

Article

# Making Knowledge in the Local Settings: Vernacular Education and Cantonese Elementary Textbooks

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**Abstract:** A growing number of Protestant missionaries engaged in vernacular education in the late nineteenth century. To meet the demands of the new era, Christian church education faced challenges not only in its curriculum design but also in the way it presented new knowledge. Previous studies have focused on church education at the tertiary level while overlooking the elementary level. This article discusses vernacular church education and vernacular textbooks at the elementary level in the late Qing, with specific reference to *Youxue baoshen yaoyan* 幼學保身要言 (*The Human Body for Children*). It argues that the demand for spreading new knowledge urged Protestant missionaries to compile vernacular textbooks and present Western knowledge in the local settings. Vernacular church education should be regarded as the precursor of indigenous education proposed by the late Qing Court. The local dialect, Cantonese in this case, bridged the linguistic gap between new terms and children's cognition and became an effective means of presenting new knowledge. Vernacular textbooks had an unparalleled significance in the cultural sphere of dialect writing, since the language of textbooks could drastically influence the writing and reading habits of the young generation and further influence people's attitudes towards dialects and dialect literature.

**Keywords:** vernacular education; Cantonese elementary textbooks; dialect writings



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## 1. Controversy on the Language of Elementary Textbooks

Christian elementary education was the foundation of the missionary educational enterprise, accounting for ninety percent of all schools in early-twentieth-century China. In 1922, the *Jidujiao quanguo dahui baogaoshu* 基督教全國大會報告書 (*The Report of the National Christian Conference*) shows that the majority of the students who had received church education were enrolled in different levels of elementary school: 74% in lower elementary school and 16% in higher elementary school, in contrast to 7.5% in high school, 1.4% in Bible school and normal school, and only 1.3% in university (Zhang 1922, p. 48). In the same year, Protestant missions in China ran 5637 lower elementary schools with 151,582 pupils, 962 higher elementary schools with 32,899 pupils, 291 high schools with 15,213 students, 48 normal schools with 612 students, and 100 Bible schools with 2659 students (Christian Education Survey Association of China 中国基督教教育调查会 1922, p. 376). The huge gap in enrollment demonstrates that elementary education was an essential part of church education in China with wide coverage.

Despite being the largest proportion in 1922, Protestant elementary schools had a humble beginning. In 1877, there had only been 68 Protestant boarding schools (30 for boys and 38 for girls) and 259 day-schools (177 for boys and 82 for girls) (Hampden 1879, p. 286). The number of Protestant elementary schools had increased twenty times in the span of 45 years! R. Lechler, a missionary from the Baptist Missionary Society in Hong Kong, emphasized the correlation between Christianity and education. "Nevertheless it is a fact, that the church from the beginning of the world has by Divine appointment been an educational institute. This is her distinctive character and it is her duty to preserve it even unto the end of the world" (Lechler 1878, p. 161). Protestant missionaries decided to seize

the opportunity to train a new generation of Chinese people who drew near to Christianity. Elementary education was where their aspiration began.

After reviewing the existing Confucian convention of elementary learning in China, Protestant missionaries had no intention of following the old pattern. As early as the 1830s, pioneering missionaries had identified the limitations of traditional Chinese primers. Elijah Coleman Bridgman, the secretary of the Morrison Education Society (hereafter MES), argued that Chinese children viewed Chinese primers as an “irksome task” (ART. III 1835, p. 243). Bridgman believed that old Chinese primers like *Qianziwen* 千字文 (*The Thousand Character Classic*) focused on basic literacy skills, requiring students to memorize and reproduce characters in the texts, which was meaningless for catching up with practical knowledge and nurturing an independent mind. He continued that Classical Chinese primers were inappropriate in the first report of the MES:

These books contain a large collection of moral maxims, and some remarkable sayings of the sages, with which are blended a variety of mystical dogmas, and a few historical facts. None of the branches of science, properly so called, enter into any part of these primary books. They are from beginning to end unfitted for the minds of children, being, for the most part, hard to understand, and wholly devoid of topics calculated to awaken interest in the minds of children or to enlarge their understanding. (ART. II 1837, p. 236)

When saying that Classical Chinese primers were “unfitted for the minds of children”, Bridgman, de facto, identified two problems: first, traditional elementary education lacked scientific and mathematical school subjects; second, traditional Chinese primers written in Classical Chinese were hard for children to understand. The latter was more implicit, but had not been publicly noticed. Following the first meeting, members of the MES approved two letters addressing Bridgman’s concern, “one to literary gentlemen long connected with one of the oldest colleges in the United States of America, and the other to the Secretary of the British and Foreign School Society in England” to ask them to assign teachers to China who were “qualified to give oral instruction in the native language, and to prepare elementary books in the same” (ART. II 1837, p. 230).

