

Article

From Mission Text to Public Text: Mission Educational Print and the Making of Useful Knowledge in Kashgar, 1912-1932

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Abstract: This paper examines how the Swedish Mission Press in Kashgar transformed missionary print into a broader framework of educational and practical writing between 1912 and 1932. It argues that the press did not merely supply mission schools with textbooks but played a pivotal role in reorganizing vernacular literacy itself by turning reading into a graded discipline, useful knowledge into a portable textual form, and local writing practices into objects of standardization. In this process, the schoolbook became more than a pedagogical tool; it emerged as a medium through which arithmetic, geography, documentary literacy, and orthography could circulate well beyond the classroom. The paper begins with the establishment of the printing office and demonstrates why educational print emerged under the material and institutional conditions of missionary work in the western regions of China. It then traces how arithmetic manuals, geography textbooks, and model letter collections linked school learning to trade, calculation, document use, and social practice. Finally, it examines the regional ambition of this textual project through the language of the Six Cities and the concerted effort to produce a common written norm. What emerged was not yet a public sphere in the full political sense, but rather a field of public texts: reproducible, portable, and widely legible forms that allowed readers in Kashgar and beyond to imagine themselves as participants in a shared written order. This study contributes to the broader historiography of print culture, missionary education, and knowledge circulation in early twentieth-century Central Asia.

Keywords: missionary press; educational print; useful knowledge; print culture; literacy; kashgar

1. Introduction

In early twentieth-century Kashgar, the schoolbook did not arrive in an empty world. Manuscript books still circulated through the bazaar. Islamic learning continued to be transmitted through mosque, madrasa, shrine, and household. Chinese officials, missionaries, merchants, and local scholars all operated within partly overlapping, partly divergent systems of literacy. What changed after the Swedish Mission Press began printing in Kashgar was not simply that more texts became available. A different kind of text began to take shape. The primer, the graded reader, the arithmetic manual, the geography textbook, the spelling book, and the model letter collection all assumed that knowledge could be divided, ordered, repeated, and transmitted in stable printed form. In that sense, the press did not merely reproduce lessons. It helped reorganize the conditions under which literacy itself could become functional [1].

That shift matters because mission print has too often been treated either as a minor appendix to evangelization or as a bibliographic curiosity. Neither description is wrong, but both are insufficient. The press certainly belonged to a missionary institution, and its books cannot be detached from that setting. Yet the texts themselves moved beyond narrow devotional use. They taught children how to read, but they also taught readers how to calculate, how to conceptualize geographical space, how to compose formal documents, and how to distinguish standardized orthography from regional variation.

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They entered a social world in which practical writing held value well beyond the classroom. Once that happened, mission educational print ceased to be only missionary print. It began to participate in the formation of a broader textual order.

Three bodies of scholarship make that problem visible. One foundational study reconstructs the press's output with remarkable bibliographic precision and preserves the chronological sequence of publication, but its great strength lies in description rather than analysis. It shows what was printed more thoroughly than it explains what occurred when these books entered local life [2]. Another work preserves the institutional history of the mission with unusual detail and gives educational activity a central place within it, yet the books themselves still tend to remain confined within a missionary context, as though their social life began and ended with the school and the chapel. More recent research on Kashgar prints and language change has moved closer to the core issue by demonstrating how these texts reshaped vocabulary, documentary conventions, and written norms, but even here the schoolbook often appears in fragments—as lexicon, as form, or as bibliography—rather than as a social object linking pedagogy, language, and circulation simultaneously. That is where this paper begins.

What makes this question worth asking is not only the local history of one printing office. It is the broader question of how new textual forms took root in a multilingual society in Central Asia under external religious and educational influence without simply displacing older written traditions. Kashgar was not a blank slate awaiting modern print. It was a place where several textual traditions met, overlapped, and competed. Mission educational print became significant not because it displaced those traditions, but because it introduced a new kind of vernacular authority: one grounded in sequential organization, standardization, portability, and practical utility. This paper argues that mission educational print in Kashgar did more than serve the Swedish mission's schools: between the establishment of the press and the early 1930s, it reorganized vernacular literacy into a portable body of useful knowledge and, in doing so, began to produce public texts before a fully formed public sphere existed [3, 4].

