Chapter 6
Early Literacy Education in China: A Historical Overview

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6.1 Introduction

Literacy teaching of young children remained essentially the same in China for 2,000 years, from the earliest days of the Chinese empire across tumultuous centuries to the beginning of the twentieth century. Although dynasties varied enormously, most literacy training of young children remained unchanged and was derived from ancient Chinese thinking and traditions, with only a little influence from outside China. A half century of change followed this period beginning in 1903 when the first preschools were founded. Political and cultural upheaval surrounded the 1911 collapse of the last dynasty, and the influential May 4th Movement of 1919 took root. Scholars returning from overseas, enamored of Western concepts, influenced education, and ancient Chinese traditions were pushed aside as irrelevant to modern needs.

In 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded, another major change affected early literacy education. China turned to her then mentor, the Soviet Union, and shut out all other Western influences. Even after the 1960 split with the USSR that led to withdrawal of all advisors and technical support, Soviet educational policy and practice remained entrenched. Only when economic and political reform came to China 30 years later in the late 1970s, led by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), did a restorative balance begin, integrating Western pedagogical literacy thinking with traditions deeply rooted in the culture and practices of the Chinese people. In the following sections we trace the themes of early literacy theory and practice as they flow across these time periods, adapting to the political and cultural shifts.

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6.2 Period 1. From Ancient Times to 1900

6.2.1 Background

Starting before Confucius (孔子, 55–479 BCE) and stretching across millennia to the early twentieth century, the purpose of receiving an education, including literacy training, was to master the knowledge and acquire the moral integrity considered necessary to pass the imperial exams and win recognition in society. The exam content during that long period was the Confucian classics, memorized by child and adult alike even though children did not comprehend the meaning.

Suggested ways to educate young children of elite families emerged in texts during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), but not until the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220) is there evidence of widespread circulation and acceptance of theories concerning instruction of small children (Kinney 1995). Early education focused on developing children's morality, so they could become government officials. The earliest extant writing on the topic, *Muyi Zhuan* (*Biographies of Maternal Paragons)* written by Xiang Liu (刘向**,** ca. 77–7 BCE), one of several Han thinkers, stresses two theories—making early childhood, including the prenatal stage, the starting point in a person's education and granting women an important role in the moral development of their children. Although throughout these millennia girls were not allowed to be part of the Imperial exam system, many became literate, some to a sophisticated degree, and they were frequently responsible for young children's first literacy learning.

Early education had two strands: literacy instruction and moral development. Although some scholars suggested children should not learn to write until 8 or 9 years of age because of their small hands and tender bones (Liao 2006), families often began a son's formal training at two or three when he could hold a brush, with the mother or nurse teaching him his first characters (Cleverly 1985). Families bent on producing Imperial scholars began preparation prenatally. The back of the pregnant woman's mirror was to be inscribed with "Five Sons Pass the Examinations." To have a chance of bearing a gifted son, she must follow proper ways to sit, avoid certain foods, not talk arrogantly, and listen to poetry and the Confucian classics read aloud (Yu 2003). Records of child prodigies in chronicles of the Han Dynasty show some having mastered difficult texts, such as the Confucian *Analects*, as early as 7 years old.

In 124 BCE, Emperor Wu Di (汉武帝; ruled 141–87 BCE), who had declared Confucianism the official state philosophy, created five institutes aligned with the Five Confucian Classics (五经): *The Book of Changes* (易经), *The Book of History* (书经 or 尚书), *The Book of Rites* (礼记), *The Book of Songs* (诗经), and *The Spring and Summer Annals* (春秋). Later the Four Books (四书) were added: *The Analects of Confucius* (论语, a record of speeches and discussions by Confucius and his disciples), *Mencius* (孟子, a collection of conversations of the

scholar Mencius with kings of his time), and two chapters from *The Book of Rites—The Great Learning* (大学) and *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸). Together, these works outlined the principles of society and government, as well as codes for personal conduct, and were central not just to Imperial exams up to the twentieth century but for several centuries were the texts used for young children's early literacy education even though the children did not understand them (Zhang 2004).

Children entered a school, usually a *Si Shu*, (私塾) at age eight (seven by Western calculations) where more formal learning began. Privately run, a *Si Shu* took a variety of forms (Han 1997). One type was conducted in a home by a family-hired tutor and was likely to have from one to ten students attending from the immediate and neighboring families. Another type was run by tutors in their own village and might be in their home or a community building, such as a temple.

6.2.2 Pedagogy and Curriculum of Early Literacy

Both preschool and primary school students learned to read and write Chinese characters through memorization. The pattern was so consistent over more than 2,000 years that eighteenth and nineteenth century descriptions of learning appear to hold considerable accuracy for much earlier times (Wu 1995). One author wrote the following description of his schooling, looking back on his small town upbringing and the arrangement of the family school where he and his relatives studied and where the tutor lived.

> To the left of the screen-wall stood a small house with a hall and two large rooms which was built to be the family school. . ..I loved to listen to the older children chanting and reciting the classics. The central wall contained a small shrine for the written image of Confucius. Our tutor [lived in] two rooms. In front of the hall was a small garden. . ..A huge thorny tree, called a Tseng. . .will always remain in my memory. None of my cousins will forget it either, for it could be seen from our desks in the hall, and our eyes were always fixed on it while we recited the classics to our tutor, especially if the recitations were difficult. It gave shade in the heat of summer, and when the tutor allowed us a little rest we would sit or play under it. (Yee 1940, pp. 22–23)

In a much earlier account Chong Wang (27–97) (王充), a Han scholar, wrote in his autobiography about strenuous instruction and how he had to learn to behave with politeness, honesty, benevolence, obedience, propriety, and reverence. He recounts they were whipped for bad writing and daily he read a "thousand characters from *The Analects* and *Shu Jing* [书经, *The Book of History*]" (quoted in Kinney 1995, p. 37).

Tutors were often those who had studied long years for the Imperial exams but had not scored high enough to receive a government post (Han 1997). They had

spent their lives studying the Confucian classics and had no knowledge of how to work as a farmer or help in their family's business. Therefore, they could do nothing for a livelihood except teach children. They had no pedagogical training. Memorization and recitation of the classics was the only method they knew for teaching students to read and write.

