

Chapter 8

Primary School Chinese Language and Literacy Curriculum Reforms in China After 1949

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8.1 Introduction

Yuwen, also known as Chinese language and literacy, is one of the most critical school subjects in the Chinese education system at both primary and secondary levels. In this chapter, we present an overview of the various historical periods in the development of primary Chinese Yuwen education from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to 2000, as well as a brief review of the key content of the most critical curriculum documents that guided primary Chinese Yuwen education within each period. We then provide the background for the latest primary Yuwen curriculum reform and present the highlights of the 2011 *Primary Yuwen Curriculum Standards for Full-Day Compulsory Education*. Finally, we discuss the impact and challenges of this most recent Yuwen curriculum reform. Implications for primary Yuwen education are also drawn.

8.2 Historical Development of Primary Yuwen Curriculum from 1949 to 2000

The Chinese education system has gone through several education reforms since 1949, usually following major political and social movements. Such reforms were carried out through the government's initiatives to develop and implement new curriculum guidelines in the form of teaching syllabi or curriculum standards for all

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school subjects, with Yuwen at the center of each reform movement. Each reform has left its mark on history. In this section, we draw on the work of Wu and Yu (2009a, b) and Jin (n.d.) in our review of historical periods and highlight key curriculum documents for each period.

8.2.1 From 1949 to 1957

This period marked an end to the use of the old terminology *Guoyu* (*national language*) and *Guowen* (*national writing*). Yuwen was a new term coined to refer to the subject of Chinese language and literacy and to more accurately reflect the major mission of the subject—to develop student knowledge and skills in both oral and written communications (Guo 2005). In 1950, the Ministry of Education (MOE) promulgated *Primary Yuwen Curriculum Temporary Standards (Draft)* and stipulated that the goal of Yuwen instruction was to teach listening, speaking, reading, and writing and to apply these skills in acquiring knowledge in other subject areas, including patriotic and civic responsibilities.

In 1956, the Ministry of Education published *Primary Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Draft)* to replace the 1950 draft and its revised version (1952) and to initiate the first primary Yuwen reform in China. This document set specific expectations for the teaching of Chinese language and required primary schools to offer two periods of Chinese language per week. Primary students were expected to recognize between 3,000 and 3,500 high frequency Chinese characters, and reading was to be taught through the use of literature and detailed analysis of literary texts. As New China's first primary school Yuwen curriculum document, this document was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union's language teaching system and Kairov's pedagogy. The impact of such a move towards Yuwen instruction was long lasting and can still be found in today's Yuwen instruction in China.

8.2.2 From 1958 to 1976

With the Great Leap Forward Movement in 1958, Yuwen instruction deviated from its original purpose and focused on political and moral indoctrination. To reset the course for Yuwen instruction, the Ministry of Education published *Full-Day Primary Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Draft)* in 1963. The document, for the first time ever, clearly defined Yuwen as an essential tool for knowledge acquisition and job performance. It also emphasized the importance of providing primary students with training in “double basics” (i.e., basic knowledge and basic skills in Yuwen). The teaching syllabus also stipulated that primary students should master 3,500 high frequency Chinese characters, and Yuwen teaching should address the teaching of Chinese spoken and written language, as well as transmitting political ideology sanctioned by the government.

Unfortunately, the reform was derailed when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. In the 10 years that followed, all previous reform efforts were abandoned.

The sole purpose of Yuwen curriculum and instruction during that period was to advance political ideology and indoctrination.

8.2.3 From 1978 to 1991

China opened its door to the rest of the world in 1978. The demand for Yuwen reform was widespread. Western educational philosophies and pedagogies—such as Bruner’s inquiry learning, Bloom’s taxonomy, and Sukhomlynsky’s aesthetic approach to learning—flourished in China. Various teaching methods were explored to promote students’ language and communication competencies. These methods included contextualized learning and reading-writing connections. A teaching sequence was established to help students move from focused character recognition to extensive reading to step-by-step exercises to prepare for standardized tests (Cui 2010).

In 1978, the Ministry of Education issued *Full-Day Ten-Year Primary School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Draft – Trial Version)*. This teaching syllabus was the first one published after the Cultural Revolution. It restored the function of Yuwen as defined in the 1963 Syllabus, noting it should be a basic tool for all learning. The major task of this reform was to improve the quality of teaching and learning of Yuwen by developing students’ language competence in comprehension and communication. Unprecedentedly, it proposed an end to the traditional spoon-feeding method of Yuwen teaching and emphasized the importance of helping students develop independent learning skills by teaching them learning methods. It pointed out that student acquisition of Yuwen knowledge and development of Yuwen skills should be accomplished through teachers providing students with basic training in Chinese language and literacy. The syllabus required primary students to recognize 3,000 characters and to achieve full mastery of 2,500 of those characters. It placed high expectations on using Yuwen education to support student learning of government-sanctioned ideologies. This teaching syllabus was revised in 1986, but the content of the revised syllabus was very similar to its original version. Some important changes in the 1986 version included a new emphasis on the importance of rigorous training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as developing students’ good learning habits.

