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Disparities Between Urban and Rural Literacy Inside and Outside of Mainland China

Overview

The establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949 brought widespread, dramatic changes within social, political, and economic spheres in China. A country with one successive imperial dynasty after another, China is no stranger to experiencing drastic reforms throughout various sectors in society. It is commonly believed that, before the establishment of the PRC, only around 20% of the entire Chinese population were considered literate. The PRC realized that education and its respective institutions would need to be amended to create room for positive social change that could benefit the newly founded entity that is the PRC. This paper seeks to unravel the complexities surrounding educational transformation in and outside of China pre- and post-1949, and how language is connected to this process. Various philosophies and organizations will be examined, along with the change that occurred, or is still occurring, in urban and rural areas. It is essential to bear in mind that we cannot examine a country's transformations by solely inspecting change that is conspicuous in urban settings; equal attention must be given to the rural, as it is the combination of various contexts that form the nation. Furthermore, specific focus will be given to mainland China, or the area currently under the control of the PRC's jurisdiction. There remains controversy regarding areas Taiwan and Hong Kong's independence and whether they truly are under the PRC's control. It is irrefutable fact that the PRC has had an influence on both of these areas, but for the

sake of marking boundaries for what China's borders encompass, in this paper, when the term "China" is used, it does not include these areas.

History of Education in Mainland China

To begin, it is impossible to understand the rapid transformations that took place in China in the 1950s and onward without delving into the various schools of thought that were connected to education in the first place. Confucius, or 孔子 *kongzi*, was an influential Chinese philosopher that lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BCE). While thousands of years have passed since his existence, his teachings have, nevertheless, had their omnipresent place within Chinese society and have become known as Confucianism. Confucius was a devout advocate of the pursuit of knowledge and furthering one's self, not just politically, but emotionally. Marinette Bahtilla and Hui Xu embellish this in their article:

> Confucius emphasized that learning should be geared towards understanding and fulfilling one's true self rather than aiming at gaining recognition from others. To Confucius, learning should be aimed at enabling learners to discover their potential and help them realize who they are. By "Self" Confucius means continuous and lifelong growth. (Bahtilla, Xu 2021)

The lifelong drive to learn was a common goal for many Chinese people in the past, regardless of the dynasty. Even with consideration given to the overthrowing of one dynasty to the next and many philosophies being replaced with new ones, Confucianism still had an exceptionally strong footing during the time of the Qing dynasty, or the last imperial dynasty of China, lasting from 1644 through 1912. Qing emperors went so far as to declare Confucianism to be the nationally recognized religion of the Qing empire. My goal is to not provide a history of Confucianism but to allow you to recognize that Confucius' teachings and education have long been intertwined with each other. While the imperial examination system or 科举 *keju* (the state-administered test used to select individuals to join the bureaucracy) perpetuated over two-thousand-year-old

Confucian traditions, this did not entail that late Qing China's intellectual environment was defined by a homogeneous, monolithic Confucianism. No great philosophical system could have survived for this long unless it was somewhat adaptable and open to unique interpretations.

The Qing dynasty's education system was rather complex, yet unique, as there existed a hybrid of two different types of institutions: the Imperial Academy 国子监 *guo zijian* and Classical Learning Academies 书院 *shuyuan*. The Imperial Academy was created centuries earlier during the Han dynasty to equip students with the necessary skills to assume a position within government. Gradually, however, it was deemed as being too rigorous by many, and by the time of the Qing dynasty, more young scholars were optimistic to attend the Classical Learning Academies, which was created in 1733. The Classical Learning Academies contrast with the Imperial Academy in that the former emphasized a limitless pursuit of knowledge, one that was not tethered to worldly affairs, like politics. Moreover, these academies did not exist to prepare students for the imperial examination. From the surface, the establishment of the Classical Learning Academies looked to provide more benefits than drawbacks as free will and learning became interconnected. However, there were many pitfalls with these institutions that could only be seen from within. Immanuel Hsu expounds on this further, stating "The curriculum consisted largely of antiquarian research in the classics and literature. The main function of the professors was to advise the students on their readings and to criticise the results of their research; only occasionally did the professors or visiting scholars present formal lectures." (Hsu 131). While students were given much time to research on their own, they lacked formal guidance from head instructors, and if there was an instructor, they would, more or less, act as a counselor rather than a teacher.

