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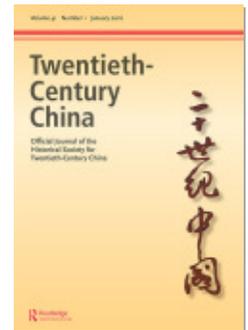
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Soviet

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VILLAGERS INTO COMRADES: LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE JIANGXI SOVIET

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This article sheds light on the literacy-education mechanism by which the literacy programs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were able to mobilize villagers during the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931–1934). Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing throughout the Jiangxi period, the CCP gave substantial attention to literacy education. Based on political documents and published literacy primers, this article explores the CCP's notion of what was possible and desirable with respect to the way the party and villagers would participate in political life. The Jiangxi Soviet conceived of literacy education within the context of military and political struggle against the Nationalists. Literacy education in this period reflected the party's desire to socialize villagers into its revolution, equipping them with a class-centered worldview and transforming them into Communist comrades. Meanwhile, owing to the modernization ideology of literacy formed around the turn of the twentieth century in China, literacy education also served as the legitimating symbol for the soviet government's rule nationwide.

KEYWORDS: *Chinese Communist Party, Jiangxi Soviet, literacy education, mass mobilization*

All children:
come to study;
come to join the revolution.
Study hard [and]
strive for the revolution.

I want to feed myself;
I need revolution.
You want to clothe yourself;
you need revolution.
He wants to study;
he needs revolution.

小孩們
來讀書
來革命

努力讀書
努力革命

我要吃飯
我要革命
你要穿衣
你要革命
他要讀書
他要革命

Readers for Red Children (紅孩兒讀本 *Honghaier duben*)¹

In 1936, during his visit to the Communist base at Yan'an, the American journalist Edgar Snow asked a 17-year-old soldier nicknamed “Old Dog” why he had joined the Communist movement. Old Dog, who had joined the Reds in the Fujian part of the soviet in the early 1930s, responded in a simple way. He declared, “The Red Army has taught me to read and to write.”² Literacy appeared to play an essential role in enlisting popular support for the revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Literacy texts such as the *Readers for Red Children* offer us insight into the reasons. Their slogan-like sentences enforced an impression that a political revolution was a precondition for meeting all the basic needs of the lower class. Peasants learned to read the words and simultaneously learned to read the world in a particular way.

Like other political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which literacy education played a role in nation-building,³ the Chinese Communists' literacy programs were more than simply an attempt to teach the local populace the skills of reading and writing. Inspired by Soviet Russia's literacy campaign during its civil war (1917–1921) and First Five-Year Plan (1928–1933), the CCP leaders perceived literacy as a key part of the party's ongoing military and political struggles against the Nationalists and its projection of a brand-new society and a regime yet to be built.⁴

¹ *Honghaier duben* was a series of readers designated, although not exclusively, for children from poor families. Adults of the working class were also encouraged to read. Multiple county governments in the Jiangxi Soviet reprinted and published this title. The excerpt cited here comes from a reprint from Yongfeng County preserved in Chen Cheng, comp., *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao* (Collection of Chinese Communist materials in the Shisou Archives) (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1960), microfilm.

² Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (1938; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1968), 83.

³ For example, on literacy efforts in nineteenth-century Sweden, see Egil Johansson, “Literacy Campaign in Sweden,” in Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds., *National Literacy Campaigns in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2008), 65–98; on literacy campaigns in Vietnam (1945–1977), in Cuba following its 1959 revolution, and in Tanzania in the 1970s, see H. S. Bholá, *Campaigning for Literacy: A Critical Analysis of Some Selected Literacy Campaigns of the Twentieth Century, with a Memorandum to Decision Makers* (Ottawa: International Council for Adult Education, 1981).

⁴ For Soviet Russia's literacy campaigns, see Ben Eklof, “Russian Literacy Campaigns,” in Arnove and Graff, *National Literacy Campaigns*, 123–45. For the CCP's understanding of Soviet Russia's literacy campaigns, see Luo Fu, “Lun Suwei'ai zhengquan de wenhua jiaoyu zhengce” (Comments on the cultural and educational policies of the Soviet regime), September 15, 1933, in Gannan Teachers' College and Jiangxi Academy of Educational Science, comp.,

In 1927, after the rupture of the first period of cooperation between the Guomindang (GMD; the Chinese Nationalist Party) and the CCP, the CCP changed its approach to Communist revolution and retreated from urban areas into rural regions, where the majority of residents were illiterate. On November 7, 1931, after thwarting the GMD's third encirclement campaign, the CCP established the Chinese Soviet Republic.⁵ This was the largest Communist revolutionary base area; it included 34 counties spread across Fujian (20 counties), Jiangxi (13), and Guangdong (1). Although land reform, administrative control, and military survival were its main preoccupations, the Jiangxi Soviet also gave substantial attention to literacy education beginning in the late 1920s and continuing throughout the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931–1934). This literacy effort, although significant, has been neglected in previous studies.

Most existing studies that address education's role in China's Communist revolution focus on formal schooling. In their studies of secondary and tertiary schools, both Xiaoping Cong and Wen-hsin Yeh have found that educational experiences in teachers' schools and colleges in the 1930s led a great number of students to become sympathetic to the CCP.⁶ In his study of the Jinggangshan revolutionary base area, Stephen Averill confirms that the earliest revolutionaries in Jiangxi were graduates of the new school systems in urban centers.⁷

This article presents a different facet of the story by focusing on the nonformal, non-school-based education in the countryside. It examines how the CCP envisioned the place of literacy education as a social and mass learning program in its plans to build power and make revolution. Further, it explores the methods used and the nature of the literacy the party provided to village students and what some of the villagers' responses were to these initiatives. This article focuses on the party's understanding of and uses for literacy education as they were formulated in its policies and government documents. I am aware that the CCP is not monolithic and that there were divergences among party leaders' opinions about mass education. But the story about the policy-making process that involved debating and reconciling various thoughts needs to be addressed in separate articles. In this article, I do not

Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian (Collection of educational documents of the Jiangxi Soviet) (Ganzhou: Gannan Teachers' College, 1985), 16–21; Kai Feng, "Suwei'ai de jiaoyu zhengce" (Soviet education policies), October 20, 1933, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 30–38; A Wei, "Lun xiaomie wenmang yundong" (Comments on anti-illiteracy campaigns), November 26, 1933, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 56–60.

⁵ The Chinese Soviet Republic is usually referred to as the Jiangxi Soviet, since its largest component territory was the Jiangxi-Fujian base area and its capital was at Ruijin, Jiangxi.

