, modify the lesson plans presented there, or devise their own methods and activities, as long as the specified objectives are accomplished. The first grade teacher explained that teachers can also create objectives to extend children beyond the basic requirements listed in the teacher's guide. She likes to encourage children to express their thoughts, and incorporates opportunities for this into her teaching. She also makes her own supplementary materials, such as pictures, slides, flash cards, math manipulatives, and transparencies. I watched one day as she taught a masterful reading lesson on the sun, moon, and earth, showing their rotation on an overhead, calling students up to the front of the room to "rotate" around her, and asking students to share their questions on the solar system. However, I also observed less imaginative teachers who stuck closely to the teacher's guide and traditional methods of memorization and recitation.

Despite her obvious talents, the first grade teacher, like all the others I observed, directed her instruction

toward the group as a whole rather than individuals. This is because all students are expected to master the material prescribed for the grade level. Chinese education has, from ancient times, stressed the mastery of a set body of content rather than the needs of the individual learner or the creative expression of the student's own ideas.

The teachers I observed overwhelmingly favored what, in the U.S., would be called whole-class direct instruction. When translated, a lesson plan from the teacher's guide, or even a transcript of the highly creative lesson I observed, would be readily comprehensible to an American educator trained in the direct instruction or Instructional Theory Into Practice (ITIP) model. Objectives, teaching time, and materials are clearly stated. Lessons follow a highly structured format of daily review, statement of the objective (often, in classic ITIP style, the lesson topic is written on the board), motivational set, modelling, guided practice with feedback, and closure. Very little class time is devoted to independent or cooperative student work. Instruction is a continuous dialogue, with the teacher rarely speaking for more than 30 seconds before stopping to check understanding by requiring a response. Responses are made in unison unless a teacher calls on an individual student, and students are trained from kindergarten in oral responding. The lesson pace is fast, and students can afford few lapses in attention. If it becomes apparent that students are having difficulty, the teacher reteaches or

provides more cues, often through a fading process. She may read a passage loudly with the class the first time, then more softly, then let the class read on its own. At times, individual children are called upon to read or answer questions, usually several per question, even if all give the same answer. Students appear to enjoy participating (loudly) in unison response, and vie for the chance to stand and answer individually. In the classes I observed, students who gave incorrect answers were asked to sit down, and another student called upon to give the correct answer. The teacher then returned to the original student and asked him to give the correct answer in his own words. Nearly all students sounded confident, even when they were wrong, and throughout the lesson the atmosphere remained businesslike and upbeat.

The lack of independent practice in class is made up for by homework assigned on a daily basis. In reading, this may consist of writing new characters, exercises in the book, or compositions. The amount assigned by teachers is usually quite minimal in the primary grades, although all students have homework over school vacations. Homework is intended to be done unaided by the child, although some receive help from parents or complete it after school with peers or in a tutoring class. It is checked on a daily basis.

Contrary to the popular image of Chinese education, homework at the primary level appears to be mainly parent-

inflicted. Teachers at Fu Hua reported that the official policy is to assign a few minutes of work for first and second graders, thirty minutes to third and fourth graders, and an hour to fifth and sixth graders. However, only one student I questioned indicated that he did very little homework (ten min.). The others gave responses ranging from 45 minutes to two hours per night, with an average of 71 minutes. These initially baffling discrepancies were also reported in studies by Stevenson and his colleagues.⁴ They in fact occur because many parents give their children large amounts of homework. Home workbooks are a booming industry in urban China, with parents spending hard-earned money on tomes such as One Story a Day, Teach Your Child to Write Prize-Winning Compositions, and Chinese Review for First-Graders.

Tutoring by parents is only one of several options available for children to receive individualized academic attention outside the regular classroom. Most classes at Fu Hua have an after-school tutorial class for pupils in need of extra assistance. Teachers may recommend that a child attend, but the decision is left up to child and parent. Many good students attend the class as a matter of course, since their parents can't pick them up from school until 5 or 6 PM, and don't want them home alone. In the tutorial class, students can get help with homework, and reteaching is given to individuals or groups as needed. During class,

students are paired in a "buddy system", and expected to help each other academically and behaviorally.

Students in need of enrichment can partake of the offerings at Children's Palaces in most major cities. These offer advanced instruction in subjects such as math, science, art, drama, music, athletics, and languages to those who qualify through tests, auditions, and parental connections. Some children also take private lessons in music, art, or languages, often from college students or retired teachers.

It is within this network of highly structured whole-class instruction and provision for individual needs that the Chinese primary student begins to acquire literacy. In the next section, I will examine specific methods used by teachers as they guide children toward literacy in Chinese.

Teaching Methods in Reading Instruction

Preschool Reading Instruction in the Home and Kindergarten

For many urban Chinese children, reading instruction begins in the home. All of the parents interviewed began formal or informal reading instruction in the home, although approaches and age of beginning instruction varied. The worker I interviewed said he left formal instruction to the kindergarten teachers, but often read and discussed stories with his daughter, bought her books and educational toys, and taught her to write some of the characters she learned

to recognize in kindergarten. At the time of the interview, his daughter was one of the top students in her second grade class.

The cadre said he also left formal instruction up to the kindergarten, but often read to his daughter, occasionally taught her characters, and bought her books and educational toys. (Toys I saw in the department stores included "magic slates" for writing characters, blocks with characters and pictures, and flashcards.) Today, his daughter is an "above average" student in her third grade class, and enjoys reading recreationally.

The professors interviewed, all of whom are college graduates, seemed to take a more structured approach to their child's early education than the above parents, both junior middle school graduates. Professor A's wife, also a professor, began teaching their son characters at age 3, and Professor A taught him English. He recognized a hundred characters at the time he entered kindergarten at age 4. Professor A also read his son children's books, of which father and son were so enamored that he spent several hundred yuan on them. Today, his son at 11 is a voracious reader like his father, and an excellent student.

Professor B explained that his son is unfortunately not of a studious persuasion. He taught characters on a blackboard at home beginning at age 5, but his son didn't like to study and only learned 50 or 60. He also reads to his son when they buy a new book, and "Every Sunday morning

before we get out of bed", occasionally asking him to identify characters he has studied. Today, his son, age 9, is a mediocre student who says reading is "very hard" and is reluctant to do it for pleasure.

Professor C is perhaps the most enthusiastic parent-teacher. When his daughter turned three, he began teaching her to recognize characters using the blocks described earlier. Every day, he also uses a blackboard to teach her 2 or 3 characters. At 3 1/2, she recognizes about 100 characters. He reads to her a lot, having purchased or acquired as gifts and hand-me-downs over 300 children's books. Professor C also tries to develop his daughter's oral language, and is very proud that she now uses the preposition "therefore" in her speech.

All of the parents indicated that their children attended kindergarten, at which they learned or would learn to read pinyin and recognize, but not write, some simple characters. Reading instruction usually begins in the "Xueqianban", the class for 5 and 6 year olds, and the extent and nature of it varies among kindergartens. I visited the kindergarten at H.I.T. several times, and interviewed a young teacher there. She explained that the main purpose of Chinese instruction in the kindergarten is to enhance children's oral language development, which receives little attention in primary school. Pinyin was formerly taught, but the Ministry of Education has decided that it should be taught differently, so pinyin instruction

is being suspended for a year while teachers are retrained. Recognition knowledge of a few hundred basic characters is also taught in order to ease children's transition to primary school, which stresses writing and text reading. Toward this end, characters are often introduced in the context of other activities, such as discussing pictures, stories, songs, "common sense" lessons, and art projects. For example, within an art activity where children make clay plates and food, they learn the characters for "plate" and "dumpling".

The most frequent context for introducing new characters is the "er ge", a children's song or poem. The teacher first shows a picture showing the key elements of the er ge, and prompts the children to answer questions about it. Next, they learn the er ge, often with accompanying dance or hand motions. Once children are familiar with it, related characters are introduced, and frequently reviewed on flash cards. The characters taught appear to have been selected mainly for their interest value to children and relevance to thematic activities, and their structure is not taught. Topics for er ge's I observed were "Autumn Harvest", "I Love Beijing's Tiananmen Square", "Teacher's Day", and "I Go to Taiwan Island". As can be seen, there is some political content, carefully tailored to the children's developmental level. (I was always baffled how one song began "Four little ducklings swimming in a

river" and ended "Without the Communist Party there would be
no new China."!

Learning Pinyin

The first week or so of first grade is devoted to acquainting students with the new academic and behavioral demands on them as primary students. Routines for breaks, recess, attendance, dismissal, and the like are taught, and there are pictures in the first pages of the reading book which serve as the basis for discussions on greeting teachers, saluting the flag, answering questions in class, playing cooperatively, cleaning the classroom, and good study posture. Students also learn to hold a pencil and write the lines, hooks and circles which form the pinyin letters.

Instruction in reading and writing the pinyin syllables begins in the second week of school, and occupies the next four to six weeks. The students had already passed this stage by the time I began my observations, so I did not get to see pinyin being taught. The first grade teacher said that in the past, pinyin was taught by beginning with isolated sounds and having students blend them, but this led to inaccurate pronunciation of the syllables. Now, syllables are taught as a whole, which is felt to be a simpler method. The switchover to the "whole-word" method of teaching pinyin is still underway at the kindergarten.

The Laubach approach is used to introduce the pinyin letters, with letters being incorporated whenever possible into pictures of objects begin with the sound. For example, the picture for j is a chicken (ji) eyeing a butterfly overhead, which serves as the dot.⁵ Teachers introduce pinyin sounds by directing students' attention to the picture, prompting them to say the word, pointing out its spelling, and having students identify words which contain the syllable spoken in each tone. They also demonstrate and have students practice the writing of each pinyin letter.⁶

First Characters

After four to six weeks, students are finally ready to embark on the first stage of acquiring the huge body of characters needed for literacy. The first twenty lessons introduce 96 basic characters, chosen for their high utility, either in daily life (numbers, directions and prepositions, money, family members) or as semantic components of other characters (sun, moon, water, grain, wood, foot). This gives the child a reading vocabulary which can be put to immediate practical use, and serves as the basis for talking about the structure of the more complex characters introduced later.

The procedure in these early lessons is as follows: First, students are given about five minutes to study independently, during which they are to look at the

pictures, use the pinyin to read the syllable printed below, and remember the shapes of the characters. Next, the teacher calls on students to read the characters. On subsequent days, characters are repeatedly reviewed, often on small, flashcard-sized slates, at first with pinyin annotation and then without.

In each lesson the picture also serves as the basis for some content area instruction, which is integrated into the lesson. For example, in Lesson 3, which teaches the characters for "person", "mouth" and "hand", students learn about the need to wash hands before eating and rinse their mouth afterward, as well as the population of their country (the word "population" is formed with the characters for "person" and "mouth").⁷

Teachers also model the writing of the new characters, in the process teaching students the names for the basic strokes which make up each Chinese character. In teaching writing, the teacher writes the character slowly on the board, naming each stroke, then calls on students to name the strokes in order while writing the character with their finger in the air. The whole class repeats the "writing" of the character in unison while naming the strokes. Finally, they write it on their desks with their fingers. The teacher may also ask them to write the character four or five times in their notebooks, and as homework. The emphasis in first grade writing instruction is on correct formation and order of strokes, in later years on the characters' balance and

aesthetic qualities. First graders learn to write with a pencil. Instruction in writing with a brush begins in second grade. At Fu Hua, writing technique is taught in a separate calligraphy class.

Text Lessons and Reviews

After students master pinyin and the basic characters, the bulk of the lessons they study follow a similar format, in which new characters are introduced in the context of a short text selection. In first grade, text length ranges from approximately 15 to 100 characters. Most second grade selections are in the 200-300 character range, and third grade selections in the 500-600 character range.

Text lessons start with what American teachers call a motivational set, an effort to relate the lesson topic to students' experiences and interests. This may be done through a variety of methods. In teaching a lesson on the Great Hall of the People, the first grade teacher I observed began by writing the lesson topic on the board in pinyin, displaying and identifying a picture of the building, pointing out Beijing, where it is located, on the map, and asking students who had visited it to share their experiences with the class. She also gave them some background information on its use for government meetings and receptions. In another lesson, a masterful sun, earth, and moon on the overhead were the stimulus for the opening discussion.