Character recognition was stressed first. Comprehension came later. According to Zisheng Pan (潘子声) of the Qing Dynasty in *A Dictionary for Young Children* (养蒙针度), every child begins by recognizing characters, and later learns to read and write (Compilation Commission 1990). Learning focused only on the form and pronunciation of characters. Meaning in context was ignored. It was believed beginning readers should not be allowed to read texts until after they recognized many characters. Nevertheless, in ancient China, in contrast to today, those able to recognize a few Chinese characters were considered literate. Over the millennia, teaching strategies remained quite similar. Memorizing, copying exact character forms, and plenty of punishment were central to becoming literate. Students recited in groups at school. Then after school they had to practice the material individually in order to commit it to memory.

Although the West saw a transformation from oral to silent reading, with reading aloud to oneself considered the mark of a poor reader, no such shift occurred in China. A walk across the schoolyard of modern Chinese elementary schools is accompanied by a chorus of strong voices reading or reciting textbook passages. In outdoor spaces before high school and college classes, students are seen bent to their books as they walk and recite, memorizing texts. The tradition dates back thousands of years and seems to have proven efficient or comfortable for teaching children to read in Chinese. For many, the repeated readings emphasize the beauty and cadence of the language and help uncover textual meaning. A saying known to many today is, "Du shu bai bian, qi yi zi jian" (读书百遍, 其义自见; "If you read or recite a book 100 times, the meaning of the book will come out naturally.") This belief was common centuries ago and continues to be an essential part of China's current pedagogical practices.

Historical descriptions are peppered with stories that laud early memorization abilities at 5 years or so. For instance, when he was seven, the mother of a Ming statesman supervised his memorization of *The Classic of Filial Piety* (孝经) until he could recite it without mistakes. Mothers and tutors had young children recite aloud repetitively and memorize various texts before they taught them to recognize characters. At other times character recognition and oral recitation of memorized texts went hand in hand.

Details of how children should learn to memorize and recite were spelled out by some. When reading, as suggested in Yòu Xùn (幼训; *Early Children Training*) by Xuegu Cui, a Qing dynasty scholar, the reader

> should not increase or omit characters, and should not repeat over and over again. The voice shouldn't be too high or too low, too fast or too slow. The worst is if, while reading, the child gets excited and reads like a croaking frog, or when bored, like buzzing flies. (Compilation Commission 1990, pp. 81–82)

Educators of ancient times combined character-recognition and character-writing with adherence to good behavior and high morals. Xi Zhu (朱熹, 1130–1200), an influential Confucian of the Song Dynasty, proposed in *The Analects of Zhu Zi II* (朱子语类辑略. 卷二), that when children read aloud, they needed to do three things: concentrate the mind, focus the eyesight, and move the tongue and mouth. To write clearly a student must form characters carefully, stroke by stroke, but also with his heart fully engaged.

In later centuries, methods were developed for adults to teach young children to read and understand difficult parts of texts (Liao 2006). Concrete strategies to aid character recognition developed. One educator instructed adults to have children listen carefully to each sentence and pay close attention to the individual characters, so they could read the text in front of their peers without any mistakes. Wooden character blocks were also suggested to help learning. Xuegu Cui explained in detail how to teach children characters using cards or books. In "Instructions for Children" he wrote:

> What about recognizing characters on cards? Generally, at the beginning of learning, one should not hasten to teach children to read books. Instead, make small cards and write a single character on the front of the card. On the back write a different character with the same pronunciation. For example "文" [wén, *article*] and "闻" [wén *hearing*], "张" [zhāng, *opening*] and "章" [zhāng, *chapter*], and teach them one at a time.
>
> What about recognizing characters from books? Choose books they have never read. First teach them the words in the books one by one. Circle them with a red brush, and then write them down on the top of the book with black ink. This is the best way to help children recognize the words. (Compilation Commission 1990, p. 79)

Others suggested textbooks could be used for teaching students to write, as well as to read, and writing characters would help children better recognize the characters (Liao 2006). Although there is some evidence the above strategies were used, most tutors of young children appear to have found straight recitation and copying more expedient (Leung 1994; Yu 2003). All assumed connecting character recognition to text meaning was unnecessary for young children.

As this millennia-long period moved towards a close, Yun Wang (王筠, 1784–1854), a philologist in the Qing Dynasty, pointed out in *The Methods of Teaching Children* (教童子法) that teachers should adhere strictly to a step by step process guided by children's developmental sequence (Zhang 2004). Through what he called "practical teaching," he proposed learning strategies that moved away from memorization of texts or isolated copying of characters. He wrote:

> It is unnecessary to read the books intensively. Instead, the ideographic character form should be taught first. For example, teach them the characters of "日" and "月" [*sun* and *moon*], by pointing at the sun and moon in the sky. To teach children "上" and "下" [*up* and *down*], one can point out the character structures to show them. (Li 1990, p. 33)

He also suggested once children recognized the characters, they could be taught other characters through combining elements of the written forms.

Yi (1994) points out that in all time periods, textbooks are one of the most important factors affecting children. This must have been especially true during

the long feudal period when Confucian texts dominated. Child-oriented rhymes began to develop quite early, and at times ethical jingles were created for children to sing and memorize (Zhang 2004). Primer-like books with simple character patterns were developed as early as the Qin (221-207 BCE) and Han dynasties (221 BCE-220 CE), but only a few families had access to them. Nevertheless, although pedagogy remained relatively static across the centuries, texts became increasingly appealing and more comprehensible for children.

6.2.3 Textbooks

The oldest known textbooks used for young learners were *The Three-Character Classic* (三字经), an early primer written in rhymes with simple characters, and *The Names of a Hundred Families* (百家姓) (CNSECE 2003; Liu 1985). Both appeared during the Song dynasty (960–1279). With the help of a tutor, children learned to recognize the Chinese characters in these books, as well as write them. *The Three-Character Classic*, one of the first books children memorized, contains a little over 1,000 Chinese characters and only 514 new ones. Directed at both the child and the tutor, the text includes general pedagogical advice infused with moral declarations and admonishments. The following is an excerpt from the book with translations done by Zhuzhang Guo (2004). The first verse reads:

人之初　性本善　性相近　习相远
[Men at their birth
Are naturally good.
Their natures are similar,
And their habits become widely different.]

It then continues with several hundred more lines of advice such as:

养不教　父之过　教不严　师之惰
[To feed without teaching
Is the father's fault.
To teach without severity
Is the teacher's laziness.]
子不学　非所宜　幼不学　老何为
[If the child does not learn,
This is not as it should be.
If he does not learn while young,
What will he be when old?]
首孝弟　次见闻　知某数　识某文
[Begin with filial piety and fraternal love,
And then see and hear to learn.
Learn to count,
And learn to read.]