In addition to the lax behavior of the instructors within these Classical Learning Academies, it is important to also recognize the academic spheres being explored and how this contrasted with what other classrooms around the world were choosing to focus on. Nowadays, most people are familiar with two major categories within the realm of higher education: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and humanities. In a comprehensive and inclusive academic environment, it is vital to have a mixture of both, or many fields. Classical Learning Academies lacked this inclusivity. Hsu also speaks of this shortfall:

> The major concern of Chinese higher education in the pre-modern era concerns its overemphasis on humanities. The students studied the classics, literature, history and philosophy and little or nothing about science and technology as understood in the West…The Confucianists stressed the exercise of the mind and depreciated the use of the hands. Applied science and technology, which definitely involved the use of hands, were considered beneath the dignity of the cultured man. (Hsu 131-132)

Note, the majority of Qing dynasty China was relatively still closed off from the outside world. It was not until the mid-1800s, during the time of the Opium Wars, did China begin formal contact with Western countries. As this contact with the materialistic West became more and more apparent during the second half of the nineteenth century, many young scholars were able to perceive how China is falling behind other nations in terms of economic growth and military advancement.

On a multitude of levels, the Opium Wars' outcomes had an impact on Confucian culture. It was not only a military failure but also a political disaster in the succession of treaties that imperialist forces imposed on Qing China. Furthermore, the appeal of learning through a different lens, a Western lens, to some Chinese intellectuals, created a cultural clash for the intellectual establishment. Chinese politician and social activist Liang Qichao 梁启超 published a book in 1920 titled *Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period* 清代学术概论. This book details

how Chinese ways of thinking and education have evolved from the Ming to the Qing dynasties.

In one passage, he mentions the effects of the Opium Wars, stating:

> After the Opium War resolute men of purpose...considered it a profound humiliation and a singular catastrophe; they sought for ways to redeem themselves. The revival of the conception of practical studies for the service of the state burst forth like an inextinguishable, raging fire. With the lifting of the ban on oceanic communication, so-called 'Western Learning' gradually came in: first the study of industrial arts and then political institutions. Scholars hitherto had lived as if in a dark room, unaware of what was beyond it; now a window suddenly opened, through which they peered out and discovered all sorts of radiant objects which they had never seen before. Looking back into their own room, they saw only depressing darkness and piled up dust. Consequently, their yearning for foreign knowledge became stronger daily and their feelings of disgust with internal developments daily became more pronounced. (Liang 85)

This so-called "yearning for foreign knowledge" can be attributed to the growing amount of contact between China and the West, and much of this contact was performed without consent from all parties involved. So, in a sense, even though the Opium Wars created upheaval for China and brought detrimental effects to society, it also acted as a stimulus for change, change for various sectors of society, like education. The Sino-Japanese War which came decades later also prompted intellectual curiosity from Chinese people. Japan, which underwent enormous development during the Meiji period due to Western influence, became a hotspot for Chinese students to study abroad in, especially after the imperial examination system was discarded in 1905 by Qing officials. Leaders encouraged students to experiment with education abroad, especially in Japan, as Japan was the first to experience first-hand, profound Western influence, and this could make the digesting of information easier for Chinese students.

The notion to scrap ancient philosophies for more progressive institutions can be closely attributed to the New Culture Movement or the 新文化运动 *xin wenhua yundong*. The New Culture Movement began in Beijing, and this comes as no surprise as major educational hubs, like Peking University, are located in Beijing. Students began to realize that classical Chinese

teachings were incompatible with the demanding need to modernize. Keep in mind that the early

20th century was when Western countries, like the United States of America, were already

regarded as wholly developed by universal standards. China, however, was lagging behind

tremendously. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, a cofounder of the Chinese Communist Party, took an open

stance toward the predicament surrounding contemporary education then, attributing the poorly

developing Chinese state to Confucian ideals that, he and many other intellectuals believed, to

have long been worn out. He decried Confucius and called for him to be replaced with

metaphorical figures representing science and democracy, or 赛先生 *sai xiansheng* and 德先生

de xiansheng. It was believed that only with these new institutions could change be attainable as

these ideas promoted the advancement of knowledge and openly criticized societal issues

because if nothing is critiqued, the status quo would not budge. Daniel Bell adds to this idea in

his book, *China's New Confucianism*, stating "But there is another interpretation of

Confucianism—let's call it "left Confucianism— that stresses such values as the obligation of

intellectuals to criticize bad governments and the obligation of the state to provide for the

material well-being of the people." (Bell xxix). Overall, the 1910s were a time in which educated

Chinese people, the minority of the population, sought change that would tackle the combination

of imperialism and Confucianism that many of the New Culture Movement's leaders believed to

have plagued China for an unprecedented period.