In 1877, the School and Text Book Series Committee (hereafter STSC) was established as a resolution of the General Conference of Protestant Missionaries of China with the purpose of providing a series of Western textbooks for Chinese pupils in their native languages (Report of the School and Text Book Series Committee 1890, p. 712). The STSC decided to prepare two series of textbooks, viz., a primary series and an advanced series, covering ten subjects: mathematics, surveying, astronomy, geology, chemistry, zoology, geography, history, language, and music. This significant and impactful change prompted the Protestant missions in China to design, provide, and circulate a standard series of textbooks which remedied the disorganized state of elementary education.

Like every missionary who engaged in translation, the members of the STSC faced an accustomed dilemma—determining the best writing style for these Chinese elementary textbooks. Soon after the establishment of the STSC, missionaries had a short discussion on the proper style and the best way to prepare elementary textbooks. Calvin Wilson Mateer of the American Presbyterian Mission (North) in Shandong Province put forward his ideas for textbook design in October 1877:

School books for the Chinese should be made as plain as possible ... Not only should the method be plain, but special pains should be taken to make the style clear and perspicuous. This will be all the more difficult to accomplish, seeing precision and perspicuity are not qualities peculiar to Chinese, especially to the Wen-li. For North China all primary books had best be in Mandarin. This, to say nothing of other advantages, will enable the student to study these branches before he could read the books if in Wen-li. (Mateer 1877, p. 431)<sup>1</sup>

The “special pains” referred to the difficulty of rendering new knowledge in vernacular Chinese perspicuously. It indicated that both missionaries and their Chinese assistants

faced challenges in proficient vernacular writing. Mateer proposed that the primary books should be written in Mandarin for elementary schools in North China, while the textbooks at higher levels could be written in Classical Chinese. Mateer's plea was based on children's cognitive level and that vernacular Chinese was proposed as a tactical option for elementary students with limited cognition. Essentially, Mateer's viewpoint was still conservative. He viewed Mandarin textbooks as an alternative to Classical Chinese textbooks in the transition period. At this time, he was not confident that vernacular Chinese would eventually replace Classical Chinese in textbooks.

Mateer's appeal encountered resistance from the conservative missionaries. In 1878, Alexander Williamson of the London Missionary Society reiterated the consistency of the whole series, which required the textbooks for general use to be written in simple Classical Chinese. "That the books may be of immediate and general use they are, in the first instance, to be composed in easy Wen-li, but hereafter, should there be a general demand for any of them to be put into the Mandarin Colloquial, the matter will be entertained by the Committee" (Williamson 1878, p. 307). The missionary bodies had reached a consensus that elementary textbooks should be written in simple Classical Chinese. However, Williamson's words made allowance for vernacular textbooks, especially Mandarin textbooks. He added that the requests for Mandarin textbooks could be endorsed by the Committee case by case. In fact, it was not easy to get an endorsement. One year later, when Mateer translated an arithmetic textbook of the primary series into Mandarin, Williamson asked him to change its style from Mandarin to the simplest Classical Chinese (Muirhead 1879, pp. 470–71).

The appeal for vernacular textbooks was not adopted by the STSC Committee. The annual report of the STSC of 1890 states "that arrangements should be made for the preparation of two series of school books in Chinese, viz., a primary series and an advanced series, and that the style of both series should be the simplest Wen-li, leaving subsequent translation into mandarin an open question" (Report of the School and Text Book Series Committee 1890, p. 712). According to John Fryer's statistics, ninety-seven schoolbooks were approved by the STSC. Around 30,000 volumes of books or copies of maps, charts, etc., had been issued, and about half of them were sold. Many leading Chinese officials were subscribers, including Zeng Jize 曾紀澤 (Report of the School and Text Book Series Committee 1890, pp. 715–18). These two series of schoolbooks had attracted much attention. The open verdict on Mandarin, however, left much space for vernacular textbooks and vernacular education. Not all missionaries were in favor of textbooks written in simple Classical Chinese. A few missionaries translated Western textbooks into local dialects to enable elementary students to acquire knowledge swiftly. Although the STSC did not approve these vernacular textbooks, they had been used widely by many regional church schools at the elementary level.

With the increasing demand for vernacular textbooks, missionaries launched a new discussion about the proper style for textbooks. In 1894, John Fryer and John C. Ferguson, members of the Educational Association of China, sent the following question to representatives of all the missions engaging in educational work and to different parts of China so that all dialects could be considered. "What is the best medium of conveying scientific and mathematical truth to the Chinese in our textbooks, whether by Wen-li, Mandarin or other colloquial dialects, or the Romanized?" (Fryer and Ferguson 1894, p. 329). Fryer and Ferguson pushed the question of the proper style of Chinese textbooks forward. First, the textbooks here were no longer restricted to elementary textbooks, indicating that children's cognitive level would not be the key factor when considering the language style. When raising this question, Ferguson planned to look for a standard written language for future church education. Second, the scope of vernacular writing had been expanded to include not merely Mandarin but also other Chinese dialects. Besides, the writing system was not confined to Chinese characters but extended to Chinese Romanization, which could be better adopted by Southern dialects.