The book also includes historical and cultural information and descriptions of the natural world.

稻粱菽 麦黍稷 此六谷 人所食
[Rice, millet, pulse,
Wheat, glutinous millet and common millet,
These six grains,
Are those which men eat.]
马牛羊 鸡犬豕 此六畜 人所饲
[The horse, the ox, the sheep,
The fowl, the dog, the pig.
These six animals,
Are those which men keep.]

The Names of a Hundred Families (百家姓), composed in the early Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), placed all of the surnames of the time in rhyming lines of eight characters (Tom 1989). Although nonsensical, it provided children characters to copy and recite.

In the *Thousand-Character Text* (千字文), which was often the next book to be memorized (Cleverly 1985), verse after verse provides general and historical knowledge, as well as Confucian morality. The following verses from the *Thousand-Character Text*, translated by Guo, show how young children were taught the characters even though they could not comprehend most of the text.

盖此身发 四大五常 恭惟鞠养 岂敢毁伤
[Human bodies are from the four main substances,
Man's minds should cherish the five virtues or principles.
Every person should remember the parents' benevolence of rearing them,
And never harm or hurt their own bodies.]
都邑华夏 东西二京 背邙面洛 浮渭据泾
[Among the cities of ancient China,
There were two capitals: one in the east and the other in the west.
The eastern capital, facing the Luo River, was in front of Mount Mang;
The western capital was situated in a place where the Wei River and the Jing River passed.]
矩步引领 俯仰廊庙 束带矜庄 徘徊瞻眺
[When walking, people should be steady and easy in their manners;
Whether bending bodies or raising heads, people should behave themselves as seriously as in temples.
The dress people wear should look neat and dignified,
When taking walks or climbing high, people should pay attention to their appearances.]

Textbooks written especially for little children, such as *The Book of Stories* (书言故事), were also published in the Song dynasty. By the end of the thirteenth century, these and books such as *The Thousand Family Essay* (千家诗) and *Ethical Teachings* (弟子规) became increasingly more popular among schools. Filled with Confucian moral teachings, they were used for both little children and adults.

Child-oriented texts multiplied from then on and served different functions, but all stressed the combination of knowledge, moral principles, and evoking children's interest. They were sometimes illustrated with fine pictures (Zhang 2004). In one

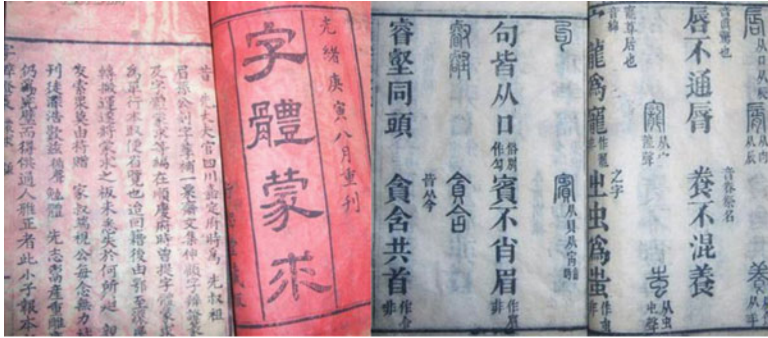

Fig. 5.1 Sample pages from *The ABCs of Chinese Font* (e.g., the *upper right corner* shows the various components that comprise the character 唇) (Photo by Zhenyou Yu)

type, illustrations accompanied a few words or sentences. During the Ming dynasty (1279–1369) illustrated books of all kinds, including those for children, were very popular (Yu 2003). They focused not just on words but on topics of the natural world, such as the four seasons and animals, so children were learning more than just character recognition (Gao 2007). In *A Newly Compiled Illustrated Four-Word Glossary* (新编对相四言), the earliest extant illustrated primer in the world, children "read" pictures about natural phenomena, such as the sun, moon, wind and clouds, animals and plants, and specific parts of the body, such as the eyes and nose. Another of these illustrated texts is *The Three-Character Book about the World* (名物三字书). Later, in the Qing dynasty (1636–1911), *The Initiatory Picture Book* (蒙养图说) and *The Twenty-Four-Picture Book for Filial Piety* (二十四孝图说) were compiled so children could read the pictures accompanying the stories (He 1990; Zhang 2004). In these books morality and nature went hand in hand with learning characters. For instance, in one story an older child gives the larger of two pears to a younger child and keeps the smaller one for himself.

Another type of textbook laid out rules for how to write Chinese characters. Unlike letters in an alphabet, children must learn which of the many strokes in a character is made first, in what direction, and how to balance the character within a square space. These texts were prepared so children, by copying from the book using a brush, could learn the controlled precision needed to write well. In *The ABCs of Chinese Font* (字体蒙求), first published in 1876, for instance, children were instructed about the various components of characters, including their origin and the different steps used to form each character (Fig. 5.1).

In China, traditional textbooks occupy a unique position. Many of those from ancient times remain a part of everyday life today. Published centuries ago, texts such as *The Three-Character Classic* continue to be read (Cleverly 1985). It is as though McGuffey's Readers were still popular in the United States of the twenty-first century.

6.3 Period 2. Early 1900s to the End of the 1940s

6.3.1 Background

Beginning in the twentieth century, early education in China passed through dramatic transformations and reflected the on-going national struggle to integrate and harmonize ancient Chinese wisdom and knowledge with Western ideas and experience (Lu 2001). External events, combined with internal political upheaval, had a profound effect on China. As early as 1840, foreign traders and missionaries began arriving. Through various maneuvers Western countries claimed rights in "unequal treaty" ports. In 1911 the increasingly weak Qing dynasty was overthrown by revolutionaries led by a hero of modern China, Sun Yat-sen (孙中山, 1866–1925), and the Republic of China was born.

The new government leaders introduced Western ideas that wrenched China from a deteriorating dynastic system to a republic and focused on radically changing her direction for the first time in centuries. Intellectual ferment culminated in the May 4th Movement of 1919, an anti-Imperialist, cultural, and political movement resulting from the Chinese government's response to the Treaty of Versailles. The movement led to an upsurge of Chinese nationalism and identified three areas of needed reform: "the emancipation of the individual person as an educational goal, the need for increased study of sciences, and the development of democracy" (Wang 2001, p. 297). It also provided the first major shift away from traditional educational concepts toward critically examining the role of Chinese education and the need for modernization (Wang 2001). The flowering of these new ideas and institutions was juxtaposed, however, against the chaos of Japanese encroachment and invasion from 1935 to 1945, and a year later, civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists that lasted until 1949.

