

ELIMINATION OF ILLITERACY: COMMON RESPONSIBILITY

Development of Literacy Education in China

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As one of the most-populated countries in the world, China has a large number of illiterates. It is an arduous task for the Chinese government to wipe out illiteracy, get rid of poverty, narrow knowledge gap and improve citizens' competence for the realization of the socialist modernization program.

Literacy education in China is an important part of the Unesco Program of Global Literacy Education. This report is aimed at further strengthening the exchange and cooperation between China and other countries and promoting the development of international literacy education by means of summing up the development experience of literacy education in China since 1990s and reporting to the World Conference of Education for All.

This report will not only help guide the further development of literacy education in China at the beginning of the 21st century, but also promote the joint efforts made by all countries to set up a knowledge society, safeguard world peace and promote human progress in the process of realizing the UN Millennium Aim, the six objectives of Dakar Action Program and the UN Ten-Year Program of Literacy Education.

1 PHENOMENON OF ILLITERACY: CHALLENGE FOR MODERN SOCIETY

As the human society enters the 21st century, the civilization progress constitutes a sharp contrast to the large population of illiterates in the world, and the contradiction between the rapid development of science and technology and the low competence of laborers is more and more serious and the phenomena of illiteracy has become one of the principal challenges for the progress of developing countries and the whole world at the beginning of the 21st century.

1. Seriousness of Illiteracy Problem

— **Huge number of illiterate population.** According to the statistics in the 2005 Unesco Monitoring Report on Education for All, there were in 2000 about 800 million illiterates at the ages of 15 or above in the world, accounting for 20.3% of the total population of the world. At the same time, 113 million school-aged children were still out of school, losing the chance and right to receive education at their childhood and forming the sources of large number of new illiterates. As was said, China is a largely-populated

country and suffers a large number of illiterates. In 2000, there were still more than 80 million illiterates at or above 15, including 20 million young and middle-aged illiterates. The big population of illiterates has exerted enormous influences upon the socioeconomic development in China.

— **Larger percentage of female illiterates in the illiterate population.** In the Unesco standards for testing gender equity in the field of education, the gender coefficient between 0.97 and 1.03 implies that male and female are equal in access to education. In 2000, the average gender coefficient of adult illiterates in the world was 0.87, but the average gender coefficient of adult illiterates in developed countries was 0.99 and that in developing countries was only 0.82. Female illiterates accounted for about two thirds of the total population of illiterates in the world. It was also the case in China. Such feudal ideas as “regarding men as superior to women” and “a woman without talent is thereby virtuous”, the heavy burden of household chores and the physical and psychological features make it difficult for rural girls to go to school and result in the situation that the number of female illiterates larger than that of male illiterates. The statistics of China’s Fifth National Census in 2000 revealed that female illiterates accounted for 72.7% of the total number of illiterates and that the rate of female illiterates was 13.4%. The gender difference in illiteracy rate not only indicates the inequality in access to education, but also reveals that the educational level of the mother will exert important influences upon the health and the learning progress of children.

— **Obvious regional difference in the distribution of illiterates.** In those underdeveloped countries, the illiterates are mostly distributed among those disadvantaged people in the remote and backward rural areas. Unesco statistics indicate that the population of illiterates in those underdeveloped countries in 2000 made 98.26% of the total number of illiterates in the world. In China, the illiterate population is mainly distributed in those underdeveloped western provinces and autonomous regions such as Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia, Yunnan, Guizhou and Tibet where the average illiteracy rate is higher than 10%, with Tibet Autonomous Region suffering the highest 47.25% in the year 2000.

— **Heavy task of literacy education for the international community.** In 1990, there were 879 million illiterates at or above 15 in the world, with the average illiteracy rate at 24.7%, but in 2000, the number was still 862 million and the rate was 20.3%. A comparison shows that the average illiteracy rate had come down by only 4.4 percentage points, less by 7.95 percentage points than the objective of “reducing the illiteracy rate by 12.35%” which was set at the 1990 World Conference of Education for All. Compared with that in 1990, the absolute number of illiterates in the world only dropped by 0.17% in 2000. Of the diversified reasons for the slow progress of illiteracy education in the developing countries, the restriction of resources might be the common one. However, one reason that cannot be ignored lies in the fact that literacy education had not been given the priority position in the strategies for educational development and even social progress in all countries concerned. The lack of sufficient awareness of the importance of literacy education and of effective actions had made the problem of illiteracy even more serious than before.

2. Urgency of Literacy Education

The seriousness of illiteracy is reflected by the huge number of illiterates, large percentage of female illiterates and unfulfilled objectives of literacy education in the world. The existence of large number of illiterates in the world will produce unfavorable influences upon both illiterate individuals and social progress. Therefore, literacy education has become more important and urgent.

— Literacy education: need of human beings for all-round and harmonious development.