In 1986, the *Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China* was passed. Compulsory education in China covers grades 1–9 and requires that all children receive basic education in those grades. To support the full implementation of the law, the Education Commission was in charge of developing teaching syllabi for all school subjects for both basic education (grades 1–9) and high school education (grades 10–12).

8.2.4 From 1992 to 2000

In 1992, *Nine-Year Compulsory Education Full-Day Primary School Yuwen Teaching Syllabus (Trial Version)* was published. The syllabus reflected the government’s

agenda to promote quality education and identified objectives related to supporting students' Yuwen learning, as well as their cognitive, moral, and ethical development. To accommodate all students, the syllabus lowered expectations for the amount of characters primary students had to master, reducing the number to 2,500 characters. Specific requirements were set for teaching at each grade level in the areas of Chinese pinyin, character recognition and character writing, listening and speaking, reading, and composition. The 1992 syllabus also contained a new section on extracurricular activities, so that while following the same teaching syllabus, schools could choose to adopt different textbooks to meet their own needs. The syllabus was instrumental in guiding the various primary Yuwen curriculum reform initiatives underway during this period. Another noteworthy aspect of this document was that for the first time ever it included Yuwen education as part of the nation's strategic plan for improving the overall quality of the entire nation. In 1993, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council jointly issued *China Education Reform and Development Guidelines* that also called for a shift from examination-oriented education to quality education for the betterment of the nation.

The changes in this period reflected a desire to promote the quality of students' language acquisition through systematic training in listening, speaking, reading and writing (Wu and Yu 2009b). The aforementioned reforms beginning in 1950 do not substantially differ much from each other in that they all focused on a teacher-centered, knowledge-based, and skills-oriented paradigm, devoid of the spirit of independent and critical thinking. Yuwen education was mainly seen as an indoctrination tool, with its main purpose to cultivate a populace devoted to the causes of the Communist Party and the central government (Jin et al. 2007). It also served as a vehicle for promoting and achieving social uniformity and conformity (Hu 2004).

8.3 Primary Yuwen Curriculum Reform from 2001 to the Present Time

The new millennium has ushered in dramatic changes on all fronts. Economically, China has become more market-oriented. Politically, China is less centralized and more locally governed. Globally, China has become a major political and economic force. In addition, new technologies have brought about an information explosion, and people have gained unprecedented access to a large amount of information at their fingertips. With all these changes happening to the Chinese society, the old rigid knowledge-based, skills-oriented school curricula were no longer adequate. Consequently, there was a public outcry for a new education reform to prepare the country for the demands of the new times.

In response, the Chinese government began its most recent education reform at the turn of the twenty-first century to support the central government's Quality Education Initiative. This initiative aims at promoting students' intellectual development, aesthetic appreciation, morality, and physical fitness, while fostering creativity,

originality, and hands-on skills. The ultimate goal is to educate productive future citizens who can contribute to China's economic development and cope with the challenges brought about by the new millennium. Curriculum reform is at the forefront of the education reform because curriculum is the "carrier of Quality Education" (Yu 2010, p. 35), and Yuwen curriculum reform is at the front and center of the full reform movement.

In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education published *Yuwen Curriculum Standards for Full-Day Compulsory Education (Trial Version)*, a key document to guide the reform of Yuwen curriculum for grades 1 to 9, which covers primary school (grades 1–6) as well as junior high school (grades 7–9). This is the most comprehensive curriculum document developed since 1949.

In the following 10 years, the document was put under intense examination while it was being implemented. The MOE sought input and feedback from Yuwen experts, schools, and Yuwen teachers. In 2011, the finalized *Yuwen Curriculum Standards for Full-Day Compulsory Education* was published (hereafter referred to as *Standards*). Except for some minor changes, the structure and content of the two versions are very similar. A major revision involved reducing the number of Chinese characters students in lower grades (1–4) are expected to recognize and write, so that the number is more manageable for younger primary students. There is also an increase in the number of classical Chinese poems primary and junior high students are required to memorize and recite to strengthen their understanding of and appreciation for Chinese language and traditional Chinese culture. Six more poems were added to the primary list while 14 were added to the list for the 7th to 9th grade band. The 2011 revised version also added a new requirement for student learning of Chinese calligraphy, another effort to strengthen students' understanding of and appreciation for traditional Chinese language and culture.