In spite of these unstable and often disastrous times, intellectual ferment continued as China threw off the feudal mantle. More and more Chinese scholars returned from the West (mainly from the United States) and began to promote new education theories and practices. John Dewey, invited to spend 2 years lecturing in China (1919–1921) about his pragmatic theories and practices (Lu 2001), heavily influenced several areas of Chinese thought, including early childhood education.

6.3.2 Birth of Preschool Education

Beginning in the 1880s, Western missionaries attempted to start some preschools and teacher-training schools. The Qing dynasty, though generally dysfunctional, supported early childhood education. In 1903, the first public preschool and kindergarten, Hubei *Meng Yang Yuan*, was established. A year later a government document, the *Guimao Educational System*, confirmed the dynasty's

commitment to preschool and kindergarten as formal educational institutions for young children, and the government founded a small number of them, including the Beijing No. 1 Preschool and Kindergarten and the Fujian Public Preschool and Kindergarten. By 1907, there were 428 preschools with 4,893 children attending (Liang 2003).

At first, the new Republic of China followed the early childhood education system put in place by the Qing dynasty, but 10 years later, in 1922, the avant-garde government circulated a new document entitled the *Renshu Educational System*, that led to the founding of more and more public and private preschools. These included the famous Demonstration Preschool and Kindergarten of Nanjing Normal School, the Nanjing Gulou Preschool and Kindergarten, and the Xiamen Jimei Preschool and Kindergarten (Shi 1999).

Through the 1930s early childhood education was led by the central government. Drawing heavily from Western theory and research, great difficulties emerged in implementing the new systems and curriculum. Because China had so few teachers, the first hired were babysitters from other countries. Three Japanese babysitters, for instance, were employed as teachers in the first public preschool in Hubei province, and people grew unhappy about the foreigner-dominated system. Also, until 1920, almost all preschool teachers were trained by missionaries. Although Christianity was not permitted, schools devoted considerable time to religion. Finally, as Western early childhood education theory and practice began to dominate teacher training schools, the new teachers promoted the reading and understanding of Western children's stories and picture books rather than recitation from Chinese primers and learning to recognize characters.

By 1927, Heqin Chen (陈鹤琴, 1892–1982), considered the father of Chinese preschool education, reflected the growing concern that China had turned too strongly toward the West. He wrote in an educators' magazine:

> Now almost all the preschools and kindergartens in China are like those in the USA. The stories children listen to are American ones and the pictures they see are American . . .That's not to say, that what is from America should not be used. Rather, it should not be copied (or imitated completely) because the two countries are quite different. (Compilation Committee 1990, p. 148)

He and other educators, such as Zonglin Zhang (张宗麟, 1899–1978), Xuemen Zhang (张雪门, 1891–1973), and Xingzhi Tao (陶行知, 1891–1946), worked assiduously to combine modern Western concepts with traditional Chinese practices in early education. They had studied in the United States and believed Western research and practice could help move China away from the traditional education system, but they wanted to explore how to do this without rejecting Chinese culture.

In the United States, Heqin Chen learned from Edward Thorndike and studied with John Dewey at Teachers College, Columbia University. He was committed to developing a Chinese education system based on research and Western knowledge about the psychological development of the child. Dewey's pragmatic approach of grounding education in everyday life and in meaningful experiences for children was important to Chen's emerging curriculum, Reading Methods (He 1990).

Upon returning to China, Chen continued to develop curriculum that incorporated practical suggestions and tried his Living Education theory in preschools. Based on his and others' ideas, the first uniform government document on early education in China, *Early Childhood Education Standards*, was created and circulated in 1932 and revised 4 years later. Unlike previous documents that completely copied Western ones, it successfully integrated Western theories while maintaining a Chinese context. It included seven learning areas, such as language, math, music, and drawing, as well as project methods.

During this time (especially 1930–1940), scholars such as Heqin Chen and Xingzhi Tao developed the majority of ideas for early childhood education. They applied the theories and standards to actual conditions in China, and through careful observation of children, practice, and experimentation, they developed a Chinese system for preschool and childhood education, including early literacy education.

6.3.3 Pedagogy and Curriculum of Early Literacy

Although many still followed traditional pedagogical paths that resembled preparation for the Imperial exams (Cleverly 1985), new teaching and learning methods, as well as new content, sprang up as the purpose of education shifted towards developing Chinese men and women conversant with the modern world (Beijing Academic Society 1989).

In past centuries early literacy education, infused with morality, was the only component of early childhood education. In the new Republic it became one part of a diverse curriculum along with math, drawing, and other subjects. Children no longer spent long hours making exact copies of characters and reading them in isolation. Instead, literacy learning was embedded in reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. Rhymes and story learning, observation and daily oral talk were encouraged (Zhao 2001). In *Government Guidelines of Education* (1904) of the Qing dynasty, curriculum domains included "play, songs and rhymes, oral talk, and manipulation skills" (Compilation Committee 1990, p. 9) The reworked *Preschool and Kindergarten Curriculum Standard* (1936), developed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China, stated in the section on "Stories and Rhymes" that children were to "read various pictures of stories," and teachers should ask them to talk about the pictures and create their own meaningful stories in simple Chinese (Compilation Committee 1990, p. 232). Even in Yan'an, the revolutionary area of the Communists in northern Shaanxi Province, that includes Xi'an and Yan'an, in the midst of war their No. 1 Child Care Center included early literacy education, such as reading newspapers and recognizing characters, as one of several curriculum areas (He 1990).

Another critical change was that children no longer had to read primers in the ancient Chinese language. Rather, they read stories and rhymes in vernacular Chinese, which meant the literacy learning process became much easier and more meaningful for them.

New story books became early childhood reading material, and the Confucian classics were abandoned. Traditional Chinese and Western translated folk stories, such as *Little Sparrow*, the *Race between the Tortoise and the Rabbit*, and selections about Monkey's adventures from *Journey to the West* were among these (Li et al. 2006). According to the standard for choosing texts in the Demonstration Preschool and Kindergarten of Nanjing Normal School where some curriculum was piloted, traditional and folk stories, historical stories, finger-play rhymes, and songs were to be included in the language curriculum. In addition, such picture books as *Introductory Physics* (物理引蒙) and *Children's Stories* (儿童故事) were to be available for youngsters to read in order to learn about natural science.

