

A Brief Introduction to Tao Xingzhi's Civilian Literacy Textbook

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Abstract: *A hundred years ago, Tao Xingzhi's "Thousand Character Course" for the common people was a typical representative of the common people's literacy textbook, which became popular and had a wide and profound impact. It not only has advanced ideas and great emotions, but also has the meaning of enlightenment and spiritual cultivation; Not only does it have a clear purpose and principles, but it also has a complete system and systematic knowledge, as well as appropriate content and scientific compilation methods. In terms of knowledge content, concept cultivation, and principle system, it has opened up the knowledge system of future civilian literacy textbooks. To this day, despite the fact that the proportion of illiterate people aged 15 and above in China still accounts for 4.94%, the civilian literacy textbooks, which were once the main tool of the literacy movement and were printed more than 70 times a year, still have value for re examination and reference.*

Keywords: *Tao Xingzhi, civilian textbooks, thousand character course*

1. Introduction

In September 1923, the Shanghai Commercial Press published the civilian literacy textbook "*Thousand Character Course*" written by Mr. Tao Xingzhi and Mr. Zhu Jingnong. As soon as this set of textbooks was published, Tao Xingzhi wrote to Zhu Jingnong in a letter: "Just watch those who have a slight understanding of Chinese characters read and read again, and you can rest assured. If 'Thousand Character Course' can only sell one million, it will be considered a failure of civilian education [1]." Indeed, in less than six months, the "*Thousand Character Course*" has been printed in 41 editions [2]; In less than 10 months, it was adopted by 20 provinces and regions, with 500000 people attending the conference. This achievement, even in today's context, is definitely one of the miracles that is difficult to achieve. At the same time, the "*Thousand Character Course*" also sparked a wave of compiling textbooks for the common people [3]. According to the statistics and textual research of Guo Qilin, a professor of Renmin University of China, in the 1920s and 1930s, there were 14 kinds and 52 volumes of representative textbooks of the same kind, such as Civilian Reader, Adult Reader, and New Thousand Character Course [4]. This shows the 'extremely warm welcome and strong interest' received by this set of thousand word textbooks. What kind of book is the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people 'and why does it have such great charm?

2. Research purpose and content

The original intention of Tao Xingzhi in compiling this set of civilian literacy textbooks is, in short, to "*teach people to read and become citizens*"; In short, it means 'using the shortest time and the least amount of money to teach the general public to read good books and become good people' [5], combining the spirit of citizenship and reading, in order to cultivate the ability of ordinary people to be citizens, so that they can not only make a living, but also gain the spirit of being citizens. This concept is stated at the beginning of the "*Thousand Character Course*": The purpose of this book is threefold: (1) To cultivate the essential spirit and attitude of life and the Republic. (2) To train the ability to handle household letters, accounts, and other application documents. (3) To cultivate the basic ability to continue reading books, newspapers, and leading excellent education [6]." Among the three major purposes, Tao Xingzhi believes that cultivating the spirit of being a good person and a citizen is the first priority, and it is also the essence of "selecting and compiling the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people. He further emphasized that the compilation of civilian education textbooks is to instill three spirits into them: first, the spirit of self-reliance, which "makes it precious for the people

to be able to make a living, and shameful for not being able to make a living"; The second is the spirit of mutual assistance, "only knowing how to be self-reliant may not lead to excessive self-interest and weak public welfare; The third is the spirit of progress, "seeking self-reliance in progress, mutual assistance in progress, a spirit of transformation, and not falling into superstition and fantasy. As for the latter two purposes, they are the original intention and bottom line of writing a thousand word textbook. It not only aims to enable civilians to recognize thousand words, read newspapers, keep accounts, and write letters, but also to equip them with the necessary knowledge for a democratic country. In fact, its purpose is to "treat four months of civilian education as a fast track national education".