Fryer and Ferguson published the representative replies on *The Chinese Recorder* in July 1894. Four-tenths of respondents voted for simple Classical Chinese and only one-tenth favored vernacular Chinese. The rest of them, the majority, advocated for the hybrid mode—combining simple Classical Chinese and vernacular.

Advocates of simple Classical Chinese asserted that it did not have regional restrictions, of which George B. Smyth's argument was most typical. "This would be much more widely understood than either Mandarin or Romanized colloquial, and would be read with much greater pleasure even by those who could read all there" (Fryer and Ferguson 1894, pp. 335–37). The missionaries' original intention in establishing the STSC was to set up a standard series of elementary textbooks. The complication of elementary textbooks in various dialects was contrary to this goal. Apart from the wide recognition of simple Classical Chinese, missionaries also needed to consider other factors, such as the labor and cost of translating textbooks into different dialects. Alvin Pierson Parker raised concerns about "the extra trouble and expense of publishing different editions of the same book" (Fryer and Ferguson 1894, p. 329) in response to whether textbooks should be written in dialects. In this regard, simple Classical Chinese was the most affordable option.

Simple Classical Chinese, however, was not as widely understood as the missionaries envisioned. Classical Chinese was only understood by a tiny portion of the Chinese population. John Campbell Gibson of the English Presbyterian Mission, a supporter of Romanization of the Chaozhou dialect in Swatow (Shantou) in northeastern Guangdong, pointed out the low literacy rate in China in 1888. "The number of readers in China was set down as certainly under 10 per cent of men and 1 per cent of the women, giving a total not exceeding 12,375,000 readers in all" (Gibson 1888, p. 1). Gibson's estimate counted people with basic literary skills who could only write and read basic characters in certain topics. In other words, this number over-estimated the population with full literacy, i.e., those who could read, write, and understand Classical Chinese.

Only John Alfred Silsby, from the American Presbyterian Mission (North) in Shanghai, defended vernacular Chinese, arguing that it would eventually overtake Classical Chinese.

In my opinion Wen-li is a great obstacle to popular education. As the use of Latin in the middle ages educated a few at the expense of the masses so does Wen-li shut out the light of scientific, mathematical and religious truth from the masses of China, and even the educated would make more rapid advance if they were freed from its shackles. The education of the future will relegate it to a place somewhat similar to that of Latin in our Western schools. (Fryer and Ferguson 1894, p. 335)

Unlike Mateer's plea for Mandarin in 1877, Silsby put the discussion in a broader context. He compared Latin and Classical Chinese, predicting that Classical Chinese would be phased out in China like Latin was in Europe. He foresaw that Classical Chinese could not catch up with the needs of the time and thus vernacular Chinese would eventually replace it. By referring to "the masses", he predicted that a radical vernacular language movement would sweep China, starting from the reform of the educational language. China could only accelerate its modernization when it broke the shackles of Classical Chinese. Silsby's visionary argument reflected some missionaries' more open, friendly, and positive attitude toward vernacular Chinese. They no longer considered vernacular Chinese an inferior alternative to Classical Chinese, but rather a promising language for China's future. He also knew that education was the key to promoting vernacular Chinese. Literacy is the core task in elementary education, affecting how children acquire information and express themselves. Children raised with vernacular education would likely obtain and convey information by the vernacular medium in the future. Hence, Silsby particularly called for vernacular education in church schools, replacing Classical Chinese with vernacular Chinese among the new generation.

Vernacular Chinese had its drawbacks, of which the geographical limitation was the biggest; all dialects were more or less confined to a certain region. Another problem was

that there were not many people who were capable of vernacular writing at that time. It was challenging to compile textbooks in vernacular Chinese. Chinese literati (the class from which missionaries' assistants were chosen) were raised with a Classical Chinese education and therefore were unfamiliar with vernacular writing. Joshua Crowell Garritt, from the American Presbyterian Mission (North) in Nanking, once complained, "It will be harder to find a good writer of Mandarin for the position of Chinese editor than to find a good writer of Wen-li" (Garritt 1908, p. 602). Compiling vernacular textbooks was challenging for missionaries as it was difficult to hire native assistants who were proficient in vernacular writing.