As is known, education is aimed at promoting human beings' all-round and harmonious development, which is the requirement of social progress and individual development. But, the self-development of illiterates is greatly restricted for lack of chance to receive school education and failure in developing their talent. It is difficult for those uneducated individuals to master new knowledge and skills through various channels, participate in social exchanges and share the material and intellectual achievements of modern society. The existence of illiterates is contrary to the fundamental aim of education. To illiterate individuals, the lack of knowledge is a kind of mental pain and a serious block for their self-development. Therefore, it is of necessity to help those illiterates get access to education, get rid of the sense of inferiority, have more participation in social activities and create conditions for their all-round and harmonious development.

— **Literacy education: important means for getting rid of poverty.** According to the results of some studies, illiteracy is relevant to poverty and they interact as both cause and effect. Namely, poverty gives birth to illiteracy, and illiteracy aggravates poverty in return. Since the elimination of illiteracy can promote the social and economic development by different means, more efforts should be made to help those new literate people master new knowledge and skills for improving the capacity of life and production, stimulate their enthusiasm for vocational and technical training, and promote their flow for new jobs, thus realizing the rational allocation of technical and human resources and promoting the regional and national economic development.

— **Literacy education: impetus to the progress of society and civilization.** As was said, the existence of a large number of illiterates is unfavorable to economic development and hinders the progress of social civilization. Specifically, it is difficult for illiterates to take part in different kinds of political activities and legal education. Such situation is unfavorable to the construction of social democracy, to the improvement of citizens' sense of rights and responsibility and ability to participate in and discuss state affairs, to the illiterates' mastering of legal concepts, moral ideas, values and public code of conduct, to the cultivation of sense of environmental protection and habit of public and personal hygiene and to the elimination of superstitious ideas and outmoded conventions and practices. So, it is very necessary to develop literacy education, improve the quality of all citizens, set up ideal social morals and guide all citizens to have healthy, civilized and scientific lives.

— Literacy education: necessary condition for the improvement of population quality.

The existence of a large number of illiterates is an important symbol of the low competence of citizens

of a country. For this reason, the literacy rate of adults is one of the important indicators in the international indicator system for comprehensive evaluation of the social development of a nation. Moreover, the existence of illiterates will influence the quality of next generations because parents as the first teachers of their children have exemplary roles in imparting knowledge and ideas to their children. The educational level of parents has close relationship with children's food, nutrition, intelligence and personal character. In this sense, the parents' words and deeds have direct influences upon the healthy growth and quality of the next generation. The result of a survey in China indicates that if the parent or parents are illiterate or semi-illiterate, their child or children are much more likely than those children with educated parents to become illiterate or semi-illiterate. Therefore, efforts must be made to improve the educational level by popularizing compulsory education and eliminating illiteracy for promoting the socioeconomic development and heightening the quality of all citizens.

To sum up, the well awareness of the seriousness of illiteracy and the urgency of literacy education will help the public have a clear understanding of the extensiveness, nature and influences of illiteracy and the methods and conditions for combating illiteracy. At the same time, such awareness will also accelerate the progress of literacy education in different countries and promote the fulfillment of the Unesco objectives of literacy education in the world as early as possible.

3. Time Nature of Literacy Education

— **Ever since illiteracy became a problem, China and other countries have a common understanding of the definition of illiteracy and the standard to make a distinction between illiteracy and literacy.** An illiterate refers to a person who can neither read nor write. According to the definition in the *Chinese Encyclopedia (Volume of Education)*, an illiterate is "a person who cannot read or only knows very few Chinese characters, thus cannot apply Chinese characters to social activities". In the 1958 Unesco Recommendations for Internationalization of Educational Statistics, the word "illiterate" is defined as "a person who can neither read with comprehension, nor write short essay about daily life". Such definition of "illiterate" from cultural and educational angles has become the common understanding of most countries in the world. On the one hand, education serves as the watershed between an intellectual person and non-intellectual person. In China and other countries, education always started with learning to read and write in the past. On the other hand, "the ability to read and write is an important tool for education in a cultural society and is an indispensable means for having further education and training". Therefore, it is stipulated in China that a farmer is considered literate if he or she can read 1500 Chinese characters (2000 Chinese characters for an urban citizen or enterprise worker) and master the ability to do the simple reading, writing and calculation. That is the minimum standard for becoming literacy.

— **Nowadays, the changing times has been giving new meanings to literacy education.** It is no longer scientific and complete to judge whether a person is illiterate only by the number of Chinese characters he or she knows. The number of Chinese characters one knows cannot reflect the inner connotation of illiteracy. Some "illiterates" who can read a limited number of Chinese

characters are actually competent persons in real life. This implies that the basic ability to read, write and calculate cannot reflect a person's fundamental skills, attitude and values. In addition, the more and more complicated environment of an economy-based society has put forward even higher requirement for the educational level of the people in such society. Accordingly, a person is judged as "functional illiterate" if he or she is "unable to participate in those character-learning-based activities with important influences upon his or her group and community" and is "unable to participate in all the activities for further utilization of his or her knowledge about reading, writing and calculation for achieving self-development and community development". Obviously, there exists essential difference between a "functional illiterate" and a "traditional illiterate". As a matter of fact, the elimination of "functional illiteracy" focuses on the learning of functional knowledge and techniques and has close linkage with learners' daily work and lives.

