

## **The *Latinxua Sin Wenz* Movement in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region of China: Centred on Winter schools in Yan'an County**

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**Abstract:** In October 1940, the government of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region used Yan'an County as the center for trying out the *Latinxua Sin Wenz* Movement for winter schools. It went through three stages: experimentation, promotion, and reformation. Faced with insurmountable difficulties, the Education Department quietly terminated the project in 1943. The foremost reason why the Communist Party promoted this project was to remove the obstacle posed by Chinese characters for eliminating illiteracy. Despite problems such as ignorance of the officials, uncultured teachers, resistance from intellectuals, subjective and unrealistic beliefs, the *Latinxua Sin Wenz* Movement in border regions of China could not be ignored since it brought out the tension between popular culture and nationalism.

**Keywords:** *Latinxua Sin Wenz*, Yan'an, popular culture, nationalism

During five thousand years of Chinese civilization, the fonts of Chinese characters have undergone constant changes, despite having generally remained square-shaped. In order to realize national salvation through cultural exploration during modern times, some radical intellectuals actively advocated the Romanization of Chinese characters, and the Communist Party of China (CPC) initiated a large-scale movement in this regard. During the Anti-Japanese War, with a view to establishing a model revolutionary base, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region (herein referred to as “the Border Region” 陕甘宁边区) Government, led by the CPC, used the quiet season of farming to pilot “winter schools” (冬学 *dongxue*) in Yan'an and other places, teaching illiterate farmers the Latinized characters (herein referred to as “*Sin Wenz*” 新文字 *xinwenzi*). The *Sin Wenz* Movement in the Border Region was a distinguishing feature of political mobilization. However, hard work did not achieve the expected results, and the Movement was eventually abandoned. When participants recalled the *Sin Wenz* Movement, they repeatedly affirmed its

achievements in eliminating illiteracy. However, few scholars seem to have studied the reasons for ending the Movement, as if this topic was deliberately avoided. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the details and context of this period.

Looking back on reform of the writing system in the past century, if Chinese characters were perceived as an important carrier of Chinese civilization, then the Romanizations of the *Sin Wenz* Movement went far beyond the scope of a writing system reform, and logically implied the remodeling of “culture”. During the course of the writing system reform, debate about cultural nationality never stopped. In recent years, some domestic scholars have published papers on the CPC’s *Sin Wenz* Movement during the Anti-Japanese War, but these studies fail to present the complete process of the Movement, nor do they address the contradictions and conflicts that occurred during the Movement. Disturbingly, many even misrepresent some basic historical facts (Hu, 2008). To this end, this article examines the *Sin Wenz* Movement undertaken by winter schools in Yan’an County. By revealing the dynamic process of the Movement and examining its contradictions and conflicts, the article analyzes various reasons for the CPC’s promotion of the *Sin Wenz* Movement and the conflicts behind it.

## I. THE TOUGH CAMPAIGN TO ELIMINATE ILLITERACY

A communist society cannot be established in a country where most of the citizens are illiterate. As early as 1931, the “Outline Constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic” (中华苏维埃共和国宪法大纲) proposed that the Soviet regime should “implement completely free universal education” (Central Archives, 1983: 467). After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, in order to create a model anti-Japanese base, the CPC proposed to launch a “race” with the bourgeoisie and the Kuomintang under the banner of the “New Three Principles of the People” (新三民主义). Therefore, regardless of whether it was for the purpose of establishing communism or for the intention of seeking legitimacy for the revolution, the CPC was required to accelerate cultural construction through the elimination of illiteracy.

In order to complete the task of wiping out illiteracy quickly, governments at all levels in the border region vigorously promoted the literacy movement by organizing character learning groups, establishing

evening schools, setting up itinerant training groups, and building winter schools. The establishment of a host of character learning groups made the shortage of teachers a common phenomenon in the Border Region. To solve this issue, governments at all levels established the “Xiao xiansheng” (小先生 little teacher) system. As a mode of learning and teaching, the “Xiao xiansheng” system was to address the shortage of teachers in rural areas and the arduous task of social education. The students in primary schools who learned faster and understood more taught other students. In 1938, the Education Department of the Border Region required primary schools, especially model primary schools, to train “Xiao xiansheng” to motivate children in their learning.