New characters are either introduced in the context of the discussion, or students are asked to look at the text and work out the pronunciation of new characters for themselves. Students read cards with the characters on them in unison, then they are helped to remember character shapes. Teachers use a variety of methods for this purpose, including reference to pictographic origins, analysis of radical and phonetic components, highlighting important details with red chalk, and sometimes poems and oral formulas. Teachers at Fu Hua emphasize the structure of characters from first grade on, and encourage students to think of their own mnemonic devices. The first grade teacher explained that the latter method because is very effective because it is most meaningful for the child, although teaching character structure is also important. She marvels at the creativity of her students today, who create make up pictures, poems, and stories for this purpose, and notes:

In the 1950's, we used only direct teaching methods. The teacher talked, and the students listened, and memorized everything. We called it "stuffing ducks". Today, students come from homes with T.V. and books. They have so much more background knowledge and it is easier for them to learn new things. The teacher's job is often simply to check and reinforce their learning.

As each character is introduced, the teacher models and guides writing in the manner previously described. When enough characters have been learned to enable students to read the text or section of it to be covered, a prereading discussion takes place in which some of the content to be covered in the text is introduced. In the classes I

observed, this took the form of a rapid dialogue with individuals and the class as a whole in which students' knowledge of the subject was checked and elaborated upon. The teacher may give students a few minutes to prepare independently, then call on several individuals to read the selection aloud before having the whole class read in unison. The process of introducing vocabulary, prereading discussion, individual and unison reading is repeated for each section covered, with the class finally reading the whole selection together. Questions to check comprehension, designed for both individual and whole-class response, follow. Questions deal mainly with literal comprehension, although there is some attention, especially at second and third grade, to finding the main idea and following the sequence of events. Questions are also asked to bring out the point of stories with behavioral or political themes. Students may also be asked to recite some lessons, especially poems, or to retell them in their own words. The lesson closes with a review of new characters and a summary of the content. For example, the first grade teacher I observed asked her students to say what they had learned about the sun, earth, and moon, and what questions they still had. These questions would serve as the basis for a later class activity.

Most lessons are covered in 2 or 3 days, with review lessons interspersed every four to six lessons. These are designed to reinforce and extend the characters and

vocabulary the children have learned, through exercises such as identifying characters with common radicals, reading new words or phrases created by character combinations, filling in the character in response to a pinyin cue, and dividing words into categories. Some review sections also contain a short selection to be read and discussed, or a picture story to be described orally or in writing. There appears to be an effort to vary the format of the review exercises.

The Pinyin Annotation Method and Supplementary Reading

The regular texts at the first and second grade level also contain several selections written entirely in pinyin-annotated characters. There are two such selections in the first reader (first half of first grade), four in the second, nine in the third, and three in the fourth. Some of these selections in the second grade readers are meant to be read independently by students as homework. Students at some schools, including Fu Hua, also read regularly from a supplementary text printed entirely in characters and pinyin. These selections are incorporated as an effort to enable children to read more interesting material that challenges their intellectual abilities despite their limited sight vocabulary of characters. It is also thought that such material helps children "pick up" some new characters on their own.

The use of these pinyin-annotated selections, not seen in earlier texts such as those analyzed by Unger, appears to be an outgrowth of a number of experiments in expanding the role of pinyin in beginning reading instruction. The earliest of these, the Wanrong County campaign in the mid 1950's, claimed to have eliminated illiteracy among rural young adults there in two months. DeFrancis suggests, however, that like much educational research in China and elsewhere, the study lacked methodological rigor and was affected by a desire to claim success.⁸ A similar study was conducted at an experimental primary school in Beijing in 1958, and in several schools in Heilongjiang Province in the early 1980's. While these studies may show methodological deficiencies (such as a lack of matched control and experimental groups and objective criteria for evaluation), they do raise some interesting possibilities for improving reading instruction for a quarter of the world's children.

These experimental programs differ from standard reading instruction in "the use of pinyin not merely to indicate the pronunciation of individual characters, as is generally (and only minimally done), but to provide the basis for literacy in the alphabetic script."⁹ In these programs, instruction begins with pinyin as in the regular programs used today, but continues to extensive use of it in reading and writing, in which syllables are joined to form words. In some approaches, characters are gradually introduced underneath until all reading material is entirely

in both scripts, while in others pinyin is gradually replaced by characters as they are taught. The former approach is similar to that used in Taiwan (although phonetic symbols are eventually faded), while the latter is similar to the Japanese approach in which many syllabic Hiragana symbols are eventually replaced by Kanji characters) until competence in the standard orthography, a mixture of the two scripts, is reached.

The Heilongjiang Province experiment began with children reading and writing entirely in pinyin, then progressing to annotated characters, then gradually fading out the pinyin. Ding, Li, and Bao report that in comparative testing of their experimental classes of first graders with control classes, "It can be seen that the accuracy of pronunciation, reading speed, comprehension, and oral reading skills of the experimental classes all exceeded the levels attained by the regular second grade class."¹⁰ In addition, "The traditional situation in which first graders were unable to write compositions was smashed."¹¹ The researchers suggest that the early use of pinyin allows children to escape from the limitations imposed by their slow acquisition of characters. They can then develop writing, speech, and comprehension skills and acquire knowledge independently of character recognition, with each aspect of literacy proceeding "in its own lane."¹²

Despite its apparent success both experimentally in China and on a wide scale abroad, the method is not

currently used in the regular curriculum, although elements of it have been incorporated into both regular and supplementary reading textbooks. This is probably due to some of the reservations about increased use of pinyin discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the difficulty of creating new materials and retraining teachers. The pinyin-annotated lessons in the first reader do not teach new characters, but emphasize correct, fluent, and expressive oral reading, and understanding the content and structure of the story.¹³ The annotated lessons in the second reader are similar, although some characters in the story are taught. In the third reader, some of the selections are intended to be read independently by students as homework. The in-class lessons follow a format similar those in the to the previous books, with some characters and words contained in the story being taught. In the fourth reader, the annotated stories are used only for independent reading. In other words, some effort has been made to incorporate the method into regular instruction, but at a level which probably represents a compromise between traditional and reform-minded educators.

Another experimental method which has been implemented to some extent in the regular textbooks is the Concentrated Character Recognition Method or Jizhong Shizifa. This method involves teaching characters grouped by common components, mainly phonetics and radicals, in contrast to the traditional method in which characters are learned in the context of a passage. It is thought that this method

encourages students to analyze the structure of characters, and to memorize meaningfully rather than by rote. The method was first devised by an army language teacher in the early 1950's, and later revived in an educational experiment in 1978 (reported in Mae, 1983-4). The experimental group was a specially selected group of "bright" children, who were first taught pinyin sounds and blending. After these were adequate, instruction focused on character recognition through the grouping together of characters with similar elements. Characters were chosen from the standard readers and regrouped, and new reading selections written for the program. Students were first taught to identify the common elements and recognize the characters, then to apply them to reading the text. It was reported that students were able to read and write 645 characters by the end of the first semester of first grade, and another 700 by the end of the second, in comparison to a considerably smaller number taught in the conventional textbooks.¹⁴ It was also noted that each child read an average of five extracurricular books each during the second semester, that parents had positive attitudes about the program, and that the "Contrastive analysis of words similar in sound, shape, or meaning has resulted in particular in less confusion of homophones."¹⁵

Aside from the quite shaky methodology used in this study, a number of problems exist with the approach. These include its ignorance of aspects of literacy besides

character recognition, the inclusion of many characters of low frequency in the list, the highly imperfect way in which phonetic components indicate the sound of most characters, the difficulty for readers with limited exposure to the written language and small oral vocabularies in using these cues, and the many high frequency characters which are not amenable to such an approach.¹⁶

The Concentrated Character Recognition approach is not, to my knowledge, currently in use for beginning reading instruction, although some elements of it have been incorporated into the revised textbooks. These include a new emphasis on explaining the structure of new characters to students, even at the first-grade level, and several lessons in the each second grade reader which do introduce characters in clusters. A total of 14 of these lessons cluster characters according to common phonetic elements. For example, radicals may be added or exchanged onto phonetic elements students already know. Others group characters by meaning (such as kinds of ball games), or pronunciation. These lessons focus only on character recognition and analysis, and contain no text beyond an illustrative phrase or sentence. Objectives of these lessons are to expand reading vocabulary and help students learn about the structure of Chinese characters as an aid to independent learning.¹⁷

Instruction in pinyin and character composition builds the groundwork for children to learn to use the dictionary, a crucial skill given the impossibility of being able, at any given time, to recognize and write from memory all the characters one may encounter or wish to write. In second grade, students learn to look up characters and words in the dictionary on the basis of their pinyin pronunciation. This is helpful in finding out how to write a character or finding the meaning of one whose pronunciation is given. In third grade, students learn to look up characters by their radicals when pronunciation is unknown. This is done by counting the number of strokes in the radical, finding the radical in a table, counting the number of strokes in the other components of the character, and finding the character and its location in another table. Since Chinese dictionaries force all characters into the radical categories, even those which are not compound ideographs and phonetic compounds, and since radicals may be located not only on the left but on the right, top, bottom, or outside of the character, this is a difficult process that takes a few years to master. In fifth and sixth grades, students also learn another method, counting strokes, which is used for complex characters in some dictionaries.

As students grow toward independence in reading, they also do so in writing. The groundwork for composition

writing is laid with "Look at the Picture and Speak" lessons in kindergarten and first grade. In second grade, students do short assignments such as describing a person's appearance, or writing sentences based on a series of pictures. From the middle of third grade on, students write essays of one to two paragraphs on assigned topics, such as a sports match or the growth of a plant. Composition writing is taught by studying the content and structure of model essays in the reading text, after which students write their own compositions based on the model. At Fu Hua, students also work with a composition textbook. Compositions are evaluated on the basis of length, correct form and usage, and imaginativeness. That there are limits to the degree of "imaginativeness" deemed acceptable can be seen in the comment of a middle school student interviewed by Ann-Ping Chin:

I almost always follow the approved way of writing. If it's an informal piece, I write it more the way I want. But if it is a formal piece, I follow the "correct path". This is what I did in primary school.¹⁸

Students also learn the correct forms for personal writing such as messages, diaries, and letters through models in their reading and composition textbooks.

Reading and Writing Beyond Chinese Class

As students grow in their reading and writing ability, they have various ways to apply it outside of Chinese class, both within and beyond the school. There is a reading room

at Fu Hua where each class goes at a scheduled time each week. During this time, students can read children's books, newspapers, and magazines. The school has just started to allow children to check out books and take them home. The Young Pioneer Palace in downtown Harbin has a reading room as well, open to all Young Pioneers in the city, which offers a large collection of the latest children's reading material and is cheerful, well-lit, and in good use. There are also numerous "libraries" in the free market where children can rent short comic or adventure books to read on the spot for a few cents. Bookstores, especially those specializing in education, department stores, and market stalls contain a wide variety of children's reading material for all age levels. Teachers said that most students have many books at home, even if the family is fairly poor. Many bring books from home to read during breaks and after lunch. Another opportunity for reading practice occurs when watching TV, where song lyrics and headlines are printed in characters on the screen.

Aside from textbook exercises and compositions, all students at Fu Hua keep diaries. At third grade and up, students produce the wall newspaper for their class. Fu Hua has recently started a bimonthly school newspaper, written, edited and published by students under a teacher's direction.

This chapter has examined the methods used by textbooks and teachers to guide students toward literacy. As indicated

earlier, however, literacy acquisition is only one of the goals served by reading instruction in the Chinese primary school. Nearly all lessons contain one or more objectives dealing with content, as well as those targeting reading and writing skills. It is the nature of this content that I will examine in the following chapter.