— **Apparently, people need to surpass the traditional narrow understanding of literacy education in the present globalizing and information-based society.**

In addition to helping illiterates learn to do the simple reading, writing and calculation or master certain skill, literacy education should also improve a person's capacity and satisfy his or her "need" for more extensive learning. As a kind of basic education, literacy education is aimed at developing learners' ability to obtain, assess and utilize the information knowledge effectively and improving their ability to survive themselves and participate in social activities. On the basis of this understanding, literacy education is first a right to receive education and it is especially the case for those disadvantaged groups of women, poor citizens in rural areas, ethnic minorities and original inhabitants in those remote and border areas. Furthermore, literacy education serves as the basis for having lifelong and sustainable education. By means of literacy education, each learner is trained to develop his or her ability and potentials, form positive values, improve competence and change life and the society. In other words, literacy education today is based on human right and centered on learners, with learning opportunity as the starting point, anti-poverty as the basic point, community as the background and information network as an important means for constructing the cultural environment and guaranteeing the quality of literacy education. Only by such means can literacy education in the world have positive effect under the guidance of new concepts and realize the Unesco objective of reducing the population of illiterates by half by the year 2015.

As one of the most urgent problems for the human beings, the phenomenon of illiteracy is threatening the progress and prosperity of human society. In this sense, it has become the common aim of all nations and peoples to surpass the regional, ideological, political and economic differences for eliminating illiteracy. At the beginning of the 21st century, the international community and all relevant countries made joint efforts again to launch an all-round campaign against illiteracy for the aim of reducing the total number of illiterates in the world by half in the ten-year period of 2003-2012. This is not only a key objective of the Program of Education for All, but also the core of the objectives of the Millennium Development Program.

Thanks to the Unesco publicity activities and promotion, literacy education in all relevant countries have achieved rapid progress. China, as a key member of the world family and the country with the biggest population in the world, should make energetic efforts to materialize this objective. The Chinese government has attended all Unesco conferences and meetings. In December 1993, the Chinese delegation attended the Summit Meeting of Nine Most-populated Countries on Education for All held in New Delhi and signed the Delhi Declaration. The Chinese government's participation in the "Dakar Conference" demonstrated the Chinese government's confidence and determination to make the utmost for realizing the objectives put forward by the World Conference on Education for All and the Dakar Declaration.



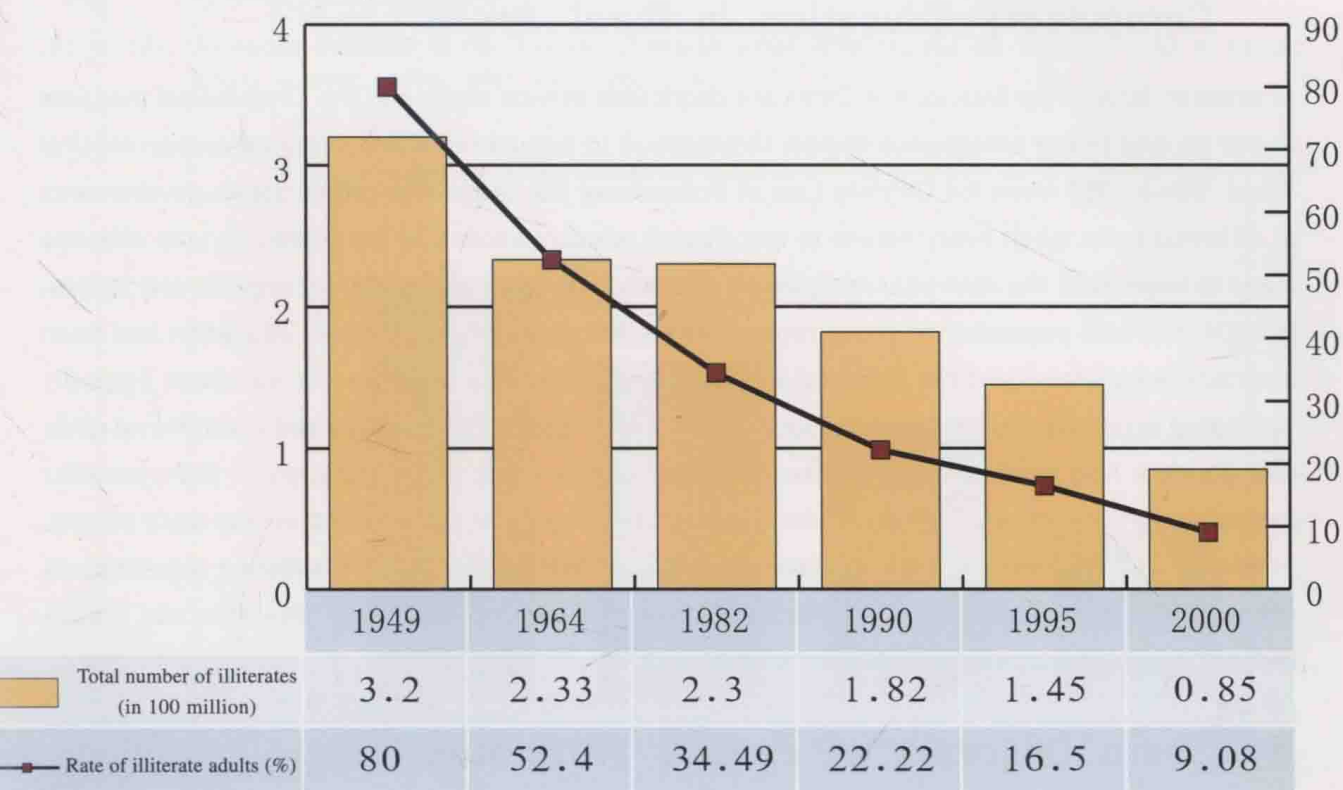
2 IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENTS OF LITERACY EDUCATION IN CHINA

