

# Mass Education Textbooks During the Republic of China (1928–1949)

— A Content Analysis of *Life-Based Peasant Reader* —

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## Introduction

In the late 1920s, China was besieged by internal conflicts and external pressures, which prompted a pivot toward modernization to safeguard the nation. The adoption of western science and technology was deemed crucial, alongside the cultivation, through education, of a populace with human capital befitting a modern state. However, the overall level of education in China during this period was notably deficient. While there are no comprehensive national statistics available, a survey conducted by the Chinese National Association of Mass Education Movement indicated that the literacy rate in urban areas stood at 40%, with rural areas speculated to be even lower, potentially less than 10% (Xu, 1928, p. 13). In contrast, during the same era, advanced countries boasted significantly higher literacy rates: 88.3% for Japanese males (Saito, 2012, pp. 51–62), 86.5% in England, and 92.3% in the United States (Xu, 1928, pp. 14–15).

Under these circumstances, there was a significant emphasis on mass education initiatives targeting the illiterate population alongside formal schooling. In 1928, the Nationalist Government introduced the Mass Education Plan, with the objective of enlightening the “ignorant and uninformed” masses through education, thereby molding them into competent citizens. As a result, facilities dedicated to mass education, known as “Mass Education Museums” (民衆教育館), proliferated nationwide. By 1936, a total of 1,612 such museums had been established across the country (Zhao, 1938, pp. 143–144). These Mass Education Museums conducted a broad spectrum of educational activities, encompassing instruction related to literacy, politics, vocations or livelihoods, health, and music. However, these activities often lacked a clear focus, which made it challenging for individuals to grasp the key points or discern their intended purpose (Gao, 1933, p. 44). As a result, Mass Education Museums were, at the time, humorously dubbed “department stores of social education.”

For a deeper understanding of mass education during the Republic of China (1928–1949), it may thus be more insightful to analyze textbooks rather than solely studying educational activities themselves. When discussing mass education in China during this era, one cannot overlook the Jiangsu Provincial

College of Education as an early higher education institution dedicated to training experts on mass education. Notably, many faculty members who had been educated in the United States took an active role. These esteemed figures included President Gao Yang (Cornell University), Yu Qingtang and Li Zheng (both of Columbia University), Chen Lijiang (University of Chicago), Lei Peihong (Harvard University), and Meng Xiancheng (University of Washington). All were deeply influenced by John Dewey's New Education Movement.

Consequently, educational philosophies that underscored student-centered learning and education grounded in real-life experiences were prominently featured within the college. Building upon these principles, Gan Yuyuan, the deputy head of the research and experiment department, scrutinized previous mass education textbooks and critiqued their detachment from the lives of the masses and their mere replication of elementary school textbooks (Gan, 1935, p. 128). As a result, in compiling a textbook for mass education, he advocated a "life-based" approach, which led to the creation of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* (生活化農民讀本) (Gan and Wang, 1935).

## Literature review

Research on textbooks from the period 1928–1949 has seen increased activity in recent years. The *Monthly Journal of Chinese Affairs* (中国研究月報) has organized special features such as the Special Issue on Pre-War Textbook Studies. This initiative has included detailed content analyses based on historical materials found in history, language, geography, and morality textbooks from the Republic of China. These studies have delved into various issues, including China's textbook system (Kawakami, 2005, pp. 4–23), territorial space and national humiliation (Huang, 2005, pp. 24–39), and Sino-Japanese relations and nationalism (Sunayama, 2005, pp. 1–19).

Masahiro Suzuki (2009, pp. 19–36) has examined three Chinese history textbooks for middle schools published under the Republic of China. He analyzed the direction of national identity formation within the "Chinese nation." His study confirmed a tendency within the textbooks to prioritize Han nationalism, advocating the inherent theory of the Han Chinese, and striving to reconnect with Confucian culture. In a similar way, research by Peter Zarrow (2015) has delved into how textbooks for the Chinese school system have significantly influenced the formation of new social, cultural, and political currents. Through these textbooks, Chinese elites sought ways to link abstractions to the concrete lives of children, covering a variety of lessons on enlightenment, citizenship, and nationalism that aimed to shape a generation into modern citizens of a rejuvenated China.

