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*Literacy and Cultural Assimilation in Rural China: A Report from the Interior*

Amanda C. R. Clark

The American Library Association has long been concerned with the promotion of literacy, particularly as it pertains to the equity and global universality of access to information.<sup>1</sup> When libraries focus on the accessibility of information, literacy is understandably an initial step in the process. This essay focuses on challenges to literacy in rural China, and how technology may be improving access to information for many of the inland population.

In rural China, with a population of more than 700 million persons (roughly, sixty percent of China's total population in 1996),<sup>2</sup> literacy was seldom a priority<sup>3</sup> until the late 1950s when the Communist Party began to promote various literacy campaigns. These attempts were disrupted by the ten-year Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976.<sup>4</sup> Thus literacy in

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<sup>1</sup> See the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS)

<<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/olos/index.cfm>>

<sup>2</sup> "Urbanization is Reducing China's Rural Population," *People's Daily* (February 23, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See Glen Peterson, "The Social and Political Construction of 'Peasant Education,' 1949-1959." Session 95: The Politics of Reform and Revolution: China and Taiwan in the 1950s. Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Conference proceedings, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

rural China has been considered relevant only within the past few decades, and the current government professes the desire to eradicate illiteracy in China's rural interior.<sup>5</sup>

In a 1996 Chinese government survey, literacy rates in China were estimated to be approximately eighty-five percent.<sup>6</sup> Concern lingers, however, that the demographic age-range of the participants was not made clear and that older individuals born prior to the country's founding in 1949 -- many with higher levels of illiteracy -- may have been excluded from the survey. Other oversights in administering the survey can be noted, such as asking rural participants to recognize 1,500 characters, while urban subjects were tested on as many as 2,000. Such figures are inadequate for identifying literacy, however, as recognition of a character is different from being able to write characters from memory.

Moreover, as the 1996 test was administered both by and for the government, there may be a conflict of interest in achieving desired survey outcomes, since it is possible to teach state-required characters prior to administering the exam. Furthermore,

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<sup>5</sup> Regie Stites, "Household Literacy Environment as Contexts for Development in Rural China," in *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives*, Brian V. Street, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 171.

<sup>6</sup> See Donald J. Treiman, *The Growth and Determinants of Literacy in China*, California Center for Population Research, On-line Working Paper Series (Los Angeles: University of California, 2002); and, Xie Guodong, "Study on Literacy Programs in China," *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* 8 (1999): 71-75.

the survey tested about the same number of rural and urban subjects, while the rural population in China at that time was approximately sixty percent of the country's total population. A nationwide survey that seeks to determine literacy levels should survey those demographics with equal distribution,<sup>7</sup> surveying the population proportionately and not weighting the more highly educated urban group. It is therefore likely that literacy rates as determined in the results of the 1996 survey are significantly lower than estimated.<sup>8</sup>

Literacy is only one facet of rural struggles in China's interior. While significant populations remain largely textually illiterate, they are increasingly technologically savvy. For example, inexpensive, personally owned cell phones vastly outnumber personal computers. In 2006, there were 461 million mobile phone users, a number 3.5 times larger than the number of Internet users—nearly the reverse percentage of that found in the western hemisphere.<sup>9</sup> While I do not discount the importance of textual literacy, I offer this reflection as an antidote to assumptions regarding those traditionally mislabeled as “ignorant” or “backward.” Simultaneously considering issues of print culture and technological adeptness as valued by these populations will offer a more

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<sup>7</sup> Treiman, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Treiman, *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan J. H. Zhu and Enhai Wang, “Diffusion, Use, and Effect of the Internet in China,” *Communications of the ACM* 48, no. 4 (April 2005): 49-53.

