


2012

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The China Beat

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Literacy and Development within China's Minorities

March 20, 2012 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#)

By Alexandra Grey

Outside of China, people are agape at the prospect of learning to write Chinese: “So hard! *Too* hard.” Back in Australia, I know first generation migrants who speak Chinese at home but have never learnt to write; they gape along with everyone else. But for all the jaw-dropping, these people can read and write the national language of their home (for the Aussie-Chinese, that’s English). What about the people inside China for whom ‘Chinese’ is a foreign language? They are a significant minority, and, on the Chinese scale, a minority still means millions of people. ‘Chinese’ is usually loosely used when we should say ‘Mandarin’, which is just one of more than 50 distinct languages of the different ethnic groups in China. Mandarin is based on the language of Beijing, has official status, and is the language of the dominant ethnicity, the Han. But it’s by no means the first language of the rural poor in China’s vast and less-developed western and southern provinces. For many of these people, writing Mandarin characters is just as daunting as it is for us, as many of these other Chinese languages are not written in characters, or not written at all.

The widespread assumption is that people need to be literate for development to progress, and that getting kids to attend school is the way to deliver literacy to a community. But the more I looked into this issue within China, the more I found literacy, schooling, development and ethnic identity to be uneasily and unsuccessfully linked.

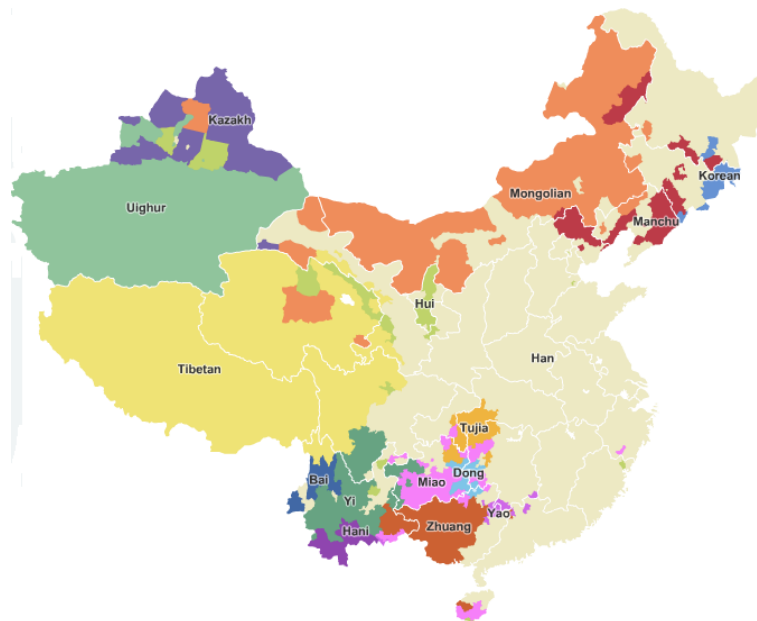
In a cross-post series with the development blog Whydev.org, I’m discussing the benefit to development work which can come from understanding that literacy is not a set of skills independently learnt regardless of context, nor is it simply synonymous with schooling. In [Part 1](#), I explain what literacy means to linguists and make the point that, unless linguistic understanding informs literacy campaigns and other development projects, they are unlikely to be terribly successful or, worse, can perpetuate development as a form of dominance over minorities. This China Beat post brings that argument into the Middle Kingdom, reviewing the role of literacy for Chinese people today, and their hurdles. (There’s also a [Part 3](#), again at Whydev.org. It’s a critique of development measurement and policy design.)



A Naxi woman and a sign in Mandarin; The Naxi's ancient, pictographic script

Many view China as a developed country now that it is the world's second-largest economy. Nevertheless, China sees itself as developing. For instance, its own foreign aid is "*South-South Cooperation*". This seems fair enough when you're here: there is a serious and obvious disparity in development between China's east and west regions. It's been clear to me from train windows as I've travelled across provincial borders (iPads and SUVs aren't the norm, you realise, once you leave Beijing), and made clearer through the stories of clients at my workplace, a service centre for China's internal 'migrant workers'. It's also very clear to the Chinese government, so redressing the development imbalance is a government priority.

For the non-Sinophile reader, some necessary background facts: Language and education policies are centrally controlled in China. Putonghua 普通话 (literally, 'common language'), known in English as Mandarin, has been the national language since the 1950s. It's also called Hanyu 汉语 ('Han Language'). The Han comprise 92 percent of the Chinese population. But China has 55 other officially recognised ethnic minority groups, who occupy about 50 percent of the Chinese territory, which are also the country's least-developed areas. Education is a development focus for the government, as illiteracy rates for most minority-language children are significantly higher than their Han counterparts. Officially, Mandarin is the language of instruction only from Grade 3 in minority regions, but discrimination against both minority cultures and their languages exists: in classrooms, in school administration, and beyond. Plus, there's a strong centripetal force in China: 'harmonious' nation-building is an inescapable urge prevailing against ethnic diversity.