On the other hand, Yukio Takada (2011, pp. 147–175) has examined social education and adult education textbooks aimed at the broader public beyond formal schooling. This examination encompassed elementary school textbooks such as the *Three Principles of the People Textbook* (三民主義

課本) and the *New Curriculum Civics Textbook* (新課程公民課本), as well as textbooks tailored for adults edited by the General Association for the Promotion of People's Education, such as the *Civic Thousand Character Classic* textbook (市民千字課). While the adult-oriented *Thousand Character Classic* was undeniably significant for literacy education, it also reflected endeavors to foster individuals who would champion democracy.

Past research on textbooks from the Republic of China have predominantly focused on school education textbooks. Ample room remains for further exploration of mass education textbooks, which wielded a significant influence on society at the time. Such books reflect educators' goals in shaping both society and individuals through mass education; examining them closely is thus critical for understanding the essence of mass education during this era. This paper analyzes the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* published by Jiangsu Provincial College of Education. In particular, the depiction of everyday life, the identification of societal aspirations for mass education, and the presentation of an idealized view of citizens in the textbook are examined to gain a deeper insight into the dynamics of mass education under the Republic of China and its social implications.

### Introduction: An Overview of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*

In 1935, the Jiangsu Provincial College of Education published the textbook *Life-Based Peasant Reader* with two goals in mind: impart literacy skills to peasants so they could read and write the common Chinese characters used daily in social interactions; and foster an interest among peasants in exploring various issues they were likely to face in daily life. Aligning with these objectives, the organization of content in the textbook focuses on integrating education with real-life experiences for peasants and emphasizing their realities. Its design and provisions consider the psychology of adult peasants to meet

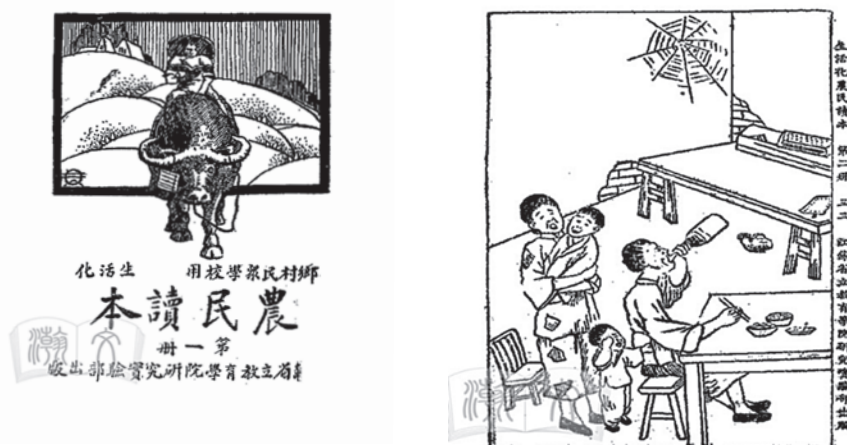


Figure 1 The cover (left) and illustration (right) of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*

their practical life needs. Consequently, the textbook features more illustrations depicting peasant life than conventional readers did, which likely enhanced the audience's comprehension of its contents.

The difficulty level of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* textbooks is incrementally adjusted: the first book contains no more than 70 characters per text, the second no more than 90, the third no more than 120, and the fourth no more than 150 characters. The level of complexity is notably easier than that of the *Textbook for Mass Schools* (民衆學校課本, published by the Ministry of Education), which set the character count at a maximum of 240 per text in the fourth book. Each book of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* comprises four units, with each unit containing 5 lessons to yield a total of 80 lessons across the four books. The titles for each lesson are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** The Table of Contents of *Life-Based Peasant Reader*