The Border Region launched the literacy campaign in the form of an “Annual Campaign” (突击年) and a “Monthly Campaign” (运动月). On April 12, 1937, the Northwest Youth National Salvation Congress (西北青年救国代表大会) proposed that the period from May 1 to the end of December be the “Annual Campaign for Universal Education” (普及教育突击年). Meanwhile, the Party Committee of the Border Region decided that the “Literacy Movement Month” (识字运动月) should last from September 1 to September 20, during which the whole region was expected to organize and train at least 30,000-character learning members. Like economic mobilization, the quotas of character learning members were allocated to each county and township, and “Character Learning Promotion Associations” (识字促进会) were established in each county. Faced with the arduous task of eliminating illiteracy, the party committees, governments, and various mass organizations of the Border Region took actions, and the goal of wiping out illiteracy through mass cultural learning gradually evolved into an organization-driven competition. During the competition, the learners with good performance were portrayed as heroes. The Yangko opera (秧歌剧), “A Couple Who Learn Characters” (夫妻识字), created by the famous composer Ma Ke in the Yan’an period, artistically reflects this movement:

妻: ……庄稼人为什么要识字。

夫: 不识字不知道大事情, 旧社会咱不识字, 糊里糊涂受人欺。

合: 如今咱们翻了身, 受苦人做了当家的人。睁眼的瞎子怎能行, 学习那文化最呀当紧来么喂哎哟。

**Wife:** .....Why do peasants need to be literate?

**Husband:** The illiterates don't know the big events. In the old society, the illiterates were fooled by others.

**Wife and husband:** Now we have been liberated and become masters of our life. If we can't read, we are no different from blind men with eyes open. Hence, it is important for us to learn characters.

In this verse, the importance of learning is colloquially expressed as “knowing the big events” (知道大事情). The problem with this approach was that it reflected the viewpoint of the organizers of the literacy campaign, not the conscious driving force of the illiterate. For the poor, food and clothing were the direct burdens of life, and literacy was actually a kind of luxury. When the acquisition of this luxury cost too much time and energy, and had negative impacts on their production and life, they would not take initiative in learning. Moreover, even though the toiling masses suffered the painful experience of being “fooled and cheated” (糊里糊涂受人欺) for not being able to read, it was questionable whether it could be converted into motivation to study hard in order to be “masters” (公家人) of their own life. For instance, the literates were likely to be enrolled in the revolutionary organizations, which not only meant their dedication to the organization, but also meant a greater risk of sacrifice. In this case, what conclusions would peasants draw based on practical and rational thinking (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No. 6-1-242)?

All these real-life issues ran through the entire process of the literacy campaign in the Border Region. Such issues indicated that there was a large gap between the expectations of the Border Region Government and the needs of the people. Simply put, the literacy campaign was a revolutionary task for educators, not a life priority for the uneducated. Once the revolutionary task was disconnected from the needs of the public, the actual effectiveness of the literacy campaign was greatly reduced. A report on the work of the Border Region Government in 1941 pointed out that the effect of the literacy campaign was far from commensurate with the actual investment, noting that “many character learning groups are nominal” (许多识字组是有名无实的) (Shaanxi Provincial Archives & Shaanxi Academy of Social Sciences, 1987b: 216). This was an unacceptable reality for communists with communist ideals and revolutionary romanticism. It required the CPC take stock of the

movements' attempt to eradicate illiteracy in a short time and create a model anti-Japanese base, thus forming a new situation for the literacy movement.

An editorial published by *Liberation Daily* (解放日报 *jiefang ribao*) reflected on the problems of the literacy campaign, pointing out that superficially, the reason why illiteracy could not be eliminated was that the vast land was sparsely populated and the common people had too few opportunities to use characters. However, the most important reason was that it was difficult to learn and remember the square-shaped Chinese characters (Anonymous, 1941). It was a common view among radical intellectuals that the reason for China's backward education was the difficulty of learning and remembering Chinese characters. In their opinion, the biggest difficulty in educating the public was the square-shaped Chinese characters. The illiterate could hardly master Chinese characters even when they spent time and energy trying. Therefore, the working masses called for reform of the writing system, and the key to solving this problem was to adopt the "*Latinxua Sin Wenz*".