⁶ Xiaoping Cong, *Teachers' Schools and the Making of the Modern Chinese Nation-State 1897–1937* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Wen-hsin Yeh, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Cong argues that many students at teachers' schools, most of whom came from less well-to-do rural families, were attracted to the CCP because of their discontent with the Nationalist government's weak rural reform efforts and its sluggish resistance to Japanese invasion. Meanwhile, students who could afford higher education, as Yeh's book shows, also tended to side with the Communists, because of their sense of alienation in the 1930s, the result of a tension between their expectation of high status and the reality that educational attainment no longer carried the cultural value it had in the past. Both studies show that formal schooling during the Republican period played a noticeable role in nurturing social insurgents.

⁷ Stephen Averill, *Revolution in the Highlands: China's Jinggangshan Base Area* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

attempt to construct a comprehensive study of the attitude of the populace toward the CCP's literacy-learning initiatives and the actual effects of these literacy efforts in rural society, either. These questions are equally important but hard to answer due to the lack of records produced by villagers and left for the historian to consult.⁸

Furthermore, this article also engages with studies of the Jiangxi Soviet, a crucial experimental period for the Chinese Communists' state-building. Recent scholarly works show that local conflicts and tensions played a significant role in shaping the actual revolutionary process in this area. Both Averill's and Gregor Benton's studies treat the Communists in terms of power competitors embedded in local society, rather than as a force imposed from outside. Instead of adhering dogmatically to ideological prescriptions, the Communist cadres adapted to the local environment and navigated through existing social tensions pragmatically. The Communists developed essential survival skills in southern China.⁹ Averill's and Benton's research challenges the party's standard narrative of this period, which condemns the Comintern adherent Wang Ming (王明 1904–1974) and his strategic mistakes for the loss of the Jiangxi Soviet. In the party's own self-reflection, ideology and revolutionary ideals were always the key to its acquisition of power.

It was crucial for the CCP to interact with existing social networks and blend into particular local settings. However, for a newly emerging regime in competition with the ruling authority, it was also important for the CCP to distinguish itself from other political forces and to brand itself as the one that could lead China to a promising future. In this respect, ideology played a significant role. Through the perspective of literacy programs, this article provides an account that balances the party's local pragmatic imperatives with revolutionary ideals. The Jiangxi Soviet's literacy programs involved a two-pronged process. One served immediate needs: training Communist soldiers and other personnel necessary for warfare. The other aimed much more at the future: transforming villagers into comrades and nurturing soviet culture in its base areas. These programs demonstrated that pragmatic and idealistic goals were not mutually exclusive within literacy education.

Most directly, the Jiangxi Soviet's literacy programs were designed to solve the problems of sectionalism and administrative fragmentation. There is no doubt that military survival was the primary concern of the Jiangxi Soviet. Effective military coordination across the whole Jiangxi Soviet area required a cohesive administration system, which the Jiangxi Soviet lacked when the party began to consolidate its power in this border area of three provinces. National party leaders did not begin to take refuge in this region until the early 1930s, after Mao Zedong and Zhu De integrated several local peasant regimes into a Communist base area through military expansion. The CCP was sensitive to the perception of villagers that it was not a local power. In response, the CCP turned to literacy education.

⁸ For this article, I was able to glean pieces of information from the CCP's archives and from the literature of contemporary journalists and writers about villagers' involvement in literacy learning. With the recent emergence of a body of memoirs by ordinary revolutionary veterans, further research might be done with a focus on individuals', or a selected group's, attitudes toward the CCP's literacy drive in the early twentieth century.

⁹ See Averill, *Revolution in the Highlands* and Gregor Benton, *Mountain Fires: The Red Army's Three-Year War in South China, 1934–1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

As Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff assert, “literacy and adult education efforts are always informed and oriented by particular political world views of societal elites and dominant groups.”¹⁰ Literacy education initiatives in the Jiangxi Soviet were no different in this regard. They reflected the CCP’s desire to socialize villagers into its Communist movement, equip them with a class-centered worldview, and transform them into committed comrades. The party relied on literacy education to strengthen the cultural connection among the people within the Jiangxi Soviet and to form a sense of collective identity and community. Literacy education also helped the CCP to strengthen communication between the party and local government while centralizing its own power.

These local imperatives coexisted with national and international discourses that valued literacy education as central to modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese elites had made the lower class the target of their modernizing projects.¹¹ Essays by reform-minded scholars, the central government’s educational policies, and reports on literacy campaigns in such foreign countries as Soviet Russia, British India, and Kemalist Turkey all depicted mass literacy education as a prerequisite for national salvation. Such direct, linear connection between literacy and modernization, a belief that Harvey Graff designates the “literacy myth,” ignores the historical complexity and contingency of literacy’s interaction with sociopolitical changes. This simple declarative claim is, however, powerful, because it is “an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes” and a widely adopted narrative championing mass literacy.¹² In early twentieth-century China, this literacy ideology would label the CCP’s literacy projects as patriotic. It also provided a perfect gloss to the party’s pragmatically, locally, and politically oriented motivations, making its literacy initiatives acceptable to audiences beyond the Jiangxi Soviet.

THE LEGACY OF MODERNIZATION

The notion of mass literacy as a prerequisite for China’s national independence and modernization was a historical product. It began to take form around the turn of the twentieth century. Before this, the pursuit of literacy had been driven by familial or individual interest, whether to advance personal prestige, power, and wealth through government service or to meet practical needs in daily life.¹³ However, the context of national crisis in the face of foreign imperialism decisively transformed literacy’s sphere of practice from private to public. Influential reform-

¹⁰ Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, “Introduction,” in Arnove and Graff, *National Literacy Campaigns*, 9.

¹¹ Members of social elites who advocated popular education as a way to reform social customs and train a new citizenry included professional educators, such as the founder of *Educational World* (*Jiaoyu shijie*), Luo Zhenyu (1866–1940); the chief editor of *The Educational Review* (*Jiaoyu zazhi*), Lubi Kui (1886–1941); and the chief editor of *Eastern Miscellany* (*Dongfang zazhi*), Zhang Yuanji (1866–1959); as well as reformists such as Liang Qichao. See Paul J. Bailey, *Reform the People, Changing Attitudes Towards Popular Education in Early Twentieth-Century China* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 64–97.

¹² Harvey Graff, “The Literacy Myth at Thirty,” *Journal of Social History* 43 (Spring 2010): 638.

¹³ For popular literacy during the Qing dynasty, see Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 24–53, 128–33.

minded scholars, such as Liang Qichao, ardently argued that literacy and basic education were the foundation for training new citizens (新民 *xinmin*) for a qualitatively different, modernized society.¹⁴

The Qing court, the early Republican regimes, and the GMD all shared Liang's idea that mass literacy was a *precondition* to building a new society, either constitutional or republican, under their leadership. The CCP in the Jiangxi Soviet, in contrast, believed mass literacy could only be achieved *after* the establishment of a proletarian state.¹⁵ Thus, although the CCP shuffled the sequence between mass literacy and state-building, it also endorsed this modernization ideology of literacy.