BOOK 1				
Tilled Field	Farming	Owned/Leased Land	Landlord and Peasant	Bountiful Harvest
Seed	Wheat Seed	Rice Seed	Bean Seed	Cotton Seed
Chang Zi's New Disease 1	Chang Zi's New Disease 2	Chang Zi's New Disease 3	The River of Qian Village	Qian Village's Manure Pit
Bridge and Road	Bridge and Road Construction	Fundraising	Labor	Rural Improvement Association
BOOK 2				
Wang Quan 1	Wang Quan 2	Wang Quan 3	Wang Quan 4	Wang Quan 5
Farming is Tough	Mutual Aid	Diligence	Combined Effort	Order
Excursion	Wang Jian learns Chinese Gung Fu	Wang Jian's Wife	Wang Qin's Son 1	Wang Qin's Son 2
Cockcrow	Fish Farming in Fengyuan Village 1	Fish Farming in Fengyuan Village 2	Reclamation in Fengyuan Village 1	Reclamation in Fengyuan Village 2
BOOK 3				
Living	Zuo Ruxin's Daughter Gets Married	Day-to-day Living	Poverty	Debt
The New Five Watches	Huang Po 1	Huang Po 2	Death Village 1	Death Village 2
First Time in the Capital	Old Scholar	Waiting for the Emperor	Distrust of Machinery	Unnecessary Chanting
Work	Uncooperative Village 1	Uncooperative Village 2	In Dire Straits	Self-serving
BOOK 4				
Diary	Daily Account Book	Loan Document	Land Sale Contract	Letter
Our China	Discount Sale	On the Ship	To the Northwest	Great Robbery
Agritainment	Xiaori Village	Xiaori Mass School	Xiaori Paradise	Xiaori Hospital
Xiaori Village Song	Xiaori Cooperative	Xiaori Defense Group	Xiaori Settlement Council	Xiaori Youth Service Club

## Discussion

### 1. The Ideal Image of Peasants as Seen Through the Characters

Compared to other textbooks of its time (e.g., the *Textbook for Mass Schools*), the most notable feature of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* is its grounding in the everyday experiences of peasants. As a result, instead of focusing on historical figures and prominent individuals, the textbook prominently features ordinary peasants and vividly portrays the specific realities of their life. However, what sets the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* apart is its evaluation of the actions of these peasants based on the ethical values prevalent in modern society and the depiction of these characters as either positive or negative.

This paper examines these two distinct types of characters, elucidating who is condemned as evil and marginalized and who is deemed virtuous and highly esteemed. This analysis sheds light on the idealized image of a peasant during the period to provide insights into the societal expectations and moral standards upheld within the context of mass education.

#### (1) Negative characters

Table 2 extracts the named characters portrayed negatively in *Life-Based Peasant Reader* and includes the reasons for their denunciation along with the resulting consequences.

The characters portrayed negatively in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* exhibit a range of detrimental behaviors that were common in rural societies at the time. These behaviors include being unhygienic, having bad habits, being superstitious, and being uneducated. Upon closer examination of the specific content, it becomes evident that the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* does not simply enumerate these bad habits. Instead, it intricately links the existence of these negative traits with the hardships and adversities faced by the characters as a direct consequence of their actions. The textbook meticulously depicts the misfortunes experienced by these characters and thus emphasizes the detrimental impact of these behaviors on their lives and communities.

A character named Huang Po is introduced in Book 3, Lessons 7 and 8. She is depicted as someone who neglects dental hygiene by not brushing her teeth and clings to the superstition that simply offering incense to the gods can cure diseases. Her failure to maintain dental hygiene results in her illness being transferred to her grandchild, and her continuous reliance on offering incense to the gods, instead of seeking medical treatment, ultimately leads to the tragic death of her grandchild.

Similarly, other peasants with distinct negative practices in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* inevitably face adverse consequences such as severe illness, death, or family conflicts. The *Life-Based Peasant Reader* serves an educational purpose by imparting lessons and moral values through the experiences and narratives of these negative characters, which closely mirror the lives of the peasants. The textbook

**Table 2** Negative Characters in *Life-Based Peasant Reader*

	Characters	Performance	→	Living Conditions
Book 1, Lesson 11	Chang Zi	Unhygienic: Drinking dirty water.		Becomes seriously ill.
Book 1, Lesson 12	Chang Zi	Unhygienic: Family members sharing the same towel.		Family members contract a contagious disease.
Book 1, Lesson 13	Chang Zi	Unhygienic: Not brushing teeth.		Suffers tooth decay.
Book 2, Lesson 1	Wang Quan	Uneducated: No one in the family can read or write.		
Book 2, Lesson 2	Wang Quan's son	Uneducated: Cannot read or write.		The shop owner declines to do business due to illiteracy
Book 2, Lesson 3	Wang Quan	Superstitious: Using Bazi to choose a son's spouse.		The son's bride was unattractive and could not farm or do housework.
Book 2, Lesson 14	Wang Qin's son	Bad habit: Heavy drinking, not working.		The son gets drunk, becomes violent, is imprisoned, and later becomes seriously ill.
Book 2, Lesson 15	Wang Qin's son	Bad habit: Smoking opium.		The son continues to smoke opium, which leads to a deterioration of his health and damages the family's financial situation.
Book 3, Lesson 2	Zuo Ruxin	Bad habit: Preparing a substantial dowry for a daughter.		The daughter is unable to do household chores and is disliked by her in-laws.
Book 3, Lesson 7	Huang Po	Unhygienic: Not brushing teeth.		Their illness is transmitted to the grandchild.
Book 3, Lesson 8	Huang Po	Superstition: Instead of seeing a doctor for their grandchild's illness, they pray to the gods.		The grandchild passes away.