## II. THE ROMANIZATION PLAN UNDER GREAT PRESSURE

Since modern times, reform of the writing system has been bound up with national salvation. Intellectuals, represented by Wang Zhao, drew lessons from the failures of two anti-aggression wars in 1895 and 1900, concluding that if China wanted to enlighten its people and popularize education, it must carry out reform of the writing system. Wang Zhao created the "Mandarin alphabet" (官话字母) based on the Japanese kana, thus pioneering the era of the writing revolution. With the rise of the New Culture Movement, radical intellectuals, while advocating new literature and vernacular Chinese, actively promoted the "*Gwoyen Romatzyh*" (国语罗马字) writing Chinese with the Roman alphabet) and proposed that Chinese characters must take the path of phonemicization and internationalization. In the view of cultural warrior Lu Xun, Chinese characters were, "tuberculosis in the body of the Chinese toiling masses, in which all the germs lurk", and the reform of Chinese characters was the toiling masses, "first and only way to survive" (Lu, 2002: 100).

Among various Chinese character reform plans, the Romanization plan stood out and exerted a wide range of influence. Specifically, in February 1929, with the assistance of Soviet Sinologist Guo Zhisheng, Qu Qiubai

drafted the Chinese Romanized Alphabet Plan (中国拉丁化字母方案 Institute of history, Gansu Academy of Social Sciences, 1985: 322). Later, China's first *Latinxua Sin Wenx* Group, the Chinese Romanization Research Association (中文拉丁化研究会) was established in Shanghai. Professors and students in big cities such as Shanghai, Peiping and Guangzhou responded positively to the promotion of *Sin Wenx*. In the view of the advocates of the *Sin Wenx* Movement, the significance of *Latinxua Sin Wenx* not only addressed the problem of illiteracy, but also facilitated the acceptance of Western experience and science, thus promoting various modern technologies. In May 1936, people from all walks of life represented by Cai Yuanpei, Lu Xun, and Guo Moruo signed and published "Our Opinions on the Promotion of the *Sin Wenx*" (我们对于推行新文字的意见). They recognized the advanced nature of *Sin Wenx*, comparing Chinese characters to a wheelbarrow and *Sin Wenx* to an airplane, claiming that:

坐上新文字的飞机来传布民族自救的教育的时候，就可以知道新文字不但不阻碍中国统一，而且确有力量帮助唤起大众挽救我们垂危的祖国。

when people get on the plane of *Sin Wenx* to spread the idea of national salvation, they will know that *Sin Wenx* does not hinder China's reunification, and has the power to help arouse the masses to save our dying motherland." (Liu & Li, 1999: 749)

As a direct successor to the spirit of the May Fourth Movement (which was an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement which grew out of student protests in Beijing on 4 May 1919), the CPC endowed the *Latinxua Sin Wenx* with the historical responsibility of national salvation and revolutionary mobilization. After reading "Our Opinions on the Promotion of the *Sin Wenx*", Mao Zedong wrote a letter to Cai Yuanpei to express his appreciation and support for the *Sin Wenx* Movement. According to the simple logic of revolution, those who are truly revolutionary in politics, must be revolutionary in writing. The *Sin Wenx* Movement aimed to eliminate illiteracy, and to reform Chinese culture. *Liberation Daily*, a newspaper based in Yan'an, published an editorial saying that:

为使中国文字向着科学化、国际化、大众化的道路前进，新文字的任务不是简单地代替汉字，而是要彻底改造中国的语文，创造与群众实际生活相关的活的文字。……新文字不仅是扫除文盲、普及教育的工具，而且是提高民族文化，弘扬民族艺术的利器，它是比汉字更高一级的文字。

In order to make Chinese characters more scientific, international and popular, the task of *Sin Wenx* is not simply to replace Chinese characters, but to completely reform the Chinese language and create the living written language that is in line with the actual lives of the masses. ...*Sin Wenx* is not only a tool for eradicating illiteracy and popularizing education, but also a weapon for improving national culture and promoting national art. It is a language more advanced than Chinese characters.” (Institute of history, Gansu Academy of Social Sciences, 1985: 448)

Inspired by the Pushkin who had adopted popular language to reform the spoken and written language of the Russian nobles, advocates of *Sin Wenx* deemed that *Sin Wenx* could reform China’s traditional culture and become a “weapon” of the public.