As the variety of children's textbooks increased, books translated from other languages appeared. *Peachy Clouds*, a play written by a Japanese author in 1921, *Little John*, a fairy tale by Eeden, a Dutch writer, in 1887, and *A Watch*, a fairy tale written by Panteleev, a Russian, in 1928 were translated by the well-known author Xun Lu (鲁迅; 1881–1936) and became outstanding reading material of the time (Yi 1994). The first children's magazines such as *Child Monthly* (小孩月报), *Child Pictorial* (成童画报), and *Children in Shanghai* (上海儿童) were launched. Books for recognizing characters, published by Business Affairs Press and Chinese Bookstore Press, included colorful pictures, and their style adhered to children's cognitive development (Beijing Academic Society 1989).

The methodological shift placed character learning in meaningful contexts. Children were taught to recognize words, such as their names or the character(s) for their favorite animal, which they would remember because they were connected to their personal lives. When teachers read stories, they showed children the pictures to help transmit word meaning and involve them in the story action. The scholar and reformer Youwei Kang (康有为, 1858–1927) said, "We should teach children to speak and read as they are able. Models and pictures are helpful for children's development of knowledge and skills, including recognizing characters" (Chen 1998, p. 265).

Heqin Chen's ideas about early literacy education were put into practice in the Nanjing Gulou Preschool and Kindergarten he founded in 1923 and later in other schools (Yi 1994). The core of Chen's Reading Methods was to engage children in reading picture-stories, to "draw" characters related to pictures, and to recognize them in daily life. To help children learn characters, Chen thought teachers should attend to the following principles:

i. Various materials, such as pictures, handiwork, stories, and rhymes should be used to interest children in imagining and recognizing characters.
ii. Reading material should come from children's daily life, and isolated drills should be avoided.
iii. What children learned to read and recognize should be connected with the content they were learning in other domains.
iv. Mistakes children made when reading or recognizing characters should be corrected at once. (He 1990, pp. 169–170)

Heqin Chen wrote in *Our Opinions* that teachers needed to use textbooks preschoolers could understand without struggling. If their attention wandered, they should change to a new activity. He also suggested teachers use pictures to help 3-year-olds identify characters, and 4-years-olds could learn characters when teachers read picture-story books to small groups or used slide shows (Beijing Academic Society 1989).

Some of the ideas from this period of early literacy learning are used in preschools today. For example, in teaching children to learn to recognize and write characters, teachers first tell a story with the help of pictures, so the youngsters become interested. Then they ask them to draw or color pictures about the story. Finally, they encourage the children to write some Chinese characters in their pictures that interest them.

Over the years, beginning with the opening of China to Western ideas in the early twentieth century, a paradigm shift was occurring in relation to the function of writing and the purpose of learning to write. Although the period from 1950 to 1980 wrought havoc in education, this paradigm shift held steady and grew to fruition after 1980.

6.4 Period 3. 1950 to 1980

6.4.1 Background

During ancient times, early literacy teaching ideas were drawn from Chinese culture. In the second period, during the first half of the twentieth century, teaching strategies were developed by integrating Western and Chinese ideas. From 1950 to 1980, however, the USSR became the source of teaching ideas for early childhood education. Beginning with the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, all social systems in China were copied from the Soviet Union, and the Soviet educational model became the foundation for China's schools. Traditional Chinese pedagogy, as well as Western ideas, were rejected. Even the Living Education and project methods of Heqin Chen and other scholars were abandoned. The widely accepted motto at the time was: "Reject everything from the old society" (Shi 1999).

For the first time in China's long history, universal education became a serious goal. Although it was not achieved in rural areas for many decades, in the cities all children, including girls, were required to attend school. In June 1960, however, a rift that had been growing between China and the USSR erupted. All Soviet advisers left, taking with them even the blueprints for in-process construction projects. Nevertheless, the Soviet-style education system continued because everything else had been discarded. Since China was closed to the outside world, the only

education policies and models were those left behind by the USSR. Both research and pedagogy after 1960 followed the Russian model even though the Chinese did not want this and, for political reasons, did not mention it.

The Cultural Revolution followed from 1966 to 1976. Preschools and elementary schools remained open even when junior and senior high schools and universities were closed. Their curriculum mirrored the always-changing upheavals of political and pedagogical currents. This was the most limited of the four periods. In ancient times, although China was closed to the outside world, it had a rich cultural tradition to draw from that had developed over thousands of years. In the second period, China was open to the West, but during the third period, for 30 years she closed her door to everything except Russian thought.

6.4.2 Pedagogy and Curriculum

In the Soviet system, children began literacy education in elementary school. Preschool did not include reading instruction (Mou 2004), and from the 1950s to 1980s no documents disseminated by the Chinese government mentioned early literacy education (Zhou 2005).

Preschool children's reading skills were developed only through talking about pictures during language lessons (Textbook Editing Group 1982). Teachers could also read stories to children, repeat rhymes, and engage them in oral language play. Literacy training began when children reached first grade, with emphasis placed on pronunciation, learning the meaning of characters in isolation, and memorizing as many characters as possible, so they could read texts about other subjects. First-grade children were also taught *pinyin*, an alphabetic system that helps beginning readers identify the sound associated with characters.

Russian pedagogy held that knowledge is paramount and should be learned systematically, based on the teaching principles developed by Zankof, a Russian educator and psychologist. The pedagogy linked teaching to development, with difficult knowledge used to arouse special cognitive processes. In preschool different subjects required discrete types of knowledge that were often abstract and far removed from children's everyday life. Chinese educators seldom discussed Russian pedagogy during these years. Teachers just copied the Russian teaching style.

A debate persisted, however, about what was appropriate for young children to learn. The first draft of *Interim Provisions of Early Childhood Education*, sent to delegations attending the first national meeting on primary education in July 1951, included recommendations to teach older preschoolers to recognize Chinese characters encountered in daily life, such as their names and common articles like "chair." Apparently there was no agreement among officials or scholars, though, for

when the final policy document was disseminated by the Ministry of Education in 1952, only oral language activities were included. Preschool teachers were forbidden to instruct children in writing or reading characters.

A second argument focused on whether preschoolers should be taught pinyin, which was considered the foundation for learning characters. Discussions and experiments in preschools were carried out in the 1950s, with some researchers and scholars believing 5- and 6-year-olds could learn pinyin while 6- and 7-year-olds could learn characters with the help of pinyin.