Elimination of illiteracy has long been a basic national policy adhered by the Chinese government. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all Chinese people under the leadership of the Central Government and local governments have been undertaking a long-term campaign against the phenomenon of illiteracy. Especially, China has obtained great achievements in literacy education since 1990s.

1. Obvious Decrease of Number of Illiterates and Percentage of Adult Illiterates in the Total Population of China

The year 1990 was designated by the Unesco as "International Year of Literacy Education". By taking advantage of the Unesco appeal, the Chinese government launched a vigorous movement of literacy education throughout the country and put forward the objective of "basic elimination of illiteracy among young and middle-aged people in the country" by the end of the 20th century. During the period of 1990-2000, about 4 million illiterates became literate each year on average and altogether 46,516,800 illiterates became literate. According to the statistics of the Fifth National Census in 2000, the percentage of illiterate people at or above 15 in the total population decreased from 15.88% in 1990 to 6.72% in 2000. Similarly, the rate of adult illiterates came down from 22.22% to 9.08%. The absolute number of young and middle-aged people came down from 61,710,000 to 22,000,000, making the illiteracy rate of young and middle-aged people dropped from 10.38% to 4.8%. China had reached the strategic goal of "basic elimination of illiteracy among young and middle-aged people" as scheduled.

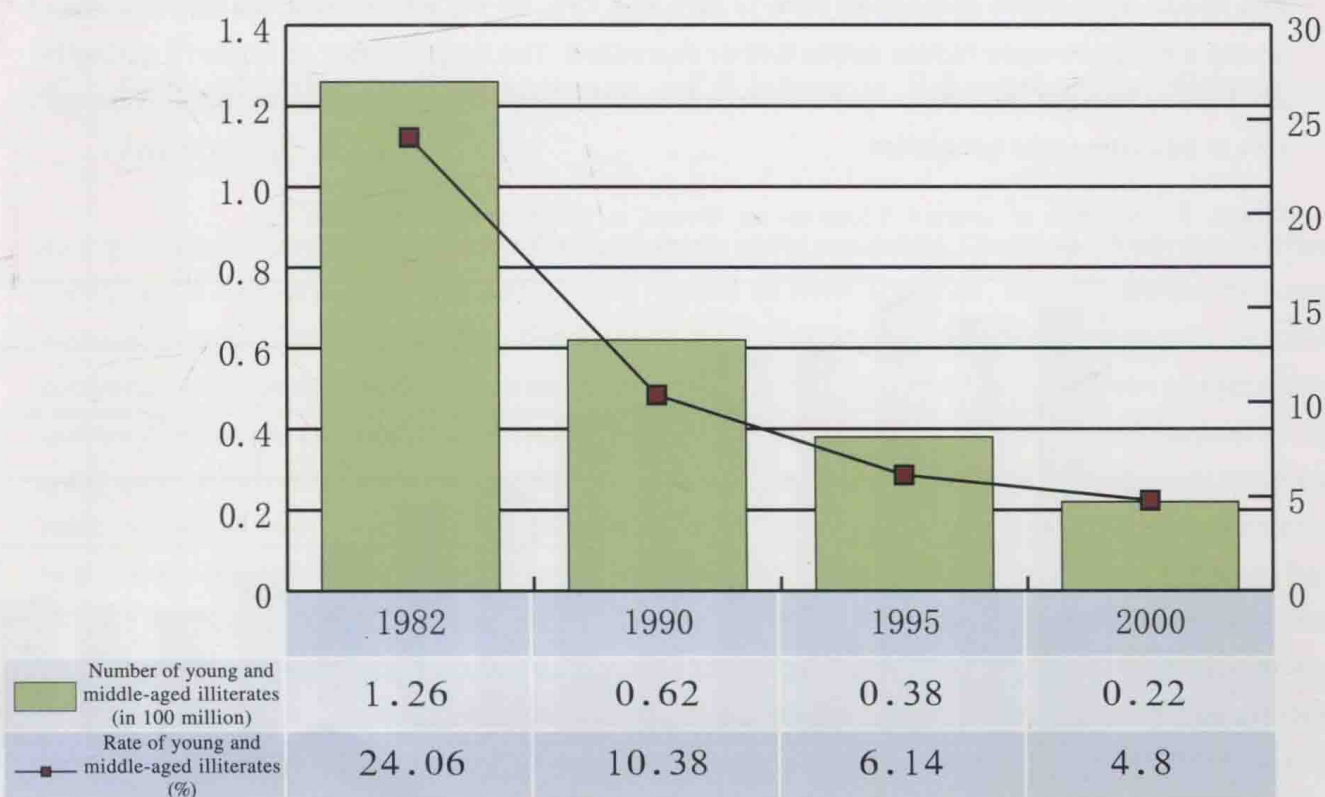
Chart 1 Decreasing Tendency of Illiterate Population at or above 15 and Illiteracy Rate among Adults in China during 1949–2000