A New York Times map of China's ethnic minorities

Is literacy an instrument of development?

The instrumental (and familiar) view of literacy gives it a central role in the economic account of development: “It is literacy that provides the foundation for acquiring human capital, and human capital is, in turn, the mainspring of sustained economic growth and the enhancement of wellbeing”, as a trio of scholars straddling linguistics and development wrote in the *Journal of Development Studies*. This assumption can be interrogated: formal literacy may *not* trigger economic development. One of those scholars, Bryan Maddox, explains, “The academic literature on literacy and economics tends to be dominated by deterministic or ‘autonomous...theories about the ‘impact’ of literacy on the economy...Such approaches oversimplify the role of literacy in economic development...and yet literacy is still evoked as the route to economic ‘take off’.” Literacy is certainly oversimplified here in China.

Despite international evidence of a positive correlation between progress in first language literacy and in second language literacy, many minority children in China do not get to develop first-language literacy. Many academics report that bilingual education in China is falling short in practice, despite legal requirements for bilingual primary schooling in minority areas (found in the Chinese Constitution and the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities). Practical constraints, including shortages of minority language teaching resources and bilingual teachers, are key reasons, though they’re often undergirded by unhelpful opinions on the worthlessness of minority languages. This is affecting children’s individual progression—most have to pass written exams in Mandarin to enter university, and cannot do so, which limits employment and social mobility—but lack of either minority language or Mandarin literacy is also affecting their community’s human capital and development overall. This also affects the literacy and attitude to schooling of younger generations, as is becoming apparent in the current crop of youngsters: illiteracy is *increasing* in many areas.

It helps to break down China’s minority-language communities into three categories (first proposed by a professor of Chinese at the University of Maryland, Minglang Zhou):

- Category 1—those that had functional writing systems broadly used before 1949 and have had regular bilingual education since: I call these the *Bi-Literate, Bi-Schooled* group;
- Category 2—those that had functional writing systems narrowly used before 1949 but have had only occasional bilingual education since: *Kind of Bi-Literate, Kind of Bi-Schooled*;
- Category 3—those that had no fully functional writing systems before 1949 and have been educated almost entirely in Mandarin since: the *Mando-Only* group.

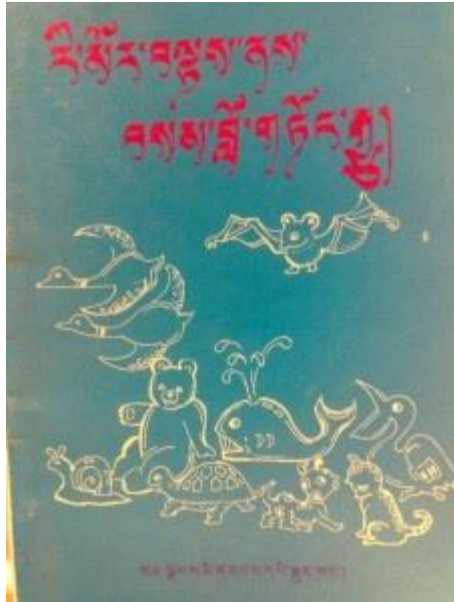
Case studies from all three categories illustrate how cultural identity factors can work against literacy campaigns.

“Literacy cannot require that the reading of the word be done in the colonizer’s language”