underscores the importance of hygiene, rationality, and critical thinking, while cautioning against the dangers of superstition and ignorance.

Additionally, among the numerous bad habits prevalent in rural society, the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* appears particularly critical of unhygienic practices. This emphasis might be attributable to the influence of the New Life Movement, spearheaded by Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s. Spanning over 15 years, the New Life Movement aimed to instill discipline, cleanliness, and orderliness in the lives of the populace, who were perceived to have fallen into a state of “coarseness and vulgarity.” Emphasizing the importance of sanitary management in daily life, the movement sought to uplift society by promoting moral values and personal hygiene. The *Life-Based Peasant Reader's* focus on hygiene aligns with the objectives of the New Life Movement, thus reflecting a broader societal push toward modernization and improved living standards.

In *Disciplining the Body: The Chinese Nationalist Party's New Life Movement*, Hideo Fukamachi questioned why, amid significant internal and external challenges, the Nationalist Government regime

initiated an enlightenment movement seemingly focused on superficial improvements in daily life habits. According to Fukamachi, the New Life Movement aimed to transform the Chinese populace into modern citizens capable of contributing to the nation's advancement by instilling discipline and cleanliness in their daily lives. It can thus be inferred that, in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*, everyday habits, with hygiene being a prime example, were portrayed as the most fundamental and crucial elements. This emphasis aligns with the broader objectives of the New Life Movement and highlights the importance of personal discipline and cleanliness as integral components of modern citizenship and national development.

## (2) Positive Characters

Table 3 extracts the positive characters from the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* and highlights how their actions receive affirmation within the narrative. However, it is noteworthy that the number of positive characters is noticeably fewer than negative ones.

The reasons for affirming positive characters in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* span an array of actions, such as selecting seeds correctly, participating in Mass Schools, engaging in cooperative farming operations, showing diligence and frugality, and strengthening their bodies. While these motives may initially seem disparate and lack cohesion, they all share one thing in common: striving for improvement without becoming content with status quo. The characters Qian Dacheng and Wang Jian both take steps to increase crop yield and quality; Zhang Ye, in contrast, faces hardship head on but emerges victorious through diligence and thriftiness.

Through narratives like these, the textbook was intended to encourage peasants—who often adopted

**Table 3** Positive Characters in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*

	Characters	Performance
Book 1, Lesson 7	Qian Dacheng	Selects high-quality wheat varieties, and the crop yield is good.
Book 1, Lesson 8	Qian Dacheng	Chooses high-quality rice varieties, and the harvest is bountiful.
Book 2, Lesson 7	Zhang Ye	Cooperates with the neighboring Wang Xiaosan.
Book 1, Lesson 8	Zhang Ye	By being diligent and frugal, they lead a good life.
Book 2, Lesson 12	Wang Jian	Despite being physically weak, he attends a night school for peasants and learns martial arts.
Book 1, Lesson 13	Wang Jian	Excels in housework, attends mass school, learns to write and do accounts, and serves the village.

an inactive, fatalistic mindset ( “There is nothing I can do”) when faced with challenges—to face difficulties proactively and assertively. At that time, rural society exhibited attitudes of passivity and resignation to fate. The emphasis placed on allocating time in Mass Schools to develop physical strength and strive for increased productivity and quality may thus represent an idealized image of peasantry rather than reflecting its realities. As such, while the characters in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* were intended to depict real peasant experiences as accurately as possible, the portrayals may fall short in terms of authenticity.