NOTES

- ¹ Catharine C.S. Lewis, "Japanese First-Grade Classrooms: Implications for U.S. Theory and Research," Comparative Education Review 32 (May 1988):170.
- ² Chin, Children of China: Voices from Recent Years, p. 281.
- ³ Harold Stevenson, Shin-ying Lee, and James Stigler, "Mathematics achievement of Chinese, Japanese, and American Children," Science 231 (February 14, 1986):696.
- ⁴ Chuansheng Chen and Harold Stevenson, "Homework: A Cross-Cultural Examination," Child Development 60 (June 1989):556.
- ⁵ Yuwen: Di Yi Ce [Chinese: Book 1] (Shandong Province: Shandong Sheng Chuban Zongshe, 1989), p. 12. (See Chapter 5 Footnote 8 for further information on the textbooks.)
- ⁶ Jiangsu Province Wuxi Normal School Educational Materials Research Office, Yuwen Cankao Jiaoan [Chinese Reference Lesson Plans], 6 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai Kexue Puji Chubanshe, 1988-1989), 1:21-25.
- ⁷ Yuwen: Di Yi Ce [Chinese: Book 1], p. 30.
- ⁸ Defrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 211.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 212.
- ¹⁰ Ding Yicheng, Li Nan, and Bao Quan'en, "A Report on an Experiment in 'Phonetically Annotated Characters Shortens the Time Needed to Learn to Read and Write'," Chinese Education 18 (1985):65.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 79.
- ¹³ Jiangsu Province Wuxi Normal School Educational Materials Research Office, Yuwen Cankao Jiaoan [Chinese Reference Lesson Plans], 1:210.
- ¹⁴ Chu-chuang Mae, ed., "Central Institute of Educational Science and Teaching Methodology: Concentrated Character Recognition at Changzhou Buailu Primary School," Chinese Education 16 (1983-4):33.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

16 DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, pp. 86 213-214.

17 Jiangsu Province Wuxi Normal School Educational Materials Research Office, Yuwen Cankao Jiaoan [Chinese Reference Lesson Plans], 3:166.

18 Ann-Ping Chin, Children of China: Voices From Recent Years, p. 195.

Political Socialization and the Role of the Textbook

As can be clearly seen from the objectives for primary school language instruction cited at the beginning of Chapter 3, learning to read in the Chinese primary school involves not only acquiring literacy skills, but being instructed in a broad range of qualities which the Chinese leadership wishes to inculcate in its citizens. Of particular interest to both Chinese scholars who design curriculum and materials, and Western scholars interested in China's future, is the process by which Chinese children are socialized into the ideology and morality of their society.

This concern reflects an awareness of the immense power of early political and social learning, that

Primary socialization accomplishes what...may be seen as the most important confidence trick that society plays on the individual-to make appear as necessary what is in fact a bundle of contingencies, and thus to make meaningful the accident of birth.¹

In other words, primary socialization, wherein children receive their initial exposure to the norms of their culture, can play this "confidence trick" because the young child tends to learn uncritically. Lacking in the abstract thinking ability and life experience needed to challenge the cultural norms he encounters, without the social power or expressive ability to try to change them, and heavily dependent on care-givers, the young child tends to learn by

identifying with and imitating the important figures in his life.

While much of this learning takes place in the home, the school is also an important venue of primary socialization. In school, children get their first exposure to norms and expectations beyond those of the family, are together for long periods of time, and are exposed to similar content, tasks, and standards. Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin write:

Educational systems are designed, in fact, to socialize their students--to teach them the values of the society and ...to accept these values. Education, then is a tool of politics; in China, it is a tool of the political leadership.²

Beginning in the kindergarten, literacy skills are rarely taught in isolation, but along with content which is centrally determined and spelled out for the teacher in her reference books. At Fu Hua kindergarten in October, five and six year olds learned characters as they discussed pictures and sang about a good rabbit helping his friend the deer, peasants bringing in the autumn harvest, and taking a boat from Beijing to Taipei. Long before children can begin to understand the political conflicts that separate Taiwan from mainland China, or have any intellectual concept of what communism is, they sing "I Go to Taiwan Island" and "Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China". What is being learned at this point are not abstract concepts of national sovereignty or political systems, but a set of terminology (Taiwan, New China, Motherland, Communist Party)

and the association of these terms with the positive feelings that go with singing, dancing, a nice teacher, and being with friends and classmates. In short, kindergarten is the time in which basic terminology and positive feelings about one's life as a group member and Chinese citizen are established.

Primary school marks the beginning of more highly structured lessons in which children are explicitly taught the attitudes and information deemed important by those in decision-making positions. Given the twofold goals cited for primary reading instruction, a particularly rich (and accessible) area for observing these attitudes and information are the primary reading textbooks. Wilson writes:

While we would not look to the readers for a detailed view of a culture, they do seem useful for revealing a distilled image of the values, motives, and points of view which are perceived by the educational elite as being most important for training the younger generation.³

Before continuing, it must be stressed that Wilson is not referring only to Chinese readers, but to those of any culture. China is certainly not unique in its use of primary school language instruction for goals other than literacy. Some U.S. reading series, as well as those in use in Western Europe, the Soviet Union, South America, Japan, etc. (see Downing, 1973 for examples) show a similar concern with teaching ideological, moral, and/or informational content along with reading skills. While political content in U.S.

readers may be less obvious, because our multiparty system creates a lower degree of official consensus, children will very likely, at some point, read stories about Washington, Jefferson, and other leaders. Nor is China unique in the degree of government control extended over its reading textbooks. Centralized control of education is typical of communist countries and is also found in some non-communist nations such as Japan.

Historical Changes in the Chinese Readers

The content deemed important by the Chinese leadership has varied with the political and social upheavals of the past forty years. In their 1971 book, The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China, Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin analyzed texts printed in 1964 and in use until schools were shut down by the Cultural Revolution. They categorized the texts as having political, behavioral, or informational themes. From these themes, they developed a list of the qualities deemed necessary by the Chinese leadership to mold children into "model citizens".

Those selections which "have as their aim political socialization and are concerned primarily with political and social attitudes" were judged to have political themes and found to comprise 34.3% of the selections. Selections which "aimed at behavioral modelling and have as their concern some aspect of personal behavior" were considered to have behavioral themes and comprised 47.4% of selections. The

researchers defined as having informational themes those selections which aimed at imparting specific information and noted "In themselves, informational themes are generally lacking in political or behavioral coloration. Although they are, in this sense, essentially neutral, they nonetheless are revealing in the range of subject matter that is presented."⁴ These themes were found to predominate in 18.3% of the selections.⁵ Informational content was found to increase to grade 3, and decline thereafter, political content to increase throughout grades 1 to 5, and behavioral content to increase to grade 4, and decline thereafter.⁶ (There were only 5 years of primary school at the time.) The five most common themes, with twenty or more selections, were recommended behavior, rural life and agriculture, aspects of communist China, war situations, and Mao Zedong.⁷

Jonathan Unger (1977) translated some of the readers in use in Guangzhou at the close of the Cultural Revolution and noted that in comparison to earlier readers, probably those in the above study, they showed more politicization, more emphasis on Mao and class struggle, and fewer parables with behavioral themes. A Chinese acquaintance who was able to attend primary school sporadically during the early 1970's recalls that learning to read and write at the time basically meant learning whatever characters were used in Mao's quotes, and that he sometimes wished the Chairman had said something that was easier to write! A teacher I interviewed commented:

In the past, textbooks had very heavy political content that was not suited to children's level of understanding. Today's texts are much better, as they are written with the characteristics of children in mind and about things which naturally interest them.

Julia Kwong (1983) examined texts of the early and late 1970's, and found in the latter, revised texts much less emphasis on Mao, class struggle, and rural life, more emphasis on science, technology, modernization, and more realistic portrayal of children in ordinary activities. She noted that "These additions certainly made the texts more interesting, more informative, and much richer than the sterile political indoctrination of the earlier parts of the decade."⁸

The textbooks were revised in 1985 with the shift to six years of primary schooling, and again in 1987 in accordance with a directive of the National Ministry of Education.⁹ According to a note in the back of each revised edition, the changes are primarily in the new characters introduced, post-reading exercises, and review sections. I am uncertain as to what changes, if any, have occurred in content, as I did not have access to the books reviewed by Kwong.

Goals and Methodology of Textbook Analysis

My goal in examining the readers was to apply a quantitative approach similar to that used by Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin, and examine how textbook content had changed since the time of their study. I was fortunate in

that, unlike these researchers, I was able to observe classes firsthand in which the text lessons were taught, interview teachers, and to obtain the centrally-determined objectives for language instruction and a complete set of teacher reference materials. This combination of resources enabled me to take a more informed approach toward analyzing the texts.

My methodology was similar to that used by Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin, but differed in a few ways owing to the broader range of resources to which I had access, and changes in the texts themselves. I translated each of the reading texts used in the first three grades of primary school (selections, post-reading questions and exercises, and review sections), as well as the objectives for each lesson and a sampling of lesson plans at each grade level. I then classified the major theme of each lesson as political, behavioral, informational, or other. My decision was made primarily on the basis of the stated objective(s) in the teacher's guide, with occasional exceptions. For example, the teacher's guide might state that a particular selection was to be analyzed for its writing style and used as a model for composition writing, but the "model" contain a heavy dose of behavioral or political content. Where there was obvious content other than reading and writing skills, this content served as the basis for classification.

My criteria for political themes were similar to those of Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin, but I also included

selections which dealt primarily with information of an explicitly political nature, such as the flag, the Great Hall of the People, etc. This was because, as I read the teacher materials and observed the teaching of some lessons with such political content, I became convinced that such information is almost inevitably taught in conjunction with an effort to instill political attitudes in students. Political themes were usually readily identifiable in the teachers guide by terminology in the objectives: "warmly love", "motherland", "socialism", "good thinking". Political themes which arose most frequently included past communist leaders (Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Li Dazhao, Lenin), war (usually the Anti-Japanese and Chinese Civil Wars), revolutionary martyrs, national symbols (flag, anthem, monuments), and the Four Modernizations drive.

Behavioral themes were those which aimed at modelling aspects of personal behavior which were not overtly political. Some difficult choices arose as the boundary between "behavioral" and "political" traits is often a blurred one. I distinguished between the two by asking myself, "Would this theme be seen in a country with a very different political system, such as the United States?" Using this criteria, I classified themes such as helping others, studying hard, using one's head to solve problems, protecting public property, and love of science and nature as behavioral, and loving the workers, peasants, and soldiers as political. Behavioral themes were often

identifiable by the format of the objectives in the teacher's guide: "Study the good conduct of ____."

Informational themes were those which aimed primarily at imparting specific information without obvious political or behavioral content. Nearly all the informational themes fell into the areas of natural science, academic skills, agricultural knowledge, personal hygiene and safety, geography, and technology. The large number of selections classified under "academic skills" includes mainly those lessons using the concentrated character recognition method described in the previous chapter, which are directed toward teaching the composition of Chinese characters, particularly phonetic compounds. These lessons did not appear in the lessons analyzed by Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin.

My classification scheme also differed from these researchers in the inclusion of a fourth category, "Other", into which I placed a small number of selections which did not fit into the preceding categories. These selections had objectives concerning observation and aesthetic appreciation of a picture, understanding imagery and metaphor in prose or poetry, and/or developing students' imaginations.

A small number of lessons had objectives from two categories, or the text content suggested an objective other than that listed in the teacher's guide. In these cases, a choice was made as to what the primary intent of the selection was (based on order of listing in the teacher's guide or degree of emphasis in the lesson plan or text), and

the other objective listed as a subtheme. For example, in one selection dealing primarily with agricultural machinery, the narrator comments at the end, "When I grow up, I want to be a tractor driver and cultivate the rich soil of the motherland."¹⁰ This selection was classified as having a major informational theme, with a political subtheme. I identified subthemes for political and behavioral content only, as I was primarily interested in the books as instruments of political and cultural socialization. As in Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin's study¹¹ the categories were not subjected to statistical reliability tests, primarily because of practical and time considerations.

After translation and classification were completed, the total number of selections in each category was found for each book. Results for the two books at each grade level were combined to yield the percentage of selections having each theme and the two subthemes at each grade level. Overall data, including data from all six books, were also calculated. Additionally, for purposes of comparison with Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin, I calculated the percentage of the total number of selections in each category that appeared at each grade level. This provided a clear picture of how the emphasis on each theme varied across grade levels. My results and a comparison with those of Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin (1971)¹² is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Themes of Selections at Each Grade Level

(Cell percentages are based on row totals; subthemes in parentheses.)