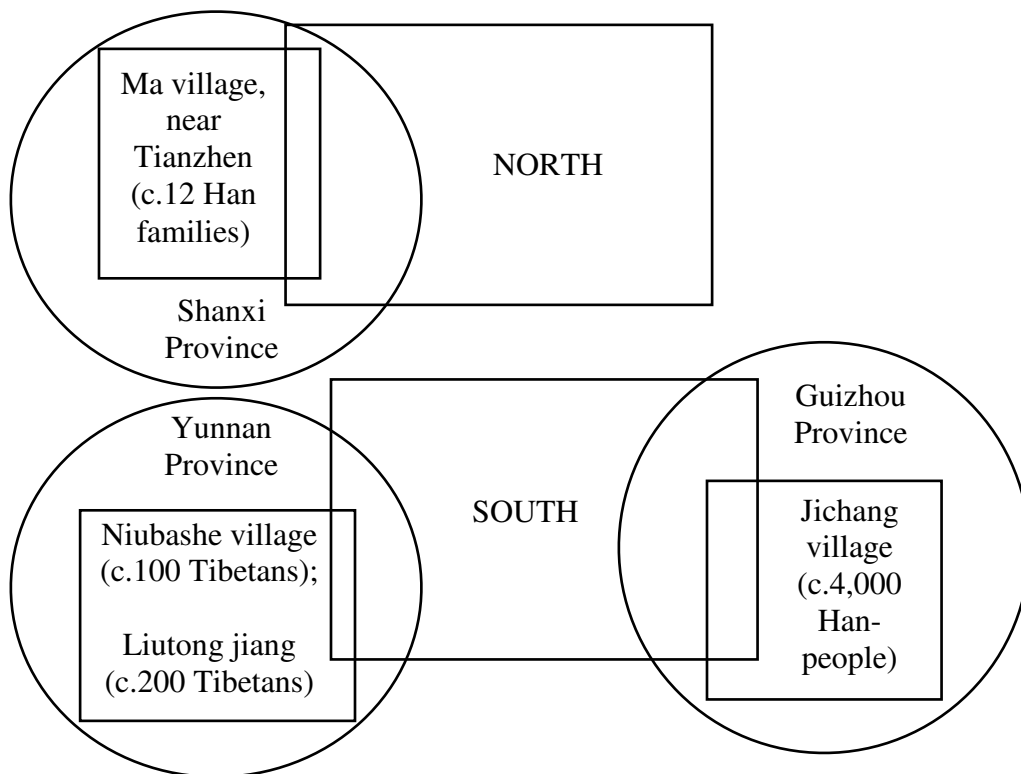
balanced perspective when considering local literacy levels. What surfaces is a complicated situation, for in rural communities, technological literacy may be a priority that outweighs a desire for textual literacy.<sup>10</sup>

While much of rural China suffers from unfortunately low levels of textual literacy, these areas are also rapidly advancing in technological literacy accompanied by an interest in the popular media and print cultures that co-exist culturally with these technologies. When considering China's rural interior, it might well be worth using a more multidimensional approach regarding issues of literacy and its byproduct, cultural assimilation.

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<sup>10</sup> See also Chen and Ravallion's study on living standards in rural China: Chen Shaohua and Martin Ravallion, "Data in Transition: Assessing Rural Living Standards in Southern China," *China Economic Review* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 23-56.

In a country that shares borders with fourteen neighboring countries and boasts fifty-six distinct minority groups, it is important to avoid making blanket assumptions regarding China. What is true for one region may not be true for another, since within each province are numerous culturally unique regions. Thus, in conducting this research, I considered disparate regions at vast distances from one another. Moreover, urban dwellers are disproportionately racially Han, while rural dwellers include both Han and most minority groups. It is logical, therefore, that researchers look beyond the easily accessible urban environment of the eastern seaboard to those interior regions that house the majority of the Chinese populace of both Han and minority peoples. This diagram demonstrates in schematic form the geographic regions and demographics considered in



this report.