As the Communist educator Yang Xianjiang (杨贤江 1895–1931) pointed out in the early 1930s, the right to education depended on property rights, and education was the vehicle for class dominance.¹⁶ The CCP did not perceive literacy as a yardstick for gauging a person's social and political capability and his/her place in Soviet China. There were Communist cadres who could not read and write. Class and family background, not literacy, were the indicators of an individual's loyalty to the new society. Literacy was allocated to the category of superstructure, which was subordinated to revolutionary war and class struggle. Nevertheless, to make a Communist revolution also required teaching at least some of the workers and peasants to read and write, as literacy education was essential to raise class consciousness. This consideration explained why the CCP invested in mass education from the very beginning of its revolution.

Within the Jiangxi Soviet, class hierarchy determined people's right to receive education. The leadership gave poor peasants and their offspring priority in accessing education programs and prohibited children from families that fell into the categories of well-to-do peasant, landlord, shopkeeper, factory owner, and artisan from entering middle school.¹⁷ Neither Qing nor GMD policies included such class-based "discrimination" in regard to educational opportunity.

Clearly, the CCP had a distinctive notion about literacy and its political value. At the same time, the CCP vigorously fostered the image of Communist revolutionaries teaching illiterate peasants how to read and write. Such an image highlighted the "sincerity" of the CCP devotion to mass literacy but without specific information about the kinds of literacy taught. This heroic but vague image allowed the party to benefit from the discourse, advocated by elites in the early twentieth century, about literacy as the foundation for national salvation and social progress. The modernization agenda made its literacy crusade serve as a sacred and powerful legitimizing symbol for the Communist movement and an attraction for potential adherents across the country.

The Chinese intelligentsia constituted one of the groups that were primed to find the CCP's literacy project appealing. The fervor for educating the general populace

¹⁴ On changes in the educational ideologies of Qing elites and the government, see Bailey, *Reform the People*, 18, 42, and 74; and Wu Fang, *Zhonghua jiaoyu sixiang yanjiu* (Studies of Chinese education ideologies) (Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1992), 432.

¹⁵ Luo Fu, "Lun Suwei'ai, zhengquan de wenhua jiaoyu zhengce," 16.

¹⁶ Yang Xianjiang, *Yang Xianjiang jiaoyu wenji* (Anthology of Yang Xianjiang's essays on education) (Beijing: Jiaoyu kexue chubanshe, 1982), 418–20.

¹⁷ "Xiang-E-Gan gongnongbing Suwei'ai diyici daibiao dahui wenhua wenti jueyi an" (Decisions on cultural issues by the First Congress of the Soviet of Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers in Xiang-E-Gan Province), September 23, 1931, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 136.

grew ever stronger among educated circles during the May Fourth movement (1915–1921). While searching for China's modernity, the young intelligentsia blamed the illiterate masses for the failure of the 1911 Revolution to produce a modern democratic polity. Enlightening the general populace through literacy training, therefore, took on tremendous significance and required immediate action. The economically and politically disadvantaged—the common people—caught the national attention thanks to advocacy by the Mass Education Movement.

Y. C. James Yen (1890–1990) initiated and led the Mass Education Movement in the early 1920s.¹⁸ It called attention to social inequities and the widening literacy gap between China's urban and rural residents. When this movement merged with the rural reconstruction program in 1926, popular literacy became a fundamental stepping stone for reforming society and economy in China's countryside. This belief in the importance of rural literacy training was widespread throughout the 1930s. Defining its literacy programs as serving the interests of poor peasants, the CCP rode on the high tide of nationwide zeal to reform the rural sector culturally, economically, and socially. Via its literacy programs, the Chinese Communists managed to place themselves and their rural movement in the spotlight.

The continuous calls for mass literacy from the late Qing into the GMD era in the 1930s implied the failure and inefficiency of those regimes in carrying out this critical task—mass literacy education. As a revolutionary force challenging the established order, the CCP benefited from rhetoric that claimed that the majority of Chinese were still illiterate in the 1930s, in spite of the mass education projects initiated by government authorities since the turn of the twentieth century. The persistent problem of illiteracy repeatedly called for a prompt solution. The Jiangxi Soviet responded, and intended to present itself as a capable government that could bring mass literacy to its districts in a timely manner.

The charm of this modernization ideology rests on the fact that it promised a modernity achieved through mass literacy without specifying what the modernity would be like. It allowed the CCP to combine the pragmatic and discursive powers of literacy, a strategy that served its revolutionary cause under a widely acknowledged legitimate name. Under the camouflage of the rhetoric of modernization, the party utilized literacy education to enlist mass support for its Communist revolution and to position comradeship and Red Army education as its priority.

ALL FOR THE WAR

In his report to the Second Soviet Congress in January 1934, Mao Zedong articulated clearly his view that the main task for Jiangxi Soviet cultural construction was the elimination of illiteracy through compulsory schooling and broad social education. Training a large number of senior cadres would be given paramount attention.¹⁹ The party's military struggles against the GMD and other interests dictated which groups of people should be taught how to read and write first. The Red Army was the initial target for the Jiangxi Soviet's literacy programs.

¹⁸ For detailed discussion of James Yen's literacy programs, see Charles W. Hayford, *To the People, James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Mao Zedong, "Suwei'ai de wenhua jiaoyu" (Culture and education of the Soviet), January, 1934, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 14.

Early in 1929, Mao Zedong pointed out that the most urgent task for the Red Army was education. Many soldiers among the Red Army ranks had formerly been part of Nationalist or local warlord forces, including forces under the command of Nationalists Xu Kexiang (許克祥 1890–1967), Zhu Peide (朱培德 1888–1937), and Xiong Shihui (熊式輝 1893–1974) and warlords Tang Shengzhi (唐生智 1889–1970) and Bai Chongxi (白崇禧 1893–1966), or incorporated bandits' forces, such as those of Yuan Wencai (袁文才 1898–1930) and Wang Zuo (王佐 1898–1930).²⁰ Therefore, it was quite important to discipline the soldiers and transform them into the CCP's forces by ensuring that they shared the party's ideology and fought for the worker and peasant classes. Political education was the channel.