The Importance of Examining Language in the Context of Modernization

With the information I have presented thus far, it is evident that tradition acted as a

double-edged sword for Chinese people. We can further understand this by examining another

important controversial aspect of Chinese society: language. As you may know, the Chinese

language is unique in that it is one of the only languages in the contemporary era to utilize a

wholly pictographic script. Pictographic scripts are those that use pictograms, or symbols to represent concepts and meanings; Egyptian hieroglyphics is another example of a pictographic script, though this, along with many other ancient pictographic languages, is no longer in use. The first Chinese characters are said to have been carved thousands of years ago on tortoise shells to practice divination. Naturally, the characters written then and now have gone through dramatic changes, as any language is bound to change within a substantial amount of time. As mentioned previously, the literacy rate of China before 1949 was exceptionally low. Part of this can be attested to the complexity of the Chinese written script. Nowadays, Chinese characters are typically grouped into belonging to either traditional 繁体字 *fanti zi* or simplified characters 简体字 *jianti zi*.

In 1909, Lufei Kui 陆费逵, one of the main proponents of the simplified character movement, published an article in an educational journal titled "General Education Should Use Nonstandard Forms of Characters". In this, he stated: "In terms of convenience and ease, we might as well adopt the usage of nonstandard forms of characters. This type of stroke writing is simple, easy to learn and easy to remember. Not only will it conserve the mental power of scholars, but it will increase the literacy among a vast number of people…" This was the first time in history that an individual openly promoted the usage of simplified characters. Notice, however, that this was published in 1909, or before the Qing dynasty toppled. Writing was a tool embodying a sense of privilege that was used in the hands of a small group of affluent elites in dynastic China who reigned over the uneducated and poor majority. This occurred because Chinese characters are too complicated to be mastered effortlessly by the average population. It was in this sense that the early language reformers considered language and script change as being linked to societal

reform. By the turn of the century, there was a widespread belief that Chinese characters were to blame for the country's vast number of illiterates.

Again, the 1920s proved to be a time when reformists wanted to move away from tradition. In *The Chinese Writing System in Asia*, Yu Li states:

> During the New Culture Movement, progressive intellectuals…were all supporters of script simplification. A major development took place in 1922, when the prominent scholar Qian Xuantong brought forward a bill to the Republic calling for adopting simplified characters. He pointed out that, for thousands of years, Chinese characters had constantly been reduced to simpler forms, and he advocated using such forms that were already in popular use as the accepted standard for writing Chinese. Furthermore, he proposed to create new simplified characters. (Li)

Most should be able to recognize a traditional form of a character versus its simplified counterpart, as the traditional version has a greater number of strokes. Take the Chinese word for turtle, for instance. While they are, regardless of script style, pronounced the same, the traditional character is 龜 and the simplified is 龟. Notice how it is incredibly difficult to make out what strokes the traditional version is composed of without magnifying or zooming in on the character. You can imagine that having to write hundreds upon hundreds of these more complicated characters from memory would prove to be a burden for many learners of the Chinese language. At the same time, many educated literati believed simplification would bring challenges. The nationalist Ministry of Education formally authorized the first list of 324 simplified characters in 1935, in response to demand from prominent persons and non-governmental organizations. Although the attempt was abandoned the next year, it served as a forerunner to subsequent improvements. Literati like Lufei Kui and Qian Xuantong realized that the first step was to establish the legitimacy of simplified Chinese characters across a wide swath of the Chinese population. Even though the reformers spent a lot of effort explaining handwritten simplified characters as not only time-saving but also having equal standing with

their complicated counterparts in modern situations, cultural conservatism persisted and had a tremendous influence on people's thinking.

Adding on, linguistic diversity was a barrier to the development of a society in which the masses could actively participate. Many countries have attempted to designate one of the indigenous languages as the official language. Speaking from personal experience, Arabic is the preferred language throughout the Arab world, even though it is not the native language of some residents. For instance, my family is Assyrian and we are a stateless ethnic group, forcing us to learn the language of what is taught in primary schools in the nation we are born in; however, the language spoken outside of the classroom is a form of Aramaic which is vastly different from Arabic. While the desire to connect these countries through a common indigenous language was strong, the results have been mixed. Conflict has arisen as a result of a decision to choose one language over another. Ideograms and the usage of Mandarin as the official imperial spoken language allowed for traditional solutions in an aristocratic political and educational system. In a mostly rural society with a peasant economy, few people needed to communicate with those outside of their community. Scholar-officials ran the country, and a system of selecting young villager boys who could be taught as scholars and administrators ensured that entrance to the elite was not only based on inherited status.