Between both poles of the debate, there was a middle ground, and this view was espoused by the largest group. These individuals were conscious of the vernacular Chinese's accessibility, yet they still regarded Classical Chinese as the orthodoxy of written language, catering to the tastes of Chinese literati. They suggested vernacular textbooks for younger children and Classical Chinese textbooks for older children, or the vernacular textbooks for more basic subjects, viz., arithmetic and the first lessons in physics and chemistry, and Classical Chinese textbooks for more advanced subjects such as algebra and physical geography (Fryer and Ferguson 1894, pp. 329–36). They emphasized that the terminology in the textbooks should be the same whether the books were written in vernacular Chinese or Classical Chinese, to maintain the uniformity of the terminology throughout the system. This compromise was also conservative, implying an unspoken prejudice that Classical Chinese was superior, i.e., vernacular education was just a stepping stone for Classical Chinese education. When children's cognitive potential improved, they would eventually accept Classical Chinese education. Essentially, they were arguing the same stance as advocates of simple Classical Chinese.

Missionaries of different persuasions on the issue did not arrive at a consensus. The initiator of the discussion gave no further suggestions on the style to adopt in Chinese textbooks, leaving mission schools to make their own decisions. This survey was not merely the question of which was the proper style for rendering Western knowledge, but rather missionaries' predictions towards the promising language in China. Any language of public education influences its respective common language, as this is how the younger generation is educated. The language of education was the key point of their language planning for Christianity in China. Therefore, they wished to find a style that balanced uniformity and accessibility. The attempt to simplify the language of elementary textbooks revealed the missionaries' ambitions to promote popular education in China. Through simpler school instruction, children could learn more quickly, without spending excessive time on literary skills. New knowledge would be disseminated through plain and intelligible language, forming the basis of the new culture for the entire society. In turn, for children who grew up in vernacular education, vernacular Chinese would naturally become their spoken and written language, and they could form a solid language community. Therefore, when choosing the language style of elementary textbooks, missionaries not only considered which style was most intelligible, but also which style was the most promising. Christian literature, like the Bible, tracts, novels, and hymns, had a broad readership spanning across classes, including masses of illiterate people, who had no time to learn to read and write Classical Chinese. A plain language style was necessary for everyday evangelization. However, the textbooks had a targeted readership, i.e., the students who would receive systematic training in mission schools. Even if missionaries translated or compiled textbooks in the high style of Classical Chinese, students could learn them through professional instruction, although it would take longer to learn than using plain language. Therefore, they not only looked for a simple language in church education but also sought the most promising language for China's future. This was why the discussion on textbook language was a widely contentious topic, second only to the language used in Bible translations.

While simple Classical Chinese was in an advantaged position over vernacular Chinese, voices calling for vernacular education were growing louder. The status of vernacu-

lar Chinese had been raised speedily in the early twentieth century. In 1909, the Qing court decreed Kwan-hwa (Mandarin) as its national language. Protestant missionaries quickly responded to this decree. They no longer discussed the language of elementary textbooks, defaulting to Mandarin as the most promising textbook language. Accordingly, an increasing number of church schools began to implement vernacular education. In 1920, the Educational Department of the Republic of China promulgated a regulation mandating that, starting from the fall of that year, Mandarin would replace Classical Chinese as the language of Chinese subject for the first and second grades in all national schools, in order to unify written and spoken Chinese (*Xiaoxue guowenke gaishou guoyu zhi buling* 1920, p. 10). This announcement signaled a belated victory for vernacular Chinese as well as vernacular education. Whatever the debate over the language had been, it had settled down, and Western missionaries, together with Chinese intellectuals, plowed their energies into vernacular education.

## 2. Human Physiological Knowledge with Indigenous Attire: *Youxue baoshen yaoyan*

In 1903, the Qing court issued the *Zouding chudeng xiaoxuetang zhangcheng* 奏定初等小學堂章程 (*The Approved Regulation for Lower Elementary Schools*) (*Zouding chudeng xiaoxuetang zhangcheng* 1991, pp. 291–96). This regulation proposed “Xiangtu jiaoyu 鄉土教育 (indigenous education)”, which required local authorities to compile elementary textbooks and prepare courses based on indigenous resources. Hence, educators in different parts of China published a series of indigenous textbooks to echo the call for indigenous education. Prior to this, Protestant missionaries had been conscious of indigenous education. They transplanted Western knowledge into the local context and published a series of textbooks written in local dialects. These textbooks should also be regarded as indigenous textbooks, as they not only drew on the local resources but also were written in the local dialect. Missionary vernacular education was also the pioneer of indigenous education.