In addition to oral political instruction, literacy education was an important vehicle for political training among the soldiers. However, it is crucial to note that literacy instruction was not aimed at all ranks of the Red Army. The young soldiers were given "special education" (特种教育 *tezhong jiaoyu*), since they were deemed the vital force on which the party needed to concentrate its material and human resources.²¹ Each column was required to establish one school for youths, in which literacy studies were closely associated with political education. Three or four literacy classes were established within each school. Each class had a chief instructor with no more than 25 students. Students used literacy primers compiled by the political department (政治部 *zhengzhibu*). The director of the political department served as the principal, with the propaganda-section chief holding the position of academic dean. Except for time and energy, there was no cost to soldier-students, and their school supplies were provided by the state.²²

The CCP's literacy program for young soldiers fostered soldiers' loyalty to the party, as shown by Old Dog's story cited above. The loyalty cultivated through literacy education in the Jiangxi Soviet period survived among young soldiers despite the hardships the party and its army endured during the Long March. The survivors of the Long March, whom Mao called a revolutionary elite (革命的精華 *geming de jinghua*), testified to the transformative power of literacy education.²³ The legacy of the Jiangxi Soviet's mass literacy efforts allowed the CCP to sustain its effort to teach people how to read and write during the Yan'an period, while the scope of the

²⁰ Mao Zedong, "Jinggangshan de douzheng" (The struggle at Jinggangshan), November 25, 1928, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 1.

²¹ Mao Zedong, "Zhongguo Gongchandang hongjun disijun dijiuci daibiao dahui jueyi an" (The Decision on the Ninth Assembly of the Chinese Communist Fourth Red Army), December, 1929, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 6.

²² Mao, "Disijun dijiuci daibiao dahui," 6.

²³ Nie Rongzhen, *Nie Rongzhen huiyilu* (Nie Rongzhen's memoir) (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1986), 294–95. In Nie's summary of valuable lessons regarding ideological and political education from the Jiangxi period, literacy learning made the list. Nie mentioned it was quite challenging to get Red Army soldiers to understand what *suwei'ai*, the Chinese transliteration of Soviet, meant. But once the soldiers comprehended its meaning, he wrote, they developed a strong emotional attachment to it and were willing to sacrifice their lives for it. See *Nie Rongzhen huiyilu*, 204, 209. Li Yaoyu, a survivor of the Long March, offered another testimony that the Communist regime granted him the opportunity to learn to read and write, an opportunity otherwise unavailable to him under the Nationalist rule. See Li Yaoyu, *Yige Zhongguo geming qinlizhe de siren jilu* (A Chinese revolutionary's personal record) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2006).

“people” varied over time depending on the needs of military and political mobilization, as had happened in the Jiangxi era.²⁴

Focusing the literacy project on young soldiers while the CCP was fighting fiercely with the GMD was a strategic choice. Only in April 1931, after the CCP had successfully resisted the GMD’s first encirclement campaign (圍剿 *weijiao*), was a literacy movement organized among the general populace. The military victory gave the CCP a break from the battlefield to work on consolidating the revolutionary base areas. The mass literacy movement served this cause.

In its second newsletter, the Cultural Department of the Jiangxi Soviet government called on the cadres in charge of cultural and propaganda work to promote mass literacy education as their most important task. It explained:

There are a great number of peasants, workers, and women in the soviet area who are illiterate. Therefore, it is hard for them to understand the revolutionary propaganda. As a result, they have a low level of political understanding and are easily deceived and subverted by the reactionaries. This is a serious problem within the current struggle.²⁵

This call to arms demonstrates that the stimulus for the CCP’s mass literacy effort was the need to heighten the peasants’ and workers’ class and political consciousness. It reveals the CCP’s understanding of literacy: that acquiring the skills of reading through the party’s literacy programs would help to transform villagers into loyal supporters of the Communist movement.

The CCP outlined the proper way to conduct literacy instruction in a pamphlet compiled by the political department under the order of the Central Revolutionary Military Committee (中央革命軍事委員會 *Zhongyang geming junshi weiyuanhui*). According to this model, literacy education did not simply mean establishing schools, nor was it to be carried out coercively; rather, it was to mobilize, and in turn rely on, the masses’ initiatives. The way to arouse villagers’ enthusiasm for becoming literate was to explain the problems of illiteracy.²⁶ Furthermore, the CCP adopted flexible approaches for explaining the advantages of literacy to different audiences. In intraparty documents, the CCP depicted literacy education as a political strategy to cultivate villagers’ loyalty. In contrast, in its propaganda materials targeting the general rural population, the party emphasized the practical

²⁴ In early 1937, the CCP’s Central Committee ruled that mass literacy education should target adults below age 40. This cap fluctuated by a range of five years over time and across different regions. Whatever age limit was chosen, the basic principle was clear: the party focused its literacy campaign on young and middle-aged men and women, the core force during the War of Resistance against Japan. As the balance of the war began to turn in favor of Chinese forces and their Allies worldwide in 1944, the CCP shifted its focus. Cultivating loyal local leaders became the key to securing and expanding the areas under its influence. Starting with the 1944–1945 academic year, local cadres and activists became the main target of literacy learning. See Di Luo, “China’s Literacy Myth: Narratives and Practices, 1904–1949,” PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2015, chap. 6.

²⁵ Jiangxi Suwei’ai zhengfu (Jiangxi Soviet government), “Wenhuabu tongxun di er hao: guanyu shizi yundong” (The second newsletter: about the literacy movement), April 11, 1931, in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm.

²⁶ “Wenhuabu tongxun di er hao.”

role of literacy in daily life, depicting its literacy education effort as a commitment to benefiting individuals and poor peasants as a group.

The significance of literacy education as a way to win local support for the CCP was heightened in the face of GMD competition. Chiang Kai-shek vigorously advocated investment in education in areas formerly controlled by the Communists. Mass education was considered the second wave of the anti-Communist crusade following the GMD victory in the fifth encirclement campaign (1933–1934). The GMD's goal was to persuade the populace to accept Nationalist education and embrace its ideology.²⁷ Facing such challenges, in September 1933, the Central Committee for the People's Education (中央教育人民委員會 Zhongyang jiaoyu renmin weiyuanhui) further articulated the ways education served the war against the GMD. Observing that some local soviet governments had closed schools in order to concentrate on the military struggle, the Central Committee stressed that education and the war effort were not mutually exclusive. Rather, education served as a means to mobilize the populace, spread Communist ideology, and meet the needs of the war.²⁸

The needs of warfare comprised not only enlisting young adults into the Red Army and mobilizing villagers to support the war but also training personnel to fill positions that required literacy. Besides teachers, there were many other such key positions. In the Jiangxi Soviet, each village posted guards at the main road junctions. Whoever travelled from one village to another was required to present a pass. Therefore, the sentry or guard had to be literate.²⁹ Moreover, only literate persons were considered competent to serve as political commissars, a position responsible for spreading political orders and decisions made by the central political authority to local military units and residents. The newly established cooperatives also needed literate people to keep accounts.³⁰

The effective and regular operation of the postal service depended on literacy too. There were a great number of postmen who were illiterate in the Jiangxi Soviet. Those illiterate mailmen usually packed the mail in geographic order, and then memorized the destinations. For example, the first letter would go to the Central Education Department, the second to the Central Bureau, the third to the People's Council, etc. However, if they made even one mistake, almost all of the mail would go to the wrong place.³¹ Literacy was a necessary skill for the development and improvement of the postal service in the Jiangxi Soviet.