As previously stated, by the late 1930s, the Nationalist Government had abandoned any language reform, leaving all future efforts to modify the writing system to its rival, the Chinese Communist Party. During the eight-year war with Japan, the CCP began using simplified characters in documents produced in the regions and base areas under its control to secure people's support for its policies during the war. As language reform was a tool to engage the massive illiterate working populace that was the primary source of the CCP's revolutionary

endeavor, an ideological link appears to exist between language reform and the CCP. Language reform occurred in tandem with major political transformations as part of a larger set of social settings. Chinese people celebrated the creation of a new country in the early 1950s, and their excitement for national construction was at an all-time high. Social reforms were seen as not only necessary but also inescapable, bucking powerful historical norms at a time when change was becoming the norm. Preparations took approximately 30 years to complete before the first modest redesign of 324 characters was implemented in 1935. The considerably more substantial and radical Table of Simplified Characters, on the other hand, was developed over the course of six years. After the People's Republic of China was created in 1949, the government believed eradicating illiteracy was a critical task to be accomplished if the country was to develop any further. In 1954, the Committee for Language Reform was established, and two tentative character simplification proposals were developed. From 1956 to 1964, a total of around 2,200 simplified characters were introduced under the first measure; some of these were later adjusted. The average number of strokes for the most common characters was likewise lowered from 18 to nine. The new communist government was faced with the challenges of modernization and educating a populace that spoke a variety of mutually incomprehensible languages as well. Before 1966, secondary schools were aimed to train school employees with special abilities in vocational schools and a minority for further education, similar to European institutions at the time. During the Cultural Revolution, there was a great deal of emphasis placed on quantitative expansion. Therefore, the debate was primarily about the quality of education to be supplied for an increasing number of young people, rather than equalizing provision in rural and urban areas, a key reason for the examination of education in these two settings.

It is important to know that opposition to the simplification of characters existed then and now, stemming especially from areas where simplified characters are not used at all. For instance, after the Communist Party of China was established in 1949 and the Republic of China relocated to the present-day territory of Taiwan, the literacy rates of people under the Republic of China were, on average, greatly higher than that of China. I want to emphasize that education and literacy are not the same, but they are connected. Without literacy, obtaining a well-rounded education is improbable. The Republic of China was quick to put forth its stance: learning traditional characters was not the core problem, but the issue lies in how institutions responsible for educating the masses were being run in the mainland. It did not help that education at this time was not considered uniform and centralized, as schools in rural China areas were operating differently than those in urban areas.

Why Foreground Education?

Education, as an aspect of any society, is crucial to understand as it allows us to understand prospects for said nation. If a society lacks a proper way of institutionalizing education, this will lead to economic lag and decline because education propels growth. Any slowdown or collapse in China's growth would have far-reaching consequences well beyond its boundaries. China has become one of the world's key development engines in recent decades, with its vast workforce propelling the global economy forward. In *Invisible China How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise*, Natalie Hell and Scott Rozelle examine the implications of China's economy falling behind:

> Let's consider a few examples of ways that economic decline in China would hurt the rest of the world. China is involved in as much as 30 percent of all world trade and is the biggest trading partner of countless countries around the world (more than the United States). Any fall in China's demand for imports would therefore hurt the economies of all those countries in serious ways. China is also crucial because of its role in manufacturing. Today 95 percent of the world's major companies have some part of their supply chains

in China…In simple terms, standards of living would decrease sharply and suddenly for ordinary people around the world. (Hell, Rozelle 11-12)

With this taken into consideration, we must not generalize and assume that China's manufacturing hubs are concentrated in the typical massive, skyscraper-filled cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. There happens to be an immense amount of production that occurs in cities located more inland as well. China's C9 League, or 九校联盟 *jiuxiao lianmeng*, is a group of nine universities that can be equated to the United States of America's Ivy League schools. These nine colleges are concentrated in areas that a large fraction of the general population would probably regard as economic and financial hubs; four are located in Beijing and Shanghai alone. As Chinese high schoolers take the rigorous 高考 *gaokao* to attempt to place into these high-ranking institutions, many seem to disregard the importance of education in lesser-known areas.

Organization of Schooling in China

Obtaining a comprehensive education in China is a multi-step process. Preschool education, nine years of obligatory education from elementary to junior high school, and standard senior high school are all included in a Chinese person's 'basic education.' The compulsory and post-compulsory stages of China's basic education system can also be separated into two categories. The compulsory education stage lasts nine years, with six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. Senior secondary school education is referred to as post-compulsory education. In general, students who complete junior high school will either continue their education in senior high school, which will take three years to complete and will lead to higher education to obtain a degree, or they will enroll in senior high school, which will take three years to complete and will lead to higher education to obtain a degree. The completion of compulsory stages of education may be easier said than done, especially when

taking into account that competition is inevitably extreme as China's population has reached an unprecedented 1.4 billion. Ailei Xie states that "School has been the most important institution in giving local rural youth a chance to break away from their rural roots" (Xie 113). Superficially speaking, especially because a large part of the educational system is compulsory, it appears to be a great opportunity to act as a push for youth to migrate to areas that many people deem more appropriate for obtaining an admired education. However, in China, rural or even areas not widely known will have a substantial population of students, leading to academic exhaustion and struggles in competing with peers.