	<u>Political</u>	<u>Behavioral</u>	<u>Informational</u>	<u>Other</u>
<u>Grade 1</u>	9.6%(7.2%)	34.9%(3.6%)	51.8%	3.3%
<u>Grade 2</u>	13.1%(4.0%)	28.3%(9.1%)	50.5%	8.1%
<u>Grade 3</u>	31.5%(8.2%)	26.0%(12.3%)	32.9%	9.6%
<u>Overall</u>	17.3%(6.3%)	29.8%(8.2%)	45.9%	7.1%
<u>Overall</u> <u>1971</u>	34.3%	47.4%	18.3%	_____

Table 2: Percent of Themes Occurring at Each Grade Level

(Cell percentages are based on row totals; Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin data in parentheses)

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
Political	18.2%(26.9%)	29.6%(38.5%)	52.3%(34.6%)
Behavioral	38.2%(31.4%)	36.8%(32.2%)	25.0%(36.4%)
Informational	36.8%(14.8%)	42.7%(31.5%)	20.5%(53.7%)
Other	16.7%	44.4%	38.9%

Overall, 17.3% (44 of the 255 selections rated) were classified as having political themes. Political themes characterized 9.6% of the selections in the first-grade readers, 13.1% in the second grade readers, and 31.5% in the third grade readers. The political content varied across grades in both quantity and sophistication.

Book 1 contained only two politically-oriented selections, although they were explicit and prominently placed as the first two text lessons. In Lesson 1, children look at a picture of the Great Hall of the People and learn to read its name. The text reads, "The people of the whole country warmly love the Communist Party."¹³ When I observed this lesson, the political content was taught by teacher-directed instruction during the prereading discussion, and brought up in the dialogue that followed the reading. In Lesson 2, students learn to read the words "Beijing", "Tiananmen", and "five-star red flag". The text reads, "I love Beijing. I love the People's Republic of China."¹⁴ The goals of these lessons are similar to those in kindergarten: basic political terminology, and associations of those words with positive feelings of love and devotion. As early as Book 1, however, a transition begins toward giving the child intellectual and moral justifications for his allegiance, such as the moral uprightness of leaders, the sacrifices of the martyrs, and improvements in the countryside. In Book 1, political subthemes are found dealing with Mao, the labor of

the peasants, and the need to conserve electricity to help national construction. 99

The transition to this more sophisticated level of political content appears complete in Book 2, with selections about laying wreaths at the graves of revolutionary martyrs, sparrows who fly home and observe the changes in the countryside, a child who is killed for leading Nationalist soldiers into a trap, , and a poem about the peasants' labor. Selections also appear featuring Communist leaders: Premier Zhou Enlai sends a raincoat to his young guard, General Zhu De saves two orphaned children, and Mao as a child solves a problem with his peers through discussion. Wilson points out the significance of such selections: "Assumptions developed during early childhood about the benignity of political leaders are among the most important factors favoring the development of a sense of political legitimacy."¹⁵ He also comments that "In the Chinese tradition, government is by persons who command obedience by the example of right conduct."¹⁶ Thus children who learn of Zhou and Zhu's generosity, and Mao's wisdom and respect for others' opinions may develop more positive attitudes toward the party and the current leaders who claim to be the successors of these early revolutionaries.

Book 3 contains additional selections about Zhou, Mao, and Zhu, as well as three stories set in wartime, about two young boys who join the Red Army on the Long March, a primary student who, in the face of great danger, studies

anti-Japanese textbooks during the war, and the fifteen year¹⁰⁰ old martyr Liu Hulan, executed by Nationalist soldiers in 1947 for refusing to reveal the names of Communist Party members in her village and eulogized by Mao for her bravery. These selections show the development of a new theme, hatred for those (Nationalists and Japanese) who have threatened the development of the communist society. Wilson writes: "A well-defined focus of hostility performs the very important function of draining off energies that might be directed elsewhere."¹⁷ Negative themes such as these become more predominant with increasing grade levels.

Book 4 continues political themes introduced in previous books (leaders, war, martyrs). Students learn about Nie Er, the musician who wrote "March of the Volunteers", a song which became a rallying cry against imperialism. In this book, children are also told that they have a role to play in leading their country to future glory. The young observer of agricultural machinery decides he wants to grow up to plow "the motherland's" soil, and Young Pioneers sing around the campfire:

Let the ideals we've cultivated take wing. Let them "ride the wind and cleave the waves" throughout the galaxy. The Motherland is carrying out the Four Constructions; we are preparing to take on important responsibilities.¹⁸

Book 5 continues the previous themes, but shows a greater emphasis on war stories, with 5 such selections, and introduces the theme of the evils of feudal China, which account for two themes and one subtheme. For example,

students read two poems in Lesson 30 about the suffering of the working class in feudal times. The brick burner laments:

When I've burned all the earth before my gate,
There's not even one strip left for my roof.
He whose ten fingers are not stained with mud,
Lives in a great mansion covered with tiles!

Also significant in book 5 is the abrupt jump in the total number of selections with political themes, from 12% in Book 4 to 30.6% in Book 5.

The increased emphasis on political themes continues into Book 6, where they account for 32.4% of all selections and occur as subthemes in 10.8%. In Book 6, children are exposed to more stories of leaders (Mao, Zhou), tales of wartime deception, daring, and sacrifice, a poem about the bravery of fishermen, and an account of a visit to the Great Hall of the People. More sophisticated concepts are introduced in selections about China's claim to the Xisha Islands, disputed territory with Vietnam; and Norman Bethune, a Canadian doctor who was killed while serving with the Red Army and lauded by Mao for personifying the spirit of internationalism. A sense of national pride in China's achievements, both ancient and modern, is also sought. Students learn about the ancient engineering marvel, Zhaozhou Bridge. They also read the story of Zhong Dizhou, a Chinese biology student in Belgium, who discovers a new technique after several years of arduous research and slights to his country by his fellow students. He tells himself, "I must make a good showing. Chinese people are

really not duller than other people. If we are conscientious, we Chinese can do things foreigners think are very difficult."²⁰

In summary, as students progress through primary school, they are exposed to increasing quantities of progressively more varied and sophisticated political content. At all levels, this content is scaled down to the child's developmental level, often in the form of songs, accounts of everyday events, and first-person narratives. This is in contrast to the pontifications that baffled earlier generations of primary school students.

Behavioral Themes

Behavioral themes accounted for 29.8% (76 out of 255) of the selections analyzed, including 34.9% of first-grade selections, 28.3% of second grade ones, and 26.0% of third grade ones. Behavioral subthemes were found in 8.2% of the selections analyzed.

Behavioral themes are fairly uniform in quantity and type throughout the grades. An exception is the high concentration of themes about good study habits, respect for teachers, and performance of school duties found in the first grade readers. For example, first graders read that "The teacher cares about the students. The students love the teacher."²¹ and that "We sweep the classroom very clean."²² Book 2, in particular, stresses the need to study conscientiously, with five selections centering on this

theme. In "Ding Ding and the Little Airplane", a little boy, dreaming of becoming a pilot, makes paper airplanes in class and is scolded by his teacher, "Only if you listen in class and study well will you be able to fly airplanes when you grow up."²³ That night, Ding Ding dreams of a beautiful silver airplane which, unfortunately, he does not know how to fly. The airplane sings to him, "Ding Ding is uneducated; he cannot fly the plane!"²⁴ , driving home the point of the lesson, the need to study hard to master the exciting new science and technology.

A theme seen across all the readers (nine selections total) is the need to use one's head to solve problems. For example, in a story in Book 2, the clever Sima Guang does not panic like his playmates, but breaks open a water vat with a stone to save a playmate who has fallen into it. Second and third graders read many stories of scientists who worked determinedly in the face of odds to solve problems, including Thomas Edison, whose diligence is thus described:

He often worked in his laboratory for several days on end. When he was really too tired, he would just lie on the lab counter and sleep for a while. Through this ceaseless diligence, he finally found a suitable filament and invented the electric light.²⁵

These "scientist stories" seek to develop students' love of science and willingness to engage in the rigors of scientific research in the future.

A goal related to developing positive attitudes about science and research is that of inspiring a love of and curiosity about nature. This was often a subtheme of

passages concerned mainly with factual content and objectives. The young boys in "Sea Turtles Lay Eggs" model this sense of curiosity and wonder:

At dusk, Xiao Meng and I were racing back from a coral island when we saw on the reef two sea turtles flapping in the spray and chasing each other. Xiao Meng said, "The sea turtles are going to lay eggs. Let's come tonight to watch."²⁶

Another knowledge-related behavioral theme, which I was fascinated to find in these readers, was the need to think for oneself rather than blindly follow others. In "Pulling Up the Moon", a group of foolish monkeys follow one another in falling into a well trying to pull out the moon reflected in it, until a young monkey finally notices that the moon is still where it has always been, in the sky.²⁷

Some contradiction is noted between passages such as "Pulling Up the Moon", and those which stress the dependence of the individual on the collective. In "A Little Goose", a young goose impatient at the slow pace of the others leaves the flock to fly alone. He briefly enjoys his newfound freedom, then faces hunters, thirst, hunger, fatigue, predators, and loneliness. Finally, he is reunited with his flock.²⁸ This passage has strong social and political implications in its account of the dangers, both physical and psychological, of breaking from the group. It is perhaps significant that both stories deal with younger members of the group. The young are portrayed as both unbound by the foolishness of their elders and able to think critically,

and liable to fail to appreciate the benefits of group solidarity and the dangers of violating it.

Not only the necessity of the collective for the individual's welfare, but also the need for the individual to work and sacrifice for the collective, is stressed. "A Little Lamb" tells how Ba Te, a Mongolian child, goes to great lengths to return a lost lamb to its production team.²⁹ The young narrator of "Return Every Grain to the Collective" tells how her brother refused to let his hungry geese eat the production team's grain.³⁰

Personal qualities such as helpfulness are also taught through modelling. Unger points out that this propinquity for holding up models for emulation is not unique to communist China, being a staple of education both in imperial China and in modern Taiwan. He explains, "The Chinese believe that positive values are more readily transmitted by concretizing them in the shape of personages whom others are to seek to resemble."³¹ Political leaders such as Mao and Lenin, often as children, serve as these "personages" in many passages. The readers also make use of a variety of models who supposedly existed in real life and do exist as cultural entities, such as the various martyrs and Mao's paragon of virtue, Lei Feng. After Lei, supposedly a young P.L.A. soldier, died in a trucking accident in 1962, his diary, confessing numerous secret deeds he did out of his love for Mao and the revolution, was found. Lei Feng is a genuine cultural relic, carted out for campaigns for

virtues ranging from unquestioning devotion to helpfulness and honesty. There was even talk in 1989 of the need to "learn from the Lei Feng spirit". Perhaps because of the cooler post-Cultural Revolution attitude toward Mao, Lei Feng is seen only once in the readers, carrying younger classmates across a flooded bridge.³² Other stories and models seek to inculcate a wide variety of virtues, such as respect for elders, a balanced view of oneself, and observing discipline.

Informational Themes

Overall, informational themes characterize the largest number of selections in the readers (45.9%, or 117 out of 255). At first and second grade, approximately half (51.8% and 50.5%, respectively) of selections fall into this category, as do 32.9% of the third grade selections.

The largest number of informational selections deal with various aspects of natural science. For example, first graders learn about the characteristics of horses, cattle, and sheep, second graders about pollination and finding one's way in the wild with natural signs, and third graders about squirrels, geese, and frogs' eyes.

A significant number of passages, as mentioned previously, are primarily intended to familiarize children with the structural characteristics of written Chinese. There are also a few selections which teach dictionary use, proper study posture, and other academic knowledge. Natural

science and academic skills topics account for by far the largest number of informational selections.

A smaller number of passages deal with agriculture, physical hygiene and safety, technology, and geography. Second graders are introduced to six agricultural implements in a character cluster lesson, one which rather baffled the urban Harbin students I observed. In one of the basic character lessons in Book 1, students learn to care for their ears, eyes, and mouth, while third graders learn about the digestive process through the eyes of a bean. First graders learn how electricity runs lights, telephones, fans, and buses, while third graders learn about the construction of the bridge over the Yangtze River at Nanjing. First graders learn about the wide range of climates in their country, while third graders learn about the lesser Xingan Mountain Range.