Adhering to this philosophy, Mr. Tao and Zhu developed the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people, consisting of one set of four volumes, each with 24 lessons, totaling 96 lessons and 1225 new words. According to Tao Xingzhi's plan, reading one lesson a day can be completed in 96 days, and even the most dull ones can receive the essential basic education of the Republic in no more than 4 months. The first volume of the textbook includes texts such as reading, writing, calculating, working, reading songs, the use of money, having customers, patriotic songs, He Jiu buying things, Yun Er keeping accounts, Dongsheng issuing invoices, etc. The second volume includes chapters such as letters from home, breaking a jar to save people, dividing rice, doing one's best in China, Yu Gong moving mountains, eliminating the three harms, treating him well, and coarse rice; The third volume includes chapters on Zheng He's voyages to the West, Confucius, Meng Fuzi, election of legislators, Yue Fei, national flag songs, the five ethnic republics, and rewards and punishments; The fourth volume includes courses on the government of the Republic of China, Watt, Franklin, law-abiding, contract, rule of law spirit, travelogue of the gentleman's country, good family, and songs about the territory of the Republic of China. The literacy rules established in the "*Thousand Character Course*", with one class and one hour per day, one book per month, and one graduation every April, have almost become the golden rule strictly followed by various groups engaged in civilian literacy activities.

The core theme of the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people is to teach people to read, understand, and be good people, to teach them basic knowledge of how to make a living, and to instill the basic spirit of being a citizen. In terms of daily life, words are symbols of life, and they must be integrated with the lives of the people in order to be effective. The image described by Tao Xingzhi is: "Education is like vegetables, writing is like fiber, and life is like various vitamins." In lesson 96 of the "*Thousand Character Course*," basic knowledge of life, such as reading, writing, calculating, working, using money, writing letters, bookkeeping, invoicing, hygiene, and interpersonal communication, accounts for more than half of the total. In terms of spirit, the three major spirits cultivated and instilled in the Thousand Character Lesson, such as patriotic songs, striving for China, Yu Gong moving mountains, Confucius, Meng Fuzi, Meng Mu, Yue Fei, Zhuge Liang, electing members of parliament, electing provincial governors, national flag songs, presidents, the five ethnic republic, the government of the Republic of China, law-abiding, and good families, are all basic knowledge of "citizenship". In Tao Xingzhi's words, "The "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people' is' the food that the common people's minds need to eat'. As a "cook", he adhered to three principles of "cooking": "The first principle is to make them eat just right, not too much or too little; the second is to be hygienic; and the third is to be flavorful. There are poems and stories in books, just to be flavorful; and experts in philosophy, history, politics, science, and education are asked to set goals, just to be hygienic; as for the amount, it is carefully considered and not hasty." It is easy to understand and can be described as having a perfect combination of color, aroma, and taste.

Of course, the knowledge and content emphasized by Mr. Tao Xingzhi are, in our eyes today, very simple, preliminary, and primitive common sense of life and education, which are essential knowledge and basic qualities for a modern citizen. However, it is hard to imagine that textbooks from a hundred years ago already had such appropriate, comprehensive, systematic, and scientific discussions and practices.

This textbook is for "civilian education". This set of "*Thousand Character Course*" is designed to meet the needs of the "Chinese Association for the Promotion of Civilian Education" in promoting civilian education. Its goal is to "enable the 100000 illiterate people aged 12 to 25 to receive basic education represented by the one thousand basic characters of the Republic of China within ten years". If this grand goal is achieved, Tao Xingzhi believes that "the most important thing at this moment is to edit textbooks. Therefore, entrusted by the Pingjiao Association, Mr. Tao Xingzhi and Mr. Zhu Jingnong, as great educators, "based on the grammar of the national language, the principles of educational psychology, and the knowledge needed by the people of the republic", according to the procedure of setting goals first, selecting commonly used characters second, and carefully organizing the content of each lesson, finally compiled the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common

people.

As can be seen from the above, the compilation of "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people not only embodies advanced concepts and great emotions, but also carries the meaning of enlightenment and spiritual cultivation; Not only does it have a clear purpose and principles, but it also has a complete system and systematic knowledge, as well as appropriate content and scientific compilation methods, forming a self-contained knowledge structure. In terms of knowledge content, concept cultivation, and principle system, it has pioneered the knowledge system of future civilian textbooks, which can be said to mark the birth of civilian textbooks.

3. Research background and value

The birth of the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people is closely related to the civilian education movement. As discussed in Fei Wen of the time, "The popularity of the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people is naturally attributed to the enthusiasm of the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people education movement; conversely, the enthusiasm and effectiveness of the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people education movement are also attributed to the existence of this "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people, which can be used as a tool for them to pave the way." Obviously, the two are born together, complement each other, and can also be said to coexist and prosper. During the Republic of China period, educator Xu Xiling made it clear that "in the minds of many people, the "*Thousand Character Course*" is the only tool for educating the common people, and some people simply think that educating the common people is teaching the "*Thousand Character Course*", and the "*Thousand Character Course*" is educating the common people. It seems that the civilian education movement is the civilian literacy movement, which has become a consensus among everyone at that time.