The postal service, in turn, made it possible for literacy to play a role in enhancing the connection between superior bureaus and subordinate organs. In the Jiangxi

²⁷ Kai Feng, "Suwei'ai de jiaoyu zhengce: Kai Feng zai yi jiu san san nian shi yue suqu jiaoyu dahui shang de baogao" (The education policy of the soviet: Kai Feng's report on the educational conference of the soviet areas in October 1933), in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 30.

²⁸ Shaogong zhongyang, Zhongyang jiaoyu renmin weiyuanhui lianxi huiyi (Joint meeting of the Youth League Central Committee and the Central Committee of People Education), "Guanyu muqian jiaoyu gongzuo de renwu yu tuan dui jiaoyubu gongzuo de xiezhu de jueyi" (The decisions on the current task for educational work and the League's assistance to the work of the education department), September 8, 1933, in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm.

²⁹ Mao Zedong, "Xingguo diaocha" (Investigation in Xingguo), January 26, 1931, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 7.

³⁰ Kai, "Suwei'ai de jiaoyu zhengce," 33.

³¹ Kai, "Suwei'ai de jiaoyu zhengce," 33.

Soviet, tardiness and ignorance of directives from higher authorities were serious administrative problems.³² To solve them, in addition to improving communication among different levels of authorities, it was also critical to promote literacy among the populace. The CCP's goal was to ensure that villagers could read and understand the documents printed and distributed by the party and government.³³ The party's definition of literacy was being able to read general books and newspapers, as well as political documents, and to write letters.³⁴ The objects of reading and writing were explicitly defined, and they included political documents, books, newspapers, and letters. Literacy was not simply the skills of reading and writing; rather, it meant the ability of individuals and political authorities to communicate. Clearly, literacy was not an isolated and independent goal. It served the needs of the party to expand its political influence, to attract popular support for warfare, and to strengthen its control over local society. Meanwhile, the CCP did not ignore individuals' needs; rather, the party played to those needs to attract villagers to join a literacy project that was subordinated to the party's goals.

FREE EDUCATION?

Despite the CCP's commitment to the project, the intermittent wars with the GMD did interrupt the Jiangxi Soviet's literacy education. The drain of war continually limited the resources the CCP could devote to literacy instruction. The ideal of free primary education for the children of the worker-peasant laboring masses existed in words only. Initially, the central government was responsible for educational expenditures, but, starting in 1934, the burden was shifted to villagers. Local governments were encouraged to collect education funds from the populace.³⁵ The villagers had to pay for material and human resources under the principle of voluntary donation. The CCP's program had no significant tuition cost advantage over other literacy facilities. This reality countered contemporary assumptions that attributed the success of the CCP's literacy education in attracting villagers to its being free of charge.³⁶ The role literacy education would play in political mobilization rested much more upon socializing children through schooling and adults through literacy movements than upon teaching the skills of reading and writing alone. By joining literacy study groups, villagers learned the concepts of class and class struggle while they worked together for the same goal, that is, eliminating illiteracy. Literacy learning acted as a practice field for cultivating comradeship among villagers.

³² Xingguoxian sufu wenhuabu (The department of culture of Xingguo county's Soviet government), "Wei buqu zhixing gongzuo zhishi de yanzhong cuowu gei geji Suwei'ai zhengfu wenhuake de xin" (A letter to the office of culture at all levels for the serious mistake of not implementing working instructions), April 22, 1931, in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*.

³³ "Suwei'ai xuexiao jianshe jueyi an" (The resolution on school building in the Soviet), January 10, 1934, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 98.

³⁴ Luo Fu, "Lun Suwei'ai zhengquan de wenhua jiaoyu zhengce," 21.

³⁵ "Jiaoyu jingfei jiesheng yundong de kaishi" (The beginning of the thrift movement on educational expenditures), March 1934, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 118.

³⁶ Since the late Qing educational reform, the belief that poverty was the fundamental reason for lack of interest in state-sponsored schooling among the masses had become widely held among government officials and the well educated interested in promoting mass education. See Bailey, *Reform the People*, chap. 3; and Di Luo, "China's Literacy Myth," chap. 4 and pp. 102–03.

The Jiangxi Soviet adopted the policy of compulsory primary education for school-age children. All children between the ages of seven and thirteen were required to enroll in elementary schooling, which initially lasted six years, consisting of four years in Lenin junior primary school (列寧小學 *Liening xiaoxue*) and two years of senior primary school (高級小學 *gaoji xiaoxue*). In October 1933, this four-plus-two model was reduced to three-plus-two. Clearly, the length of schooling was contingent on actual situations and could either be reduced or extended.³⁷

In terms of the distribution of elementary schools, the basic principle was to ensure that there was a school within 3 *li* (里; about 0.3 mile) of each child; in remote areas, this stipulation could extend to 5 *li*. By 1934, according to Mao Zedong's own statistics, 3,052 Lenin primary schools had been established, covering over 2,932 *xiang* (鄉 townships) in the three-province border region. On average, every township had a primary school. However, the enrollment and attendance rates of students were not as high as the numbers of schools indicated. Among the total of 89,710 students enrolled in those schools, about 12,806 were from Xingguo (興國) County, the exemplar county of the Jiangxi Soviet. In Xingguo, however, only 60% of school-age children enrolled.³⁸ Even for those enrolled, there was no guarantee that they would attend school every day. In Nanguang (南廣) County, in an urban area, about 50% of students were regularly absent from school.³⁹ Although a policy of compulsory education was adopted, the development of primary education was still uneven within the territory of the Jiangxi Soviet, and there was no mechanism to enforce attendance.

This regional imbalance in student enrollment and high rate of absence did not prevent the CCP from claiming achievement in primary education. According to statistical data, the Jiangxi Soviet "had at least achieved close to the national average proportion of the age-group in elementary school," which was about 22%.⁴⁰ Mao Zedong claimed that the percentage of *uneducated* children in the Jiangxi Soviet had decreased from 90% to 40% under the leadership of the CCP.⁴¹ Whatever its accuracy, this assertion indicates that Mao and the party tried to use their investment in primary education to win credit within a national political context and saw literacy as an index of legitimate and effective administration.

The Jiangxi Soviet promoted informal education in addition to the regular school system. By 1934, the government had established 6,462 night schools with 94,500 students. The night schools were affiliated with Lenin primary schools and served the educational needs of youths and adults. Night schools offered one-hour classes every evening, teaching mathematics as well as reading and writing Chinese (國語 *guoyu*). Primary-school teachers and township soviet representatives volunteered as night-school instructors.

³⁷ "Zhongyang wenhua jiaoyu jianshe dahui jueyan" (Decisions on the central conference on cultural and educational construction), October 20, 1933, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 96, 98.

³⁸ Mao, "Suwei'ai de wenhua jiaoyu," 12.