Sources: 1. The State Bureau of Statistics; *Bulletins of major statistics of national censuses in 1982, 1990 and 2000.*

2. The State Bureau of Statistics; *National 1% sampling census in 1995*

Chart 2 Decreasing Tendency of the Numbers of Young and Middle-aged Illiterates and the Illiteracy Rates of Young and Middle-aged People in China in 1982, 1990, 1995 and 2000



Sources: 1. The State Bureau of Statistics; *Bulletins of major statistics of national censuses in 1982, 1990 and 2000.*

2. The State Bureau of Statistics; *National 1% sampling census in 1995*

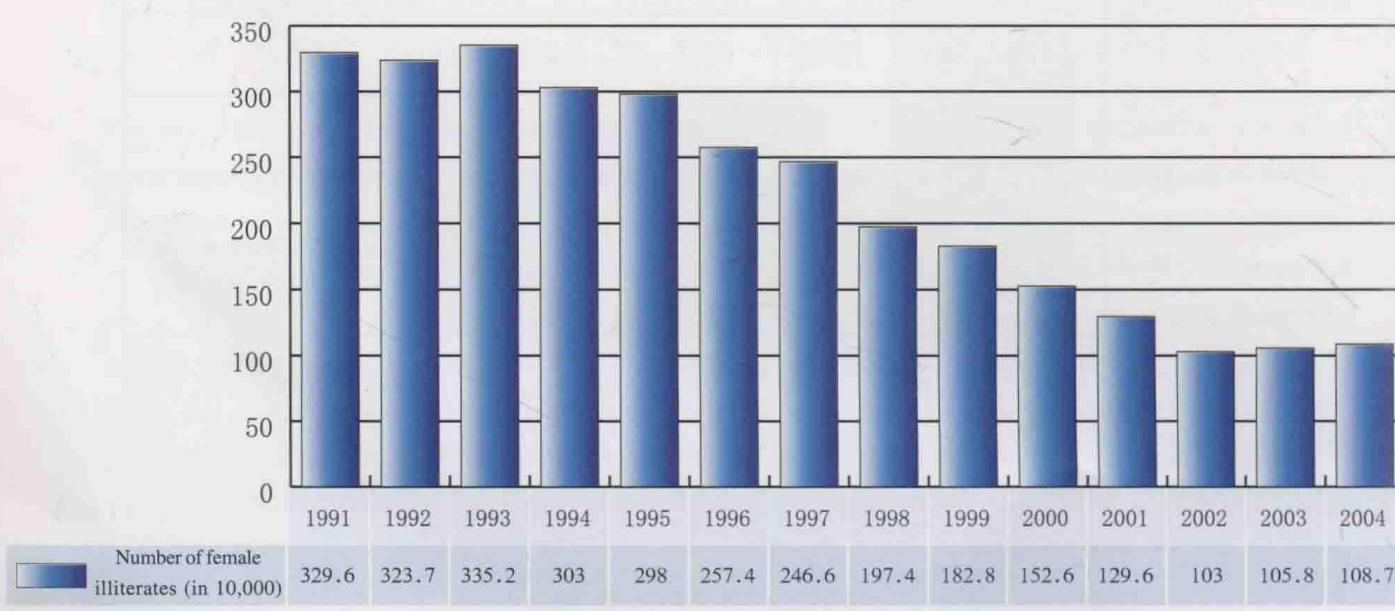
2. Decrease of New Illiterates as the Popularization of Compulsory Education in Rural Areas

At present, 90% of the illiterates in China are distributed in rural areas and the fundamental measure to put an end to the emergence of new illiterates is to popularize compulsory education in rural areas. Since 1986 when the Chinese Law of Compulsory Education was promulgated, governments at all levels have taken every means to mobilize all relevant sectors of the society to take effective steps to implement the nine-year compulsory education as planned in different regions and stages. In 2004, the total population in those regions where the nine-year compulsory education had been basically popularized and the illiteracy among young and middle-aged people had been basically eliminated accounted for 93.6% of the total. At the same time, 2,774 counties and county-level cities and districts had been passed the examination for the basic popularization of the nine-year compulsory education and the basic elimination of illiteracy among young and middle-aged people. Furthermore, 12 provinces and municipalities had also fulfilled the above-mentioned objectives as scheduled. These measures have effectively blocked the channels of new illiterates and greatly reduced the percentage of low-aged illiterates.