Whether it's the "*Thousand Character Course*" for the common people or the education for the common people, the greatest value of both lies in the word 'common people'. A correct understanding of the concept of 'civilians' is the primary prerequisite for examining both. In today's context, civilians often refer to the general public, the majority of people, workers and peasants, and even the poor, vulnerable groups, etc., with a self-evident meaning. In fact, the term "commoners" in the popular education movement often specifically refers to "illiterate commoners who, regardless of gender, age, wealth, or social status, have exceeded their school age and have not received formal education. That is to say, in Tao Xingzhi's view, there are only two criteria for distinguishing whether a person is a "commoner": first, whether they have exceeded the school age; Secondly, whether one can read or not, that's all. Mr. Yan Yangchu, who was later called "the father of civilian education", pointed out more clearly: "We call those who have passed school age (that is, those who are over 12 years old) and are illiterate, as well as those who have read but lack common sense," civilians ". The reason why we call these people, who account for the majority of the people in the country," civilians "is that they should rely on the power of education to make them knowledgeable and able to be equal citizens." But how many such civilians were in China in the 1920s and 1930s? According to a survey by the China Education Improvement Society, there are "200 trillion" or 200 million. Such civilians cannot be regarded as sound or even as citizens, and the 'panacea' for educating them to become 'citizens' is to read and write. Under such understanding, civilian education naturally flourished and even developed into a massive movement.

This movement is actually a civilian reading movement, with the direct goal of teaching such civilians to read and write in a very short period of time, and to acquire some essential knowledge and skills for daily life; The ultimate goal is to develop the personality and group characteristics of civilians, cultivate a sound personality, and complete their national qualification under civilian politics. As for the content of the textbooks used, it is naturally aimed at cultivating national qualifications. From an individual perspective, reading and literacy are essential elements and rights of ordinary people's lives; From a social perspective, enabling illiterate people to read is to improve the level of society and seek a sound and peaceful society; From a national perspective, reading and literacy is a way for ordinary people to fulfill their obligations to the country, and it is indeed a good remedy for saving the country.

Examining the development of education for the common people, it can be said that the Simplified Chinese Character Movement in the Former Qing Dynasty was in its infancy. In 1909, the Qing government's Ministry of Education issued the "Regulations for Simplified Chinese Character Learning Schools", which compiled simplified Chinese character reading materials specifically for elderly people who had dropped out of school. However, after several years of implementation, no results were

seen. From 1917 to 1918, Yan Yangchu used the "600 word course popular education textbook" for literacy education among the 200000 Chinese workers who assisted France. Although the results were significant, the number was limited and the representativeness was not strong. After the May Fourth Movement, there was a wave of enthusiasm for civilian education, and many civilian schools such as compulsory schools, midnight schools, and cram schools were spontaneously established nationwide, but they quickly failed. To investigate the reasons, Yan Yangchu summarized that besides inexperienced teachers and unorganized activities, the most crucial factor is the lack of "good textbooks". Therefore, a major element of remedy proposed is the "tool of education" - good textbooks. In this context, the emergence of Tao Zhu's version of "The Thousand Character Course for the Common People" is a natural progression. Wherever the civilian education movement reached, the textbooks used were "the kind compiled by Mr. Zhu Jingnong and Zhixing". So, bookstores such as Zhonghua Book Company, World Book Company, and Shanghai Book Company emerged one after another, as well as enthusiastic educators who also edited their own books, but the names and content were only slightly different.

4. Research promotion and impact

The birth and popularity of civilian textbooks cannot be separated not only from the background of the civilian education movement, but also from the high-quality and scientific compilation of textbooks themselves, and even more importantly, from the diligent and practical implementation and hands-on practice of Tao Xingzhi and others.

Tao Xingzhi put in a lot of effort at the beginning of writing the groundbreaking civilian textbook 'Thousand Character Course for the Common People'. He conducted a systematic comparison of textbooks published from the Guangxu period to the Republic of China and discovered "an astonishing fact": "The fact is that over the past thirty years, although Chinese textbooks have made some progress in minor aspects, there has been no fundamental change. Thirty years ago, Chinese textbooks were centered around writing, and now they are still centered around writing." Moreover, "the writing used" is not "first-class writing. He gave an example, the Jia family library wrote: "A big dog barks, a small dog jumps. When it barks, it jumps twice." The Yi family library wrote: "Little kitten, run quickly. Little kitten, run quickly."