In short, by the time they complete third grade, students will have been exposed to a considerable amount of content area knowledge in the process of acquiring literacy.

Other Themes

A small number of lessons (7.1%, or 18 out of 255) have objectives other than political, behavioral, or informational ones. These selections, comprising 3.6% of lessons in first grade, 8.1% in second, and 9.6% in third, aim primarily to develop children's powers of observation, imagination, and aesthetic appreciation, or their ability to

understand imagery and metaphor. For example, first graders read and discuss a poem similar to Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

The hills in the distance are vivid with color,
The waterfall nearby makes no sound.
When spring passes, the flowers will remain,
When people come, the bird will not startle.³³

Second graders read a passage describing a picture of autumn scenery in metaphorical terms. Book 6 contains one of the most imaginative selections found in the readers, in which a girl is so entranced by lotus flowers that she imagines she is one:

I suddenly felt as if I myself were a lotus flower,
wearing a snow-white outfit, standing in the sunlight.
A gust of gentle wind blew and I began to flutter, my
snow-white clothing floating in the wind. Not only me,
but the whole pondfull of lotus flowers was dancing.³⁴

It was a relief to find some content other than that of a political, behavioral, or informational nature, and children portrayed in such a realistic manner.

Comparison to Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin

It is apparent from the tables that dramatic differences in content were found between the current readers and those analyzed by Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin. My figures show a much greater concentration in the current readers on informational themes, too large to be accounted for by differences in classification methods. This is despite my classification of political information into the "political" rather than the "informational" category.

Political themes make up a substantially greater proportion of the 1960's readers than the current ones. This flip-flop of political and informational emphases is not surprising given the turn away from class struggle and Mao worship and toward economic and technological development which has characterized China since Mao's death. The decrease in behavioral themes may also be related to these factors.

Overall, the most common themes in the current readers were found to be natural science (45 selections), academic skills (32), Chinese communist leaders (15), war (15), agricultural knowledge(11), and helping others (10). This "top five" list differs from that of Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin's in the inclusion of natural science and academic skills, and inclusion of many selections about communist leaders other than Mao Zedong. Common themes from the two lists are war, agricultural knowledge, and helping others (part of "recommended behavior").

Not only the relative predominance of each theme, but the grade levels at which they receive greatest emphasis, has changed. In the current readers, a heavy emphasis on political themes (comparable to that found in the 1960's readers) is delayed until third grade, whereas they are fairly predominant in the 1960's readers at first and second grade levels. Behavioral themes, which rose steadily until grade 4, then declined in grade 5 in the old readers, decline

after grade 2 in the current readers (although some of the slack is picked up by subthemes). In the 1960's readers, informational content is initially quite low, rises dramatically to grade 3, then falls dramatically to grade 5. In the current readers, informational content is initially high, rises to grade 2, and drops significantly with the rise of political content in grade 3. The overall trends seen are an increased use of the readers to teach content-area knowledge, and a delay in extensive treatment of political themes.

Concluding Remarks

As can be clearly seen from the preceding discussion of how thematic emphases in the readers have changed over time, the content of the readers has varied with the political climate. The variations reflect the ongoing tug-of-war between the so-called "Red" and "Expert" camps that has characterized Chinese education since the revolution. Should children be taught to be thoroughly "red", selfless revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers committed to class struggle and communism, or to be experts in the new sciences and technologies needed to bring China into the sphere of developed nations, or some mixture of the two? Currently, a tenuous balance is maintained between these two extremes:

China still wishes to modernize, to learn from the rest of the world, to increase the standard of living, and to upgrade the educational system, but not at any and all costs-not, for example, at the cost of permanently fixing the existing differences between peasant and worker, between mental and manual labor, and between city and countryside.³⁵

The Chinese appear to be hedging their bets. The readers contain moderate amounts of political instruction, as well as heavy emphases on content area knowledge and achievement-related values such as studying hard, love of science, curiosity, and using one's head to solve problems. It will be interesting to see how the trends toward economic retrenchment and political conservatism seen in the past year, if they persist, will be reflected in future editions of the readers.

¹ Jon L. Saari, "Breaking the Hold of Tradition: The Self-Group Interface in Contemporary China", in Social Interaction in Chinese Society, ed. Sidney L. Greenblatt, Richard W. Wilson, and Amy Auerbacher Wilson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), p. 31.

² Charles Price Ridley, Paul H.B. Godwin, and Dennis J. Doolin, The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China, (Stanford, Cal.: The Hoover Institution Press, 1971), p. 3.

³ Richard W. Wilson, Learning to Be Chinese: The Political Socialization of Children in Taiwan, (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1970), p. 12.

⁴ Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin, The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China, p. 87.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 87-88. (definitions on p. 87, statistics on p. 88; figures rounded to nearest tenth)

⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸ Julia Kwong, "Changing Political Culture and Changing Curriculum: An Analysis of Language Textbooks in the P.R.C.," Comparative Education 21 (1985):205.

⁹ The textbooks I reviewed were the primary school Yuwen [Chinese] textbooks for the first three grades in national use (except for Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Zhejiang Province) in 1989. They were all published as prototypes in Beijing by Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe [People's Educational Publishing Company], and were reprinted by each province. The date of initial publication, and the place and date of reprinting for each of the volumes used follow:

Book 1: Nov. 1987, reprinted by Shandong Sheng Chuban Zongshe, April 1989.

Book 2: June 1984, reprinted by Heilongjiang Sheng Xinwen Chubanjū, Oct. 1987.

Book 3: Nov. 1987, reprinted by Jiangsu Sheng Chuban Zongshe, May 1988.

Book 4: May 1988, reprinted by Jiangsu Sheng Chuban Zongshe, Oct. 1988.

Book 5: Nov. 1987, reprinted by Heilongjiang Sheng Xinwen Chubanjū, Feb. 1989.

Book 6: May 1988, reprinted by Jiangsu Sheng Chuban Zongshe, Oct. 1988.

¹⁰ Lesson 2, "Spring Plowing," Chinese 4:10.

11 Ridley, Godwin, and Doolin. The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China, p. 19.

12 Ibid., pp. 88-89. The information in the first table is from a table on p. 88. The information in the second table was derived from a table on p. 89. The authors analyzed the readers for grades 1 to 5, and used these totals to calculate their percentages. I arrived at the figures for grades one through three by adding the numbers of selections they counted in each theme (also included in their table) for the first three grade levels. I then divided the number of selections with each theme at each grade level by the total number of selections with that theme in grades one through three.

13 Text Lesson 1, "Warmly Love the Communist Party," Chinese 1:52-53.

14 Text Lesson 2, "I Love the People's Republic of China," Chinese 1:54-55.

15 Richard W. Wilson, Learning to Be Chinese, p. 144.

16 Ibid., p. 53.

17 Ibid., p. 113.

18 Supplementary Reading Lesson, "Overnight Camp," Chinese 4:110.

19 Lesson 30, "Two Ancient Poems," Chinese 5:111.

20 Lesson 3, "We Must Make a Good Showing," Chinese 6:7.

21 Text Lesson 3, "Student, Teacher, Classmates," Chinese 1:56.

22 Text Lesson 5, "Sprinkle Water, Sweep Floor," Chinese 1:58.

23 Lesson 5, "Ding Ding and the Little Airplane," Chinese 2:50-51.

24 Ibid., p. 53.

25 Lesson 8, "Edison," Chinese 5:26.

26 Lesson 4, "Sea Turtles Lay Eggs," Chinese 5:9.

27 Lesson 8, "Pulling Up the Moon," Chinese 3:34-36.

28 Independent Supplementary Reading Lesson, "A Little Goose," Chinese 3:138-142.

- 29 Lesson 12, "A Little Lamb," Chinese 2:24-5.
- 30 Lesson 23, "Return Every Grain to the Collective," Chinese 3:101-102.
- 31 Jonathan Unger, "Primary School Texts and Teaching Methods in the Wake of the Cultural Revolution," Chinese Education 10 (1977):9.
- 32 Text Lesson 18, "Crossing the Bridge," Chinese 1:88.
- 33 Lesson 32, "A Painting," Chinese 2:84.
- 34 Lesson 18, "Lotus Flowers," Chinese 6: 63-64.
- 35 Jan L. Tucker and Eugene M. Gilliom, "Education in China Today: Social and Moral Preparation for the Year 2000," Social Education 48 (May 1984):312.

General Comments

In the preceding chapters, I have looked at the environment in which Chinese children acquire literacy, the nature of the learning tasks they confront, the methods used to teach them, and the content which they encounter in their textbooks. My perspective has generally been one of a reporter of facts, and the voice, in most cases, has been my own. In writing about American comparisons of the Japanese educational system with their own, educator Tadahiko Inagaki notes:

When used by persons outside a culture, the criteria for comparison tends to focus on the outcomes of education or its surface features rather than on the processes and problems lying beneath the surface. Both points of view, external and internal, should be considered in comparative studies.¹

While my study is not really a comparative one, it is in some sense as my previous knowledge of the beginning reading process (and that of my readers) has been of how it proceeds in the United States. I felt that I should examine not only the surface features mentioned above, but, for a deeper understanding, explore the attitudes and feelings of the participants themselves. This chapter, then, belongs less to me than to the teachers, parents, and students who shared their experiences with me.

Few extensive studies have been done on teacher, parent, and student attitudes in mainland China. This reflects linguistic barriers, the difficulty of scheduling

surveys or interviews into tightly structured school schedules, and the need for official sanction and personal connections, often difficult for foreigners to obtain. Stevenson and his colleagues were able to do some fairly extensive research in Beijing, which will be cited at relevant points in the chapter. Knowing that I lacked the academic credentials, methodological training, and high-level contacts needed to carry out any extensive research, I sought instead to get a small sample of candid responses. While the participants may or may not be representative of urban Chinese as a whole, their responses do provide a fresh "inside view" of the process of acquiring literacy in the Chinese primary school.

Teachers

The vast majority of information on teacher attitudes toward the beginning reading process was obtained through interviews with the first grade teacher in whose classroom I conducted the majority of my observations. My questions about attitudes focused on children's view of learning to read, their reading interests, correlates of success and failure in beginning reading, and input from parents about the beginning reading process.

In response to the question, "What are children's initial attitudes toward learning to read? What changes, if any, occur as they progress?", she explained:

At first, they may not be too sure about what reading 117 is, but they are willing to learn. In the first lesson, we discuss the purpose of learning to read. If they know characters, then they can read books and newspapers, write essays, and improve their language. This arouses the students' interest. They are very willing to study reading, because they can learn many new things. After a while, students get a sense of mastery and joy about reading. They are excited that they can write down speech and keep a diary. I emphasize what they have mastered, and often tell them how much they have learned and can do. They all think the characters are very hard, but we progress slowly, moving from the simple to the complex, with lots of practice.

When asked about the reading interests of her students, she commented that most of her students enjoyed the reading text, and had widespread interests, with space, astronomy, scientific knowledge, and science fiction the most popular. (The lesson I observed on the sun, earth, and moon ended with a heated argument between two students on whether there were extraterrestrials!) She feels that these broad interests stem from watching T.V., and is often surprised by how much her students know and the interesting questions they ask. She notes that boys tend to enjoy war stories more, and in general have wider interests and experiences, perhaps because parents shelter them less than girls.

When asked about the factors that contribute to success or failure in beginning reading, she mentioned intelligence, attitude, previous learning, and teaching methods:

Factors to consider would be the child's intelligence, attitude, and how well we teach. We need to use a variety of methods to reach different students. Whether or not a child has attended kindergarten can also make a difference. It is often hard for children if their first exposure to reading is in primary school, as most of our students have learned pinyin and simple characters at home or in kindergarten. They can usually catch up if they get individual help in the first grade. If a child isn't getting 90%'s by the end of first grade, it's too late; he probably won't catch up.

The first grade teacher told me that in an average year, she usually has 7 or 8 students (out of a class of about 60) who have serious problems in learning to read, typically five or six boys and one or two girls. Such children, generally do poorly in all subjects. She notes:

For some it is an attitude problem. They do not conscientiously study. Others are just not interested in learning to read. Others simply have low intelligence and learn slowly. Their interest gradually declines as they fall further and further behind their classmates.

