

The World Book Company's ABC Series and the Popularization of Knowledge: A Study of Its Relationship with Left-Wing Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the World Book Company's ABC Series (1928–1933) as artifacts of commercial operations as well as a pivotal cultural project by some leftist intellectuals, exploring its role in advancing knowledge popularization and its intricate relationship with left-wing propaganda tactics. By analyzing the series' editorial philosophy, author network, and content, this study demonstrates how leftist intellectuals, including Mao Dun and Yang Xianjiang, leveraged the series to disseminate Marxist theories and try to promote social reform through accessible education. The ABC Series exemplified a strategic blend of "covert propagation": leftist authors reinterpreted myths, history, and social sciences through a historical materialistic lens, critiquing imperialism, feudalism, and class hierarchies while avoiding direct political confrontation. Its success also manifested a symbiosis between capitalist publishing logic and leftist thought, revealing how capitalist institutions could facilitate ideological subversion and offering a critical case study of profit, propaganda and power.

KEYWORDS

ABC series; Left-wing; Knowledge popularization

1 Introduction

The ABC Series published by the World Book Company in Shanghai during the late 1920s and early 1930s stands as a landmark in China's modern publishing history. Comprising 154 titles across 24 disciplines, the series aimed to "make academic knowledge accessible to the general public through concise, engaging, and affordable volumes." (Xu Weinan, 1929, p. 26) The rationale behind the "ABC" ending can be explained through its symbolic significance and editorial objectives. Firstly, "ABC" represents the first three letters of the English alphabet, serving as a universal symbol of foundational knowledge and learning beginnings. By adopting this term as the series suffix, the publisher intends to emphasize that the books serve as introductory resources, providing readers with essential concepts and entry-level insights in their respective fields, much like how "ABC" represents the starting point of language acquisition. Secondly, the simplicity and memorability of "ABC" align with the series' goal of establishing a recognizable brand identity. The term conveys a sense of accessibility and approachability, signaling to audiences that the content is designed to be understandable and engaging for beginners or general readers. Edited by Xu Weinan and featuring contributions from prominent intellectuals such as Sun Benwen, Zhang Ruogu, Xia Mianzun, Wang Tiran, Feng Zikai, Kuai Shixun, and Zeng Xubai, the ABC Series achieves a unity of academic rigor and accessibility in content. Also, against the backdrop of political upheaval and intellectual ferment, it reflected the left-wing commitment to democratizing knowledge and challenging elitist educational paradigms. By presenting complex theories in simplified language, the series sought to empower ordinary citizens with critical tools for social change, aligning with the Marxist emphasis on education as a vehicle for class consciousness. This paper delves into the historical context, editorial strategies, and ideological implications of the ABC Series, situating it within the broader narrative of knowledge popularization and left-wing cultural activism.

2 "Covert propagation": the infiltration of left-wing ideology

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of left-wing cultural movements in Mainland China. Leftist intellectuals sought to propagate revolutionary ideas through literature, art, and education, aiming to mobilize the masses against imperialism and feudalism. Central to this effort was the concept of culturalcultural popularization, which emphasized making knowledge accessible to workers and peasants, thereby fostering collective resistance. Though rooted in making profit, the ABC Series corresponds to this milieu, coinciding with the left-wing belief that education was a weapon for social transformation. World Book Company, under the leadership of Shen Zhifang, strategically positioned the series as a commercial venture with educational and ideological goals. By recruiting left-wing intellectuals like Mao Dun and Yang Xianjiang, the company tapped into the growing demand for Marxist-informed literature while maintaining a veneer of academic respectability.

The series became a platform for leftist intellectuals to engage in "covert propagation" of progressive ideas. Some leftist authors transformed academic topics into vehicles for leftist critique, blending scholarship with ideological

advocacy. Key figures included: ① Mao Dun. Using pseudonyms like Xuanzhu and Fangbi, Mao contributed five titles, including *Studies on Chinese Mythology ABC* and *Nordic Mythology ABC*. His works reinterpreted myths through a sociology lens, linking primitive social structures to class struggle and critiquing contemporary social hierarchies. ② Yang Xianjiang. As a Communist Party member, Yang's *History of Education ABC* applied Marxist theories to analyze education as a tool of class domination, criticizing feudal and capitalist educational systems. ③ Gao Ersong and Gao Erbai. They are brothers and former Communist cadres and they authored titles like *History of Political Thought ABC* and *Social Policy ABC*, introducing socialist theories and labor rights.

There are also subversive themes in academic discourse in the ABC Series: ① Social science. Titles like *Economics ABC* and *Municipal Management ABC* introduced Marxist economic theories, including direct citations of *Das Kapital*. ② Literary studies. Mao Dun's mythological works used anthropological methods to expose class contradictions in ancient societies, implicitly criticizing Kuomintang (KMT) rule. ③ History and geography. Books like *Japanese History ABC* and *Human Geography ABC* not only critiqued imperialism and colonialism but also analyzed history from the perspective of historical materialism and emphasized the inevitability of human society's transition from capitalist society to communist society.

By framing radical ideas as academic inquiry, the ABC Series avoided direct political confrontation while nurturing leftist thinking among readers. Following the 1927 KMT purge of Communists, the Nationalist regime intensified censorship of left-wing literature. The ABC Series faced various pressures: as a commercial publisher, World Book Company needed to avoid legal penalties, while leftist contributors still sought to sustain ideological outreach. Hence, the leftist intellectuals positioned their works as a "ladder to scholarship," using terms like "scientific inquiry" and "educational popularization" to deflect censorship. Leftist authors used pseudonyms and avoided overt political terminology. For example, Yang Xianjiang's *History of Education ABC* discussed class struggle in education without explicit Communist branding. Moreover, many ABC titles adopted comparative or global perspectives to circumvent domestic censorship. For instance, *Labor Law ABC* cited European labor policies to advocate for workers' rights in China. And *Women's Movement ABC* used international feminist theories to critique gender inequality, avoiding direct confrontation with KMT family policies.