The CPC’s plan to promote *Sin Wenx* was temporarily shelved during the Agrarian Revolutionary War due to lack of appropriate conditions. After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, the relatively stable social environment in northern Shaanxi made it possible to promote *Sin Wenx*. At that time, Lin Boqu, the Minister of Finance of the Chinese Soviet advocated for *Sin Wenx*, which was approved by Xu Teli, the Minister of Education. In the winter of 1936, Xu began teaching *Sin Wenx* to disabled soldiers and elementary school teachers, and piloted schools for promoting *Sin Wenx* (Xu, 1995: 106). A survey showed that *Sin Wenx* played an effective role in eliminating illiteracy.

According to the *New China Daily* (新中华报), the Yan’an City Trade Union established a night school for workers. In the beginning, nine out of ten students could not read Chinese characters. However, most students could spell, write, and read two months later after learning *Sin Wenx* every night for an hour (Anonymous, 1937). In early 1937, there were 15 classes for teaching *Sin Wenx* in Yan’an City with more than 600 students. Under Xu’s instruction, the *Sin Wenx* Promotion Association was established. However, after formal cooperation was established between

the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, the *Sin Wenz* Movement was forced to stop due to the Kuomintang's prohibition of *Sin Wenz*, and the winter schools returned to teaching Chinese characters.

The re-launch of the *Sin Wenz* Movement in the Border Region came from the support of the main leaders of the CPC Central Committee. In January 1940, the article "On New Democracy" (新民主主义论) by Mao Zedong put forward that, "Characters must be reformed under certain conditions, and speech must be made in a way accepted by the people." (Mao, 1991:708) In response to Mao Zedong's call, Wu Yuzhang, the director of the Border Region Cultural Committee, proposed the promotion of *Sin Wenz* to the Central Propaganda Department. After much discussion, the Central Propaganda Department wrote to the Education Department of the Border Region, requesting the trial operation and promotion of *Sin Wenz* in winter schools during 1940. Later, the "Promotion of the *Sin Wenz*" (推广新文字教育) was introduced into the policy agenda of the Border Region Government. On November 7, 1940, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region held the establishment meeting of the *Sin Wenz* Association. Prior to this, the *Latinxua Sin Wenz* Movement targeting young people and adults had been widely launched in the anti-Japanese base areas. Yan'an County was the only pilot county that fully experienced the *Sin Wenz* Movement for three years (1940-1942), which provided information and an overall picture of the movement.

### III. THE "THREE STEPS" OF THE *SIN WENZ* MOVEMENT UNDERTAKEN BY WINTER SCHOOLS

In the Border Region, social education was conducted in different forms, such as character learning groups (识字组), half-day schools (半日校), evening schools (夜校), winter schools, and clubs. However, due to the characteristics of traditional rural agricultural production, except for winter schools, most of the other character learning organizations were nominal. The winter schools used for promoting *Sin Wenz* were mainly led by the Third Section of the Education Department of Border Region and the Third Section of the counties. Moreover, the Winter School Committee (冬学委员会) was set up with the support of major local leaders, and the mobilization work was largely undertaken by mass organizations. To solve the shortage of teachers, in 1940, the *Sin Wenz*



Association selected a group of male and female students to establish the *Sin Wenx* Training Class, which was taught by Wu Yuzhang, Xu Teli, and others. Afterwards, the trainees were immediately assigned to serve as instructors.

The *Sin Wenx* Movement in winter schools in the Border Region went through three stages:

### 1. The preliminary test

In 1940, the winter school system was piloted in Yan'an City and Yan'an County, and the Education Department of the Border Region dispatched a work guidance team to both places to guide work. In Yan'an County, the students in winter schools made rapid progress after a dozen days of study. "There are at least fifteen students who have acquired alphabet in each school", "There are seven or eight students who have mastered spelling skills in each school" (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No. 10-355). Students who wanted to graduate from winter schools had to pass an exam. Those who could read and write were rated as "*Jia*" (甲), those who could write but occasionally made mistakes were rated as "*Yi*" (乙), those who could spell but could not write were rated as "*Bing*" (丙), and those below this level were rated as "*Ding*" (丁). There were 1,563 students (224 females) in Yan'an County taking the test, and the number of students who were rated as *Jia*, *Yi*, *Bing*, *Ding* was 561, 219, 462, and 321, respectively. Compared with the literacy campaign of Chinese characters, the *Sin Wenx* Movement undertaken by winter schools in Yan'an City and Yan'an County, achieved great success. It was regarded as "an unprecedented achievement in eradicating illiteracy, which proves that the *Sin Wenx* is enormously popular and easy to learn. It is indeed a powerful tool to wipe out illiteracy." (Anonymous, 1941) In order to showcase the achievements of the *Sin Wenx* Movement undertaken by winter schools, the *Sin Wenx* Association in the Border Region organized the *Sin Wenx* Achievements Exhibition in Yan'an City and Yan'an County. This movement reached a climax with the endorsement of the leaders of the CPC. Mao Zedong's testimony for the *Sin Wenx* Movement was, "Strive to promote, the wider the better." Zhu De declared that, "The *Sin Wenx*, which applies to all, should be introduced to the whole country." (Anonymous, 1941)