All of the teachers I interviewed indicated that the number of children with apparently normal or high intelligence and motivation but severe difficulty specifically in reading, which American teachers might consider learning disabled, was very low. This may reflect cultural differences in ideas of intelligence, or a greater tendency to attribute low achievement to lack of motivation and effort than some innate disability. The latter would be consistent with Stevenson's findings. He noted that Chinese teachers, when asked to rank a number of factors contributing to children's achievement in school, ranked homework (completion of which relates to motivation and effort) much higher than American

teachers.² He also found that when asked to rank effort, natural ability, difficulty of schoolwork, and luck or chance by importance in determining their child's achievement, Chinese parents consistently ranked effort as most important, while American parents placed higher importance on natural ability.³ This attitude is probably held by teachers as well. Teachers observed that children who do poorly are usually embarrassed and don't need to be told they're not doing well. Their self-respect is damaged, and they become envious of their more successful peers. Nearly all students, they say, are highly motivated and perfectionistic.

Much of children's motivation to succeed probably comes from the influence of their parents, who, as one teacher commented, "All want their children to become 'dragons'[important people]." Teachers report strong pressure on children to do well in school, with some parents paying their children for good marks. Parents are generally very interested in and involved with their children's education, and if things are not going well, they will often blame the teacher.

Parents

The theme of strong parental pressure for achievement came up again in my interviews with parents. The existence of such pressure may be accounted for by the traditional Chinese view of education as a path to success, parents

whose own educational opportunities may have been curtailed by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the concentration of parental ambitions onto only children, the tiny supply of higher education opportunities in relation to the demand, and the recent opening up of opportunities to study abroad. In a survey of parents of students at Taorenting Primary school in Beijing, over 87% said they wanted their children to attend university. In reality, as discussed in Chapter 2, only about 4% can. About half of the parents said they would punish their children if they did not pass their exams, some by beating them.⁴ My questions for parents focused on how they motivated their children to study, how conscientious their child was, their policy on homework, opinion of reading texts and the instruction the child was receiving at school, how they communicated with the teacher, and the age at which their child had attained (or at which they hoped the child would attain) independence in reading. I interviewed five parents, and received a wide range of responses. Since these topics are intimately related to one another in shaping the experience of the individual child, I have chosen to present the parents' responses as profiles. (The parents are the same as those profiled in Chapter 4.)

The worker says he took his daughter to see an Egyptian movie which makes the point that those who are uneducated are stupid, while those who are educated can get a good job and do it well. He also commented that his own education was cut short by the Cultural Revolution, so it is especially

important that his daughter take advantage of the current opportunities. He told me that his daughter is not smart, but has a good memory, is strongly motivated, and very conscientious. ("It's not that she thinks slowly," said his wife, "It's just that she's not very articulate." The girl sat quietly, filling in her own questionnaire, during this discussion.) He is strict about homework, and won't let his daughter out to play until he checks to see that it's completed. If there are mistakes or sloppy parts, he has her erase and redo them. He expressed no opinions on the texts or teaching methods, other than commenting that different teachers use different methods. He attends the parent meetings at the school at the end of this term. They are uneventful for him, as his daughter is a good student, listens well, and is obedient. At eight, his daughter likes to read, both in and outside Chinese class. He says that she will probably start reading the newspaper after fifth grade, when "her thinking will be developed."

The cadre seems the strictest of the five parents I interviewed. He motivates his nine year old daughter by telling her that reading is the key to acquiring knowledge, but says the most significant factor is his wife, a physician, who is a good role model. He requires his daughter to finish her homework before going out to play, and always checks her homework, making her correct mistakes and tearing it up if it is too sloppy. He said that in the past, if she slacked off on homework, he would scold,

criticize, and spank her. Now, he says, she does well on her own, is very independent, and studies hard. When he does need to punish her he makes her do 100 math problems in 20 minutes. The cadre comments, "When children are small, they have no interest in work, so you must force them to do it neatly and correctly. When they are older, they become self-motivated." He often makes her go above and beyond the requirements for her assignments, such as demanding that her essays be at least 200 characters rather than the required 150. He isn't in as close communication with the school as he would like to be, because his daughter's class is so large (81 students) that the teacher has no time for home visits. He or his wife attend the parent meetings at the end of each term. He complains that the textbooks have too much repetition, which bores the brighter children, and feels that the teacher, rather than the textbook, should handle review. His daughter, he says, masters a lesson after one reading. She likes to read, especially aloud, and enjoys Chinese class. Her favorite recreational reading are the adventures of BabaBaba, (a pink bloblike character who can take on numerous shapes) which appear in children's magazines and his own book series. The cadre notes that his daughter can read the newspaper already, but doesn't understand it because of the political content.

My interview with Professor A was one of the most delightful I conducted. As I interviewed him in the family's one-room apartment, his eleven year old son sat next to his

father and drove a model jeep around his balding head, occasionally protesting what his father said about him. Professor A said he motivates his son by setting a good example by reading everyday. (Most of the tiny dwelling is occupied by books.) His son is not allowed outside to play until he finishes his homework, but sometimes he doesn't listen. ("Yes, I do," his son interjects.) When this happens, the boy gets spanked. Professor A's son usually does his homework alone, with occasional help from his father, who checks the homework and makes his son do it over if it is sloppy or incorrect. He has no complaints about the textbooks or the teachers at Fu Hua, and often goes to the school to talk to his son's teacher, asking how the boy is doing in school and if he has been naughty. If he has, he gets spanked at home. His son is an avid reader and has been reading independently since the third grade.

Professor B, with the unstudious son, is displeased with child and school. He complains that his nine year old son, who attends a key primary school attached to the normal school in Harbin, uses the wrong characters when he writes compositions. He attributes this to the heavy emphasis at his school on reading for meaning from a book with pinyin-annotated characters. The text, he says, stresses understanding the main idea of paragraphs and selections, analyzing structure, and using context cues to learn new words. Another text is used to introduce new characters, but Professor B feels there is not enough emphasis on this

aspect of reading. Every day after school, he asks his son to read a short passage from a book besides his text, but the boy is not very willing. He does his homework by himself, with occasional help from his mother. Professor B checks it, punishes him for sloppy work (sometimes tearing it up), and makes sure his son corrects mistakes with the aid of his explanations or the dictionary. He complains that his son is not conscientious, and says he doesn't let him outside until homework is done. He takes him to and from school every day, and so has many chances to communicate with his teachers. His son, he says, doesn't like to read on his own, only to watch television. He hopes that next year the boy will be able to read storybooks independently.

Professor C, whose work with his three year old daughter was described in the section on preschool education, also has an eighteen year old daughter by a previous marriage. He motivates her by telling her that if she studies well, she can go to a university and make lots of money. He explained that he serves as an example of studying hard, acquiring knowledge, and earning money. As his daughter matured, he stressed the need to make a contribution to the country. His daughter usually does her homework alone or with friends, and only occasionally with parental help. If he checks her work now, it is just to see if it is completed. He paid much more attention to her primary school homework, when he would make her rewrite sloppy work and correct mistakes, and occasionally scolded

her for being stupid. When she was younger, she was allowed to play for a while before doing her homework. He would not do this, however, with a naughty child, he said. He explained that his daughter enjoys, studies diligently, and does well in Chinese, geography, and history, but dislikes and does poorly in math and science, even with tutoring. He expressed no strong opinions on the texts, other than that in his daughter's early years they were too politicized and hard for children to relate to. His opinions of teaching methods varied with the teacher, and he felt more confident in those with higher educational levels. He goes to the school once or twice a term to talk to the homeroom teacher, and attends the parent meetings at the end of each term. Tests are passed back at the meetings, and parents compare their children's scores. Later, the teacher asks the parents of students with serious problems in academics or behavior to stay behind, and talks to them privately, sometimes criticizing the parents. His daughter began reading independently after fourth grade, and ever since that time he has worried about her reading "bad" material, especially in magazines. He has caught her with novels inside textbook covers, trying to fool him!

The parents I interviewed were similar in their high degree of concern and involvement with their children's education, although their impressions of the schools varied and their methods for motivating their children to study

ranged from setting an example to verbal exhortation to physical coercion.

Students

It seems fitting to end this section with the voices of the Chinese children themselves. I interviewed Professor A's son and the worker's daughter at their homes, sent a questionnaire home to Professor B's son, and gave questionnaires to five students in a first grade class at Fu Hua Primary School. The questionnaire and interviews asked students about their favorite, least favorite, hardest, and easiest classes, their attitudes about reading class and their reading achievement, their reading interests, after-school activities, and future aspirations.

Favorite classes were listed as natural science (2), Chinese (2), music (2), P.E., and math. Least favorite were P.E. (3), Chinese (2), music, and calligraphy. The worker's daughter said she had no least favorite class.

Labor received two votes as the hardest class, while the others seemed divided on the matter, listing Chinese, math, P.E., class activities, and natural science. The worker's daughter said no class was hard. Art, with four votes, was a shoo-in as the easiest class, with others listing math (2), P.E., and music.

One student (Professor B's son) said reading was "hard", while three judged it "not too hard", and four "easy". A confident first grader I met at a park in Dalian

and informally interviewed told me he didn't think learning to read was hard for Chinese children "Because the teacher goes so slow and always repeats herself," but "It would be for Americans." Dictation received three votes as the "hardest thing about reading", with supplementary reading, new characters, and writing the main idea getting one mention each. One smart-aleck first grader wrote, "Class". Of course, the worker's daughter said there was nothing hard at all about reading!

The textbooks in general got a positive rating, with only one student describing them as "boring". One student said they were "okay", two "interesting", and four "fascinating".

Asked about their attitudes when they started learning to read, one student wrote, "I thought reading was very hard. I still think it is very hard." Other responses were "I liked it." and "I was willing." Four students said their attitudes were "very good", and two of them quoted Mao's advice to schoolchildren, "Study every day, make progress every day." One enthusiastic student responded "Extremely good."

Three students described their reading achievement as "okay", three as "good", one as "very good", and one as "excellent".

Outside reading interests included E.T. stories, Star Wars, the classical epic Journey to the West, science fiction, short stories, math and logic brain-teasers, and

drawing books. Animal stories in the readers received high ratings with the girls, as did war stories with the boys.

After school, students reported that they most enjoyed doing homework (5), playing chess, drawing, and playing. The students in the first grade class all answered "homework", as did the others, but I was able to ask those I interviewed in person or through a parent to tell me what they liked to do besides homework. I don't know if students really enjoy homework (considering that many do it at school with peers, this is possible), or if this is the answer they felt they were expected to give.

Finally, one can't spend too much time around children in any country before finding oneself asking, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", and so I did. Among my group of eight are two aspiring mathematicians and a future scientist, soldier, party chairman, calligrapher, musician, and artist. I was fascinated by these goals, which suggest that children have drawn meaning and inspiration from the full range of cultural traditions they meet in everyday life and in their lessons at school: the classical arts, the revolutionary heritage, and the new emphasis on science and technology.

NOTES

¹ Tadahiko Inagaki, "School Education: Its History and Contemporary Status," in Child Development and Education in Japan, ed. Harold Stevenson, Hiroshi Azuma, and Kenji Hakuta (New York: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1986), p. 90.

² Chuansheng Chen and Harold Stevenson, "Homework: A Cross-Cultural Examination," Child Development 60 (June 1989):560.

³ Harold Stevenson, Shin-ying Lee, and James Stigler, "Mathematics Achievement of Chinese, Japanese, and American Children," Science 231 (February 14, 1986):696.

⁴ Zhu Chengpei, "Parents Back to School to Teach Children Better," China Daily 2 October 1989, p. 6.

I set out in this study to learn something, I was not sure exactly what, about China and about the beginning reading process through investigating beginning reading instruction in the Chinese primary school.

My study has given me insight into the effects of orthography on the nature of the literacy learning task for children, and on the methods used to teach them. I have found that not only orthography, but also cultural, social, and economic factors affect teaching methods in beginning reading. Through examining the content of the textbooks, I have gained a deeper understanding of the goals of the Chinese leadership for the nation's children and how they are pursued through the medium of primary school reading instruction. I found that learning to read in the Chinese primary school was a process in some ways very similar to, and in others very different from learning to read in an American school, and identified some areas in which we could learn from the Chinese experience.