Shifting to Taiwan: A Nation that Incorporates Tradition with Modernity?

Chinese heritage[1], other East Asian cultures, and even North American colleges and universities have all had an impact on the development of higher education in Taiwan over the last few decades. Throughout these social upheavals and political system shifts, education has always been at the forefront. In *Taiwan Education at the Crossroad: When Globalization Meets Localization*, Chuing Chou and Gregory Ching claim that the system's uniqueness, marked by a mix of Japanese, American, Chinese, and local characteristics, reveals the "options facing Taiwan in its pursuit of localization and globalization in higher education." Taiwan's politics, economics, culture, and education have all changed dramatically since the 1980s. After the 1990s, government measures shifted the education system from an elitist to a universal one, including enabling commercial companies to participate in the quest for systematically organizing education. Taiwanese education, particularly higher education, has gone through several stages of transformation from a rather colonial to a Chinese-like system, and then into a modern system, as one of the Confucian societies. After the creation of multiple private

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[1] Keep in mind that while there was a significant indigenous population before the Kuomintang relocated to present-day Taiwan, most people responsible for the process of institutionalization can be classified as Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic group in mainland China.

education providers in the 1970s, Taiwan's higher education system began to expand. The Kuomintang government was more favorable to the creation of private universities during this time. Following political democratization and social emancipation in the late 1980s, the Taiwan government was under pressure to decentralize institutional governance and strengthen institutional autonomy. Over the past four decades, there has been a push for deregulation, fueled by the desire to free state authority.

Taiwan's higher education system has advanced rapidly during the last century. As previously stated, various bodies of authority have had a significant impact on the Taiwanese academic system. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the scale and scope of the current academic system were developed in line with the modern university as we perceive it today. This amazing progress has greatly increased the number of higher education providers, making Taiwan, along with Western and other Asian countries, one of the most advanced higher education systems in the world. There are certainly challenges as well, however. Domestic and international problems still face Taiwanese education, including aging societies, the industrial revolution, a smooth transition from university to work, more social responsibility, increased international ranking competitiveness, and transnational talent mobility (Hou, Chan, Chiang 24). For instance, most reputable educational institutions are located in core bustling cities, like Taipei. This situation is similar to that of China. How can these areas gather a larger population from lesser-known cities, away from the metropolitan centers? There are known social outreach initiatives for students in more rural areas to apply to widely-known universities. Often, these universities will offer substantial amounts of scholarships to students who are admitted, encouraging the migration from rural to urban, and therefore, increasing demographic diversity. With this being said, bear in

mind that mainland China is nearly 300 times larger than Taiwan. Social outreach can be more easily achieved in a nation with a smaller landmass and population.

What do I precisely mean by "Tradition" in the context of the modernization of education? As previously explored, Taiwan, along with some other overseas communities, uses traditional Chinese characters instead of simplified characters, and the propagation of the latter is the approach the Chinese Communist Party took to enhance the literacy rate among the general population. While many Taiwanese officials are firm on their stance on the preservation of traditional, more additional stroke-containing characters, there must exist an additional reason for why the Taiwanese government wants to preserve this system and remain connected with antiquity. In China and Taiwan, the debate over script reform has never been just a topic surrounding language itself. Instead, it has frequently remained part of a much larger argument with clear political implications. I perceive it to be an attempt to delineate what makes China and Taiwan independent and disassociated from each other. The cliche us versus them dichotomy appeals to many groups because humans naturally tend to seek out differences in one another. Individuals desire to be part of a particular social group, hence why many mainland Chinese people are adamant about the idea of China being unified with its neighbors that share a historical past, ultimately, however, led by one governing faction. On the contrary, it is not uncommon to hear Taiwanese people show disdain toward China, and often, if you regard them as being Chinese, you may be met with disapproval. This is a primary reason why the Chinese language is not called 中文 *zhongwen* in Taiwan because China is 中国 *zhongguo,* and both of these terms share the character 中 *zhong,* which is used to refer to China in an extensive amount of situations. Instead, the term used in Taiwan is 国语 *guoyu,* or the language of the nation.

Adding on to the importance of examining the written script, existing biases toward traditional or simplified characters can extend beyond the political scope and carry further implications. For script conservatives of any language, the relationship between patriotism and a predilection for a certain writing form is what you can believe to be both a convenient and strong weapon. In *Writing Systems of the World*, author Florian Coulmas states that "Writing is a cultural tool which defines the cultural sphere more clearly than many other societal features and techniques…" (Coulmas 227). The Chinese and Taiwanese psyche is profoundly ingrained with a nationalistic preference for a specific script of Chinese characters, which acts as a disincentive to any reform efforts. Patriotism displays itself in a love for indigenous culture, and traditional characters are the best representations of indigenous culture. Therefore, it is incredibly unlikely that the Communist Party will undo simplification efforts, and it is equally unlikely that the Taiwanese government will simplify its script, or borrow from what China has done. Both areas, having their unique scripts, may very well seek to represent their jurisdictions using characteristics like language and writing that many, at first thought, may not regard as representative of a nation.