## 2. The Ideal Rural Image as Seen Through the Featured Villages

### (1) Negative Village

The villages depicted in the textbook mirror the depiction of the individual characters and can be categorized into negative and positive types. First, concerning the negative portrayal, the textbook illustrates the decline of rural society during the recession by highlighting Sunjia Village which is referred to as the “death village.”

*The people living in Sunjia Village have no habits of cleanliness. The village is cluttered with manure heaps, and the river is filled with fallen leaves, rags, and miscellaneous wood, often resulting in water pollution that turns the river green. The village roads are uneven and full of potholes, covered in chicken and cow dung. The peasants’ homes are no longer fit for humans, with the accumulation of several centimeters of dust and a foul smell permeating the air. The villagers of Sunjia Village have poor complexions due to malnutrition and disease, with not a single healthy person in sight. Therefore, in other places, Sunjia Village is called “Death Village.”* (From Book 3, Lesson 9)

*The peasants living in Sunjia Village lead a life of poverty. None of them own their own farmland; they maintain their lives through debt and are in agony. However, they spend their days only dreaming idle dreams, like one day money might rain down or they might plant a tree that grows money. When it comes time to pay the rent for their tenancy, there are those who are beaten nearly to death, those who flee to other regions, and those who are put in prison. When will Death Village become Life Village?* (From Book 3, Lesson 10)

As the quotations indicate, in Book 3, Lesson 9 of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*, the unsanitary environment of Sunjia Village and the impoverished lives of the peasants are vividly portrayed to illustrate the dire reality faced by the village. Subsequently, in Lesson 10, the attitude of the villagers toward their circumstances is discussed. Despite lamenting the hardships of their lives, the villagers



exhibit a passive approach and refrain from actively seeking solutions or taking action to improve their situation. Instead, they resign themselves to fate. It can thus be inferred that, regardless of the passage of time, it would be challenging for a village with such entrenched passivity and resignation to transform into a “life village.” The passive behaviors and lack of initiative among the villagers suggest a deeply ingrained mindset that may hinder efforts toward positive change and development within the community.

## (2) Positive Village

Lessons 12–20 of Book 4 of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* depict the transformation of Xiaori Village from a death village to a life village.

*There is a village called Xiaori Village. Outside the village are several mountains, and at the foot of the mountains, a stream flows. Three years ago, Xiaori Village was just like other villages, immersed in poverty, hardship, and sorrow. Afterwards, the villagers decided to improve Xiaori Village into a better community. They established a new organization called the Village Improvement Association. Anyone over the age of 20 was required become a member. Members cooperated for the sake of the village and established a mass school, a mass tea garden, a cooperative, and public recreational facilities. The villagers of the village concentrated their efforts wholeheartedly on the realization of a new Xiaori Village.* (Book 4, Lesson 12)

In essence, the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* attributes the transformation of Xiaori Village to the establishment of new organizations that improve the community. Specifically, starting from Book 4, Lesson 13, the texts depict the new developments in Xiaori Village, including the introduction of the Xiaori Mass School, Xiaori Paradise, Xiaori Hospital, Dawn Cooperative, Dawn Defense Group, Dawn Mediation Association, and Dawn Youth Service Corps. Many of these initiatives were educational activities and social projects initiated by the Jiangsu Provincial College of Education as part of their mass education efforts. For example, cooperatives, a prevalent social project during mass education initiatives, are depicted in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* as follows:

*Due to Xiaori Village's distance from the town, shopping was inconvenient, and prices were relatively high. The village organized a cooperative, and the villagers became members, collectively preparing the capital. Through the cooperative's bulk purchasing, everyday items could be bought at lower prices... Previously, when people wanted to borrow money, the interest rates were extremely high. But after the establishment of the credit cooperative, the interest rates decreased, and installment payments were*

*introduced, allowing anyone to borrow.* (Book 4, Lesson 17)

These texts, including the aforementioned Xiaori Cooperative, introduced the new changes in Xiaori Village following the same logic. First, the traditional rulers of rural society, such as the government and local elites, become nearly invisible. Instead, the previously passive peasants begin to take initiative and act autonomously. Second, these actions are not isolated to one or two individuals: the collaboration of all villagers is emphasized. For example, the villagers of Xiaori collectively organize social projects like the cooperative. Third, these new social projects consistently yield positive outcomes. For instance, the cooperative responds to the villagers' expectations and begins to benefit them. There is thus a strong emphasis on the necessity for the entire village to come together to improve rural society and its way of life.