³⁹ "Nanguang xian gequ wenhua buzhang lianxi hui yi" (Joint conference of ministers of education in all districts), September 17, 1932, in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm.

⁴⁰ Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in Twentieth-Century China: The Search for an Ideal Development Model* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124.

⁴¹ Mao, "Suwei'ai de wenhua jiaoyu," 12.

For those unable to attend night schools—pregnant women, elders, and individuals living far away from schools—literacy classes (識字班 *shiziban*) or literacy groups (識字組 *shizizu*) were organized, reflecting a strategy used in the Mass Education Movement. Each literacy group comprised a headman (組長 *zuzhang*) and three to ten members who lived nearby. Often, night-school students served as headmen, teaching their fellow villagers whenever and wherever possible.

In addition to educational organizations, every village was ordered to set up literacy boards (識字牌 *shizipai*) along main roads, upon which primary-school teachers wrote two or three characters. Most of the time, pictures accompanied the characters to facilitate recognition. Literacy boards greatly increased the opportunities for villagers to encounter written characters, which Mao Zedong considered an effective way to promote literacy.⁴²

Compared to regular primary schools, alternatives like night schools, literacy classes, and literacy boards cost very little. The only expenses were for equipment, such as oil lamps, chalk, blackboards, and so on. But it was still the villagers who paid for them from their own pockets. Although night schools and literacy groups attracted some rural students, they failed to stir villagers' enthusiasm for literacy study. The achievement in increasing rural literacy rates existed in the numbers of enrollment only; there was no great improvement of literacy skills among the populace.⁴³

As far as instructional personnel were concerned, Lenin primary schools, night schools, and literacy classes constituted a hierarchical structure for literacy education in the Jiangxi Soviet. The higher-level institutions usually had better-educated teachers. Primary school teachers were part-time instructors in night schools. Night-school students, meanwhile, often served as the teachers of literacy groups. This integration of teaching staffs connected people with different levels of education. Employing night-school students as instructors of literacy groups solved the problem of teacher shortages but also deprived teachers of a professional identity. This personnel structure weakened education as a symbol of social distinction, but it fostered the formation of a sense of collective identity and the notion of community among rural residents.

A townwide network took shape through literacy study groups. Within each village, some five or six literacy groups were organized into a local Literacy Movement Committee (識字運動分會 *Shizi yundong fenhui*); above the local committees, a headquarters was established at the township level. These local literacy organizations were absorbed into a new administrative system beginning in June 1933, during an anti-illiteracy campaign that aimed to eliminate illiteracy within three months.

During this campaign, a unified and centralized system of informal literacy education was established. The Association to Eliminate Illiteracy (消滅文盲協會 *Xiaomie wenmang xiehui*) replaced the former Literacy Movement Committee, with offices from the township up to the central government. This association was subject to the leadership of education departments at all levels. Subordinated to this, Eliminate Illiteracy Branch Associations (消滅文盲分會 *Xiaomie wenmang*

⁴² Mao Zedong, "Changgangxiang diaocha" (Investigation in Changgang town), December 15, 1933, in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 10.

⁴³ "Zhongyang wenhua jiaoyu jianshe," in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 99.

fenhui) formed at the village level, guiding the activities of the Eliminate Illiteracy Small Groups (消滅文盲小組 Xiaomie wenmang xiaozu) composed of literacy groups and night schools. Both teachers and students involved in literacy groups and night schools were asked to join the association. In this way, the literacy education organization was transformed into an administrative organ, responding to the call of governmental authority and carrying out a political task, that is, eliminating illiteracy. In this process, villagers also learned to be comrades, becoming both the subjects and objects of political mobilization.

In practice, mobilization for the anti-illiteracy campaign was also achieved through mass organizations. Such organizations included the Labor Union (工會 Gonghui), the Poor Peasant Association (貧農團 Pinnongtuan), the Women's Organization (婦女會 Funühui), Mutual Aid Societies (互濟會 Huijihui), the Red Teachers Association (赤色教師聯合會 Chise jiaoshi lianhehui), and formally Communist-affiliated societies like the Communist Youth League (共青團 Gongqingtuan) and Children's Corps (兒童團 Er tongtuan).⁴⁴ Mass organizations acted as agencies for the CCP's political mobilization, which continued to play a key role in Communist governance after 1949. Without them, it is impossible to imagine how the CCP, which consisted of just 57 people in 1921 and only accounted for 0.2% of China's total population by 1945, could have organized a mass revolution.⁴⁵ However, mass organizations only provided a mechanism or framework for popular mobilization. The content of literacy education played an important role in the cultivation of loyalty to the CCP's cause.

SOVIET CULTURE IN PRINT

Literacy primers compiled by the soviet government offered a social lexicon and worldview that made the documents and policies of the party understandable to the poor. There were two basic kinds of literacy primers used in the Jiangxi Soviet: one for schoolchildren and the other for adults. Most primers were compiled by the Department of Education. Other departments also wrote special versions for particular needs. For example, the Culture Department of the Central Cooperative (中央合作總社文化部 Zhongyang hezuozongshe wenhuabu) published a primer aimed at teaching how to keep accounts and popularizing knowledge of cooperativism. Such primers indicate that, besides political mobilization, literacy education was also used to train competent individuals to fill the new positions created by land and economic reform.

All aspects of the production of literacy primers—conceptualization, writing, editing, printing, publishing, and distribution—were subordinated to CCP objectives. This was part of the party's effort to tighten its control over publication and propaganda, a tendency that appeared between the Third (June 1923) and Fifth (May 1927) Party Congresses and continued to grow during the Jiangxi and the

⁴⁴ Luo, "Wenhua jiaoyu zhengce," in *Jiangxi suqu jiaoyu ziliao huibian*, 21.

⁴⁵ There were about 1.21 million CCP members by the time the Seventh National Congress of the CCP was held on April 23, 1945. The Chinese population in 1945 was about 540.53 million. See Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi, *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi* (The history of CCP) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1, 826.

Yan'an periods.⁴⁶ Literacy primers were the instruments employed to teach commoners to read party-guided print materials in the way the party desired. No doubt their publication attracted substantial attention from the party. Though it is impossible to estimate the numbers of copies published and distributed, extant primers show that the CCP managed to print basic learning materials via all available technologies, including letterpress, woodblocks, and mimeograph.

The majority of the primers published in the Jiangxi Soviet focused on political and military topics. By comparing six primers for adult literacy learning and three kinds of literacy primers and readers designed for school students published in the early 1930s, it can be seen that there were no major differences in content between children's literacy primers and those used by elementary adult readers except that the language used in children's primers was much livelier to make it close to children's life experience.⁴⁷ Parallel content allowed educated children and youths to serve as teachers in literacy groups. Also, the similarities contributed to the construction of a homogeneous soviet culture across age, gender, and location.