2. From Mission Press to School Press: Why Educational Print Emerged in Kashgar

The Swedish Mission Press did not begin as a school press. It evolved into one because mission work in Kashgar encountered a fundamental constraint: preaching alone could not secure a durable audience, and handwritten books could not sustain the kind of repeated, graded instruction required by mission schools. From the outset, the Swedish missionaries integrated evangelization with educational work [5]. That integration was not incidental; it reflected the practical realities of mission activity in the western regions of China, where conversion posed significant challenges, literacy levels varied widely, and access to printed materials was limited. In that context, educational print emerged not as a deviation from missionary objectives, but as an essential instrument supporting them.

The material conditions of the region were decisive. A retrospective account emphasized that there was "no printing-office in the whole of southern western regions of China" capable of meeting the mission's needs [6, 7]. Books circulated primarily in manuscript form—copied by hand and sold in local markets—while lithographed works entered the region from Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Those publications typically reflected Islamic traditions or belonged to the broader Chaghatay literary sphere. The missionaries thus entered a textual environment that was neither vacant nor underdeveloped, but structured around distinct technologies, genres, and authoritative frameworks. Contemporary Chinese provincial educational records from the late Qing period reinforce this observation: they describe the western regions of China as possessing distinctive customs and instructional practices, where local communities already maintained established scriptural and pedagogical systems. From that official perspective, the challenge lay not in the absence of learning per se, but in the presence of forms of knowledge transmission that differed from the standardized school model promoted by educational reform initiatives.

That is why the establishment of the printing office in 1912 represented more than a technical upgrade—it transformed the scale and structure of pedagogical work. Although plans for a full-scale printing office in Kashgar had been approved as early as 1893, implementation was delayed until equipment could be shipped from Sweden and transported across mountainous terrain by horse and camel caravan. Once operational, the press enabled activities previously conducted only provisionally through cyclostyle duplication and manuscript copying. Historical accounts underscore this point clearly: a primary function of the new press was the production of textbooks previously composed by hand. Spelling manuals, arithmetic texts, and geography primers had already been prepared by mission personnel; after the press became active, these handwritten materials were revised and rapidly converted into printed editions. New subject areas were introduced [8, 9]. Thus, the press did not merely reproduce existing content more efficiently—it actively contributed to the formation of a new pedagogical corpus.

The surviving schoolbooks illustrate this transition. Prior to 1912, missionaries distributed hand-copied alphabet guides and subject textbooks to students. After the press opened, such materials began to be produced "by modern means." In 1914, the press issued a thirty-page primer titled *a-b kita:bi*, edited by Gustaf Raquette and printed in an edition of one thousand copies. Its physical design is revealing: the title page identifies it simply as an ABC Book, and its opening pages proceed directly to letter forms, syllables, and elementary combinations—without introductory religious content. This does not indicate the removal of spiritual instruction from the curriculum; rather, it signals that literacy itself had become a discrete, systematically ordered object of instruction. The primer treated written language as a skill to be taught incrementally, replicated consistently across copies, and developed through sequential practice—a logic intrinsic to formal schooling [10, 11].

A similar pattern becomes even more evident in subsequent years. The 1914 alphabet book served as the foundation for later primers, and in 1920, Gustaf Raquette and Gustaf Ahlbert collaborated with a local scholar to revise and expand it under the title *Mekteb kitabi: A-B Kitabiniñ tedriji*. This detail is significant: educational print in the region was not solely produced externally and imposed upon local readers [10]. It relied on sustained collaboration, iterative revision, and an evolving understanding of effective vernacular pedagogical materials. In the same year, the press published *ilmi tæbijet*, "Natural Science," Part One, focusing on "Animals and Man." Its title page alone reflects a notable expansion of curricular scope. The press was no longer confined to producing primers and devotional materials; it was now naming, organizing, and publishing secular, teachable knowledge in the local language.

By the mid-1920s, the mission itself described the printing office explicitly in educational terms. A 1926 station pamphlet lists lower primary schools in Kashgar and additional schools in Hancheng (Shule) and Yengihisar, then identifies the printing press and bookbinding department as the facility responsible for producing all vernacular-language materials—including "Class-books for the Mission schools." It further notes that occasional printing services were provided for private individuals and foreign consulates. This final point is easily overlooked but crucial: although rooted in the mission, the printing office was integrated into the broader urban fabric. Its outputs circulated across multiple domains—schoolrooms, medical clinics, marketplaces, and diplomatic offices. Educational print emerged in Kashgar because the mission required standardized teaching materials, but it also emerged because printing itself was becoming a practical civic service.