Such textbooks lack the power to cultivate bookworms. In Tao Xingzhi's view, "ready-made good literature" is like the words spoken by Liu Laolao at Jia Mu's banquet in *"Dream of the Red Chamber"*: "Old Liu, old Liu, eat like a cow, eat like an old sow, don't look up." Such good words have no place in existing textbooks, and meaningless words filled with "cats and dogs" are sold out in millions of copies. So, in his edited book *"Thousand Character Course"*, the concept of living books, real books, dynamic books, and practical books is reflected everywhere, and the three major standards of his textbook compilation are initially formed and implemented: "(1) whether it has the power to guide people's actions, whether it has the power to guide people to do one action and then another... (2) whether it has the power to guide people's thoughts, whether it has the power to guide people to think and think again... (2) whether it has the power to guide people to generate new values, whether it has the power to guide people to generate new values for seeking new benefits..." .

In addition, for the *"Thousand Character Course"* for the common people, while theoretical thinking is important, practical implementation is another key factor in whether it can be effective as a textbook for the common people.

Within a month of the publication and printing of the *"Thousand Character Course"*, Mr. Tao Xingzhi made a grand vow in a letter to his sister Tao Wenmei: "I aspire that wherever my footprints go, it will be the place where civilian education (the *"Thousand Character Course"* for the common people) comes. We will soon bring civilian education into the military, good halls, factories, prisons, nunnery, and Jiliang office. We will make dark places shine brightly." Tao Xingzhi, who has always believed in the unity of knowledge and action, said so and did so. From August 1923 to the end of 1925, in just over two years, he traveled to more than 10 provinces and cities including Shanghai, Nanjing, Tianjin, Beijing, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and even as far as Inner Mongolia. Wherever he went, he enthusiastically and actively promoted education for the common people and implemented the *"Thousand Character Course"* for the common people. Such a tense and busy situation can be seen in one of his poems: "Getting on the bus to celebrate the New Year, getting off the bus to celebrate the Old Year, and getting on the bus every year is also considered the New Year." For two consecutive years of the Spring Festival, he spent it on the journey.

Of course, the impact of a personal "roadshow" is limited after all. If we want to popularize and promote civilian education on a large scale, we still need to rely on institutionalized and systematic promotion. Regarding this, Tao Xingzhi mainly adopted three methods to "meet the needs of various civilians": firstly, establishing a "civilian school", which is no different from classroom teaching, with a large class of one to two hundred people and a small class of three to four hundred people, focusing on teaching those civilians who can squeeze out time to study. Secondly, establish a "civilian reading center" specifically for civilians who cannot attend classes on time. Each household, store, or institution will hire literate individuals to teach illiterate individuals. Tao Xingzhi himself has opened over 100 civilian reading centers in Beijing, which he vividly describes as "chefs teach chefs, tea houses teach tea houses, women teach women, prisoners teach prisoners, and monks teach monks.

Through the unremitting efforts of Tao Xingzhi and the members of the Chinese Association for the Promotion of Civilian Education, the concept of "civilian education" and "thousand character classes for civilians" became a consensus in Chinese society during the 1920s and 1930s. The civilian education movement and the civilian literacy movement achieved considerable success within a certain scope and period of time, playing a positive role in improving the literacy rate and cultural level of civilians. But for this magnificent literacy movement, apart from the propaganda at that time and some memories today, there is still a lack of research on academic rationality. Therefore, from the perspective of restoring the original essence, presenting historical scenes is becoming increasingly significant.

5. Conclusion

It is necessary for us to look back and explore the experience of 'civilian education' we once had. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Pinghui Church was dissolved and the specific civilian education movement officially ended. However, the literacy movement and the literacy movement still reached a climax, and its remnants continue to this day. According to the China Statistical Yearbook (2019), among the population of 31 provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities directly under the central government, and active military personnel in China, the proportion of illiterate people (those aged 15 and above who cannot read) still accounts for 4.94% of the population aged 15 and above. This fact indicates that although literacy work, which was once forgotten by the public for many years, has been valued for a long time, it still has a long way to go. Tao Xingzhi, who was once the only tool for literacy work and printed more than 70 editions of this set of civilian literacy textbooks in a year, still has the value of being reintroduced.

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