As expressed in the primers, the most prominent feature of soviet culture was a worldview centered on social class. The words "worker" (工人 *gongren*), "peasant" (農民 *nongmin*), and "proletariat" (無產階級 *wuchan jieji*) were often introduced in the first lessons. If not, they were taught in the lessons immediately following initial sections about numbers. For the learner, the paramount social relationship first learned from the written text was their class affiliation rather than their kinship, neighborhood, or ethnicity. Students were encouraged to cultivate a sense of collectivity through the concept of class—not through blood ties or education or place of residence but rather through shared economic conditions. The sense of class was also defined by shared "enemies" (敵人 *diren*), including "landlord" (地主 *dizhu*), "rich peasant" (富農 *funong*), and "bourgeoisie" (資本家 *zibenjia*), terms introduced in the succeeding lessons. A sharp distinction was drawn between poor peasants (貧農 *pinnong*) and tenants (雇農 *gunong*) on the one side and rich peasants on the other. On the basis of their different economic situations, landlords, rich peasants, and the bourgeoisie were categorized as the exploiting class, while workers, poor peasants, and tenants were grouped together as the exploited class.⁴⁸

In order to highlight the conflict between the exploiting and exploited classes, the texts of literary primers frequently used sensationalizing or emotive words, such as "good" (好 *hao*), "bad" (壞 *huai*), "hardship" (苦 *ku*), and "privilege" (享福 *xiangfu*).

⁴⁶ Christopher A. Reed, "Advancing the (Gutenberg) Revolution: The Origins and Development of Chinese Print Communism 1921–1947," in Cynthia Brokaw and Christopher A. Reed, eds., *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800–2008* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 276–77.

⁴⁷ Literacy primers for adults include *Shizi keben* (Literacy primer) edited by Zhongyang hezuo zongshe wenhuabu, *Shizikeben* published by Gonglüe xian Suwei'ai jiaoyubu, *Shizikeben* published by Minxi Lining shuju, *Shizi keben* edited and published by Zhongyang jiaoyu bu in December 1933, *Shizi keben* published by Zhongyang geming junshi weiyuanhui in March 1931, and *Suwei'ai gongmin* (Soviet citizens) edited and published by Zhongyang jiaoyu renmin weiyuanhui in April 1934. Literacy primers and readers for school students are *Shizi keben* printed by Ruijin sanchengtai, *Honghaier duben* (Readers for Red children) printed by Yongfeng xian Suwei'ai zhengfu, and *Gongchan ertong duben* (Readers for Communist children) edited by Zhongyang jiaoyubu, in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm.

⁴⁸ *Shizi keben* (Ruijin: Ruijin sanchengtai publishing house, n.d., 1930s), in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm.

What is more, color words like “white” (白 *bai*), “black” (黑 *hei*), “red” (紅 *hong*), and “yellow” (黃 *huang*) were also attached to moral values to evoke class consciousness and awareness of the nature of class exploitation. An example is illustrated below:

“Black and White”
 What is black?
 The underground coal.
 What else is black?
 The hearts of rich people.
 What is white?
 Rich people’s magnificent houses.
 What else is white?
 The bones of the dead poor.

黑白
 什麼是黑的？
 土中的烏金，
 還有什麼是黑？
 富人的...心，
 什麼是白的？
 富人的華屋，
 還有什麼是白的？
 窮人的枯骨。⁴⁹

Entitled “Black and White,” this short rhyming poem used the colors of objects visible in villagers’ daily lives to indicate the exploitative relationship and lack of equality between the rich and the poor. This poem invoked class resentment and stressed that the landlords and bourgeoisie exploited peasants and workers. The primary goal of such narration was to mobilize working people to participate in the Communist revolution. Authors of the primers paid a great deal of attention to the vast differences in living conditions between the propertied class and the proletariat in literacy primers. By contrasting the leisure and well-being enjoyed by landlords and the bourgeoisie with the poverty and hardship suffered by workers and peasants, the producers of material wealth, the literacy primers presented to the readers a world full of class conflict and inequalities.

The following texts offer a glimpse of such a world constructed in the literacy primers.

The bourgeoisie and landlords
 do not work but just enjoy a happy life,
 having delicious meals,
 wearing refined clothes,

⁴⁹ *Shizi keben* ([Ruijin?]: Zhonghua Suwei’ ai Zhongyang geming junshi weiyuanhui, 1931), in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm. A nonstandard character has been omitted from the fifth line of the Chinese text.

using good utensils,
and living in great houses.

Benefit makers
do not enjoy the benefit.
Tenants
do not own grain;
Bricklayers
do not have houses;
Tailors
wear tattered clothes;
Why is it this way?
It is because of being exploited.

資本家, 和地主
不打工, 專享福,
吃好飯菜,
穿好衣服,
用好器皿,
住好房屋。

造福人,
不享福;
雇農,
自己沒有穀;
砌匠,
自己沒有屋;
裁縫,
自己穿著破衣服。
為什麼這樣?
被人剝削的緣故。⁵⁰

After referring to villagers' life experiences, the literacy primers "revealed" class exploitation as the cause of the misery of the working class. Class-centered world-views not only organized villagers into different class groups but also placed them in opposing positions. These texts created a sense of class "togetherness" and "otherness." They closely tied the poor peasants with the sense of suffering. Meanwhile, they offered the poor an "other" to blame for their bitter lives. As Richard Wilson pointed out in his classic study of GMD textbooks in Taiwan during the mid-Cold War years, hostility is channeled by political authority into "increased loyalty and solidarity for their own political system and into hatred for political enemies."⁵¹ The contrast-and-compare format and references to daily experiences

⁵⁰ *Shizi keben* ([Ruijin?]: Zhongyang geming junshi weiyuanhui, 1931).

⁵¹ Richard W. Wilson, *Learning to Be Chinese: The Political Socialization of Children in Taiwan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 10.

made the theory of class exploitation sensible and reasonable to villagers. Literacy learning became a means for cultivating class consciousness and a process of naturalizing class theory. The learners were equipped with class-tinted lenses through which they were taught to interpret their lives in connections with others.

As Wilson suggests, education not only develops in the learner a sense of awareness of the group to which he/she belongs but also makes the learner aware of, and subject to, the values of that society.⁵² The class-based society constructed in the literacy primers assigned different roles to various classes. Peasants were the supporters and main participants of the Chinese Communist revolution, for which the worker class provided leadership. Although it is unlikely there was an industrial working class in the mountainous regions in Jiangxi in the early 1930s, villagers were taught to perceive themselves as a subordinate social sector needing guidance from their worker brothers, represented by the CCP. Thus, when the villagers adopted the lexicon of class and class struggle, whether or not they were aware of it, they subjected themselves to the leadership of the CCP. In other words, along with the social lexicon introduced by the primers, a new concept of political and social structure was being formed. Hence, literacy education was structured to play an influential role in cultivating in the populace both loyalty to the CCP and commitment to the Communist movement. Under the class-centered worldview, villagers would learn to be comrades, fighting along with and following the lead of their class brothers and sisters in the CCP.