This helps clarify why educational print in Kashgar cannot be understood merely as an auxiliary to evangelization. While originating within a missionary framework, it was equally shaped by the functional requirements of schooling, the scarcity of local printing infrastructure, collaborative engagement with local educators, and the broader educational developments of the late Qing and early Republican periods. Official discourse from those eras characterized the western regions of China as a complex pedagogical frontier. In practice, however, it became a site where literacy, orthography,

arithmetic, geography, and natural science were reorganized into reproducible, serially structured texts. The Swedish Mission Press did not immediately displace older manuscript and marketplace-based textual practices. Instead, it introduced a new textual form—the schoolbook—printed in the local language, designed for sequential use, and intended to transmit knowledge systematically across pupils, classrooms, and communities [12]. That was the foundational condition under which the mission press became a school press—and the condition under which mission-produced texts gradually entered wider public circulation.

3. Useful Knowledge for Whom: Arithmetic, Geography, and Documentary Literacy in Kashgar

If the first generation of mission schoolbooks in Kashgar taught children how to decode letters and syllables, the next generation taught them what kinds of knowledge were worth carrying into daily life. This was not yet a public sphere in the modern sense. It was, first of all, a school world. A 1926 station pamphlet still described the mission in institutional terms: lower primary schools, higher primary schools, girls' schools, orphanages, and a training school for local educators. The printing press stood inside that world and served it directly through "Class-books for the Mission schools." Reading came first, especially for beginners. Then followed arithmetic, spelling, religious instruction, natural science, geography, music, physical exercise, drawing, and handicraft. In Yarkand, older pupils also studied some Persian and Arabic grammar [5]. Useful knowledge, then, was not a single subject. It was a structured set of disciplines designed to produce literate, orderly, practically capable students. It began in the classroom, but it did not remain there.

Arithmetic offers the clearest example. The Swedish Mission Press did not issue a single mathematics booklet and leave the matter there. It printed a graded sequence: Arithmetic Part I, Arithmetic Part II, and a separate book of answers. A 1916 arithmetic text is divided into a first part on whole numbers and a second on fractions, followed by tables and a distinct answer key. A 1932 catalogue still listed these volumes among the press's core educational publications, placing them beside the ABC book, reading books, "Nature knowledge," geography, and the spelling book. That sequence reveals what arithmetic was for. It was not ornamental learning. It was a discipline of number, order, and verification. It trained students to move from simple reckoning to more advanced calculation and to measure correctness against printed solutions. The arithmetic books also transmitted a dense practical vocabulary of measure, money, volume, and time. Their language included terms for weights, grain measures, spoonfuls, minutes, handspans, and monetary units. In other words, arithmetic did not remain abstract. It attached calculation to trade, transport, household economy, and the quantification of the everyday.

Geography pushed this pedagogical project further outward. A 1927 geography textbook opened not with Kashgar alone but with diagrams of the globe, the equator, the poles, the hemispheres, and the division of continents. It is hard to imagine a sharper contrast with manuscript traditions that organized knowledge through genealogy, shrine geography, or moral anecdote. This was knowledge of the earth as a measurable whole. In the geography book and related educational texts, readers encountered terms for globe, compass, and even the United States of America. The Swedish Mission Press was therefore not only teaching local children where they lived. It was giving them a vernacular vocabulary for thinking at planetary scale. That scale did not erase Kashgar. It re-situated it. A pupil trained in this literature could move, at least on paper, from the oasis to the hemisphere. Useful knowledge in Kashgar was thus also geographical imagination (As shown in Figure 1).

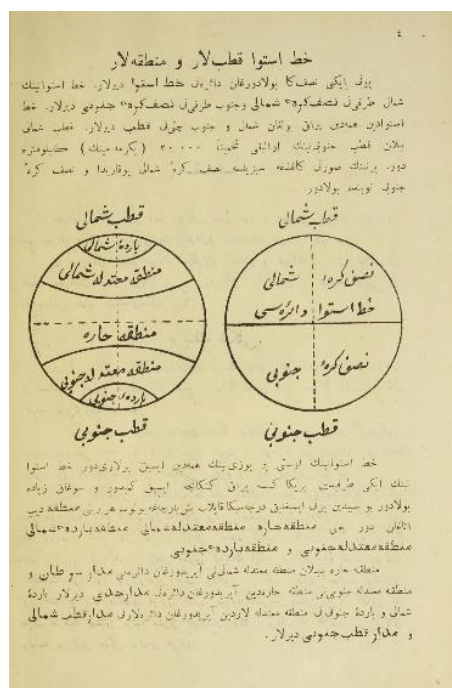


Figure 1. The 1927 Ilmi ɗɔɣra:fija's Introduction to the Equator, the Poles, and the Geographical Zones.