Such varied beliefs translated into mixed messages for practitioners. In spite of the ban on teaching characters, for instance, occasional directives said that "some children" could be taught pinyin and characters in preschool. In addition, government policy makers and educational scholars came to different conclusions about research results, leaving up in the air questions about when and what young children should be taught. The Ministry of Education and All-China Women's Federation suggested in a document July 1960, that preschools and kindergartens with the "right conditions" could teach the children pinyin, mathematics, and also Chinese characters. It urged that various methods and teaching aids be developed and used well, and recommended plays, rhymes and songs, stories, music, and gymnastics for high-quality early childhood education (CNSECE 1999, p. 112).

Interestingly, ignoring conflicting policies and disagreements, almost all parents taught their preschool-aged children to recognize and write individual characters they thought were important for elementary school. Even in rural areas where adult literacy was very low and universal schooling had not started, parents knew the importance of having their young children develop the ability to read and write. Literate or not, parents found others who knew how, neighbors or older children who attended school, and had them teach their children.

Although the arguments continued, toward the end of this period when the country was beginning to reestablish its educational institutions, experiments with early literacy in preschool and kindergarten showed positive results. For instance, Huang and Lu (1982) carried out several experiments between 1978 and 1982 that found preschoolers, even at age three, could recognize characters if appropriate methods were used. They also found that early literacy experiences positively affected children's achievement in Chinese language and math examinations at the end of grade one.

Because some preschools and kindergartens advocated and taught early literacy, a few rudimentary principles circulated among educators and researchers. For instance, to teach reading skills, teachers should use pictures meaningful to the children, and when they told children about something, they should point to it. When using several pictures, they should show them one by one to help children concentrate. In addition, they should ask age-appropriate, interesting questions (Textbook Editing Group 1982). To teach pinyin and characters, teachers, using a variety of aids, should ask children to recognize those useful in daily life and ensure they were having fun while learning (Mou 2004).

6.5 Period 4. 1980 to Present

6.5.1 Background

In 1978 China opened her door to other countries in order to pursue social and economic development, and found everything was new outside. After the Cultural Revolution, pursuit of a sound educational system was key to progress, but because high schools, universities, and normal schools had been closed for 10 years, the challenge was immense. Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904–1997) understood it well :

> Education is the most fundamental undertaking of a nation. The realization of the *Four Modernizations* (i.e., modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and society and technology) depends on knowledge and skilled manpower. An error in policy can be rectified fairly easily, but knowledge cannot be acquired at once, nor can skilled manpower be trained in a few days. This is the reason why education must be conducted in real earnest, and started from early childhood. (Deng 1995, p. 140)

Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s China rebuilt the Soviet style education system (Shi 1999). Not only were many urban preschools and kindergartens restarted quickly, but a lot were set up in rural areas. Tasks and goals of early childhood education were affirmed in government documents (CNSECE 1999), but early literacy was essentially excluded. In the preliminary *Urban Preschool Regulations*, circulated for discussion by the Ministry of Education in 1979, for instance, the teachers' main task was to care for and educate children, with health and physical exercise, play and work, and moral lessons included in the curriculum, but not literacy. *Guidelines for Preschool Education* (Draft), distributed by the Ministry of Education in 1981, retained the 1951 Soviet structure and expanded curriculum considerably to healthy behaviors, physical exercise, moral lessons, language, general knowledge, math, music, and art, but in the language domain the only mention of early literacy education was that older children should be encouraged to enjoy reading and talking about books. However, in *Care and Education Guidelines for Children Under 3* (Draft), from the Ministry of Hygiene in 1981, literacy education was omitted. A draft or a trial document is distributed for testing its viability and for using experimentally.

Because schools and universities had been closed for so long, the whole country was in dire need of teachers, textbooks, and updated knowledge for the droves of students seeking high school and college certificates. Some qualified teachers returned to preschools and kindergartens, but there were not enough. Many untrained individuals were hired. However, immediately after 1978, normal schools for early childhood education were set up and 22 were operating within a year. By the 1990s, some preservice training programs for preschools were upgraded to universities, such as Beijing Normal University and Nanjing Normal University (Tian 2005).

International communication between China and the rest of the world was restored, and new theories and practices were introduced to early childhood education. Experts from different countries were invited to help fill the professional void

caused by the Cultural Revolution, with many Westerners hired to teach in colleges and universities. Chinese scholars were sent abroad to study or interview experts. The foreign educational theories of Dewey, Montessori, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, and especially Piaget and Vygotsky, began to spread throughout China (Zhu 2002), challenging the existing early childhood education system. Preschool textbooks were published according to government guidelines in 1982–1983, contributing greatly to the reconstruction of early childhood education.

Although research was sparse, even in the 1980s a few experiments on integrating Western and Chinese traditional experiences had begun in a few preschools. In 1983, researchers carried out an experiment at the Nanjing Experimental Preschool and Kindergarten on integrating curriculum areas, and in 1984, the China National Institute for Educational Research did a similar experiment in two Beijing preschools (Shi 1999).

6.5.2 Pedagogy and Curriculum

In this fourth period, China moved from copying or importing Western theory and practices to adapting them to local needs and exploring culturally relevant practices in early literacy learning and education. Early childhood curriculum reform began with spontaneous experiments in different parts of the country. For example, Jishi Zhao conducted research about Preschool Integrated Curriculum based on two important Western ideas. The first was Piaget's constructivism and the concept that children develop through direct interaction with people, objects, and events. The second was the proposition by Bronfenbrenner that development is a function of the interaction between the developing person and the changing environment (Zhao 2001). In 1989 *Preschool and Kindergarten Work Regulations and Procedures* (Trial Version) issued by the National Education Committee (the former Ministry of Education) accelerated research when it introduced progressive theories and practices to early childhood educators (Zhu and Zhang 2008).

Dynamic new research results taking root in the West deeply influenced Chinese early childhood education. The concepts of emergent literacy, early literacy, pre-reading, and early reading were opening new vistas in the U.S. and Britain. Research on invented spelling, use of environmental print, and emergent writing blossomed in preschool classrooms there and was coupled with the thrust to expose all children to books and print experiences at an early age in order to prevent reading difficulties (Snow et al. 1998). At the same time, in China, a paradigm shift related to the function of emergent reading and writing and methods of teaching preschool literacy was occurring. It had begun in the early twentieth century as Chinese educators like Heqin Chen tried to shake off the ancient model of memorization and isolated character learning. The impetus from new Western research in the 1980s and 1990s led to increased momentum to change the nature of preschool literacy instruction in China. However, when and how to teach literacy puzzled the

teachers of young children. They were learning traditional teaching methods but knew these did not fit the new concepts.