The most obvious dissimilarities in learning to read in the two countries stem from the different orthographies in which literacy is acquired. The Chinese, drawing upon thousands of years of cultural tradition, have chosen to define literacy as mastery of a character-based writing system. Despite the use of alphabetic aids such as pinyin in initial literacy learning, the ultimate goal remains literacy in characters.

The character-based system, having evolved for thousands of years from ancient pictographs, today represents sound and meaning in ways which are by no means arbitrary, but are abstract, imperfect, and difficult for the beginner to grasp without explicit instruction in the structure of the written language. Teachers have often lamented the phonetic irregularity of English, which makes decoding and particularly spelling a struggle for beginners, but as DeFrancis points out, the manner in which Chinese characters (at least the majority which are phonetic compounds) represent sound is "incomparably more deficient than the frequently caricatured English orthography".¹

Even after the principles of character formation are learned, which can only be done through explicit teaching and prolonged exposure to the written language, the radical and phonetic elements serve merely as an aid to memory and a helpful hint in guessing unknown characters. Unlike the American student, without the use of context cues, the child cannot arrive at a reliable approximation of the word independently. Even assuming that the child knows all the phonetic elements, which is unlikely, fully 1/3 of these elements give no useful clue as to the character's modern pronunciation.² If context cues are insufficient, the child must rely on pinyin annotation, ask someone to pronounce the character, or use a dictionary.

Stevenson's research on comparative levels of reading achievement in American and Taiwanese first graders contains

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a finding which reveals the educational implications of this aspect of character-based writing systems:

Among the children who were unable to advance further than the first grade [on a reading achievement test based on their texts], the Chinese children received significantly higher scores than the American children. On the other hand, among the children who were able to go beyond the second grade level, vocabulary scores of the American children significantly surpassed those of the Chinese children..Scores were also higher for reading text and reading comprehension than among the Chinese children...³

In other words, the Chinese primary students who are the highest achievers in reading have a more limited reading vocabulary relative to their average peers than their American counterparts. Such children may have mastered more characters than other children, but are still limited by the lack of a reliable strategy to decode words independently. Even Chinese adults must look up the pronunciation of unknown characters in the dictionary if context cues are insufficient. This is in contrast to the ability of advanced young American readers to flexibly apply learned sound-symbol correspondences and rules and, with the help of context cues, read a large proportion of the words in their spoken vocabularies.

Once a basic sight vocabulary, knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences, and strategies for using context cues are developed, reading instruction is primarily a matter of helping children to apply their skills to new material, building automaticity and comprehension, and providing a variety of interesting and meaningful material

that will encourage them to use and build upon their newfound literacy. This stage of literacy development, in my experience, is typically achieved in the second grade by average students, and in the first by advanced ones.

As indicated in Chapter 3, the use of context cues is a common element in reading in the two orthographies, and may to some extent enable Chinese children to read meaningful material containing many unknown characters. Differences between acquiring literacy in the two scripts are most noticeable in writing, which requires a more thorough knowledge of a word or character than does recognition, especially in context. The Chinese child cannot, when writing only in characters, "take a stab" at writing a word in his oral vocabulary whose written representation he has not been taught. Adults also must look up the writing of unknown characters. This is in sharp contrast to English speaking children who, after mastery of the basic consonant and vowel sounds will display what DeFrancis calls "A capacity for phonetic expression that manifests itself among adults as well as children who readily continue to invent their own spellings if they have not been able to achieve full mastery of the traditional orthography."⁴ While the spellings of someone just beginning to master the complex rules and exceptions that govern sound-symbol correspondences in traditional English orthography may be far from technically correct, the meaning can often be discerned when the message is read aloud. This

is also true with Chinese children writing in pinyin, as I found in the questionnaire responses. It is rarely true with characters, particularly at the early stages when the child is not likely to know another character with the same pronunciation.

Thus, a significant difference between beginning reading in Chinese and English, which I see as resulting primarily from the orthography in which literacy is to be acquired, is the prolonged dependence of the Chinese student on explicit, teacher-directed instruction in reading and writing new characters. This has implications for beginning reading instruction in both countries. Chinese educators have long recognized the quandary posed by the prolonged gap between children's cognitive and oral abilities and their recognition and writing vocabulary of characters, and have sought to reduce it through a variety of methods. Of these, the pinyin annotation method appears to be the most promising, although not without drawbacks, as such as those revealed by Professor B in the previous chapter. I found in particular the diaries kept by Fu Hua students (in which they may express their thoughts fully by writing pinyin if they do not know the character they need), the emphasis on teaching character structure as an aid to independent learning, the use of pinyin-annotated books to develop comprehension skills, and the availability of pinyin-annotated books, newspapers, and magazines as intelligent efforts to reduce the gap between literacy and cognitive

levels, and to hasten the development of independent reading and writing skills.

Further possibilities will of course suggest themselves to a Western observer, as they no doubt do to Chinese observers of our schools. Assuming the retention of the goal of eventual literacy in characters, I think a greater emphasis on initial spelling and reading in pinyin, as in the experimental programs, and unlimited use of pinyin in content-area textbooks in the primary schools, might further allow students to read and write closer to their cognitive and oral language levels. However, as mentioned before, political and practical considerations make these reforms unlikely in the near future.

As for the way in which we teach our children to read, the Chinese experience suggests a few ideas. First, we should appreciate what we have, an orthography which, while its sound-symbol correspondence is far from perfect, can provide fairly reliable clues to beginners who have grasped its underlying principles.

To this end, we should make use of the logic inherent in our language, by providing students with explicit instruction in its structure--the sounds of the letters, and the rules which govern their pronunciation within words. However, as the Chinese first grade teacher pointed out in the case of pinyin, teaching sound-symbol correspondences to young children, although there are not many to be learned, is difficult because they are abstract and of little

intrinsic interest. Additionally, as Sheridan has written, many young children do not accurately discriminate or sequence individual sounds in words,⁵ which leads to difficulties in blending and the "distorted pronunciation" familiar to both Chinese and American teachers. A way around this would be to teach the sounds in the context of meaningful words, and with mnemonic pictures such as those used in the Chinese readers. It would be still more desirable to teach the sounds in the context of meaningful text which contains a high degree of phonetic regularity. This is, of course, the drawing power of Dr. Seuss for parents teaching their young children to read. Songs and nursery rhymes could be found which would be suited to this purpose as well. Many such selections would also provide the basis for some content-area learning. We could also learn much from the Chinese use of pinyin annotation, a transitional orthography in which children can quickly become literate. The current move toward "process writing", allowing children to freely express their thoughts in writing, creating their own spellings when they do not yet know the traditional ones, is an analogue to the diary writing at Fu Hua Primary School. Additionally, we might consider the use of some kind of annotation, such as diacritical marks for vowels, to enable beginning readers to handle material closer to their oral language and cognitive levels.

Not only orthography, but also social, cultural, and economic factors influence teaching methods in beginning reading instruction. A cultural tradition which focuses more on the needs of the group than those of the individual, an enormous school age population, and scarce resources for education contribute to the situation in China in which reading instruction is overwhelmingly directed towards large groups of children, who are given uniform tasks and evaluated according to uniform standards of achievement. The difficulties which some children face in achieving these standards and the effect on their self-esteem was described by the first grade teacher in the previous chapter. In American schools as at Fu Hua (and perhaps to an even greater degree), children come to first grade with widely varying degrees of readiness for acquiring literacy, depending on their linguistic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. Some children are already reading and writing, and highly motivated to learn. Others may be unable to speak the language or dialect in which they are expected to acquire literacy, have parents who place little value on formal education, and have not been prepared at home or elsewhere for the academic and behavioral demands of elementary school. These differing degrees of readiness for the literacy learning task to some degree make uniform tasks and standards, at least in the early grades, unfair and unrealistic. Because of our tradition of respecting individual differences, and our greater resources which

allow for smaller class sizes and a greater variety of teaching materials, we can afford to tailor beginning reading instruction to the special needs and interests of individuals and small groups of children.

Our more plentiful resources also extend to the availability of education beyond the elementary school level. Public secondary education is available to all students, and college education to a sizeable proportion. There is no need in our elementary schools for the cutthroat competition in which Chinese children must engage, first at their parents' urging, and later through their own initiative, if they wish to be highly educated. We can give our children more time to "smell the roses" and enjoy their blossoming abilities- to read widely according to their interests and to express themselves creatively in writing.

However, lest we become too smug and self-satisfied, we might do well to reflect on Stevenson's studies, which indicate that Asian students, on the average, outperform U.S. ones in both math and reading, and consider some of the factors which he suggests may contribute to this discrepancy, such as teaching style, homework, and parental attitudes. Perhaps we could adapt some of the attributes which appear to be the strong points of Chinese education-a teaching style which actively involves students, high expectations, and a belief that success comes largely through effort-to our own cultural values. High expectations could be set on an individual basis, and group-oriented

teaching used in cases where students' readiness for learning the material is similar.

In examining how children learn to read in the Chinese primary school, we can learn something not only about how we teach our children to read, but about what we ask them to read. The most outstanding quality of the Chinese readers is their high degree of relevance to the daily lives of Chinese children. Even the political content they contain may be seen in this light, as daily life for the Chinese citizen is highly politicized. The selections are often accompanied by illustrations which, as Lillie Pope writes, "Are attractive and speak to the reader clearly."⁶ Arriving in China after translating the textbooks, I encountered many scenes which could have stepped straight from the readers.

The selections themselves are generally interesting, informative, and occasionally thrilling. I was really getting anxious as I worked through stories of child martyrs facing enemy soldiers, and an airplane with four passengers and three parachutes about to crash! Such selections are especially impressive considering they are from second and third grade readers. The first grade texts are somewhat insipid, owing to the low vocabulary content, but come to life in the hands of a gifted teacher who masterfully integrates reading skills with meaningful content.

The language used in the texts is very colloquial, and even complex political and behavioral themes are couched in stories of everyday events and models with which children

can identify. They also contain a high degree of informational content, much of it about natural science. These selections are often narrated through the voice of a young child who observes the natural world with great curiosity.

The content of the readers shows a careful consideration of goals by the Chinese leadership, and a thoughtful translation of those goals by educators and writers into material that is meaningful and, as the students in Chapter 6 indicated, enjoyable for young readers. Given that the Chinese leadership's current educational goals are to develop students who are both loyal citizens of a Communist society ("red") and comfortable with the new sciences and technologies seen as necessary for China's modernization ("expert"), the readers appear to be excellent means of achieving those goals.

Whether or not we agree with the political content of the readers and the carefully planned role they play in the primary socialization of Chinese children, there is something we Americans can learn from them. Primary school language instruction can and does serve to transmit values basic to our society, whether or not it is explicitly planned to do so. We should take a closer look at our own readers to see what information and values, both social and political, are being transmitted in them. Having evaluated this, we can then make an informed decision as to what our

own goals are, and how we would like our readers to transmit¹⁴¹ these to our children.

On the basis of my experience with several reading series, I would argue that the content of reading selections in most series takes a back seat to the development of "reading skills", even after highly controlled vocabulary ceases to be an obstacle. This often results in a situation where, as one second grader told me, "I like to read, but I don't like to learn to read." Children, like anyone else, do not learn skills in isolation but as they are needed to do something important and meaningful to them. We could follow the example of the Chinese and put in our readers much more substance than there now is, perhaps even (gasp) a few patriotic themes. Not "Warmly Love the Republican Party", of course, but children should know something about their large, varied, and beautiful country which, despite its many problems, gives its citizens freedoms, rights, and opportunities that many others do not have.

We would also do well to incorporate some behavioral themes into our readers. Fairy tales and parables, as well as stories of realistic modern kids demonstrating various behavioral traits we would like our children to display (including some distinctly American ones like creativity and thinking for oneself) could be used, as they are in some current series. These often serve as the basis for fascinating discussions when students are encouraged to think about the application of these morals to their own

life. Merry White, in comparing American and Japanese schools, cautions, "For better or for worse, we are a motley nation, and need a greater, wider range of permitted norms."⁷ Nevertheless, I think we could find in our rich and varied cultural tradition some goals for our children which we could agree upon.