Source: Gustaf Ahlbert and Abdul Qadir Akhond, ilmi ɗɔɣra:fija [Geographical Science] (Kashgar: Swedish Mission Press, 1927), 4.

The most revealing case, however, may be documentary literacy. Arithmetic and geography all addressed the pupil as learner. The formulary known as Khuṭūṭ al-mutanawī', by contrast, addressed the reader as a future writer of social life. A 1932 catalogue listed it simply as "Examples of Letter Writing," among the press's principal books. Its introduction explicitly set out to present the forms of letters and documents widely used in the Six Cities. It assumed that readers, "especially graduates of traditional religious schools," would benefit from access to these models. The collection included family correspondence, business letters between merchants and customers, as well as complaints, debts, receipts, certificates, leases, mortgages, sales, procurations, contracts, and announcements. Here the answer to the question "useful knowledge for whom?" becomes especially clear [13, 14]. It was for pupils, certainly, but also for clerks, merchants, individuals submitting formal requests, debtors, landlords, and any literate person who needed to move through a world of paper. Documentary literacy was useful because it made social action reproducible in writing.

This is why the mission schoolbooks cannot be reduced to missionary pedagogy in the narrow sense. They did not merely supplement evangelization. They reorganized the vernacular field of practical knowledge. Arithmetic taught reckoning and units. Geography taught the earth as a global object. Documentary manuals taught how to write one's way through kinship, commerce, and law. These books were first made for mission schools, but the knowledge they carried exceeded the classroom almost from the beginning. In Kashgar, useful knowledge was knowledge that could be taught, repeated, checked, copied, and applied. Once printed in the local language, it also became portable. That portability was one of the conditions under which mission educational print began to move beyond the mission itself.

4. From Schoolroom to "the Six Cities": Orthography, Regional Address, and the Emergence of a Public

The transition from classroom instruction to broader textual engagement did not commence when mission publications ceased functioning solely as schoolbooks. It began when instructional materials started envisioning readers beyond individual classrooms

and isolated mission stations. In the western regions of China, this shift occurred first through textual forms, titles, and orthographic conventions—well before any form of mass circulation emerged. The reading community that gradually coalesced was not yet a political public. Rather, it constituted a textual public: a network of readers, copyists, clerks, religious educators, and students who could be addressed through a shared written language and standardized written formats.

The classroom remained the foundational site of this development. The 1928 Study Plan for Mission Schools in the western regions of China categorized schools by grade level and structured lessons accordingly. Its opening sections classified school types, allocated instructional time, and prescribed reading materials in a sequential order. Here, the school appears as a rigorously organized pedagogical space—one in which literacy acquisition followed prescribed levels, timetables, and a regulated corpus of texts. This arrangement served not only disciplinary purposes but also aimed to cultivate reproducible literacy. A student trained under such a plan did not merely acquire competence in reading a specific text; rather, they internalized the expectation that texts belong to an intelligible, systematic whole.

The impetus toward a wider readership emerged even earlier. In 1914, the mission contemplated launching a monthly periodical with secular content titled *jaruyluq alte šchernij ru:zna:məsi*, "Enlightenment: A Newspaper for the Six Cities." Though the journal never appeared in print, its proposed title carried significant conceptual weight. It designated a regional readership before such a readership had been materially realized in printed form. The term "Six Cities" functioned less as a strict geographical descriptor and more as a mode of address—imagining a communicative space where a single text could simultaneously reach multiple oasis settlements.

This aspiration culminated in the 1929 spelling guide. Its title page declared the work not merely as an orthographic reference but as a resource "suitable for the language of the Six Cities, as spoken in Kashgar and Yarkand." This formulation performed two interrelated functions: it acknowledged local linguistic variation by explicitly naming Kashgar and Yarkand, while simultaneously situating those locations within a broader, unified written domain—the "Six Cities." Consequently, the guide was not merely descriptive of existing usage; it was normative and constitutive. It advanced the proposition that a single orthographic standard could serve across a linguistically diverse region.