3. Sharp Decrease of Female Illiterates

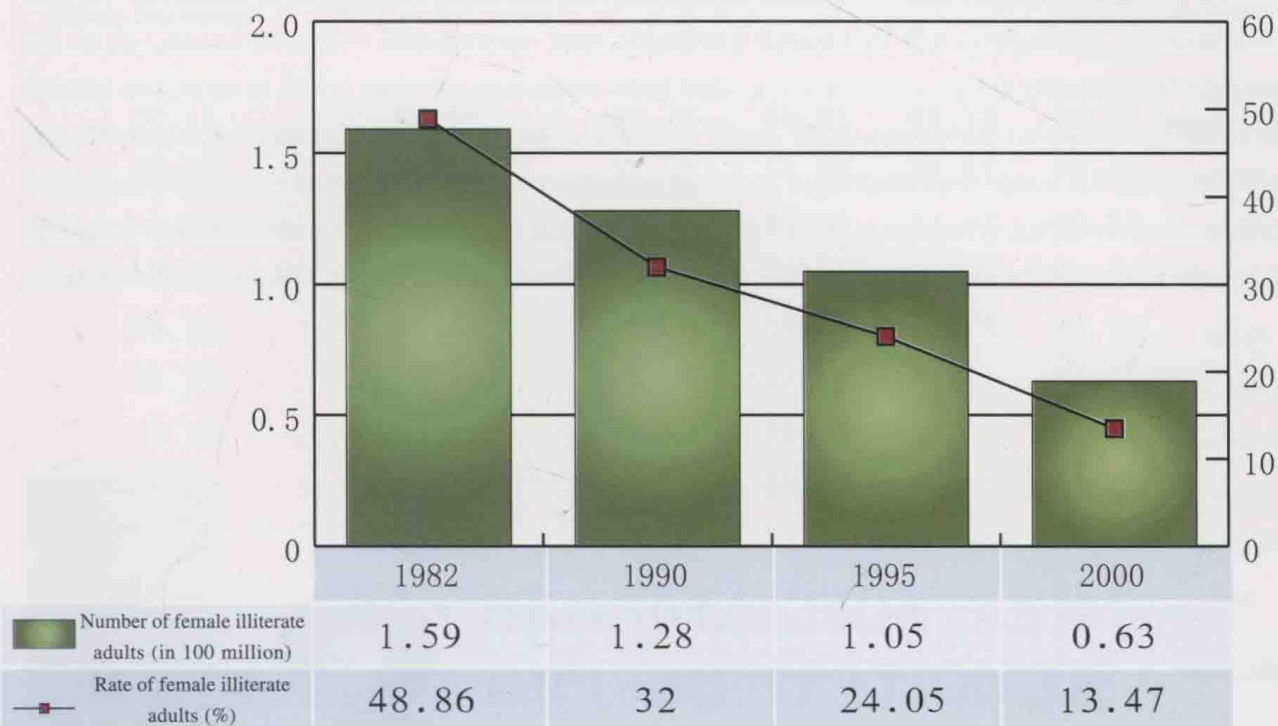
Elimination of illiteracy among women is a key aspect of literacy education in China. In the early stage of New China, 90% of women were illiterates. But, as a result of 50 years' unremitting efforts, both the number of female illiterates and the illiteracy rate of female population have been greatly come down. During the period of 1991-2003, nearly 30 million women got rid of illiteracy. The illiteracy rate of female adults decreased from 32.0% in 1990 to 13.47% in 2000 and the illiteracy rate of young and middle-aged adults came down from 14.78% to 4.13%. By the end of 2002, the illiteracy rate of young and middle-aged female adults further decreased. The large number of women's getting rid of illiteracy had not only improved their capacity and social position, but also exerted an important role in educating new generation.

Chart 3 Statistics of Literacy Education for Women in China during 1991-2004



Sources: Bureau of Development Planning of the Ministry of Education, P.R. China; Yearbook of Educational Statistics in China (1991-2004), People'S Education Press.

Chart 4 Decreasing Tendency of the Numbers of Female Adult Illiterates and the Illiteracy Rates of Female Adults in 1982, 1990, 1995 and 2000



Sources; 1. The State Bureau of Statistics; *Bulletins of major statistics of national censuses in 1982, 1990 and 2000.*
 2. The State Bureau of Statistics; *National 1% sampling census in 1995*

4. Remarkable Achievements of Literacy Education in Ethnic Minority Areas

As a multi-ethnic country with Hans forming the majority of the population, China has 55 ethnic minorities distributed in such provinces and autonomous regions as Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu, Xinjiang, Sichuan, Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai and Tibet. Due to the influences of economic, cultural, geographic and historical factors, those areas inhabited by ethnic minorities have long been comparatively backward in cultural and educational development, with different phenomena of illiteracy popular in the areas and illiteracy rates higher than the average level of the country. Over the past 50 years since the establishment of New China, the Chinese government has been adopting a series of favorable policies to guarantee the ethnic equality. As a result, the educational cause in those ethnic minority areas has enjoyed an unprecedented development, symbolized by the sharp decrease of the number of illiterates and the rate of illiteracy. According to the statistics of the fifth national census in 2000, the adult illiteracy rates in Guangxi, Xinjiang and Sichuan were close to or even lower than 9.08% — the national average level. In 1982, the adult illiteracy rates in Ningxia, Gansu, Yunnan, Guizhou and Tibet decreased by larger margins than the national average percentage of 25.41%.