My research was conducted in two parts: the first in 2008 with subsequent follow-up on-site research in 2011 while accompanying Dr. Patrick Lucas, who was conducting his own research on ethnic minorities in China. We travelled to four remote villages (Tianzhen, Niubashe, Liutong jiang, and Jichang) in three provinces: Shanxi Province in north-central China (2008 and 2011), and Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces in the south and southwest (2008). Within these areas we visited both Han people (who constitute the majority of Chinese nationals) and Tibetan minority groups. Poverty was a unifying factor among all those visited. In terms of issues directly related to literacy, the north/south, Han/Tibetan contexts were striking. In the following paragraphs I will briefly outline those elements that all four villages had in common, but more specifically I will consider the role of nationalism, assimilation, and modernization within the greater project of universal literacy and information access goals. I will expand briefly on the theme of Sinification, or assimilation, through the use of nationalized schooling within the two Tibetan villages visited. I was able to conduct informal oral interviews with various residents, a variation of *in situ* observation.

## **Findings**

Within Deqin county in the northwest corner of Yunnan Province, and specifically within the Foshan district (a Tibetan autonomous region), I visited the 100-person

Tibetan village of Niubashe. Those who live there are, in general, all ethnic Tibetan relatives of one another. As farmers, they work from early morning to late evening, harvesting corn and sunflower seeds, and tending their vineyards, the major source of their income. This small village is located in a valley surrounded by the Himalayas at an altitude of roughly 2,400 meters, or nearly 8,000 feet. Entry into the village is by a narrow, one-lane gravel and dirt road prone to collapse and slides.

It is a remote and impoverished area. The nearest town, which boasts only a clinic, not a hospital, is more than a two-hour drive in good weather conditions. The pride of the village is a small, three-room schoolhouse with a multi-use athletic court, the type of compact, local elementary school common in remote areas. Because no children in the village were then of elementary school age, the elderly resident schoolteacher was on leave, farming instead of teaching, waiting for future pupils. It is not uncommon for village schoolteachers to have an education level only marginally higher than that of their fellow villagers, and those who leave the villages to pursue higher education rarely return—something of an epidemic in China’s countryside. The families I met during my visit in the Niubashe village whose children had gone away to college were typical in that the post-graduation children remained in those urban environments, visiting the village only during the spring holiday.

The school, integrated among the houses, is centrally placed within the village. Niubashe itself is wholly Tibetan and the only other publicly used structure is a small Buddhist shrine, so the national flag of the Chinese government flying from the school



associates the village with the ruling government and makes the school itself an isolated point of connection to the whole of China. While teaching standards vary dramatically, these village schools teach in Mandarin Chinese and use standardized Mandarin-language textbooks, thus promoting Han Chinese culture over their native Tibetan language and way of life.

For many of the pupils in this and neighboring villages, the language spoken at home is Tibetan, and their exposure to Mandarin Chinese comes from attending school classes and from watching television at home. This type of standardized schooling is also relatively recent to remote rural China; often only those born after the early 1980s have had access to schooling of this sort. Frequently, villagers past the age of fifty have little if any Mandarin speaking ability, and while some may read Tibetan, elderly women are not usually literate. In addition to Tibetan, those younger individuals tend to speak Mandarin comfortably, though with a heavily accented dialect, and are literate in the universal Chinese written language. In my interviews, I noted that their particular form of Mandarin does not initially exhibit a high level of literacy (as many American teenagers, one might argue, likewise may not exhibit high levels of English literacy). Due to the limited nature of the research excursion, I was unable to determine the competency levels of Tibetan language literacy, yet it must be noted that current China-wide employment trends reward standard Mandarin language use. Since library institutions are predicated on a culture of literacy and education (and funding), and since we find these factors still

lagging in rural China, it should not be surprising to find a dearth of libraries in such a setting.