### **Discussion: Is the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* Truly Reflective of Peasant Life?**

Jiangsu Provincial College of Education developed its mass education textbook the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* to integrate education and daily life by emphasizing the life experiences of peasants rather than history or nature as a way to broaden the peasants' horizons. The contents of the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* were familiar to peasants, although its characters, places, and themes depicting daily lives or agricultural work were represented from an alternative moral and value perspective.

Book 1, Lesson 19, entitled "Labor," provides an account of the progress of bridge and road construction in Qian Village. Qian Shaofeng announces information regarding the construction projects to his fellow villagers and calls on those with strong muscles or financial means to contribute; those without such resources are still encouraged to provide labor if available. For example, Zhisheng and Yinmin willingly offer their labor whenever their free time permitted, thus illustrating peasants actively engaging in social projects. Furthermore, in Book 1, Lesson 5, "Bountiful Harvest," the text emphasizes, "Half of a bountiful year is governed by the climate, but the other half is left to us. There's no destiny without human effort." Such texts stress the significance of human endeavor over relying solely on divine providence.

However, according to a social survey conducted in the suburbs of the Jiangsu Provincial College of Education, 101 people (55%) believed that crop yields were attributable to divine forces, while only 54 individuals (30%) attributed it to human efforts (Gan, 1935, p. 52). This suggests that a larger proportion of people passively waited for fate rather than actively taking initiative. Faced with this reality, the Jiangsu Provincial College of Education established an ideal image of a peasant who, when united with others, would proactively and autonomously tackle social problems. By showcasing this ideal in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*, the Institute sought to instill a sense of agency and inspire peasants to believe

in their own capabilities. In this regard, the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* can be viewed as embodying the hopes and aspirations of the educators, while remaining rooted in the lives of the peasants themselves.

The social survey mentioned above also explored the masses' perception of the benefits of literacy. The most commonly cited benefits included "being able to keep basic accounts" (36 people, 27%), "being able to read and write letters" (27 people, 20%), "understanding reasoning and becoming a teacher" (15 people, 11%), "avoiding bullying" (14 people, 10%), and "facilitating farming and business" (11 people, 8%) (Gan, 1935, p. 48). Indeed, while becoming literate and numerate through education are crucial, acquiring practical life skills such as managing accounts and improving agricultural and business activities were also earnest requests from the masses. However, such content was not given significant emphasis in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*.

Furthermore, the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*, which focuses on living conditions, appears to incorporate not so much the actual lives of peasants, but rather the idealized lives of peasants as envisioned by the educational institute. The book's aim was to instill these ideal lifestyles in the peasants through their portrayal in the textbook.

## Conclusion

This study examined the *Life-Based Peasant Reader* to analyze the content of textbooks for mass education during the Republic of China. The *Life-Based Peasant Reader* was designed with the objective of teaching peasants to read and write the common Chinese characters used in daily social interactions. It also sought to foster an interest among the populace in addressing issues pertinent to their lives, with a focus on relevance to the peasants' actual experiences and concerns.

Ordinary peasants are depicted in the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*, which showcases their specific lifestyles. However, the reader is also intended to evaluate the characters' actions according to specific norms such as unity and diligence. The textbook portrays peasants who previously may have considered specific issues as unrelated to them taking initiative and actively addressing problems based on these values. These peasants may thus embody the ideal image that the Jiangsu Provincial College of Education aimed for when publishing the reader. The *Life-Based Peasant Reader* aimed to guide peasants toward an ideal way of life by presenting an image of peasants who actively and independently tackle rural problems. However, whether the idealized image of a peasant depicted based on the ethical standards of modern society was truly perceived as realistic by the peasants themselves remains uncertain.

It is important to note that textbooks for mass education, such as the *Life-Based Peasant Reader*, were just one tool used within the framework of mass schooling, which was part of the broader mass education initiatives at the time. Apart from school-based mass education, social projects undertaken

in rural communities, such as improvement associations and cooperatives, also played a significant role in social-style mass education and constituted a substantial portion of mass education practices. While this study has not delved into these aspects, further research is warranted to analyze mass education practices comprehensively and explore its complexities during that period from a more multifaceted perspective.

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