Table 1 Adult Illiteracy Rates in the Ethnic Minority Areas in China in 1982, 1990, 1995 and 2000

Province or region	1982	1990	1995	2000	Reduced percent points of gross illiteracy rates between 1990 and 2000	Reduced percent points of gross illiteracy rates between 1982 and 2000
Inner Mongolia	31.08	21.68	16.65	11.59	10.09	21.96
Ningxia	43.04	33.48	26.41	15.72	17.76	27.22
Gansu	48.05	39.17	34.05	19.68	19.49	28.93
Xinjiang	30.72	19.52	13.44	7.72	11.80	23.50
Sichuan	31.96	21.25	16.82	9.87	11.38	22.09
Guangxi	24.96	16.25	13.50	5.30	10.95	19.66
Guizhou	47.88	36.73	29.49	19.85	16.88	28.20
Yunnan	49.26	37.47	29.42	15.44	22.03	33.87
Qinghai	46.81	40.04	37.43	25.44	14.60	22.24
Tibet	73.16	69.34	61.50	47.25	22.09	25.87

Sources: 1. The State Bureau of Statistics; *Bulletins of major statistics of national censuses in 1982, 1990 and 2000.*

2. The State Bureau of Statistics; *National 1% sampling census in 1995*

Table 2 Comparison of Gross Illiteracy Rates in the Ethnic Minority Areas in China in 1990 and 2000

Province or region	1990		2000		Reduced percent points of gross illiteracy rates between 1982 and 2000
	Illiterate population (in 10,000)	Gross illiteracy rate (%)	Illiterate population (in 10,000)	Gross illiteracy rate (%)	
Inner Mongolia	330	15.39	217	9.12	6.27
Ningxia	103	22.06	75	13.40	8.66
Gansu	625	27.93	367	14.34	13.59
Xinjiang	193	12.75	107	5.56	7.20
Sichuan	1336	17.05	636	7.64	9.41
Guangxi	448	10.61	170	3.79	6.82
Guizhou	941	25.44	488	11.39	14.05
Yunnan	786	24.27	490	13.89	10.38
Qinghai	123	27.70	93	18.03	9.67
Tibet	98	44.43	85	32.5	11.93

Sources: The State Bureau of Statistics; *bulletins of major statistics of national censuses in 1990 and 2000.*

5. Acknowledgement of Literacy Education Achievements in China by International Community

Literacy education in China is an important part of the International Action Program of Literacy Education set up by Unesco in 1990 – International Year of Literacy Education. The outstanding achievements in literacy education in China over the past years have been acknowledged by the international community and China has won the international fame in this field. Since 1984, altogether 14 units from China have been awarded prizes in the international rewarding activities organized by Unesco. All these prizes and fame are the international community's acknowledgement of the outstanding achievements of literacy education in China and the important contributions made by China to literacy education of the world.