*Youxue baoshen yaoyan* 幼學保身要言 (*The Human Body for Children*) is the only existing elementary physiology textbook entirely written in Cantonese and published by Protestant missionaries in 1900. Its compiler, Jeannette May Nelson, and her Chinese assistant, Lin Chengchu 林程初, had engaged in church education in Canton for years and thus were very familiar with the educational needs of South China. It was used for elementary church schools in Cantonese-speaking areas and had been reprinted several times. Hence, this book would serve as a good case study to explore vernacular education carried out by Protestant missionaries in Canton, and further the vernacular education in the South. Jeannette May Nelson was the wife of Charles A. Nelson. C. A. Nelson was a missionary from the American Board of Commission for Foreign Missions (hereafter ABCFM) and the founder of Meihua zhongxue 美華中學 (American–Chinese High School) in Canton. The Nelsons were commissioned to China in 1892 (*The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* 1892, pp. 69–70). The same year, they opened the Lotak School in Canton, a boarding school for boys. In 1894, the ABCFM established the Lotak Girls’ School with 36 enrolled pupils. Mrs. Nelson, accompanied by a native teacher, frequently visited these pupils’ homes, and in this way, they preached among the women and the children (*The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* 1894, p. 73). Mrs. Nelson and her colleagues, Miss Edna Lowrey and Miss Ruth E. Mulliken in Canton, were members of the American Chinese Education Commission, whose headquarters was in Oberlin, Ohio (*Indigenous Church in South China* 1932, p. 457). Lin Chengchu was a native teacher employed by Mrs. Nelson. In addition to *Youxue baoshen yaoyan*, they also collaborated on a book for women entitled *Hunyin bu rujiao zalun* 婚姻補儒教雜論 (Essays on the Contribution of Marriage to Confucianism). Unfortunately, no further information has survived, since few Chinese assistants were prominent individuals for whom extensive records would have been kept.

The Nelsons insisted on Chinese as the medium of instruction in the schools under their superintendence, even for Western school subjects. English was taught as a foreign subject separately. It was unique among mission schools (Zhou 2008, pp. 73–74). Many

mission schools only taught Chinese subjects in Chinese, while Western subjects were taught in English. In this regard, these mission schools founded by the Nelsons were local in that they utilized Cantonese as the medium and employed many Chinese educators as teachers. Even though Cantonese was the pedagogical language, it did not mean the textbooks were necessarily written in Cantonese, as local children could read aloud textbooks written in Mandarin or Classical Chinese using Cantonese. Vernacular textbooks like *Youxue baoshen yaoyan* were a bold attempt to adapt the local language to school materials, which opened a new chapter in vernacular education.

*Youxue baoshen yaoyan* provided the basic knowledge of human physiology for children. Human physiology, or in Chinese *Shenli* 身理, was one of the fifteen Western school subjects promoted by the Chinese authorities, though it is not a compulsory course in elementary education today. In 1880, Robert Hart, the second Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, wrote to his agent James Campbell that he wanted to order a series of science and history textbooks for Chinese schools. Hart then hired Joseph Edkins to translate these textbooks into Chinese, and finally published them in 1886 as a series titled “*Xixue qimeng shiliuzhong* 西學啟蒙十六種 (Sixteen Primers of Western Learnings)”.<sup>2</sup> After the series was published, leading court officials, including Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 and Zeng Jize 曾紀澤, provided prefaces for it, indicating its endorsement from the authorities. Although *Youxue baoshen yaoyan* is a primer translated for other Western physiological textbooks instead of a Cantonese translation of *Shenli qimeng* 身理啟蒙 (A Primer on Human Physiology) in *Sixteen Primers of Western Learnings*, it still demonstrates that physiology was an important subject in modern education at the elementary level in the late Qing.

*Youxue baoshen yaoyan* consists of seven chapters that discuss the bones, muscles, skin, stomach, blood, lungs, and brain. Each chapter is followed by a series of short questions. This design aligns with Alexander Williamson’s ideas for elementary textbooks with questions at the end of each chapter. “They are to be well illustrated, and at the end of each chapter there will be a list of questions embodying the contents of the chapter, and, in fact, every care is to be taken to make them as efficient text books as possible” (Williamson 1878, p. 307). The practice test was a new and effective way to highlight the key points, which was rarely observed in traditional Chinese primers.

Regarding the language, *Youxue baoshen yaoyan* is completely written in Cantonese. Mrs. Nelson and Lin Chengchu had no intention of adhering to the customary book language and employing the words of Classical Chinese. The paragraph below illustrates the colloquial style very well:

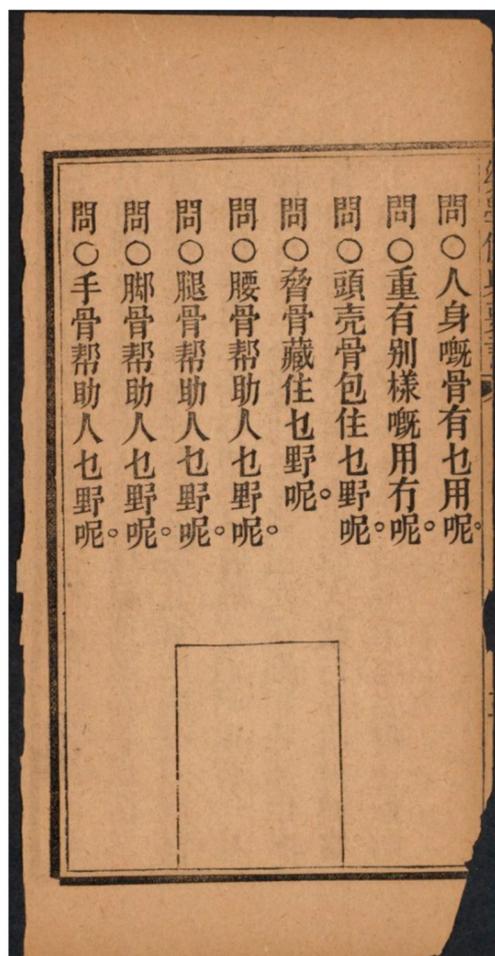
人身嘅骨，係譬如乜野呢？好似一間屋嘅棟樑噃。佢有能扶助四肢百體，彼此聯絡得堅固，又係保護身上嘅嫩枝節。好似個頭壳包住個腦，脅骨藏住個心肺。又好似腰骨共腿骨幫助人坐立，腳骨噲令人行動，手骨噲令人摩野攞野。(Wu 1900, p. 2)

(What do people’s bones look like? They are like the pillars of a house. They support the arms, the legs, and all the other parts of the body, and they are tightly bound together. They also protect the body’s vulnerable organs, just like the skull wrapping the brain, and the flank bones covering the heart and lungs. In addition, the lumbar bone and leg bone enable people to sit and stand, the foot bone allows people to walk, and the hand bone empowers people to touch and take stuff.)

This paragraph has been well-crafted. In terms of language, its words and phrases demonstrate a distinctive feature of the Cantonese-speaking area and thus revitalize the representation of knowledge. The determiner “*ge<sup>3</sup>* 嘅 (of)”, the linking verb “*hai<sup>6</sup>* 係 (be)”, the interrogative pronouns “*mat<sup>1</sup> je<sup>5</sup>* 乜野 (what)”, the phrase “*tau<sup>4</sup> hok<sup>3</sup>* 頭壳 (skull)”, and the phrase “*mo<sup>1</sup> je<sup>5</sup> lo<sup>2</sup> je<sup>5</sup>* 摩野攞野 (touch and take the stuff)” are special expressions in spoken Cantonese. Because of the colloquialisms, the text sounds catchy and is easy for children to memorize. As the text does not maintain a distance from the spoken language, children can easily direct it to the counterpart of their everyday experience when reading it

aloud. This connection is established through the sound pattern. That is the irreplaceable advantage of vernacular education.

Furthermore, its structure is constructed in the question-and-answer format. It imitates the classic style derived from the catechism, which opens with a conversation between the instructor and the reader. This format had been widely inherited and tweaked in Chinese Christian literature. In the third-person point of view, it presupposes the readership is children. The instructor creates a dialogue with the children, conversing with them in their mother tongue directly. Questions appear at the beginning of paragraphs to guide children in step-by-step problem-solving. At the end of each chapter, there are also after-class questions for students to review the key points of the chapter (see Figure 1). Paired with colloquial Cantonese, this format bridges the gap between the instructor and children and opens the dialogue in a gentle manner.



**Figure 1.** After-class Questions in *Youxue baoshen yaoyan*. Image source: Harvard–Yenching Library Collection.

Considering children’s natural curiosity, Williamson laid special stress on textbooks being attractive. “While, however, they are primarily intended for schools the authorship will not prepare a mere congeries of dry bones, but make them interesting and attractive so that they may win their way into the interior, and be prized by native scholars” (Williamson 1878, p. 307). By “dry bones”, Williamson referred to the rigid translation word by word, sentence by sentence. He asked translators not to do literal translations, but in a creative way and preferably grounded in local resources, as to “win their way into the interior”. Mateer made it clearer: Western knowledge should be localized in the Chinese context. “All figures and illustrations, however, should be drawn as far as possible from things with which the Chinese are acquainted. The book should also be specially adapted to the

place it is to fill in China, that is it should be so constructed as to make the Chinese feel that it is a book for them" (Mateer 1877, p. 430). Their suggestion was in line with the indigenous education proposed in *Zouding chudeng xiaoxuetang zhangcheng*, which stressed the linkage with indigenous resources. When preparing *Youxue baoshen yaoyan*, Mrs. Nelson and Lin Chengchu made good use of the indigenous resources. They used metaphors to make terminology concrete for children, rather than transliterations. These metaphors were constructed in the local dialect and rooted in the local context. The paragraph below is a good example:

骨裏頭係有好多節嘅，啲節係分開兩樣：一樣叫做舂杵節，一樣叫做轉絞節。點解叫做舂杵節呢？即係膊頭嘅骨節，共手臂相連個處就係喇。因為膊頭骨節個處，好似個舂坎噉樣，係窩入去嘅。手臂骨係好似一條杵噉，連住膊頭骨窩入去個處。是以個隻手臂，好似風車咁轉都得，故此就叫個啲做舂杵節咯。(Wu 1900, pp. 3–4)

(There are many joints in the bones, divided into two types: one is called the mortar-and-pestle joint, while the other is the hinge joint. Why is it called the mortar-and-pestle joint? The joint where the shoulder and arm are connected is the mortar-and-pestle joint, since the shoulder bone is like a mortar, which is recessed. The arm bone is like a pestle, which can be inserted into the recess of the shoulder bone. Therefore, the arm can move like a windmill, so we call this joint the mortar-and-pestle joint.)

The description of joints has been visualized in the indigenous narratives, associated with daily necessities. According to the paragraph above, there are two types of joints: the mortar-and-pestle joint and the hinge joint. The mortar-and-pestle joint refers to the ball-and-socket joint in the Western description. Mrs. Nelson and Lin called it the mortar-and-pestle joint because its structure resembled a mortar-and-pestle. Although the term "ball and socket joint" is vivid as well, Chinese children were unacquainted with the device and found it hard to have the corresponding image in mind. Thus, Mrs. Nelson and Lin replaced it with a mortar-and-pestle, which was used for husking and was common in Chinese families in late imperial China. This metaphor visualizes, externalizes, and simplifies the jargon in an indigenous way. It is based on children's life experiences, which facilitates comprehension. Furthermore, the narrative employs a wide range of Cantonese modal particles, strengthening the local features. The sentence-ending auxiliary modal words "ge<sup>3</sup> 嘅", "ne<sup>1</sup> 呢", "laa<sup>3</sup> 喇", and "lo<sup>1</sup> 咯" are commonly used at the end of sentences in spoken Cantonese. The use of Cantonese colloquial words and phrases such as "zung<sup>1</sup> ham<sup>2</sup> gam<sup>2</sup> joeng<sup>6</sup> 舂坎噉樣 (like a mortar)" and "fung<sup>1</sup> ce<sup>1</sup> gam<sup>2</sup> zyun<sup>3</sup> 風車咁轉 (move like windmills)" not only softens the tone of sentences but also establishes a vivid and tridimensional image of the jargon.

### 3. Budding Vernacular Education and Impacts of Vernacular Textbooks

By drawing on the local dialect and local resources, Mrs. Nelson and Lin indigenized physiological knowledge. Vernacular textbooks were genuinely indigenous textbooks and conveyed Western knowledge to local children in a vernacular way. *Youxue baoshen yaoyan* was just the tip of the iceberg in the thriving landscape of vernacular education and vernacular textbooks.

In 1906, Rev. Philip Wilson Pitcher, from the Dutch Reformed Church in Xiamen, predicted that vernacular education had been the emerging trend of the educational system in China.

The new system of education which has been inaugurated by the Chinese government, resulting in the abolition of the official literary examinations (producing the greatest revolution the world has ever seen) and the adoption of a highly commendable national system, composed of graded courses from the primary school to the university, to take the place of that hoary time-honored system that has held this nation like an iron vise for more than twenty centuries—the opening of schools and colleges in every part of this land, even turning temples into

school-houses—has not only put a new aspect on the whole missionary problem, but has changed completely the question of the importance of vernacular schools and vernacular education. (Pitcher 1906, p. 681)

The abolition of the imperial examinations was soon followed by the proliferation of popular education and modern schools. In 1903, there were 769 schools nationwide. This increased nearly sixfold to 4476 the following year. It grew to 23,862 in 1905, and then soared to 87,272 by 1912 (Wang 1986, pp. 109–12). The school expansion brought unprecedented opportunities for education reform in China. The vernacular language was a crucial point in meeting the challenges. In turn, vernacular education boosted the growth of modern schools. The abolition of the imperial examinations was merely a trigger. The underlying reason lay in the urgent need for the dissemination of new knowledge and new ideology, which Classical Chinese was no longer able to present and spread effectively. Protestant missionaries, in turn, sought the most straightforward means of presenting Western knowledge from the local dialect and the local resources. Simultaneously, this also indicated that church education has entered a new stage, involving not only the introduction of new school subjects but also the attempt to present knowledge using previously overlooked regional languages.