Furthermore, the primers used in literacy education introduced the people to the party's social and military organizations, such as the Red Army, Red Guards (赤衛隊 *chiweidui*), Youth League, Children's Corps, and women's organizations. Through literacy learning, villagers became familiar with those organizations, their names, members, roles, and principles. Those organizations, in turn, offered a framework with which villagers could position themselves within their class groups. They might get a sense that the way to realize one's social value was through associating with certain organizations. Therefore, literacy learning might germinate incentives to join or support those organizations. By affiliating with certain organizations emotionally or physically, villagers actually experienced and trained to be comrades, cooperating with fellow members and working for a concrete goal. In this way, the literacy primers produced an "organizational culture" within the class framework.

This organizational culture was intertwined intimately with class struggle and Communist revolution. The literacy students learned that it was necessary for poor peasants and workers to form the Poor Peasant Association and Labor Union in an effort to revolt against the exploiting class. Each mass organization was defined and described in the literacy primers used by the Jiangxi Soviet. For example, the Labor Union was the organization of workers sharing the goal of eliminating the bourgeoisie; and the Society of Poor Peasants was the leading entity in the struggle against rich peasants.⁵³

The literacy primers depicted these two associations as militant, which made them breeding grounds for class comradeship and an accessible platform for the lower classes to learn to be Communist comrades in the class struggle. They were

⁵² Wilson, *Learning to Be Chinese*, 45.

⁵³ *Suweī'āi gongmín* (n.p.: Zhongyang jiaoyu renmin weiyuanhui, 1934), *Shizi keben* (n.p.: Zhongyang geming junshi weiyuanhui, 1931), in *Shisou ziliaoshi gongfei ziliao*, microfilm.

revolutionary organizations, which imposed preexisting political ideologies and tasks upon their members. Thus, these literacy-learning materials not only presented villagers with a class-structured society but also indicated a means through which they could associate with each other and fight against their common class enemies. In this way, literacy education in the Jiangxi Soviet served as a path to political mobilization and a channel to cultivate Communist comrades.

In addition to political knowledge, literacy education in the Jiangxi Soviet taught some practical skills, such as words and numbers used for measurement, knowledge of climate and time, and vocabularies of direction. Certain kinds of administrative literacy were taught as well, skills that included how to read and write travel permits, letters, and reports and how to keep accounts. However, as revealed in the literacy primers, literacy education in the Jiangxi Soviet, overall, was oriented toward politics. The party designed these learning materials according to the soviet state's understanding about what literacy knowledge was necessary to live in a soviet society. It offered a kind of literacy valued by the state and valuable to learners too. These literacy-learning materials reflected the CCP's effort to legitimate the dominance of their political discourse through written texts. It brought a literate world with the features of soviet culture into rural society.

CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly, the literacy education offered in the Jiangxi Soviet in the early 1930s was more responsive to the needs of military and political mobilization than to individual concerns for self-improvement. Literacy education was a socialization process through which villagers became associated with others sharing an ambition: learning to read and to write. Literacy learning is hard work.⁵⁴ It played a role in fostering a sense of comradeship among the rural populace. Literacy is not a neutral variable; it is, rather, a carefully constructed, potentially transformative vehicle. This transformative role depends on how literacy is offered and what kind of literacy is taught. The organization and content of literacy education are always determined and designed by its sponsor. In this case, literacy education in the Jiangxi Soviet in the early 1930s reflected the CCP's conception of what was possible and desirable with respect to the way the party and villagers would participate in political life. Villagers were expected to become zealous Communist comrades, infused with a class-centered worldview, identifying with each other by shared economic conditions, and supportive of the CCP's military struggle against the GMD.

The literacy offered by the Jiangxi Soviet was a literacy focused on soviet culture and politics. A literate person in this context was not necessarily well educated but was definitely proficient at understanding and transmitting political instruction from higher levels. As observed by scholars such as Christopher Reed and Hans van de Ven, printed texts were crucial to the party's operation and survival from its outset in 1921.⁵⁵ The value attached to literacy was largely shaped by its role

⁵⁴ Harvey J. Graff, ed., *Literacy and Historical Development: A Reader* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 23.

⁵⁵ Reed, "Advancing the (Gutenberg) Revolution," 275; Hans J. van de Ven, "The Emergence of the Text-Centered Party," in Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven, eds., *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 5.

in promoting communication between the government of the soviet and the populace, as well as comradesly cooperation among villagers. This politics-oriented literacy education could not have aroused the populace's interest in literacy unless opportunities were available for villagers to claim a place in the political world. Not coincidentally, women were the group who most enthusiastically participated in literacy education. In Xingguo, for example, 69% (10,572) of 15,740 night-school students were female, as were 60% of 22,519 literacy-group members.⁵⁶ Literacy granted village women a chance to act as leaders in literacy education and in the work of political propaganda.

The influence of the CCP's literacy education went beyond its soviet districts. Owing to the modernization discourse popularized since the turn of the twentieth century, the CCP's literacy effort served to legitimate Communist rule nationwide. Literacy's sociopolitical function was conceptualized in the context of national salvation in the early twentieth century. The CCP was not the first political entity to appropriate modernization discourse to promote its literacy projects; the Qing court and the Republican government also employed the same strategy. However, this does not mean they shared the same conception of literacy. As their visions of China's modernization differed from each other, so did their understanding of literacy's role in facilitating the modernity they envisioned. For the CCP in the Jiangxi Soviet, literacy efforts were part of the process by which the party consolidated its revolutionary base areas and worked to transform the populace into Communist comrades. For the villagers, literacy education offered a cultural badge, a sign of initiation into a community prescribed and led by the CCP.

Although the military retreat known as the Long March spelled an end to the Jiangxi Soviet, the party never lost its faith in the transformative power of literacy education. During the Yan'an period, the CCP continued to rely on literacy education to train loyal devotees and enlist popular support to its cause, but it worked to adjust its literacy rhetoric to correlate with changing national concerns in order to sustain the legitimating power of their literacy narratives. When China's national independence was at stake in the wake of the Japanese invasion during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the CCP took a more subtle approach in competing with the Nationalists for political leadership. The party toned down its discourse on soviet education. Instead, the Communists claimed to be devoted to national education (國民教育 *guomin jiaoyu*), a GMD term, to highlight the CCP's commitment to the national cause. Instead of emphasizing the soviet nature of its regime, the CCP emphasized that a new society capable of sustaining a secure, ever-improving life during a turbulent time was under construction in its base areas during the Yan'an era.

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⁵⁶ Mao, "Suwei'ai de wenhua jiaoyu," 13.

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