Organization of Schooling in Taiwan

Taiwan's educational system consists of six years of elementary school, three years of junior high, three years of high school, and four years of college or university. Schooling in elementary and junior high, a total of nine years, is compulsory. The Joint High School Entrance Examination (JHSEE) and the Joint College and University Entrance Examination (JCUEE) are national examinations used to gain admission to senior high school and university (JCUEE). Over 93 percent of junior high students pass the JHSEE, while 67 percent of senior high students enroll in colleges or institutions (Liu 93). Those who fail the exam might attempt alternative

admission exams, such as the Vocational School Entrance Examination, or go as far as to enroll in select preparatory schools to continue their studies in preparation for the next entrance exam. The examination system provides long-term goals for students, teachers, and parents, and provide an incentive for students to continue pursuing education[2]. Taiwanese education is rigorous, like Chinese education. There are more than 15 mandatory subjects for those in junior high school, for example, and the overall number of teaching hours per week exceeds 30 (Liu 93).

Despite how difficult academic strifes may be in China and Taiwan, according to the World Population Review, the overall literacy rate of Taiwan, as of 2022, is 96.10%, a number I find exceptionally high. Likewise, China's is 96.36%, and the population of China is around 60 times higher than Taiwan's. However, sources like World Population Review acknowledge drawbacks in literacy rates, stating "many countries have mismatched definitions as to what qualifies as literacy." Moreover, as most of a country's population tends to be centrally located in more happening areas, like the capital or coastal cities, literacy rates may overlook the gap between rural and urban, in that they primarily take into account urban surveys rather than rural, as this is where the majority information centers are located.

Case Study Proposition and Implications

As research challenges have been presented, I firmly believe that a case study is needed in examining how, from urban to rural settings, education outlooks change. Also, because these two areas utilize different written scripts, it is important to realize that more time may be

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[2] An interesting comparison can be made between Chinese/Taiwanese and American education. Students in America are typically enrolled in a 5-year elementary, 3-year junior high, and 4-year high school. Moreover, while there are standardized tests like the ACT and SAT that many colleges and universities use as determining factors for admission, these do not necessarily place you into a certain university. Certain institutions may have more strict requirements, like a higher grade point average or standardized test score, but students must individually apply to every college they have interest in enrolling in. Therefore, many would agree that there is more flexibility in the American education system.

allocated during childhood to make up for the differences in complexity. This may have an impact on how much stress a student experiences during primary and secondary school. We may not overlook that every person's situation is unique, and it is not appropriate to generalize by saying that students share identical experiences. Other factors may be at play, like household dynamics and student stress stemming from the pressure that family members impose on them on the importance of education and career choice. However, for this case study proposal, I believe that it is difficult to incorporate this as part of my focus and analysis as the number of exceptions and possibilities would then be limitless. Moreover, the swath of land that many may regard as being rural in mainland China is far greater than that of Taiwan.

In addition, I believe that literacy rates may be greatly exaggerated. Previous government-conducted surveys are flawed in terms of their methodological approach. Literacy rates in China were reported to be over 85% in a 1996 survey (Xie 1996). However, there is concern that the demographic age range of the survey participants was not made apparent, and that older people born before the country's foundation in 1949 — many of whom had greater levels of illiteracy — could have been left out. Other mistakes in the survey's administration can be found, such as requiring those living in rural areas to visually recognize 1,500 characters whereas urban participants were tested on up to 2,000. However, such data are insufficient for determining literacy because recognizing a character differs from being able to write characters from memory. Furthermore, because the 1996 test was conducted both by and for the government, there may be a complication in reaching desired survey outcomes, since state-required characters can be taught before the exam is administered. Furthermore, the survey included an essentially identical number of rural and urban participants, despite the fact that China's rural population at the time accounted for roughly 60% of the country's overall

population. Therefore, I think that a nationwide survey aimed at determining literacy levels should include demographics with an equitable distribution; the population should be surveyed proportionately rather than weighting the more educated urban group. As a result, literacy rates as indicated by the 1996 survey results are likely to be much lower than expected.