## 2. Issues arising from all-round promotion

In 1941, the Border Region Government decided to promote *Sin Wenx* in its jurisdiction. To solve the shortage of teachers, the *Sin Wenx* Association established *Sin Wenx* Cadre Schools to train teachers. According to the instructions of the Border Region Government, Yan'an County planned to establish 41 winter schools, including 39 winter schools for promoting *Sin Wenx*, and intended to enroll 1,295 students (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No. 10-400). However, tuition fees, coupled with the possibility of being enrolled in “revolutionary organizations”, made most people reluctant to go to school. In order to avoid being admitted to school, people cried, ran, or pretended to be deaf, dumb, or sick. In this regard, the Education Department of the Border Region reckoned that persuasion should be the first option in their mobilization work, but it was “not easy to complete the plan” without coercion (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No. 10-400). In early 1942, the Education Department of the Border Region held a summary meeting on the educational achievements of winter schools. Among 12 cities and counties that conducted the *Sin Wenx* Movement, Zhidan County and Yan'an City had the best performance, with 50% of students passing the exam. The worst were Yanchuan and Qingyang counties, with only 12% to 15% of students passing the exam (Anonymous, 1942). With a glorious tradition of criticism and self-reproach, leaders at all levels of the CPC analyzed the causes from the perspectives of cadres and winter school teachers.

Firstly, local cadres were weak in leadership and lacked enthusiasm for work. Taking Yan'an County as an example, the report revealed that, except for the head of the Third Section, county-level cadres never cared about *Sin Wenx* and winter schools. Apart from education assistants, cadres at the district and township levels did not know *Sin Wenx*. Secondly, the quality of teachers was low, and most of them were peasants. On June 25, 1941, the Yan'an County Government arranged the training of winter school teachers in detail at the joint meeting of district heads, and launched a mobilization plan of 82 people. Regrettably, the excessive mobilization activities during this period affected the enrollment of trainees. To meet demand, the training class had to lower the graduation standard. Based on the four-month work summary on the winter school teachers of the training class, the males with a test score of 60 or more and the females with a score of 55 or more could graduate from the school (Shaanxi

Provincial Archives, file No. 10-469). The teachers only attended training for 4 months, which could not ensure quality teaching. Finally, students were burdened with heavy financial responsibilities. According to the Guidance Group's report on the *Sin Wenx* Movement undertaken by winter schools, in 1941, the allowance for winter school teachers in Yan'an County was 2 yuan per month, and there was a special allowance of 2.5 yuan for female teachers. The monthly office fee was 4 yuan per school. All these expenses were shouldered by the students of each school. The statistics revealed that during the winter study, students "pay more than 300 yuan at most and 150 yuan at least" (Anonymous, 1942), which caused great economic pressure.

### **3. The troublesome pilot reform**

In August 1942, the Education Department of the Border Region held a symposium on *Sin Wenx* to discuss the implementation of the winter school and the promotion of *Sin Wenx*. After listening to the opinions of all parties, the Education Department of the Border Region proposed that the winter school must conform to the principle of "small but fine" (少而精) and oppose the pressure to highlight quantity over quality. Promotion of *Sin Wenx* or Chinese characters in districts and counties should be decided by local governments according to their specific conditions. It was decided that teachers must have received primary or higher education, be aged between 20 and 45 years old, and have some social experience. The school sites were to be located in places with concentrated populations and enough school buildings. The funds for winter schools must be included in the county education expenditures. If funds were difficult to raise, the entire county or district must factor that into overall planning. Furthermore, students should be persuaded to go to school. In October, the Education Department of the Border District decided that the annual *Sin Wenx* Movement undertaken by winter schools, "should be centered on Yan'an County, and the Education Department will directly dispatch personnel to all districts of the county to handle it" (Anonymous, 1942). The winter school expenses were uniformly allocated by the county government, school office expenses were taken on by the government, and the remuneration of teachers was improved.