Chinese scholars began to study curriculum needs and to carry out classroom research. By 1988, Jishi Zhao (1988) had recommended the teaching of literacy, including listening, speaking, and literature, in preschool, and her later research suggested young children would benefit from adults reading aloud to them and enlivening book characters, answering teachers' questions about the pictures, and reading enjoyable picture books themselves (Zhao and Lou 1993).

Jing Zhou's research suggested goals for early literacy education should focus on helping children become interested in written language and understanding the relationships between oral and written language, and early literacy education should include pre-reading, as well as pre-writing (Zhou 1995). In book reading activities, for example, children should be encouraged to recognize the characteristics of print, then understand and retell stories, and finally make their own picture books. In so doing they would learn the function and structure of characters and how to use different writing and drawing tools.

By the end of the 1990s, early literacy had gained considerable importance, a result of both research and new governmental directives. *Guidelines for Preschool and Kindergarten Education (Trial Version)*, publicized by the Ministry of Education in 2001, explicitly included early literacy goals. Teachers needed to interest children in reading picture books, encourage them to explore simple symbols and characters from daily life, and develop their pre-reading and pre-writing skills.

Since then, children's early literacy education has been recognized as important to overall development, and it has been generally accepted that teachers and parents should promote early literacy in the preschool years (Zhou 2007). Teachers have been encouraged to explore effective activities, and scholars have been asked to study and solve theoretical and practical problems.

Nevertheless, disagreement exists among teachers (Ouyang and Zhang 2003) and parents (Tang 2003) about what activities and strategies are appropriate and effective to support reading habits and children's interest in recognizing characters. Some have shown no understanding of early literacy. For example, many teachers, especially older ones, still think early literacy means primarily teaching children pinyin and recognizing and writing isolated characters (Ouyang and Zhang 2003). Changing these perspectives is a major challenge.

New types of activities have been introduced to develop young children's beginning literacy skills, and preschool teachers have begun to enjoy teaching with these activities (Yu 2005; Zhou 1995). So that children can casually learn the functions of written language, teachers now provide character-rich environments with signs such as "积木角" [block corner] beside the block area and "桌" [table] stuck to the table. They record children's stories and post them for all to enjoy. They help children read picture books and discuss plot and character roles in order to engage them in extended discourse (see Fig. 5.2). And in preschool, teachers now encourage children to communicate by using drawings and their own invented symbols, as well as conventional characters, as in Figs. 5.3 and 5.4.

Fig. 5.2 Picture book sharing. A teacher shares a big picture book with several children and encourages them to talk about it (Photo by Zhenyou Yu)

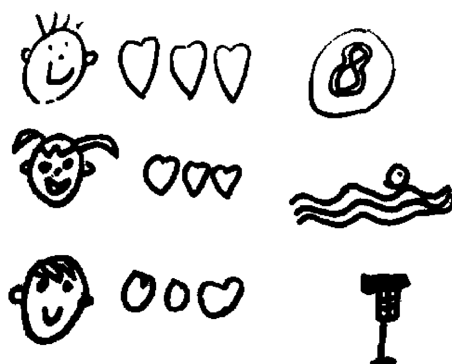

Fig. 5.3 Writing sample produced by a 5-year-old girl. The child recorded her teachers' favorite sports. The "sentences" read:
Miss Boring's favorite sport is bowling
Miss Feng's favorite sport is swimming
Mr. Yu's favorite sport is playing basketball (Photo by Zhenyou Yu)

Fig. 5.4 Student-teacher joint writing. Two children drew a picture, their teachers recorded the questions they asked, and the children signed their names. On the *left*, Yaochi Wang (王尧池) asked, "Why does a cock crow?" On the *right*, Tuotuo's (拓拓) question was, "Why does a cock have a crest?"(All photos by Zhenyou Yu)

New strategies for early literacy instruction have spread among preschool teachers. Unlike the type of literacy teaching done at the beginning of elementary school—where children must adhere to strict instruction on how to write characters correctly and must comprehend and memorize whole texts—preschool teachers are beginning to help children learn to pre-read and pre-write in authentic contexts, using such items as newspaper advertisements and storybooks. They are learning that children can acquire Chinese characters casually in different activities, including play, picture book reading, and everyday life experiences. This is a completely different perspective from previous periods of early literacy teaching.

Picture books are now used widely in preschools. By 2008, at government request, almost all preschool classes had their own reading area where every child had access to many books (CNSECE 1999). Children are encouraged to read and enjoy them during their free time. Teachers also read them aloud to help youngsters understand what happened in a book, and encourage them to use reading strategies, such as commenting on character roles, speculating about how a story will develop, and comparing story events with their own experiences (Yu 2009).

However, a rift continues between modern theories and practices and parents' beliefs about what their only child needs (Tang 2003). Many parents continue to care more about how many characters their children learn than whether they can use literacy for multiple purposes. This tradition, dating back to ancient times, is ingrained in Chinese parents. They think the more characters a child knows, the brighter he or she is. Not only do they teach their children at home to recognize as many characters as possible, but also they put pressure on teachers to provide more traditional academic instruction, including teaching more characters. By doing this they believe they will provide their only child a fast start towards becoming economically successful in a future adulthood fraught with competition (Tobin et al. 2009).

6.5.3 Current Issues

In 2001, *Guidelines for Preschool and Kindergarten Education (Trial Version)* amplified the 1981 regulations, emphasizing meaningful and individualized early literacy learning, including children's rights and the promotion of independence and creativity. Activity theory, developed from work by Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Leontiev (1903–1979), provided a theoretical framework for the guidelines (Feng 1997). Even so, it has been difficult for practitioners to fully embrace this progressive ideology since powerful and deep-rooted Chinese cultural traditions run counter to modern scientific and democratic ideas (Wang and Mao 1996). Preschool teachers, for example, spend less time reading books to children or encouraging reading activities than they do on other classroom matters even though they understand their importance. They also still spend considerable time teaching children to recognize and write isolated characters even though it does not help increase their pre-reading and pre-writing skills (Yu 2006).

In addition, contemporary scholars such as Yan Liu and XiaoXia Feng (2005) have identified gaps in China's early childhood education reform: new top-down policies are disconnected from classroom practice, new theories conflict with embedded educational practice, and current educational realities are often distant from projected ideals. Different reasons have been suggested for these gaps. Zhu and Zhang (2008), for instance, argued the conflict between Western and Chinese cultures is the reason, with Chinese people considered more social unit-oriented and extrinsically motivated, and Westerners more individual-oriented and intrinsically motivated.

