



Towards Literacy For All

—Vaiju Mahindroo

IN Asia, where a goal has been set to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000, China has special problems, stemming from the fact that its largely rural population is so unevenly distributed over the country's 9,550,000 sq.km. territory. In spite of this and other difficulties, a massive effort undertaken since 1949 has brought the illiteracy rate down from 80 to 23.5%. By 1982 in addition to the massive enrolment of children in primary schooling, over 143 million young people and adults between 12 and 40 years old had been taught to read and write. Another 39 million already in work force had received a primary education, and over 10 million had completed technical secondary schools or institutions of higher learning.

How did the country with the world's largest population (one billion in 1982) and enormous development problems achieve these results?

Perhaps the answer lies in three major concepts: the first is the linking of education and learning with production at all levels; the second, a great flexibility of approach to suit local needs and conditions; and the third, teaching adapted, as far as possible, to the student's specific aptitudes.

A wide variety of schools: China applies the "walking-on-two legs" policy whereby the state and the people cooperate to run a wide variety of schools in order to develop literacy, post-literacy and continuing education. In addition to

This article analyses China's success in bringing down the illiteracy rate from 80% in 1949 to the present 23.5%

those set up at the provincial, prefectural and county levels, schools are also run by industrial and commercial enterprises, communications and transport services, trade unions, and agricultural, forestry and fishing institutes. Still others are operated by women's organizations, the Communist Young League, the people's militia, etc.

To cope with the huge staff requirements for literacy education, tens of millions of literate citizens have been co-opted as part-time teachers.

China has adopted a system under which people are given time off from regular work to attend classes on fixed days. In schools where the goal is to provide primary or secondary education the form adopted is usually that of spare-time study, while more advanced students may be dispensed from work to attend secondary and higher educational establishments.

Education is seen as a continuing process in which young peasants and workers who have achieved literacy are encouraged to move up the ladder through primary school, middle and technical school. For those who attain the highest levels there are over 600 spare-time universities and colleges run by factories, enterprises, professional associations and regional bodies. Radio, television and correspondence courses are also

widely used at this level.

Achieving universal literacy, however, remains a major problem in remote, sparsely-populated areas of this huge country. Wu Lien county in Shandong province, which was awarded Unesco's prestigious Nadezhda K.Krupskaya Literacy Prize for 1986, is an example of how these problems can be overcome. Its 22 townships and 629 villages, many of them located in mountainous areas, suffer from a severe lack of transportation and rudimentary economic conditions.

The 1982 census showed that nearly 79,000 people in the 12 to 40 age group—representing about a third of Wu Lien's population—were still illiterate. The county government took action in three well-defined areas. First, teacher training was emphasized and upgraded. The county Normal School was given the task of training key personnel. Once they had been trained these teachers returned to their villages and, in turn, conducted courses for literacy instructors at local centres set up by the county authorities. Nearly 4,000 teachers were trained in this way.

Next a massive fund-raising drive was launched. In three years the county was able to raise 1,200,000 yuan (some 325,000 US dollars) to pay for school facilities, including the building of 132 classrooms.

The third step was a widespread

campaign to enroll as many illiterates as possible in courses especially geared to the needs of people of Wu Lien county.

These courses complied with the criteria laid down by the central government. In China new literates must have a reading vocabulary of 1,500 Chinese characters, be able to read elementary publications and write simple articles using between 200 and 300 characters.

Between late 1983 and early 1985, five evaluations of Wu Lien county's literacy campaign were conducted. The final evaluation indicated that over a three-year period, 67,534 young people and adults had learned to read and write. To prevent a relapse into illiteracy the county government set about popularizing elementary education, offering higher pay to teachers and providing better facilities and teaching aids. Technical schools for peasants were set up in the county's 22 townships and in 560 villages. Wu Lien county's success is already serving as an example in other regions where, despite certain progress, much remains to be done, especially to combat the illiteracy rate among young girls and women which is over twice that for men. It is now possible, thanks to an empirical approach on the part of the authorities and the massive participation of the population, to foresee throughout China results comparable to those of Wu Lien. (UNESCO SPECIAL)