The *Standards* reconceptualizes the subject of Yuwen not only as a critical discipline but as the foundation for student success in all other subject areas. It defines Yuwen as the most important tool of communication, a carrier of information, and a critical component of human culture. Yuwen plays an important role in Chinese 9-year compulsory education. The *Standards* highlights four guiding principles for the Yuwen curriculum reform: (a) fully develop students' fundamental competencies in and positive dispositions towards learning Chinese language and culture; (b) properly understand the characteristics unique to Yuwen education; (c) actively promote independent learning, collaborative learning, and inquiry-based learning; and (d) strive to build openness and vitality into Yuwen curriculum. These guiding principles are reflected throughout the whole document.

The *Standards* points out that Yuwen curriculum and instruction should focus on knowledge and skills, process and methods, and dispositions in five major areas: character recognition and character writing, reading, writing (composition), oral communication, and integrated learning. Specific objectives are set for students at various developmental levels. For example, students in the 5th to 6th grade band are expected to recognize 3,000 characters and write 2,500 of them, write Chinese calligraphy with a brush, read with fluency in Mandarin Chinese (*Putonghua*), understand the main outline of narrative texts and key points in expository texts, compose simple realistic and creative writing, complete about 16 compositions in

class, read more than one million characters in out-of-school reading, communicate with others through oral and written language, and conduct research through various information channels to solve real-life problems.

In terms of recommended practices, the *Standards* suggests that schools should give full play to the creativity and innovation of teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning. It redefines the roles of students and teachers in Yuwen teaching and learning and emphasizes the importance of independent learning, aesthetic response to literature, collaboration, and inquiry-based learning. Students are to be given ownership of learning. Yuwen instruction should stimulate student interest in learning, create an environment for independent learning, cultivate students' awareness and habit of independent learning, and encourage students to draw on their own learning styles when learning Yuwen. Teachers are the facilitators and guides in student learning and should promote student interests, motivation, and positive dispositions towards Yuwen learning, as well as engage students in inquiry- and discussion-based learning.

The *Standards* recognizes that traditional paper-pencil exams provide only one method of assessment and evaluation. It stipulates the purposes and functions of assessment and evaluation. In other words, assessment and evaluation not only should focus on whether students meet the curriculum goals and objectives, but also should be used to examine the effectiveness of teaching, enhance student learning, improve curriculum design, and perfect instructional processes. It is recommended that both formative and summative assessments take into consideration student overall performance in various areas of knowledge and skills, process and method, emotions and attitudes, as well as values. The document also recommends that student self-evaluation and peer evaluation be an integral part of teacher and parent evaluation to respect individual differences and promote the healthy development of every student.

8.4 Analysis of the Current Primary Yuwen Curriculum Reform

Unlike previous curriculum reforms, it is noteworthy that the current Yuwen curriculum reform is future-oriented and heavily influenced by Western educational philosophy (Chen 2010). Instead of placing heavy emphasis on the function of language and literacy as a tool for ideological and political causes as it was in the past, the new curriculum establishes that Yuwen is the carrier and transmitter of Chinese culture and the foundation for personal life-long success, and that Yuwen education should gear itself toward modernism, the world, and the future. Creativity, innovation, and problem-solving abilities also seem to weigh heavily in the current reform. Such an orientation aligns closely with the Chinese government's overall vision for the country to embrace the challenges of the twenty-first century while preserving and revitalizing traditional Chinese culture.

The new primary Yuwen curriculum recognizes the importance of affective factors in student learning and supports the development of interest and positive

attitudes towards Chinese language and literacy learning. It values personal experiences and individuals' responses to and appreciation of literature. For the first time, a concept similar to the term "dispositions" used in the U.S. context is proposed to expand the goal of Chinese language and literacy education beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to develop student motivation and positive attitudes toward Yuwen learning and competencies in inquiry and decision-making. Compared with previous curriculum documents, the new curriculum places less emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and skills for primary students. Instead, helping students experience the pleasure of reading and to construct personal meanings becomes an important goal of Yuwen instruction. For example, isolated grammatical knowledge was considered essential in the old curricula, but not in the new curriculum. Prior to the reform, there was only one way to interpret a text, and students had to match their answers to the ones prescribed in the teachers' guide, but the new curriculum encourages personal responses. The new curriculum still describes memorization and recitation of outstanding classical literature as an important means to develop students' sense of the Chinese language and culture, but it also gives much attention to students' personal and emotional responses to literature.