Page from a Freirian adult literacy reader produced by EREV Institute in Senegal

So wrote Paulo Freire, a radical educator from Brazil, the proponent of a global movement called Emancipatory Literacy. It appears that Freirian ideas on colonisation through language have not impacted on Chinese literacy policy. Studies of the Bi-Literate, Bi-Schooled group and the Kind of Bi group reveal interplays between literacy and development that suggest literacy is not an autonomous, functional instrument (backing up linguistic theory). For instance, Zhou's 2000 data shows Tibetans (Bi-Literate, Bi-Schooled) have very high Mandarin illiteracy rates (69.39%). In contrast, in other Bi-Literate, Bi-Schooled areas, illiteracy rates are below or on par with the Han (at 21.53%). What is different for Tibetans? Bilingual schooling has not been as consistent in Tibet, and the ability of the minority to use its language in official settings or to assert its culture has been comparatively restricted. Many Tibetans now speak English as their second language (but not as many read and write it). This enables them to trade with tourists and promote political causes to a wider audience than Mandarin Chinese would. They also continue to speak and write Tibetan because it is unique and special to them. The academics Wang and Phillion report that "few texts [in schools in Chinese minority-language regions] discuss minority experiences or concerns; none addresses struggles with poverty or economic and education inequalities". They give an example of a learn-to-read book whose story is about the Tibetan minority being thankful for the support of the Han, who are responsible for them. Wang and Phillion's criticism of such learn-to-read materials probably strikes a chord (a pretty clanging one at that) for readers coming from or working with minority communities: "The dominant ideology, as a result, is reproduced and instilled in minority students. Han knowledge, Han culture, and Mandarin Chinese represent advancement, science, and truth; minority knowledge, culture, and language, on the other hand, are represented as backward, unscientific, and not worth learning". I suggest literacy in both Tibetan and English is a conscious act of maintaining non-Han culture while developing, which goes to explain this minority language community's comparatively low Mandarin literacy rates, and the broader school attrition rates in the region, as schooling, with its Mandarin instruction, is associated with the central government.



Tibetan People's Publishing House in 1996: bilingual Tibetan/Chinese children's reader, found by Duncan at Sinoglot blog

The Kind of Bi category has the highest census-reported Mandarin illiteracy rates. Why, given that schooling is in Mandarin in these communities? Many of these communities have a traditional script and a missionary-introduced alphabet script, using the former in cultural rituals and elite circles, and the latter in religious activities. For instance, in Muslim North-West China, written Arabic is used for religious practices. These scripts are not associated with the school domain. My analysis is that when bilingual schooling doesn't happen in practice, this causes students to learn in their second language without the advantage of first language-to-second language transfer years, and second language literacy is hindered (along with other basic skills that are the content of those early years' classes, classes not fully comprehensible to Mandarin learners). Not having out-of-school practice opportunities for written Mandarin also makes progress slower and learning less relevant to the students. In these Kind of Bi-Literate communities, schooling isn't building upon pre-existing literacy at all. It is analogous to the lower-class students in the developed world, whose formal literacy is often below average: poverty itself doesn't make children unable to learn to read and write. Instead, the issue is the lack of correspondence between their home life and school literacy practices.

In contrast to the groups above, the data on most Mando-Only communities shows a reduction in Mandarin illiteracy, supporting my hypothesis that those for whom literacy in another language or script is *not* a feature of their cultural identity are more receptive to Mandarin literacy, because literacy does not play as strongly into identity politics.

As I noted with the Tibetan example, focusing on schooled literacy to deliver development outcomes may run into problems when school itself is perceived as culture-imposing, and this is an issue not only in areas of obvious cultural clash like Tibet. Singapore recently reformed the teaching of Mandarin reading and writing skills. In this context, the Singaporean Minister for Chinese Language said, "We started the wrong way... We had teachers who were teaching in

completely-Chinese schools. And they did not want to use any English to teach English-speaking children Chinese and that turned them off completely”. This is a dramatic testimony to the negative effects on literacy when schooling ignores home languages. In rural China, the home language is not prestigious, unlike English is in Singapore. In more stable but under-developed areas of China, discrimination against minority-language groups may be felt in small doses but on many fronts. One can imagine that in these areas, students taught in government-sanctioned Mandarin are turned off literacy even more quickly than the Singaporeans. Further, poor experiences with Mandarin literacy can cause students to generalise and reject *all* literacy, even in their community’s language, as literacy is so closely associated with school, and school with unwelcome authority and suppression of identity. Not learning becomes passive resistance against the powerful, though it is self-defeating as those without literacy, or education, will struggle to achieve their own power and voice in China.

Conclusions

This three-part series delves into the multiple roles for literacy in development generally, including as an:

1. instrument for economic development;
2. measurable indicator of development;
3. essential capability for individuals.

Through the lens of China, we can see more clearly how, in all these roles, literacy can affirm or undermine cultural identity for minorities. Many of China’s least-developed communities understand literacy as a social practice and in terms of identity construction; however, national policy is underpinned by an understanding of literacy as functional and autonomous of context and community. If literacy is being used as a key instrument of development, but social realities are not integrated into education policy, development is less successful and the benefits of development less equally shared. Perhaps more support for minority language in China will help even up the development, as the government wants, rather than entrench diversity, as the government fears.

References and Suggested Reading

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Alexandra Grey lives in China, studying Mandarin while researching linguistic issues, law and development. She's also undertaking a Masters of Applied Linguistics. Pre-China, Alexandra taught law and practised as a lawyer in Sydney, Australia. She writes for www.whydev.org and you can follow her on Twitter @Alex_Grey_