Moreover, it is worth considering issues of cultural assimilation in tandem with issues of literacy, as this plays a particular role in rural China. Those youth who have undergone education do not, as noticed in Niubashe, often wear the traditional ethnic garments worn by their elders. The cultural gap between parent and child is growing increasingly wider. Is there a correlation between the Mandarin Chinese/Han education system, literacy, access to information (especially television broadcasts), and cultural behavior? Within the Niubashe village dwellings that I visited, the common rooms were often adorned with posters of the city of Lhasa, whereas younger household members tended to decorate their rooms with posters of mainstream Han Chinese pop-stars, not, I emphasize, images of traditional Tibet or Tibetans. Of all the homes I visited, books were overtly present only in the home in which two daughters had attended university and subsequently moved away to cities. Satellite television, provided in many cases by the government, was a staple fixture in nearly every home I visited in Niubashe and the other villages. In one home, I observed elderly Tibetans watching culturally Tibetan programming, while the family whose daughters had attended university were watching Mandarin language programming broadcast from Beijing.

A point of comparison is the larger village of Liutong jiang, home to approximately 200 persons. Liutong jiang is the largest of six remote villages in the area, and like Niubashe, harvests corn, grapes, and other fruits. I spoke at length with Mrs.

Zuoma, the ethnically Tibetan school teacher in residence at Liutong jiang. At the time, she lived within the school compound along with several students who boarded in dorm rooms; she and the students shared a collective shower and bathing quarters. Teacher Zuoma was a villager without exceptional training, but had a welcoming personality, appeared to be extremely proud of her students, and was motherly toward them. Her husband taught in a nearby village.

At this particular school the children were between five and eight years old, roughly grades one through three, and several were from neighboring villages, necessitating on-site housing. Of the thirteen Tibetan students, one was female and five resided at the school. One boy offered to demonstrate his reading ability, reading in Mandarin from a children's primer about fifteen pages in length. When these students finish their last year at this school they may, though not necessarily will, travel twenty kilometers to attend a more advanced school.

The Liutong jiang school compound included an athletic court and a building housing several classrooms and storerooms. At the center of the compound was a garden that the students tended, and a large engraved stone that told the history of the school. Along with the Buddhist stupa recently built in the village, the school was a point of pride among the villagers and several villagers directed me to it prior to my asking to see it.

These ethnic minority villages offer an interesting counterpoint to several additional visits to Han nationality villages. In China's southwest Guizhou Province, I

visited Jichang village with a population of 4,000. While this size would be considered a town by American definition, its economic level and lack of modern amenities identify it as a village. The residents of Jichang are racially Han; however, they consider themselves Tunpuren people of Ming dynasty origin, and continue to wear traditional costumes and coiffeur that date back some 600 years. The harvest is primarily rice and corn. Due in part to their larger size and more central location—but perhaps also because of their status as Han—their school complex was quite large, more equivalent in size to commensurate schools in America.

This village had a strong government presence, and I had the opportunity to visit the Party official's residence during my research. As customary, the decor that I saw in the house included several religious statues, good luck posters, and a television; no books or magazines were evident. Elderly women in this village, like other villages, are generally illiterate; men of the same age, somewhat less so. These same village women wear traditional clothing and shoes, with sewing a prominent activity. As in all the villages I visited, the culture was one of agricultural labor from pre-dawn to post-dusk. When I asked how the village would celebrate the National Holiday, I was informed by the Party official that they were too busy with their labors to celebrate. In a village that cannot find time to honor one of the country's most celebrated holidays, where, it might be asked, could a place be found for libraries? In such a society, literacy is often interpreted as a luxury.

The rural and remote farming communities I visited are considered fortunate to have a schoolhouse; in some cases they are additionally fortunate to have proper textbooks and adequate chalk. In such a setting, library services are seldom a consideration. At one village of the Miao minority group in Guizhou Province, pencil boxes were a novel item. Indeed, some villages lack both schoolhouses and teachers. In north-central China, near Tianzhen in Shanxi Province, I visited a Han village made up of several families surnamed Ma. I made my first visit to this village in 2008 and was able to return in 2011 to assess changes. In both visits, I spent time in the traditional mud-formed dwelling belonging to one particular family of five: father, mother, two daughters aged fourteen and twelve, and son, aged ten. A low mud wall surrounded the outside yard of chickens and dogs. Inside, in 2008, the walls of the one-room dwelling were festooned with magazine clippings of Chinese pop-stars. The entire family slept together on a traditional, large brick bed, called a *kang*, which is heated from below, staving off deadly winter chill and regulating heat in the summer. The people of this region are culturally shy, due in part to the harsh climate, and speak with a heavy dialect.