In China's heartland, literacy is merely one dimension of rural challenges. While many people are still illiterate, they are becoming more technologically aware. Personal computers or laptops, for example, are significantly outnumbered by affordable and handheld cell phones. In the mid-200s, there were around 500 million mobile phone users, which was 3.5 times the number of Internet users (Zhu, Wang 2005). It is critical to not label those who are unable to write characters or be completely literate as being "undeveloped." If we keep in mind that technological competence plays an influential role in these people's lives, it will also allow us to possess a more well-rounded point of view that is inclusive of varying factors. On a similar note, Taiwan also promotes media literacy, and to some Taiwanese, the definition of literacy goes above and beyond the ability to read and write. According to *New Media and Learning in the 21st Century A Socio-Cultural Perspective*…

> The goal of media literacy education is 'to foster critical thinking and to enable all citizens to become people who can shape the cultural taste of nation and communities. This illustrates to some extent that the media should be the 'first curriculum'. Because of the considerable amount of time that the younger generation spends in school, media might have the potential to replace the role of schools. (Lin, Choy 104)

We can understand that, in rural or urban settings, technology does have its role, and it has allowed individuals to "cheat" the traditional system of attaining literacy, as in China and Taiwan, it is not necessary to be able to write to get around. Moreover, the usage of Chinese 拼音 *pinyin* keyboards has attached greater emphasis to recognizing rather than writing, causing many people to forget aspects like stroke order or how the character, as a whole, is written.

Methodological Approach

      With all of these considerations, I believe the best way to approach this is to utilize a combination of surveys and interviews to gather data. Both of these methods are inexpensive and will allow me to gather data immediately without having to perform any long-term analyses. Different age groups must be examined, along with taking into account what should and should not be considered an urban or a rural setting. In mainland China, the character 村 *cun* is used after place names to denote their status as a village. In Taiwan, 村 *cun* is explicitly used to refer to rural villages, while 里 *li* is for urban villages, which have a significantly larger population than the former and are often located closer to urban areas. It is much simpler to select an urban city from both China and Taiwan to conduct research in as we are most familiar with hearing the names of places that are more happening. One may be quick to select the capital of each, Beijing and Taipei City, respectively. However, because we know that information and reform typically disseminates from capital cities and spreads to other areas gradually, I believe it would be best to select urban cities that have a considerable distance from the capital, and even share important bonds with the past and tradition. People fond of tradition may criticize the simplification of Chinese characters, as explained above. For China, I find Kunming 昆明 to be an ideal choice as it is a cross between modernity and tradition. Many individuals exclusively travel to Kunming to learn about and utilize traditional Chinese medicine as there are many schools and even research universities in Kunming that are devoted to the research of the topic. With that being said, as of 2022, Kunming has a population of nearly five million, and it will not be difficult to see skyscrapers across the horizon (World Population Review). As Taiwan is concerned, Tainan City 台南市 is an appropriate fit. Tainan City is located on the southwestern tip of the island, while the capital, Taipei 台北市, is in northern Taiwan. Moreover, many believe that Tainan City is one

of the oldest cities in Taiwan that has a strong connection and drive to preserve traditions and customs. Like Kunming, it does have a significant population and a robust market economy, demonstrating its status as an urban city.

The rural areas are not as simple to select for research as the urban. For instance, in many villages in China and Taiwan, there is a large percentage of people who are considered indigenous and speak their language, rather than any form of Mandarin Chinese. In many cases, they can only speak and understand their language, and cannot read and write Chinese characters. Therefore, without prior knowledge or living experience in said area, it may be difficult to determine which rural setting is best to conduct research in regarding the relationship between language and education and how rural and urban disparities fit into all of this. At the same time, I think it is crucial to select rural areas that are not too distant from urban centers; by doing so, we can pinpoint if proximity plays a role in the propagation of language education and education as a whole. One Chinese rural area that has captured my attention is Yihezhuang 义和庄, located less than a three-hour drive away from Beijing. This village is located within the mountains and some areas are only accessible by foot, leading us to question the impact geography and natural terrain have on institutionalization. Many villages in Taiwan, likewise, are not remote in relation to urban areas but are also located within difficult-to-navigate terrain. Because Taiwan is entirely composed of islands, I believe that it would be valuable to examine a part of Taiwan that is away from the block of land that we tend to associate Taiwan with. Namely, I am interested in pursuing research in the Matsu Islands 马祖列岛. The Matsu Islands are an archipelago made up of 36 small islands and is also known as Lianjiang County 连江县. Within this area are 22 rural, not urban, villages. This is important because we can solely focus on the rural without including the Taiwanese government's designation and definition of urban.

There are many appealing options for villages to conduct research in the Matsu Islands, but the overall location is a fitting choice.

