

## Education 1949-1956

AIM: To understand the extent to which the CCP was successful in revolutionising education in the period 1949-1956.

Key points:

- Reshaping traditional attitudes - Transition from revolutionary war to government and the need to control thoughts and behaviour of the Chinese people
- Expansion of primary education
- Public Health Campaigns
- Women in China

The first point above relates to control. It can be looked at through the organisation of the state which relied on an intertwined relationship between party, government and army. Also, the way people were monitored and controlled via their 'danwei'.

Mao Zedong understood the political importance of control over education, and as part of its development strategy, the Communist Party returned to its pre-civil war aim to improve access to education for all.

**EDUCATION** itself was a focus from the Yanan Years. But, prior to 1949, China's literacy rate was just 15 to 25 percent. Education can be split into the eradication of illiteracy and the schools policy. Linked but not entirely the same as illiteracy was a problem in the adult populace so could not be fixed via increased number of schools.

### **Literacy:**

After 1949, there was a literacy drive to upskill the labour force and to allow the Communist word to be spread more effectively. It was seen as a key way of breaking the historical pattern of education only being available to the elite, education could bring equality.

1949-54 rural literacy campaigns developed rapidly. Many were successful particularly those based on experience gathered during the Sino-Japanese War and the Civil wars.

Simplification of characters was also a target with a list of 1,500 aimed at teaching peasants to read, however, simplification only really happened in the late 1950s with the establishment of the Committee to Reform the Chinese written Language in 1955. This was also the time that pinyin was introduced and it was formally used in primary schools from 1958.

However, there were key weaknesses in many campaigns:

- Teacher shortages
- Childishness of teaching materials
- Conflicts between teaching and farming schedules
- Politicisation of the eradication of illiteracy

Politicisation of education was a key problem. As the eradication of illiteracy was a 'state task', party cadres were keen to show loyalty and thus hit targets early. Thus peasants were coerced either physically or with financial sanctions to attend. In addition, much political teaching took

place over literacy which turned peasants away from education as they saw it as politics not literacy.

1954 National conference on rural adult education convened: Education was steered to teaching characters that supported rural collectivisation, not those taught at a full time school. Literacy was to be vocational and functional.

Some good progress was made, especially through 1955-56 but then it became clear many cadres were again pursuing speed of completion of curricula over long term literacy, in 1956 the Renmin Ribao (CCP newspaper) commented that 'illiteracy elimination plans were set at excessively high levels'.

The push for collectivisation made long term planning very difficult but in 1957 the Ministry of Education felt secure enough to issue a formal directive strategy recommending incremental and steady growth and improved quality. This was aimed to benefit the students and the teachers who were under intense pressure to hit targets.

By 1960's 90% of the population had a basic grasp of reading and writing

### **Schools:**

In 1949, only a few Chinese were attending school. During the period of the national economic recovery (1949-1952), the new government consciously protected the rights of the poor, and modestly encouraged locals and ordinary people to establish new schools, including private, public, and collective. Old primary schools were also supported and 'adjusted'.

However, much of the educational strategy focused restructuring higher education, adopting a Soviet patterns with its heavy emphasis on engineering programs and production labor.

This policy did not address mass illiteracy thus between the years 1953-1955, a new policy, stressing the improvement of educational quality rather than quantity, was adopted. In 1956 the main policy of the Ministry of Education once again changed in the effort to accelerate development. Private schools were nationalized, education was expanded at all levels and was heavily subsidized, and indeed the growth in enrollment rate again accelerated.

**Public Health Campaigns:** These were a masterclass in the art of propaganda.

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/chineseposters/public.html>

They also improved health awareness and general awareness of sanitation.

Although not all campaigns were successful or required - eg the eradication of rats and mosquitos - many were successful - eg the eradication of schistosomiasis by informing rural workers of the risk of the disease bearing snails.

In addition, the average life span of Chinese rose from 35 in 1949 to 68 years in 1979 and infant mortality dropped substantially.

### **Women**

In 1950, there was a new marriage law which made arranged marriages illegal. So too were dowries and concubinage.

Women's property rights were equal to men and any woman (unmarried, widowed, divorced) could hold land.

Divorce was available to man and woman.

Children born out of wedlock had equal rights.

Prostitution was also declared illegal.