We could in particular learn from the inclusion of a substantial amount of informational content in the Chinese readers. Young children have a natural curiosity about the world in around them, and often choose nonfiction books rather than stories when they can read independently. Even the two year old who tries to stick a finger into the wall socket is curious about how things work. We should capitalize on this curiosity in the material we ask students to read.

Finally, because of the lesser need for explicit political information in our readers, we can include more of what, in reviewing the Chinese texts, was classified as "other" material, poetry and prose selections which help to develop children's imagination and understanding of imagery and metaphor. A wide range of excellent children's literature suited to this purpose is available at all reading levels. Reading texts can be seen not only as tools for practicing "skills", but as means to introduce children to important cultural values, content-area information, and imaginative literature.

However, we are not limited as the Chinese are by requirements for political uniformity, centrally-controlled curricula, or staggering class sizes. Thus, we should not confine the material used in reading instruction to a series of basal readers, no matter how excellent they may be, but draw upon a wide variety of well-chosen children's literature to work toward carefully considered goals dealing with both "reading skills" and content. In this sense, our very heterogeneity can be our strength, freeing us from rigid national standards to make reading as meaningful and enjoyable as possible for those children we teach.

In summary, we are a very different nation in many ways from China, with a different cultural heritage and political climate, and some different goals for our children, but not so different that we cannot learn something from the Chinese about how we might achieve a goal we both share, that of creating literate citizens.

- ¹ DeFrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 129.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Shin-ying Lee, James W. Stigler, and Harold W. Stevenson, "Beginning Reading in Chinese and English," in Orthographies and Reading: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Neuropsychology, and Linguistics, ed. Leslie Henderson (London and Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984), p. 137.
- ⁴ Defrancis, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy, p. 281.
- ⁵ Marcia E. Sheridan, "Reading Disabilities: Can We Blame the Written Language?" Journal of Learning Disabilities 16 (February 1983):83.
- ⁶ Lillie Pope, "Reading Instruction in Modern China," Reading Teacher 35 (March 1982): 691.
- ⁷ Merry White, The Japanese Educational Challenge, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), p. 189.

- Chen, Chuansheng, and Stevenson, Harold. "Homework: A Cross-Cultural Examination." Child Development 60 (June 1989): 551-561.

A comparative study investigating cultural differences in amount of time spent on homework and attitudes toward homework through interviews with elementary students, teachers, and parents in Beijing, Taipei, Sendai (Japan), Minneapolis, and Chicago.

- Chin, Ann-Ping. Children of China: Voices From Recent Years. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Chinese children interviewed by a native speaker talk about school, family life, friendship, and dreams for the future.

- DeFrancis, John. The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984.

A detailed look at spoken and written Chinese for both speakers and non-speakers. Debunks several popular misconceptions about Chinese, such as the claims that it is monosyllabic and ideographic. Also discusses process and problems of becoming literate in Chinese, and takes a detailed look at the language reform movement, especially the debate over Romanization.

- Ding, Yicheng; Li, Nan; and Bao, Quan'en. "A Report on an Experiment in 'Phonetically Annotated Characters Shortens the Time Needed to Learn to Read and Write'." Chinese Education 18 (1985): 60-79.

Report of an experiment on an approach to beginning reading featuring an expanded use of pinyin annotation in the early stages of reading and writing instruction in several Heilongjiang Province schools in the early 1980's.

- Downing, John. Comparative Reading: Cross-National Studies of Behavior and Processes in Reading and Writing. New York: MacMillan, 1973.

Provides an overview of the history of comparative reading research, describes methodological approaches and problems, discusses variables to consider, and profiles reading instruction and research in several countries, including Hong Kong.

Feitelson, Dina, ed. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Reading and Reading Research. Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1978.

Discusses research methodology, variables, and effect of orthography on decoding and comprehension in several languages, including Chinese.

Geertz, Clifford. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Explanation and examples of the ethnographic description of cultural phenomena.

Gentry, Joyce M. "Early Childhood Education in the People's Republic of China." Childhood Education 82 (September/October 1981): 92-96.

A look at the kindergarten system and curriculum (including beginning reading instruction) in China.

Greenblatt, Sidney L.; Wilson, Richard W.; and Wilson, Amy Auerbacher. Social Interaction in Chinese Society. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982.

Contains several studies dealing with the political and cultural socialization of Chinese children.

Hawkins, John L. Education and Social Change in the People's Republic of China. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983.

Provides an overview of the Chinese educational system and its changes in the past four decades, and cites some Chinese educational statistics.

"Hanyu Hanzi Jiang Zai Ershiyi Shiji Fahui Wuli." [Chinese Language and Chinese Characters Will Be a Powerful Force in the 21st Century] Harbin Ribao [Harbin Daily], 22 October 1989.

Report of a meeting of Chinese linguists in Beijing; expresses the government's current lack of interests in language reform such as increased use of pinyin.

Henderson, Leslie, ed. Orthographies and Reading: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology Neuropsychology, and Linguistics. London and Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984.

Compares the linguistics of reading and learning to read in various orthographies, including Chinese and English.

Jiang, Shangye, and Li, Bo. "A Glimpse at Reading Instruction in China." Reading Teacher 38 (March 1982): 762-766.

Provides an overview of reading instruction in China, describes rationale for use of pinyin annotation and character clusters in beginning reading instruction, and notes current problems in the field.

Jiangsu Province Wuxi Normal School Educational Materials Research Office. Yuwen Cankao Jiaoan [Chinese Reference Lesson Plans], Vol. 1-6. Shanghai: Shanghai Kexue Puji Chubanshe, 1988-1989.

These are the teacher reference materials corresponding to the primary school reading textbooks for grades one through three. They contain an overview, objectives, and suggested lesson plan for each lesson.

Kwong, Julia. "Changing Political Culture and Changing Curriculum: An Analysis of Language Textbooks in the P.R.C." Comparative Education 21 (1985): 197-208.

Compares reading textbooks of the early and late 1970's and finds in the latter a lessened emphasis on Mao and class struggle, and a new emphasis on science, technology, and modernization.

Leong, Che Kan. "What Does Accessing a Morphemic Script Tell Us About Reading and Reading Disorders in an Alphabetic Script?" Annals of Dyslexia 36 (1986): 88-102.

Compares and contrasts the psycholinguistic processes involved in reading alphabetic and morphemic scripts and investigates the optimum number of strokes for character recognition.

Mae, Chu-Chang, ed. "Central Institute of Educational Science Teaching Methodology Department: Concentrated Character Recognition at Changzhou Buailu Primary School." Chinese Education 16 (1983-4): 31-46.

Describes experiment in teaching beginning reading using the concentrated character recognition method.

Pope, Lillie. "Reading Instruction in Modern China," Reading Teacher 35 (March 1982): 688-694.

Report of American teachers visiting China. Provides an overview of the challenges the Chinese language poses for beginning readers, and experimental methods being implemented there.

Ridley, Charles Price; Godwin, Paul B.; and Doolin, Dennis 148
J. The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China.
Stanford, Cal.: The Hoover Institution Press, 1971.

Translated and analyzed content of primary school readers in use in China in the late 1950's and early 1960's; focused on primary school language instruction as a mechanism of political socialization and a reflection of the goals of the Chinese leadership.

Rozin, Paul; Poritsky, Susan; and Sotsky, Raina. "American Children with Reading Problems Can Easily Learn to Read English Represented by Chinese Characters." Science 171 (March 1971): 1264-1267.

Report on an experiment in which inner city children with reading difficulties were taught to read 30 English words represented by Chinese characters. The small number of characters taught probably invalidates their claim, but the authors do point out the advantage of a syllabic orthography for young readers.

Shanghai, Zhejiang, Beijing, and Tianjin Joint Writing Group for the Design of Educational Materials. "Six-Year Elementary School Language Program: Character, Word, Sentence, Article; Listen, Speak, Read, Write." Chinese Education 18 (1985): 86-99.

Contains the objectives (based on Ministry of Education directives) for primary school language instruction on which the version of the revised readers used in the above cities was based.

Sheridan, Marcia E. "Reading Disabilities: Can We Blame the Written Language?" Journal of Learning Disabilities 16 (February 1983): 81-86.

Examines the issue of whether it is easier to acquire literacy in an alphabetic, syllabic, or morphosyllabic writing system. Discusses the linguistic demands of learning to read Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and English; also considers cultural factors in the development of reading disabilities.

Shirk, Susan. Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982.

Provides a detailed description of the Chinese school system, and inquires into attitudes of students toward the academic and political pressures they face.

Spodek, Bernard. "Chinese Kindergarten Education and Its Reform." Early Childhood Research Quarterly 4 (March 1989): 31-50. 149

Describes the Chinese kindergarten system, training of teachers, kindergarten curriculum, and current reform efforts.

Stevenson, Harold W.; Stigler, James W.; Lucker, G. William, and Lee, Shin-ying. "Reading Disabilities: The Case of Chinese, Japanese, and English." Child Development 53 (October 1982): 1164-1181.

Compares reading achievement and incidence of reading disability in U.S., Japan, and Taiwan; finds a similar incidence of reading disability in each country and some discrepancies in average achievement levels in favor of Asian students. Formulates hypotheses about effect of orthography and cultural factors on reading achievement and disability.

Stevenson, Harold W.; Lee, Shin-ying; and Stigler, James. "Mathematics Achievement of Chinese, Japanese, and American Children." Science 231 (February 14, 1986): 693-698.

In addition to comparing mathematics achievement of elementary students in the three countries, this study also examines several variables relevant to reading instruction: percent of school time engaged in academic activities, percent of time spent in teacher-led activities, length of school year, amount of homework, and student, parent, and teacher attitudes toward school, achievement, and homework.

Tucker, Jan L., and Gilliom, Eugene M. "Education in China Today: Social and Moral Preparation for the Year 2000." Social Education 48 (May 1984): 312-323.

Discusses the current social and political goals for Chinese education, and the struggle to find a balance between "red" and "expert".

Unger, Jonathan. "Primary School Texts and Teaching Methods in the Wake of the Cultural Revolution." Chinese Education 10 (1977): 4-29.

Describes the primary school readers in use in Canton immediately after the Cultural Revolution. Also provides information on teacher training, teaching methods, and classroom management at the time based on interviews with Hong Kong refugees.

Wilson, Richard W. Learning to be Chinese: The Political Socialization of Children in Taiwan. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1970.

Examines the socialization of Taiwanese children into the political and moral tenets of their culture, focusing on the development of children's attitudes toward authority in the family, school, and political setting. Analyzes elementary school textbooks as tools for socialization.

Yuwen: Di Yi Ce [Chinese: Book 1]. Shandong Province: Shandong Sheng Chuban Zongshe, 1989.

Nationally-adopted reading textbook for first term of first grade. (See Chapter 5 footnote 8 for further information about the books.)

Yuwen: Di Er Ce [Chinese: Book 2]. Heilongjiang Province: Heilongjiang Sheng Xinwen Chubanj, 1987.

Nationally-adopted reading textbook for second term of first grade.

Yuwen: Di San Ce [Chinese: Book 3]. Jiangsu Province: Jiangsu Sheng Chuban Zongshe, 1988.

Nationally-adopted reading textbook for first term of second grade.

Yuwen: Di Si Ce [Chinese: Book 4]. Jiangsu Province: Jiangsu Sheng Chuban Zongshe, 1988.

Nationally-adopted reading textbook for second term of second grade.

Yuwen: Di Wu Ce [Chinese: Book 5]. Heilongjiang Province: Heilongjiang Sheng Xinwen Chubanj, 1989.

Nationally-adopted reading textbook for first term of third grade.

Yuwen: Di Liu Ce [Chinese: Book 6]. Jiangsu Province: Jiangsu Sheng Chuban Zongshe, 1988.

Nationally-adopted reading textbook for second term of third grade.

Zhang, Zhigong. "Chinese Characters and Reading: An Outline." Chinese Education 18 (1985): 41-56.

Examines the features of Chinese which make learning to read difficult for Chinese children, and the developmental stages of learning to read in Chinese.

Zhu, Chengpei. "Parents Back to School to Teach Children Better." China Daily, 2 October 1989, p. 6.

Describes classes for parents of school-aged children in Beijing. Cites survey showing intense pressure on students to succeed academically.