Based on the instructions of the Education Department of the Border Region, forced mobilization rarely happened in the initial stage. As a result,

many students did not attend school. Due to the difficulty in mobilizing students, none of the winter schools in Yan'an County started or began classes as scheduled. After the start of the winter school, the loss of students was a serious problem. Despite coercive measures being used against students who skipped classes, they did not prevent students from playing truant. At the end of 1942, the Northwest Bureau of the CPC Central Committee held a meeting for senior cadres in Yan'an. The meeting proposed that the work of the Border Region Government should respond to the actual conditions of the base area and the overall context of the Anti-Japanese War and national salvation. As far as the CPC was concerned, education for revolution and war "must be mainly based on cadre education and supplemented by national education" (Lin, 1996: 310-312). To implement the ideas from the meeting, the Education Department of the Border Region shifted its focus to cadre education and began to summarize the issues in educational work since the Anti-Japanese War, so as to overcome the tendency of subjectivism and detachment from reality (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No. 10-6). Given the ineffectiveness of the *Sin Wenx* Movement, the Education Department of the Border Region completely terminated the program in 1943.

#### IV. THE IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICTS

With the input and support of the main leaders of the CPC, the *Sin Wenx* Movement gained more traction and standing than the literacy movement of Chinese characters. With a vision of a bright future for *Sin Wenx*, all departments invested significant manpower and material resources and made timely improvements on existing issues, but the *Sin Wenx* Movement undertaken by winter schools in Yan'an County did not improve. It can be seen in this process, that the leaders of the Movement failed to figure out the root causes of the problems, or in other words, the Movement itself was grappling with conflict that could not be resolved.

##### 1. Quick to learn but practically useless

Receiving an education was originally the dream of most poor children. Regrettably, the masses were often reluctant to attend school in the Border Region. In addition to general reasons, the inherent reality of the *Sin Wenx* Movement in being quick to learn, but practically useless, could not be

circumvented. On the one hand, although *Sin Wenz* itself had a lot of room to improve, it was an indisputable fact that the Latin alphabet was easier to learn and remember. Among the 39 winter schools established in Yan'an County in 1941, 17 students graduated from the winter schools that taught *Sin Wenz*, while only 3 students graduated from the two winter schools that instructed Chinese characters. In the two winter schools that taught Chinese characters in Yan'an County, half of the boys and all the girls asked to study *Sin Wenz*. Ironically, the students in winter schools that taught *Sin Wenz* in 1942 in Yan'an County wanted to learn Chinese characters after studying *Sin Wenz* (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No.: 10-357).

Why did students in winter schools have such a contradictory attitude towards *Sin Wenz*? To answer this question, it is necessary to explore the underlying issue that *Sin Wenz* could be learned quickly but was practically useless. *Sin Wenz* was composed of 28 Latin letters. It was easy to learn these letters and understand simple spelling. However, in actual practice, people who mastered *Sin Wenz* accounted for only a small number of the two million people in the Border Region, where most people were illiterate. There was no discourse or practical reason for the use of *Sin Wenz*. It was impossible to sustain the support of the masses for such a subjective movement that was divorced from reality. Hence, it was understandable that students who had learned *Sin Wenz* in the winter schools of Yan'an County wanted to learn Chinese characters. Due to the lack of mass support for the promotion of *Sin Wenz*, the education carried out by winter school was 'formalistic'. Under the negative resistance of the masses, the elimination of illiteracy through *Sin Wenz* was worse than that of the Chinese characters. According to a survey conducted by the *Sin Wenz* Guidance Group on the education level of residents in Wuxiang Town, Mudan District, Yan'an County in December 1942, only 13 people in the town could use *Sin Wenz* after two years of the *Sin Wenz* Movement (Shaanxi Provincial Archives, file No. 10-179).