The preface reinforced this orientation. It opened with the assertion that literacy—including accurate reading and writing—was essential for all, particularly for educators and religious instructors. The guide stated that correct literacy practices were necessary for effective communication and that the manual had been prepared both for classroom use and for individuals seeking proficiency in the local language [15]. Orthography was thus framed not as a technical or scholarly specialty, but as a shared social requirement—relevant equally to teachers, religious scholars, and general literate readers. A textbook originally intended for classroom instruction now extended its address beyond institutional boundaries.

The guide's pedagogical structure operationalized this claim [7, 16]. Early lessons systematically introduced letter forms, distinguished phonetic values, and resolved recurring spelling challenges through carefully sequenced examples. It was not a literary or ideological statement, but a practical manual. Yet such manuals perform profound cultural work: they convey that there exists a socially sanctioned way to write; that this standard is teachable; and that it applies uniformly across towns and among diverse readers. In this sense, the orthographic guide did not simply document an emerging readership—it actively contributed to its formation. Readers in Kashgar and Yarkand could now be positioned within a common written framework—not because their speech was identical, but because their linguistic differences could be accommodated within a single, codified norm.

This development held particular significance, as the local language lacked an officially endorsed orthographic standard at the time. While the Swedish Mission Press

had long pursued relatively consistent spelling conventions—including for Arabic and Persian loanwords—the 1929 guide gave this effort formal, book-based articulation. It established a regional orthographic reference for the southern part of the western regions of China [17]. Though it neither eliminated linguistic variation nor immediately achieved universal adoption, it provided a benchmark against which local usage could be recognized as variation. The distinction between localized practice and regional standard thus became analytically visible.

By 1932, the mission's catalogue listed the spelling guide, the study plan, language instruction materials, and the letter-writing manual together as a unified educational inventory. Viewed retrospectively, these works constitute a coherent sequence: the study plan organized classroom instruction; the formulary standardized documentary conventions; and the spelling guide codified the written language capable of supporting both. Collectively, these publications enabled the conceptualization not only of discrete schools, but of dispersed readers, writers, and document users linked across a geographic area. This was not yet a fully formed public sphere [1, 10]. However, it represented the emergence of a public in a more grounded, functional sense: a community brought into being—and sustained—through print, normative standards, and formal textual conventions.

5. Conclusion

Between 1912 and 1932, the Swedish Mission Press in Kashgar did more than expand the material reach of missionary work. It altered the form in which knowledge could be organized, taught, and circulated in the western regions of China. What began as a practical solution to the limits of handwritten school texts gradually became something larger. The press made it possible to standardize primers, sequence lessons, and reproduce the same text across multiple readers and multiple sites. In that sense, it did not simply support schooling. It helped define what schooling could be.

The significance of this transformation lies not only in the fact that books were printed, but in the kinds of books that were printed. The early alphabet books and graded readers treated literacy as a skill that could be broken down, ordered, and repeated. Arithmetic books did not offer abstract number alone. They attached calculation to money, weight, measure, and exchange. Geography did not merely describe places. It repositioned Kashgar within a larger spatial order, one that ran from the oasis to the globe. Natural science brought animals, the body, and bodily care into a vernacular language of instruction. Model letters and legal forms extended this pedagogical world into trade, kinship, debt, and everyday administration. Taken together, these texts reveal a shift from conversion through isolated reading toward the production of practical literacy as a social capacity.

This is why the movement traced in this paper is best understood as a movement from mission text to public text. The books remained rooted in mission institutions, but they were never fully confined to them. They passed between schools, religious teachers, private readers, clerks, merchants, and consular settings. They entered a manuscript world without simply replacing it. They offered new textual forms that could be learned, copied, reused, and adapted. By the late 1920s, orthographic instruction and regional address made this tendency unmistakable. A spellingbook "for the Six Cities" did more than regulate writing. It imagined a field of readers larger than the classroom and broader than the single town. It proposed that a common written order could gather dispersed local usage into a shared textual domain.

That domain was still limited, uneven, and fragile. It was not yet a public sphere in the stronger political sense. Yet it was already producing some of the conditions from which such a sphere might later emerge: reproducible texts, portable knowledge, standardized forms, and readers who could imagine themselves addressed as part of something larger than their immediate school or neighborhood. In Kashgar, public texts appeared before any fully formed public did. They were among the means by which such a public first became thinkable.

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