With the reform movement accelerating in China, Western ideology has continued to influence the development of early childhood education. Different curricula, such as the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia, and Montessori, have been widely adopted and localized in urban preschools. Some scholars warn outside theories such as these must be used carefully and must take into account traditional Chinese culture and social issues, such as the one-child policy, the disequilibrium of social and economic development in different parts of China, and the rifts between urban and rural populations and developed and developing areas (Li and Li 2003; Zhu 2008).

Many preschool teachers prefer traditional methods, such as drilling children to recognize and memorize characters in picture books they read to them, and some copy foreign activities without understanding their purpose and without integrating them into Chinese culture. This does not mean they do not understand the new approaches at all, but they are deeply influenced by Chinese traditional values and parental attitudes. The *Guidelines* of 2001 include specific requirements and content in different domains in order to ensure early childhood innovations contain Chinese characteristics. Many preschools are trying to adhere to these. Tobin et al. (2009) found some preschools incorporated storytelling and socio-dramatic play activities that in fact helped "children who would grow up to be socially minded and recognizably Chinese" (p. 227).

6.6 Conclusions and Implications

This chapter traces the development of early literacy education in China through an analysis of perceptions, concrete strategies, and important influences across 2,000 years from ancient times to the present. Perceptions and strategies held relatively steady for centuries, and then changed dramatically in the twentieth century under the influence of shifting social, economic, and cultural policies.

In recent years, greater attention has been given to the role of early childhood education programs. The preschool years are now considered a critical period for acquiring important early literacy skills. Researchers, practitioners, parents, and policy makers are increasingly coming to the conclusion that more effort needs to be given to strengthening the quality of child care programs across China, so children develop essential beginning literacy skills in the preschool years and are prepared for entering the formal primary school setting. While some teachers and parents are making major strides in promoting activities that build these skills

in preschools or at home, a large number encounter confusion. They are trying to employ “new” child-centered strategies they have learned from different sources, but these frequently fail because they do not know how to implement them.

For observers from outside China, it is critical to understand the economic and political background when examining early literacy education in China. Before the twentieth century, education was based on Confucianism and was didactic, controlling, and teacher-centered. The only goal was to memorize Confucian classics and pass the Imperial exams in order to gain a higher rank, a government position, and uphold family honor. Young children were expected to begin by recognizing and remembering characters in the Confucian classics. During the second period, Confucianism became the target of the transformational New Culture Movement, and Western educational theory and practice had considerable influence. Preschool education became less didactic and more child-centered. At the beginning it was imported in its entirety, but was gradually localized. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, previous methods and traditions were thrown out, and the USSR education system was copied across the board. Academic-oriented preschool education became the norm in China, and even though the Chinese-Soviet collaboration ended abruptly in 1960, the Russian system continued to influence preschool education practice. In the 1980s economic and social reforms became the motivation to learn from Western education theory and practice, with growing attempts to blend them with Chinese culture. However, many difficulties persist in how to transform early literacy practices into modern perspectives.

For preschool teachers, it is important to realize Chinese traditional culture must be considered when teaching children early literacy. Confucian values, as well as Soviet socialist pedagogy, remain ingrained in Chinese people’s everyday lives and cannot be erased. Even the radical attempt that Mao Zedong made to obliterate all the old traditions in China did not work. These previously used strategies continue in teachers’ and parents’ minds and habits when they are learning new instructional practices, such as including daily experiences in their teaching. Preschool teachers need to understand how to make good use of their own prior experiences while implementing new practices. Rather than applying “new strategies” mechanically regardless of their appropriateness for children, preschool teachers must be helped to comprehend new theoretical foundations and how they can be used in practice. Finally, it is imperative for preschool teachers to attempt to understand parents’ perceptions and to develop realistic activities for them to use at home.

For researchers of early literacy education, it is urgent to conduct in-depth experimental research projects on early literacy development and education for Chinese preschool-aged children. Because the Chinese written language is very different from English, approaches that are fitting for native English-speaking children are not necessarily helpful to Chinese children. So far, little has been learned about how young Chinese children develop their pre-reading and pre-writing skills (Zhou 2007). Literacy experts also need to spend time in preschool classrooms and need to conduct action research collaboratively with preschool teachers. They need to convert theoretical ideas into concrete strategies that can be mastered in realistic settings. In addition, Chinese researchers and teachers need to forge a new approach to early childhood literacy education by fusing ingrained

Confucian values with the influx of new ideas (Tobin 2007; Tobin et al. 2009; Zhu and Zhang 2008).

For policy makers, sensitivity to Chinese culture is essential when developing new ideas. Without this consideration, new policies will not be implemented effectively. Documents that explain new concepts, such as pre-reading and pre-writing in *Guidelines for Preschool Education (Trial Version)*, need to be developed so preschool teachers can understand how to implement them. Government documents play an important role in the preschool experience. If they merely state preschool teachers should foster children's early literacy without explaining instructional strategies, teachers will be at a loss for what to do. To this end, the Beijing Society of Early Childhood Education has formulated an implementation document in which the requirements of early literacy are more concrete. For example, it explains 3- to 4-year-olds should be encouraged to become interested in listening to adults reading, to learn to turn book pages one by one, and to find and talk about persons or objects in books that interest them (Beijing Education Commission 2006). Much more of this needs to be done.

The professional development of teachers is also essential if they are to organize diverse early literacy activities. They need access to high-quality, age-appropriate picture books and other print material, and more in-depth training to provide them with the latest research-based information on how to teach children early literacy skills. Many preschool teachers are used to traditional, subject-based curriculum and teacher-centered pedagogy and will need considerable help implementing the new curriculum and pedagogies. Finally, urban preschools and their teachers receive more support to promote early literacy development than their rural counterparts. More attention needs to be focused on how teachers working in rural or remote areas can receive support and training that will assist them in their efforts to help children acquire essential early literacy skills.

Although many challenges lie ahead, the pedagogical and theoretical shifts that have occurred in China since the early 1900s are significant. In spite of massive twentieth century political and social upheavals, a paradigm shift has occurred in early literacy education in China during these years. It has moved, and continues to move, from didactic and teacher-centered to more open and child-oriented. A recent document from the Chinese State Council (2010) stresses the need to make preschool education available to all children in China in the next 10 years. Despite all the historical twists and turns, there is reason to believe early childhood education in China will continue to grow in a positive direction.

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