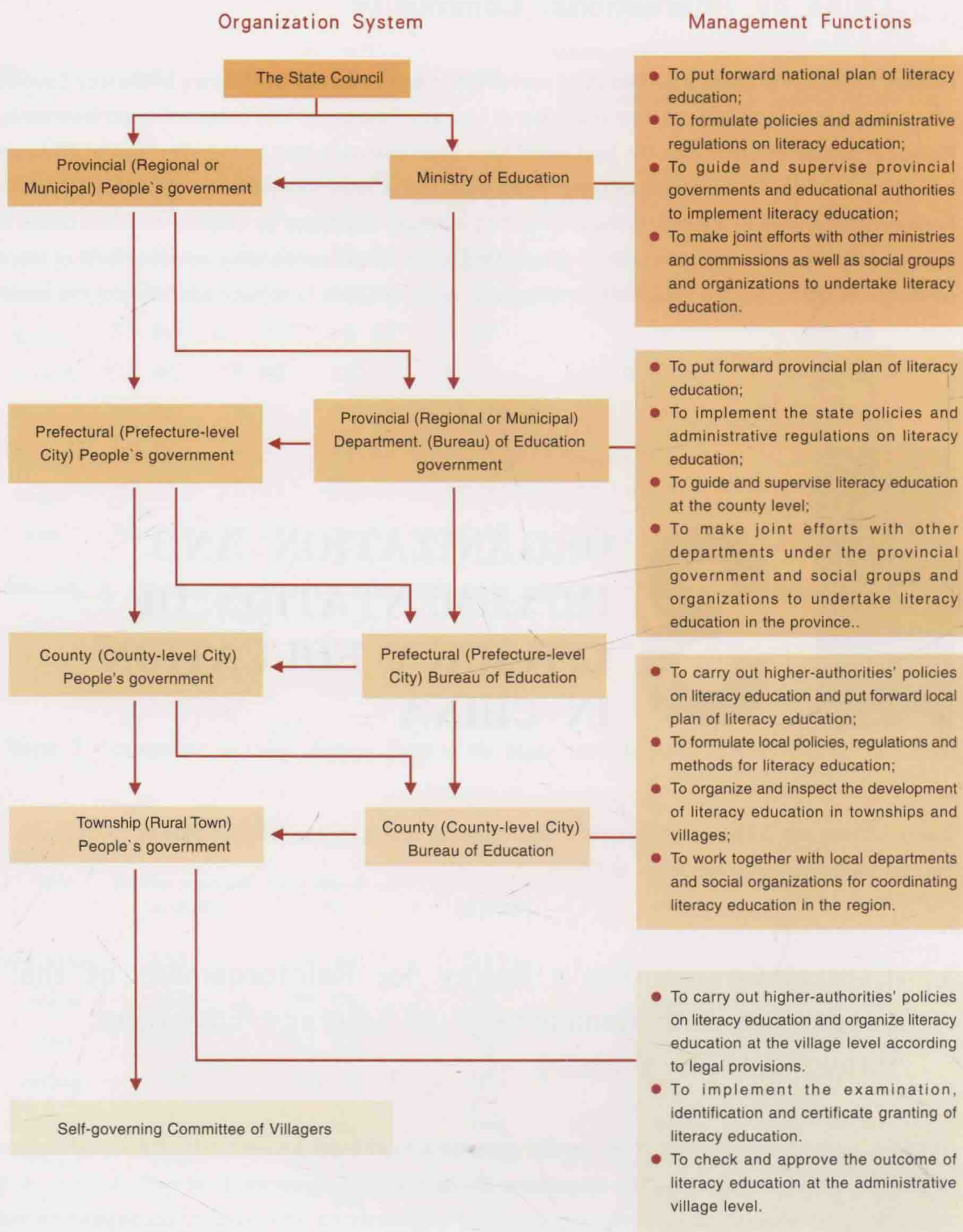
3 ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF LITERACY EDUCATION IN CHINA

Since 1990s, the Chinese government has adopted many measures and means to promote the development of literacy education in China.

1. Central Government's Policy for Reinforcement of the Leadership and Management of Literacy Education throughout the Country

In China, under the leadership of the central government and local governments, literacy education is organized and implemented by the educational departments of governments at various levels. At the same time, all relevant social sectors, groups and organizations with divided responsibilities make joint efforts to promote literacy education. The Section of Literacy Education in the Bureau of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education is in charge of the coordination of literacy education throughout the country. In addition, the functional setups in the educational administrative department at the provincial, prefectural and county levels are equipped with full-time officials to take up the organization and management of literacy education.

Sketch Map of Management System of Literacy Education in China



In order to reinforce the policy orientation and macro-level planning of literacy education and promote the coordinated socioeconomic development in China, the Chinese government has consistently treated literacy education as an important content of the national development program by including the same into each five-year plan and working out a series of guiding policies on literacy education

in every historic period. In 1993, the Chinese government revised and issued the *Regulations on Literacy Education*, in which special provisions were given on the definition of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy, the target groups of literacy education, the standard for individuals to get rid of illiteracy, the criteria for units to eliminate illiteracy among young and middle-aged people, the system of check for approval of literacy education result, the cultivation of trainers and teachers for literacy education, the fund sources for literacy education, the rewarding practice as well as the basic principles for the organization and leadership of literacy education. In the same year, the Chinese government put forward the objective of literacy education by 2000 – “basically eliminating illiteracy among young and middle-aged people and reducing the illiteracy rate of young and middle-aged people under 5%.”

Excerpts from State Laws and Policies

“The state develops educational facilities in order to eliminate illiteracy”.

— *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, revised in March 2004.

“People's governments at all levels, grass-root mass organizations and enterprises and institutions should adopt various measures to undertake literacy education. According to the state regulations, all citizens with the capacity to receive literacy education should attend literacy education”.

— *Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, March 1995.

“By 2000, illiteracy among young and middle-aged people should be basically eliminated throughout the country to reduce the illiteracy rate of young and middle-aged people under 5%.”

— *Program for Educational Reform and Development in China*, February 1993.

“Except those who have lost the ability to learn, all illiterate or semi-illiterate citizens above the age of 15 shall have the right and duty to receive literacy education regardless of gender, nationality and race.

— *Regulations on Literacy Education*, August 1993.

For implementing the *Regulations on Literacy Education*, the Ministry of Education formulated and issued a series of policies and documents for promoting literacy education. Each year, the Ministry of Education organizes a national working conference on literacy education to check the development of literacy education, sum up successful experience, analyze existing problems, adopt countermeasures and make relevant arrangements.

Under the guidance of the above state laws and policies on literacy education, local governments at all levels have also worked out corresponding local laws, regulations, policies and plans to include literacy education into the general plan of local social and economic development and take the objectives of literacy education as the content of government work. At the same time, such means of mass media as broadcast, television, newspapers, blackboard bulletins and posters are also used to publicize the importance of literacy education and mobilize all social forces to participate in literacy education for the purpose of making literacy education accessible to illiterate individuals.