Regarding methods of delivery, the new curriculum promotes collaboration, independent learning, and inquiry-based learning (Zheng 2003). It encourages student learning through dialogue between students and teachers and between peers. Teachers are asked to encourage students to explore different learning methods and to engage in independent learning. This counters the traditional notion of Chinese instruction as teacher-directed and textbook-centered practices. It is also the first time in recent literacy education history that extensive after-school reading is mandated in curriculum guides (Zheng 2003). It is expected that students will develop their reading abilities through both intensive reading of textbooks and extensive, self-selected after-school readings. This new addition to the *Standards* supports the call for more extensive reading recommended by Wu, Li, and Anderson (1999) in their review of Chinese reading curriculum and instruction.

The most significant change brought about by the latest reform is the redefinition of the roles of teachers and students under a new curriculum that strives to be student-centered and developmentally appropriate. The new Standards document acknowledges students as the main agent in the learning process and encourages them to take initiative and ownership of their own learning. Teachers become facilitators and guides instead of authoritative figures who possess all the knowledge and spoon-feed their students.

Another major departure from previous curricular reforms is the new perspective on assessment and evaluation. Chinese education has long been a test-driven enterprise and is well known for its test-oriented paradigm. The new Standards document mandates that assessments and evaluation should be used to promote student growth, teacher development, and improvement of instructional practices. Shifting the purpose of assessments from ranking and selection to promoting student growth, teacher development, and improvement of instructional practices resembles the perspectives on literacy assessments proposed by many Western educators (see Afflerbach 2007; Caldwell 2009).

8.5 Issues and Challenges of the Current Primary Yuwen Curriculum Reform

Because of its profound impact on how Chinese language and literacy teaching and learning should move forward in China, the reform has been under intense scrutiny and heated debate (Chen 2010). However, it is indisputable that this reform has already left an indelible mark on Chinese education.

The new primary Yuwen curriculum reform marks a significant departure from any previous curriculum reforms (Feng 2006; Yu 2010; Zheng 2003) and has generated controversy among Yuwen teachers and educators. Some primary Yuwen teachers have wholeheartedly embraced the reform and implemented new ways of teaching, and they encourage student learning through exploration and social interaction in a low-risk learning environment (Xiao 2008). However, changes are difficult for many others. It is not surprising that several issues and challenges exist that prevent the new curriculum standards from being fully and effectively implemented.

When one examines the *Standards*, it is not difficult to notice that many similarities exist between some of the ideas promoted in the *Standards* and Western philosophy and practices of literacy education. In particular, the paradigm shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning is hard for many teachers to make within a short period of time. The shifting of the teachers' role from an authoritative figure to a facilitator and guide also contradicts the traditional view of teachers in Chinese culture. According to Confucius, a teacher's job is to "transmit wisdom, teach knowledge, and resolve confusion." In this sense, the current curriculum reform is more than a reform of education. It is a reform of the Chinese culture of education. This reform can only be successful if teachers change their view of the teacher-student relationship in the learning process.

The new Yuwen curriculum standards for primary grades (1–6) have a decreased emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, especially knowledge of Chinese grammar, but there is an increased focus on encouraging students to experience the joy of reading and to respond to texts through inquiry-based, collaborative, and independent learning. Some educators and teachers feel the new curriculum does not pay adequate attention to skills instruction. Therefore, they call for a return to the basics in teaching and learning Chinese (Chen 2010; Song 2006; Xiao 2007; Zhang and Liu 2009).

The current reform places a higher demand on teacher quality, teacher knowledge, and teacher expertise in order for them to implement new standards in their teaching. The number of new ideas for teachers introduced in the *Standards* is overwhelming for teachers to process (Yu 2010). Some complaints from primary Yuwen teachers include a lack of instructional time due to having to spend more time on discussion and exploration, as well as students' inability to collaborate and learn through inquiry due to their previous spoon-fed schooling experiences. In addition, teachers have to improve their own knowledge base in all subject areas because of the need for integrated learning (Chen 2010; Xiao 2007).

Another important issue to address is the relatively small amount of writing mandated in the curriculum Standards document. The literacy field in the West has

long recognized the symbiotic relationship between reading and writing development (Kucer 2009). Strengthening writing instruction and increasing the amount of writing, both in class and after school, can further improve the quality of Chinese literacy teaching and learning.