Southern missionaries like Mrs. Nelson attempted to compile textbooks in the local dialect as they were conscious of the sound pattern caused by the local dialect. The positive feedback from local Christians regarding vernacular religious publications such as vernacular Scriptures, hymns, and prayers encouraged missionaries to compile textbooks in local dialects. Regarding the nature of the linguistic sign, Ferdinand de Saussure argued, “a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer’s physiological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses” (de Saussure 1983, p. 66). The use of linguistic signs is precisely based on a collective habit: convention (de Saussure 1983, p. 68). In other words, the connection between a concept and its sound pattern is constructed in collective recognition, rooted in daily experiences and local customs. For instance, when Cantonese children read the phrase “zyun<sup>2</sup> gaau<sup>2</sup> zit<sup>3</sup> 轉絞節” in *Youxue baoshen yaoyan*, the image of a door hinge would immediately come to their mind, making them understand the term “hinge joints”. The local and colloquial expression presents a visual form of the term. It helps local children to find the counterpart of the term in their familiar environment and understand its meaning in the local context. The solid connection between the mother tongue and daily experiences ensures that vernacular textbooks function efficiently. Hence, the local dialect holds an irreplaceable advantage in spreading new knowledge and enlightening the local people, compared to Classical Chinese and Mandarin.

The production and circulation of vernacular textbooks had ushered in a new stage of dialect writing, challenging the well-established written system. The language of textbooks constituted the basic literacy skill of the new generation, and thereby had a significant impact on the common written language of a speech community. In traditional Chinese elementary schools in South China, Mandarin or the local dialect was the medium of instruction, while Classical Chinese was the default language of print materials. Southern dialects rarely became the written language in education, even at the elementary level. Southern educators were skeptical about whether Southern dialects were fully functional for formal writing and whether it was worth compiling vernacular textbooks that only circulated within a specific region. With these concerns, Southern educators, both Chinese scholars and Western missionaries, made little effort to produce vernacular textbooks. They preferred to compile elementary textbooks in simplest Classical Chinese, though it took longer for students to gain the knowledge. Textbooks written in the local dialect indicated a new stage in vernacular education in that knowledge could be represented and circulated by the indigenous language. More importantly, it challenged people’s stereotype of dialects, that dialects could not become a formal written language. Vernacular textbooks justified the possibility and legitimacy of dialects as the formal written language. Public

education was a fundamental way to promote and sustain a language. When dialects entered the education system, particularly as the language of textbooks, they received further recognition from Chinese society.

The local dialect not only provides an intelligible way to acquire new knowledge but also maintains the emotional linkage within the speech community. In the 1890s, missionaries in Shanghai grouped students into communities according to their mother tongues so that they could employ the same dialect as the medium of instruction:

But the cosmopolitan character of this port requires different schools for the different dialect-speaking taxpayers of Shanghai. As the Ningpo, Soochow and Shanghai dialects are similar, scholars hailing from these localities may easily be collected together under the same teachers, whilst the children of Canton and Swatow-of whom there are not a few in Shanghai-will require separate establishments. (*The Education of Chinese Children 1893*, pp. 751–52)

The establishment of vernacular schools targeting students from different parts of China was motivated not only by linguistic considerations but also by the resilience of regional identity. A similar cultural background tied immigrants together, and therefore they preferred to live in enclaves in new cities. They were able to speak their mother tongues and maintain their customs and traditions within their communities. The local dialect became an identity to distinguish regional groups. The local dialect as the medium of instruction provided a sense of belonging for children. The same situation existed abroad in areas with high concentrations of Chinese immigrants, such as Malacca, San Francisco, and New Zealand. In this regard, vernacular education not only served as an efficient way to learn new knowledge, but more importantly, provided a comfort zone for immigrants to integrate into the local society, maintain their identity, and build their communities.

#### 4. Conclusions

Educational language, particularly the language of textbooks, attracted much attention from missionaries. They not only sought an appropriate language for textbooks but also a promising language for China's future. In the late nineteenth century, vernacular education gradually emerged, accompanied by an increasing availability of vernacular textbooks. Dialects were also incorporated into the educational language of church education, leading to the emergence of vernacular textbooks. Missionary vernacular textbooks and vernacular education were the precursors of indigenous education proposed by the Qing court in the early twentieth century, which called for the utilization of local resources. The local history and customs hidden in the local dialect build the inner connection between the local dialect and the signifier. The local dialect could spread new knowledge effectively by establishing a sound pattern of a new term and enabling children to understand it in the local context, as in the analysis of *Youxue baoshen yaoyan*. Thus, vernacular education and vernacular textbooks provided the momentum for popular education. In addition, vernacular textbooks ushered in a new stage in dialect writing, as the use of dialects in the field of church elementary education became increasingly prevalent. The use of dialects in textbooks was significant for the development of dialect writing, indicating that dialect writing had entered the education system, which would have a significant influence on the daily linguistic practices of the new generation.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Protestant missionaries called Classical Chinese “Wen-li”.
- <sup>2</sup> *Sixteen Primers of Western Learnings* contains fifteen textbooks and one book called *A Brief Account of Western Learning* written by Joseph Edkins.

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