## **2. Latin alphabet and square-shaped Chinese characters**

The conflict between the Latin alphabet and the square-shaped Chinese characters was directly manifested in the resistance of those who had mastered Chinese characters against the *Latinxua Sin Wenz*. In Xu Teli's view, opposition to the implementation of the *Sin Wenz* came mainly from

intellectuals. As intellectuals used Chinese characters as a tool, they deemed that *Sin Wenz* had numerous shortcomings, and “used their knowledge to find the shortcomings of the *Sin Wenz* to oppose it” (Xu, 1995:276). Therefore, the first difficulty in promoting *Sin Wenz* was that those who had learned Chinese characters were unwilling to give up the old tool. To wipe out illiteracy through *Sin Wenz*, the Border Region Government decided that from January 1, 1941, *Sin Wenz* would enjoy the same legal status as Chinese characters. Official documents, such as sales bills, “written in the *Sin Wenz* are as effective as those written in Chinese characters” (Shaanxi Provincial Archives & Shaanxi Academy of Social Sciences, 1987a: 541). Under the strong promotion of the main leaders of the central government, those who openly opposed *Sin Wenz* disappeared, but the invisible obstruction still existed. In this regard, Xiao Yun, an advocate of *Sin Wenz*, pointed out that the use of *Sin Wenz* was a process of “struggle” (斗争), and the Border Region Government endowed *Sin Wenz* legal status, which was only the starting point and basis of that “struggle”. The expansion of the application of *Sin Wenz* depended on “the concerted efforts of those who have learned the *Sin Wenz*” (Xiao, 1941). However, unlike other social mobilization, it was difficult to carry out reform of the writing system in the form of a “struggle”. In October 1940, the Yan’an County Government decided that, all district and township-level cadres should be enrolled to learn *Sin Wenz* (Anonymous, 1940). However, the follow-up surveys indicated that none of the district-level cadres mastered *Sin Wenz*, and only 34 township-level cadres could use *Sin Wenz* to make notes. The reason was that quite a few cadres were accustomed to using Chinese characters.

The resistance of cadres and masses represented by intellectuals, to the *Sin Wenz* Movement was a logical paradox that could not be resolved. Since there was no internal connection between *Latinxua Sin Wenz* and Chinese characters, people who mastered Chinese characters could not read books written in *Sin Wenz*. If 80% of the illiterate acquire *Sin Wenz*, it means that 20% of people who know Chinese characters but do not learn *Sin Wenz* would become the new illiterate. In this regard, one batch of low-level illiterates are eliminated but another batch of high-level illiterates are created. According to the literature, there are no reports on the main leaders of the central government learning *Sin Wenz*. In this context, if it is not possible to successfully promote *Sin Wenz* in the anti-Japanese base areas under the leadership of the CPC and with the support

of administrative power, then it would be virtually impossible to promote it in the Kuomintang-ruled areas, throughout the rest of China and to Chinese people across the world. Reflecting on the reform of the writing system, it is fair to say that if Chinese characters caused a disconnect between elites and grassroots, the *Sin Wenx* Movement undoubtedly deepened this gap.

### **3. Popular and national**

The primary reason why the CPC promoted *Sin Wenx* was to remove the obstacle posed by Chinese characters to the promotion of literacy. In the opinion of the movement's initiators, Chinese characters were complicated and difficult to recognize, hindering the spread of new ideas among the people and the progress of Chinese society. From the perspective of revolutionists, Chinese characters were associated with feudalism, decadent ideology, and other backward cultures. Therefore, some radical intellectuals and communists believed that the goal of reform was to create a new language that was easy for the workers and peasants to learn and use. The question was whether the promotion of *Latinxua Sin Wenx* as a popular language exerted a negative impact on China's national character and culture. The reform of the writing system was originally justifiable, but the Romanization plan of subverting tradition and copying Western civilization obviously undermined the intention of the reform. The abandonment of Chinese characters as the carrier of national culture inevitably deconstructed the common language and moral paradigm formed based on national culture. In this regard, scholars who adhered to the stand of nationalism pointed out that the Latin alphabet was a foreign alphabet, which did not fit with the Chinese people's learning psychology. Additionally, Latin characters were indistinguishable from foreign characters, losing the national traits of the Chinese characters (Ni, 1941: 9,26). Furthermore, a unified country should have a unified language. The use of Romanized spelling throughout the country was complicated by the fact that there were a variety of different dialects, which will seriously affect the unified written form of the Chinese characters, thereby raising the idea of national secession and undermining the unity of the country (Ni, 1941: 47,57).