Besides selecting appropriate research locations, the age demographic must be considered as well. It is in my best interest to examine three different age groups across these various areas: children (age 12 or younger), young adults and middle-aged individuals (age 18-50), and the elderly (age 60 or older). Language is best acquired during the critical period when an individual is most sensitive to environmental stimuli. By surveying and interviewing children, I will be able to gauge the language skills they are acquiring and if in both urban and rural settings, importance is given to teaching children not just how to speak, but how to read and write Chinese characters as well. Next, we shift into a demographic that may have not experienced education like how children now may be experiencing it. Institutions may have changed, and by including them in the study, I will be able to deduce how structural, educational transformation has changed within the past few decades. Lastly, the elderly is a crucial age group to examine. Many seniors alive today may have experienced dramatic events like the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution. From them, influential information can be gathered regarding massive societal shifts between the 20th and 21st centuries and whether this affected their chance of achieving high-level literacy, in comparison to other age groups and areas.

I have said that I am interested in using surveys as one of my primary methods of acquiring data. More specifically, I want to assign paper-based assessments to respondents. Gathering research results about literacy requires a test of language skills, and more specifically, how knowledge of Chinese characters may be more profound from one group to the next. We cannot forget that mainland China and Taiwan use two different character scripts: simplified and traditional. So, in Kunming and Yihezhuang, the former will be tested. In Tainan City and the

Matsu Islands, the latter will be used. Testing for reading and writing will all be included. Individuals will be given a passage in Chinese followed by reading comprehension questions. Some of these questions will be multiple-choice, while others will be short answers and require respondents to answer the prompts using their own words. Moreover, another section will be entirely devoted to writing. Test-takers will need to write a few paragraphs responding to one out of several questions.

Hand-written surveys are only one of the tools I will use to acquire data; interviews will be conducted as well. While I am versed in Standard Mandarin Chinese, people in rural areas may not be able to respond to questions using this. Therefore, I will need to find someone who will be able to assist me with translation (local dialects translated into Standard Mandarin Chinese or English); only then will I be able to analyze information. I will ask respondents numerous questions regarding the schooling they went through, while also simultaneously appropriating these questions depending on the age group I am speaking with. For instance, I am interested in asking children what they are currently being taught in the classroom, while elderly people will be asked questions regarding what they remember from primary and secondary school if they attended. Also, older populations have a wider set of questions applicable to them, especially about their life experiences. I intend on asking them if they know anything about education reform and whether or not they were directly affected by this. Also, understanding trends in socioeconomic status over time will help in analyzing data because many may have been unable to attend school, then or now, due to a lack of resources, and socioeconomic factors are connected with this.

While the format of the surveys and the interviews have been explained, it is equally important to understand how the results will be interpreted. I plan on utilizing three categories

for the analysis of data: illiteracy, limited literacy, and functional literacy. Regardless of age, illiterate people cannot read and write Chinese characters, or what they can write is only valuable information, like their name, address, and telephone number. In many cases, the last time an illiterate person wrote anything down or read extensively was when they were in primary school. Limited literacy is what the term implies: the capacity for reading and writing exists, but not so much to the extent that no mistakes will be made. To have a strong grasp of the reading and writing system, it is often touted that around 3,500 characters must be memorized. Someone with limited literacy may have an advanced or even a limited knowledge of 1,000 of these 3,500 most common characters. This allows them to read simple materials, but not something along the lines of a newspaper. Lastly, functionally literate people will not have any difficulty reading advanced texts like newspapers and textbooks and can perform tasks like writing letters and essays. It is still important to realize the impact that technology is having on the Chinese language; the requirement for writing characters has significantly diminished since particular keyboards exist which allow users to simply type in the pronunciation of characters to find them from a comprehensive database.

As explained previously, researching trends in education is important because it is the literate and educated population that will go on to contribute to both the public and private sectors of society which are both, directly and indirectly, related to our livelihoods. Moreover, East Asia has modernized at an unprecedented rate, and many people argue that China will become the world's largest and most powerful economy by 2030, surpassing that of the United States of America. Having said that, not everyone in China, and other areas that use similar means of communication, has the same access to obtaining an education or becoming literate. Taiwan utilizes traditional Chinese characters whereas mainland China uses simplified, a

movement pushed during the mid-20th century to address issues of illiteracy, specifically among the uneducated population, which made up the majority of China then. Regardless, even through periods of education reform, there exist great disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of experiencing schooling and learning standard (as touted by the state) means to communicate. Some individuals may not have been able to complete every part of their education, including primary, secondary, and higher education, and this may be tied to external factors. Consequently, this may have led to an inability to attain literacy concerning Chinese characters. Do urban areas have higher literacy and education levels than rural areas? Why is this the case? How is education reform being implemented in rural areas? Does proximity to metropolitan centers influence the rate of reform? These are questions I seek to answer through my research.

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