

THE POWER OF WORDS: LITERACY AND REVOLUTION IN SOUTH CHINA, 1949–1995

Glen Peterson (1997). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press

The Power of Words is a comprehensive and richly detailed history of the Chinese revolutionary government's efforts, over five decades, to raise literacy levels in Guangdong province. Peterson describes and analyzes the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to provide universal elementary and adult education programs to eradicate illiteracy among the 30 plus million (in 1949) residents of Guangdong—a linguistically diverse, largely rural, and politically conservative province. Several prior studies (e.g., Hayford, 1987) have informed western readers about the magnitude of the challenges faced, and the achievements made, during China's literacy campaigns. However, Peterson brings new interpretations and understandings of China's epic popular literacy education efforts that demand educators re-assess the findings of those earlier studies.

Peterson's goal is not an analysis of the adult literacy campaigns and school policies to assess their outcomes; instead he focuses on the state's literacy ideologies and how they have shifted over time. *The Power of Words* addresses four broad topics: an exploration of the meanings of literacy in China since 1949 from social, economic, cultural and political perspectives; a reconstruction of the history of local responses to state literacy programs; an analysis of the relationship of literacy to social structures in Guangdong; and a critique of existing narratives of literacy and social development in China to re-cast the state's literacy efforts following the decollectivisation and economic restructuring policies introduced in the 1980s. With 11 chapters, extensive footnotes, and a very comprehensive bibliography *The Power of Words* is a well edited and, with the exception of its too limited appendix of literacy statistics, thoroughly documented report of a massive social and educational change initiative.

The Power of Words is based on a multi-method approach; it is not an ethnography, nor a macro-level survey with vignettes of Chinese literacy work and policy outcomes. Peterson spent sufficient time in Guangdong to glean rich detail from local archival research, document analysis, and interviews—which, when combined with a thorough critique of the published literature in English, results in an impressive scholarly text. As others have observed, discussions of national and international definitions of literacy and related statistics on the distribution of illiteracy frequently strain the attention and credulity of the most conscientious reader. Peterson claims to have kept his use of provincial and national statistics to a minimum, but still less would have been preferable. To my

surprise and relief, I found the attention to other detail in this well written and edited book does not detract from its readability.

My prior reading about adult literacy campaigns in China left me with the impression that the greatest barriers to their success were the sheer size of the illiterate population, the shortage of resources following the revolution, and the unwieldy operations of the state bureaucracy. From my reading of the literature I thought the liberation of the peasant class through land redistribution, communal farming, and rural education were among Mao Zedong's and the CCP's most firmly established priorities. However, Peterson offers new insights into the campaigns and rural education policies. Peterson challenges previous conceptions of Chinese literacy education history through his analysis of the contradictions in Mao's social, economic, and education policies; description of the resistance in rural areas to the establishment of a two-tier education system which privileged urban populations; documentation of disagreements among campaign strategists regarding language reform options; and re-examination of the campaign targets and of the disabling aspects of CCP political doctrine and orthodoxy.

Peterson argues that the state policy of a two-tier education system that directed most educational resources to urban schools and required county governments to rely on local resources and volunteers perpetuated social and economic inequalities. By documenting how resources were taken from adult literacy education and re-directed to schools for the privileged urban class, Peterson exposes the failure of the CCP to serve peasants' interests. Further, he claims that the peasant class was betrayed by the CCP, which placed industrial growth and political ambition ahead of liberatory education and economic relief for the rural masses. Another western misinterpretations, according to Peterson, is that Mandarin, as reported by Bhola (1984) to UNESCO, was widely and popularly accepted throughout China for literacy education. Rather, Peterson states, "Guangdong villagers and political leaders alike openly resisted these efforts to impose an artificial linguistic environment" (p. 114). Peterson peels away other misinterpretations such as, for example, the prevalence of unanimity within the Chinese government's planning processes. According to Peterson, CCP politicians at the national and provincial levels were frequently engaged in disputes among themselves and with national and provincial education officials and local cadre leaders.

The traditional value placed on education by Chinese villagers is discussed from a socio-cultural perspective that extends beyond the oversimplifications of Confucianism that mars the work of others. Peterson's descriptions and analyses of the village teacher and his role (practically all were male), the importance of education as a means to escape from subsistence farming, and the needs for

literacy created by communalization in the 1950s are devoid of rhetorical flourishes and reification.

So how did Guangdong fare from 50 years of state adult and elementary school literacy efforts? There were large disparities in literacy gains between counties. Those areas of the province where literacy had been well established by 1949 made the greatest gains. In Meixian, an area with few economic opportunities, poverty drove literacy acquisition to high levels whereas in the Pearl River Delta rural-urban commerce and lineage support for education were the main factors supporting high literacy gains. Minority populations, of which there are 46, fared least well. Gender differences in literacy achievement also remained significant, as families continued the traditional practice of favoring boys rather than girls to receive elementary education. Today, according to Peterson, Guangdong has the highest ratio of female to male illiterates of any province in China at 11:4.

What did Peterson conclude about the state's interest in eradicating rural literacy? I urge readers to reflect on current discourses about the commodification of literacy in the west and the ubiquitous interests of the state in all its variations globally as they consider Peterson's conclusion:

The mass literacy efforts in China's countryside after 1949 cannot be understood apart from the state's larger political project of creating a class of statutory peasants, tied permanently to their collectives. The ideological premise underlying the literacy drive was crucially involved—along with ration cards, residential status and other mobility restrictions—in the "pinning down" of the Chinese peasantry to the land where the production of China's precarious food supply occurred. (p. 180)

International development and education planners, adult education faculty, and graduate students with interests in comparative literacy may wish to add *The Power of Words* to their must-read list.

References

- Bhola, H. S. (1984). *Campaigning for literacy: Eight national experiences of the twentieth century, with a memorandum to decision makers*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Hayford, C. W. (1987). Literacy movements in modern China. In R. F. Arnove & H. J. Graff (Eds.), *National literacy campaigns: Historical and comparative aspects* (pp. 147-171). New York: Plenum Press.

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