Faced with all kinds of doubts, advocates of *Sin Wenx* claimed that there was no unification of characters in China, and that Chinese characters

were only used by 20% of Chinese people, with 80% of people unable to use them. Moreover, some radicals argued that square-shaped Chinese characters were not used by all ethnic groups. It was practically impossible to force all Chinese people to learn Chinese characters, which was contrary to revolutionary nationalism (Ni, 1941: 47-48). What is revolutionary nationalism? Ye Laishi pointed out in the *Romanization Textbook* (拉丁化课本) that the antagonism and unification between people is determined by their material interests. Among people with the same interests, no one can prevent them from uniting, even if there are differences in language, race, gender, age and custom (Ni, 1941: 57).

It can be found that the above views of the supporters in the Movement have errors in historical facts and logical paradoxes. First, they held that the Chinese nation did not have a unified writing system. It is well known that after the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty conquered six states, he abolished the original characters used by these states and took small seal script as the official standard character, which was called “the unification of Chinese writing system” (书同文). The view that China did not have a unified written system ignored historical facts. Second, they deemed that a unified writing system was not required to maintain a national community. It is conceivable that in a country with many ethnic groups, if the official documents are written in the Latin alphabet, it would generate numerous spelling versions for multiple ethnic groups and dialects. To this end, the central government must have erudite scholars who were proficient in a variety of ethnic languages and local dialects. Otherwise, its orders could not be understood by local authorities. Even if the above goals were achieved, what were the cultural roots that sustain a national community in the face of a myriad of spelling differences?

Some scholars suggested that the northern Romanized spelling scheme could be used as a unified standard to be implemented throughout the country. In that case, the unified writing system would have devastating impacts on the languages and dialects of all ethnic groups. The Chinese nation would not exist without a diverse ethnic community. In fact, the leaders of the CPC represented by Mao Zedong did not deny the national traits of culture. Mao emphasized in the article “On New Democracy” that the new democratic culture should be national, scientific, and popular. When dealing with foreign cultures, we “should not absorb it uncritically”. The so-called “wholesale westernization” (全盘西化) claim is wrong (Mao, 1991: 707). Objectively speaking, Mao Zedong had a profound



understanding of cultural nationality, but the Romanization of Chinese characters is undoubtedly the “wholesale westernization” for the writing system reform. People may have wondered why the publication of this article promoted the *Latinxua Sin Wenx* Movement.

When discussing the *Sin Wenx* Movement in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region, it is necessary to consider the historical context. When the Anti-Japanese War entered the stalemate stage, especially after the Battle of *Huangqiao* and the Southern Anhui Incident break out, the Kuomintang and the CPC were in a state of tense confrontation. Apart from blockading all anti-Japanese base areas under the leadership of the CPC, the Kuomintang restricted the development of the CPC by suspending military expenditures and other means. Furthermore, due to tight budgets, the CPC greatly increased the levy on social resources in the base areas, resulting in rising tension between the CPC and rural society. Undoubtedly, the leaders of the CPC were eager to win the support of the masses in the base areas and people of all walks of life throughout China in the complex conflicts.

Nowadays, it is easier to grasp a clear understanding of the social changes in various parts of the Border Region during this period. For example, since 1940, in order to survive and develop, the CPC had conducted a comprehensive democratic election movement under the organizational principle of “three-three system” (三三制). The system was defined by quota allocation of people in government institutions and public opinion organizations – that is one-third of the quota was allocated to the working class and poor peasants represented by CPC members, one-third was allocated to non-party left-wing progressives who represented and contacted the large and small bourgeoisie and the representatives of the middle bourgeoisie, and one-third was allocated to middlemen who were enlightened gentlemen. Culturally, the CPC took the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region as the center, from where they actively carried out the *Latinxua Sin Wenx* Movement. If a democratic election complied with the trend of democratization, the Romanization of Chinese characters reminded people of “emergency actions”, and the contradictory conflicts during the Movement perfectly illustrated the consequences of “wholesale westernization”.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that although the Romanization of Chinese characters caused conflicts between cultural popularity and national identity, the objective fact that the Latin alphabet is easy to learn

cannot be denied. Therefore, after 1949, some advocates of the Romanization plan remained passionate advocates for the simplicity of the Latin alphabet. Implementing the alphabetic character that matched the rest of the world became a clear reform goal for the CPC's leaders. To this end, it is understandable why some contributors in this historical movement kept silent or deliberately circumvented it.

#### Notes

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