The television, of which they seemed quite proud, used a government satellite feed. I inquired regarding schooling and teaching within the village and was told that the village had neither schoolhouse nor teacher but that “sometimes someone will come to the village and teach.” It was unclear how frequently someone came, or who the teacher might be. On the rear wall of the interior, scratched into the paint, were the names of the five family members, written in a stiff hand. The poor quality of execution, and that this

was the only writing visible in the house, may be indicative of the literacy levels found there.

Demonstrating technological savvy, the eldest Ma daughter used her cell-phone to record a popular song being broadcast on television. In my field notes from 2008, I noted the curious mix of urban and rural fixtures found in this dwelling, and I moreover noted my speculation that these children, like so many found in rural China, might perhaps leave for the cities when they were old enough to depart. Also in 2008, Mr. Ma informed me that he knew only that his father and his father's father had lived and farmed in this village, and had in fact inhabited this same house, but that they had no further knowledge or record of their history, either oral or written. In a small farming community such as this, literacy may not have been viewed as a necessity for survival; upon my asking, Mr. Ma told me that the family "does not always have the opportunity to eat meat each month."

These examples assist in clarifying some of the conditions associated with illiteracy in rural China. It is additionally revealing to consider a family's economic poverty when reflecting on their appreciation for, and interest in, mass media and print culture. The younger members of the Ma family possessed a relative degree of comfort in using technology, particularly cellular phones, and an ability to operate a television.

In 2011, I returned to the Ma village near Tianzhen and visited the same Ma household. I found the dwelling not much changed, though a bit worse for wear. What was striking upon this follow-up visit was the disappearance of the children in the village

as a whole. Within this household of five, all three children had left farming to work in the city. At the time, the elder daughter was seventeen, the younger daughter fifteen, and the son, only thirteen. Even at such young ages, these children had moved from their home to seek employment, material gain, and a less bitter lifestyle. Under such circumstances, formal education, when available, often ceases upon employment. I cannot adequately convey the desolate atmosphere of a childless village; it may be speculated that this village now contains the last of its members and may likely die with them.

In summary, there were no libraries to be found in any of the villages I visited. Some might argue that there is no *place* in rural Chinese villages for libraries. Even if the population is widely literate, villagers who work in the fields seven days a week, and who continue life-sustaining chores into the evening hours, typically choose to spend their few leisure hours gathered socially in front of a television. In the more stagnant winter months, many preserve food and conduct time-consuming activities, such as holding wedding ceremonies. Theoretically, a library could be used in the winter months if there were literacy levels to support it; however, with the lure and ease-of-use of television, one wonders how attractive the option of reading might be by comparison.

While the library community worldwide celebrates advanced learning and literacy, the situation in rural China is a complicated one. The primary trends seen in these villages are a rapid Sinicization among the youth of ethnic minorities, and a movement among all of the youth toward Han-dominant urban centers—motivations that are largely

fueled by the prospect of material gain. Further complicating this report is the issue of technological literacy versus traditionally understood textual literacy.

By examining literacy in several of rural China's remote villages, we can see the need for long-term research in better assessing the cultural effects of literacy on those agrarian populations that have remained, at least historically, educationally stagnant. At the outset, several concerns arise regarding the erasure of culture—an issue currently of concern in the American library community regarding immigrants and successful library services. While the function of librarian and educator may be viewed as facilitators of the transmission of knowledge, their sometimes-unintended role in the cultural assimilation, or marginalization, of a group of people is far less clearly understood.

Information access in China is a complex web of variables. Access to information is censored at varying degrees at all levels, and a large population is “censored” in that they are illiterate. As the library profession becomes increasingly international, such issues of literacy and culture may, it is to be hoped, move to the foreground.