Other issues include inequality in student access to reading materials since extensive after-school reading is mandated. Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, as well as those in poor regions, will have less access to reading materials. Access to information technologies is also problematic for teachers and students in poor schools.

While progress is being made and individual responses are encouraged, the meaning of critical reading and critical thinking has not yet been fully explained in the Standards document. Since Chinese teachers and students have been conditioned to accept the traditional skills-oriented teaching, much effort should be provided related to professional development for teachers on how to engage students in critical reading and creative thinking if China wants to have future generations who are truly creative and innovative.

Currently, several textbook companies in China are eligible to publish Yuwen textbooks. Schools can choose which textbook series to use. Therefore, finding a series that fits local needs is also a challenge.

8.6 Implications for Primary Yuwen Education Practices and Policies

The Ministry of Education understands that the current curriculum reform is an exploratory process due to its scope and depth (Yu 2010). A major reason behind the resistance from some schools and teachers is the inability of teachers to make the paradigm shift and their lack of preparation and training for its successful implementation. Since this is a top-down reform, in order to ensure the reform is successful, systematic efforts have to be made to effectively address the clash between traditional and current views of Yuwen instruction and to bring schools and teachers on board to support the reform.

Even though it is helpful to borrow ideas from Western literacy educational philosophies and practices, primary Yuwen instruction should also maintain some of its traditional practices that have endured the test of time, such as oral recitation and repeated reading of classical texts for fluency and better comprehension. The Chinese language is a carrier of Chinese culture and has its own unique characteristics. It is important to find a balance between Western pedagogical practices and Chinese traditional teaching methods that are rooted in the special nature and characteristics of the Chinese language. In addition to learning Western philosophies and pedagogical practices, Chinese teachers need to increase their knowledge and understanding of traditional Chinese culture and Chinese teaching to integrate the two (Song 2006).

Inservice teacher training and preservice teacher preparation should be strengthened in order for teachers to fulfill their new roles (Zhong and Liao 2008). In addition, teachers should also be encouraged to take on the role of researcher to achieve new thinking and adopt new practices (Zhang 2004; Zhong and Liao 2008). Teacher education institutions and universities need to restructure their goals and objectives, programs, curriculum structure, and instructional approaches to reflect the new reform and provide leadership in moving the reform forward.

To ensure the success of the new curriculum, the test-driven Chinese society and teacher accountability issues have to be addressed. Chinese teachers have to grapple with the tension between implementing the new curriculum standards that are more student-centered, experience- and inquiry-based and handling the societal pressure for increasing student test scores. Although in primary schools, the pressure for standardized high-stakes testing has been decreasing dramatically in recent years due to the elimination of middle school entrance exams in most places in China, teachers are still facing the pressure of having their students' test scores compared to those of students from other classes in the same school or across different school districts. As a result, many teachers are still teaching to the test.

The issue of providing students with equal access to technologies and reading materials should be addressed. In addition, teacher education needs to address how technologies can be used to effectively facilitate Yuwen instruction. It is critical that technologies be used to support literacy instruction but not drive literacy instruction.

8.7 Summary

Since 1949, primary school language and literacy education in China has gone through five major stages of development characterized by the various reform efforts associated with the unique social and historical contexts of the country during those times. The current primary Yuwen curriculum reform initiated in 2001 is the Chinese government's response to the dramatic changes the country has experienced in global and domestic arenas and aims at meeting the demands of the information age, globalization, and individualization. It has expanded teachers' perspectives and enriched Yuwen instruction (Chen 2010) by pushing teachers to think and reflect on their existing practices and find innovative ways to prepare a new generation of students in the age of technology. However, it is also important to understand that the reform has encountered opposition from old-school Yuwen educators and teachers. Although facing mounting challenges, the current literacy reform is moving in the right direction towards engaging students in mind, heart, and hands.

While embracing many of the ideas in the new curriculum standards that strive to provide a more student-centered curriculum, many primary Yuwen teachers have to deal with the cultural clashes between their traditional views of Yuwen education and Western ideas. The reality is that traditional approaches to Yuwen instruction are deep-rooted and still are much favored and practiced by many Yuwen teachers in China. Finding a balance between teacher-directed, knowledge-based, skills-oriented,

test-driven teaching and more student-centered, collaborative, inquiry-based learning remains a pressing issue to be solved in the foreseeable future. The paradigm shift cannot be achieved overnight. Teacher preparation and teacher training need to catch up with the demands of the new curriculum standards. Furthermore, the test-driven culture has to be continuously challenged and changed to accomplish the new curriculum goals and objectives.

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