The ABC Series exemplifies how leftist intellectuals in China navigated political repression and commercial imperatives to embed revolutionary ideology within ostensibly academic and educational frameworks after the April 12th Incident. By merging Marxist analysis with popular scholarship, deploying pseudonyms, and adopting comparative perspectives, they transformed publishing into a site of cultural resistance, challenging imperialist and feudal structures while evading direct confrontation with the KMT regime. This "covert propagation" not only sustained leftist discourse under censorship but also forged a bridge between intellectual theory and mass mobilization, illustrating the power of cultural institutions as arenas for ideological struggle.

3 Interdisciplinary integration: the justification of left-wing ideology

The ABC Series transcended disciplinary boundaries to create a cohesive framework for leftist ideological diffusion, demonstrating how interdisciplinary knowledge could serve as a vehicle for Marxist critique. By integrating social sciences, literature, history, and philosophy into accessible narratives, leftist intellectuals transformed fragmented academic fields into a unified discourse challenging feudalism, imperialism, and class oppression. This strategy not only expanded the series' readership but also embedded revolutionary ideas within the seemingly neutral terrain of "universal knowledge."

Leftist authors like Mao Dun and Yang Xianjiang employed interdisciplinary methodologies to reinterpret traditional disciplines through a Marxist lens. Mao Dun's *Studies on Chinese Mythology ABC* and *Nordic Mythology ABC* merged anthropological analysis with sociological critiques, decoding ancient myths to reveal patterns of class struggle in primitive societies. By framing mythological narratives as reflections of social hierarchies, he implicitly critiqued contemporary power structures under the Kuomintang regime. Similarly, Yang Xianjiang's *History of Education ABC* synthesized historical materialism with educational theory, arguing that class domination was perpetuated through curricula and pedagogical practices—a thesis that transcended educational scholarship to indict broader capitalist and feudal systems.

The series' social science volumes, such as *Economics ABC* and *Municipal Management ABC*, directly cited Marxist economic theories, including excerpts from *Das Kapital*, while maintaining an appearance of academic objectivity. Gao Ersong and Gao Erbai's *History of Political Thought ABC* and *Social Policy ABC* introduced socialist theories and labor rights through comparative political analysis, using European welfare models to advocate for proletarian interests in China. These works avoided overt political slogans by presenting Marxist ideas as part of a global intellectual tradition, thus circumventing censorship while fostering critical awareness of economic exploitation. In historical and geographical studies, titles like *Japanese History ABC* and *Human Geography ABC* deployed historical materialism to reframe national

and global narratives. By emphasizing the inevitability of social evolution from capitalism to communism, these works positioned imperialism as a transient phase in historical development. For example, *Human Geography ABC* critiqued colonialism through the lens of spatial inequality, linking geographic expansion to capitalist greed—a narrative that aligned with leftist anti-imperialist agendas while masquerading as neutral scholarship.

The series' editorial philosophy, led by Xu Weinan, actively promoted interdisciplinary connections, arguing that "true knowledge popularization must break free from academic silos" (Xu Weinan, 1929, p. 28). This approach created a cumulative ideological effect: readers exposed to Marxist analyses in literature, history, and economics were encouraged to view social issues through a unified class-conscious framework. Feng Zikai's *Art Education ABC*, for instance, merged aesthetic theory with proletarian politics, advocating for art as a tool of mass mobilization—an idea that complemented Mao Dun's literary critiques and Yang Xianjiang's educational theories to form a holistic leftist worldview.

By dissolving disciplinary barriers, the series created a seamless narrative that positioned Marxist critique as a natural extension of scientific inquiry. This approach not only expanded the reach of leftist ideology but also prefigured later Communist efforts to integrate theory with practice across diverse fields. Accordingly, efforts made by leftist intellectuals in the ABC Series demonstrated that interdisciplinary knowledge could be both a commercial asset and a revolutionary weapon, revealing the profound potential of cultural production to reshape societal consciousness under the drive of intellectual curiosity.

4 Commercial logic and left-wing ideology: symbiosis between profit and propaganda

The ABC Series exemplifies a sophisticated interplay between capitalist publishing mechanisms and leftist ideological dissemination, revealing how commercial logic can serve as both a vehicle and veil for political subversion. At its core, the series' design—systematic knowledge delivery through accessible language—aligned not only with left-wing ideals of educational empowerment but also with World Book Company's strategic goal of occupying the knowledge popularization book market.

World Book Company employed aggressive commercial tactics to maximize sales: ① Marketing and branding. Advertisements in major newspapers like *Shen Bao* emphasized the series' "authoritative authors" and "systematic knowledge," appealing to urban youth and students. ② Affordable pricing and high-volume publication. The ABC Book Series comprised 163 volumes, with paperbacks priced at 0.5 yuan and hardcovers at 0.6 yuan per volume. This dual-version model offered exceptionally low prices, particularly for the paperbacks, aligning with the purchasing power and practical needs of most contemporary readers. Even the full-set hardcover edition was priced at only 97.8 yuan, making it accessible for institutional buyers like schools and government agencies despite the large number of volumes. This strategy quickly captured market share by balancing affordability with scale. ③ Elegant binding and dual-format strategy. Prior to the ABC Series, World Book Company primarily focused on paperbacks due to their low cost and accessibility. For the ABC Series, however, the publisher adopted a hybrid approach, using high-quality Dowling paper and offering both paperback and hardcover editions after careful internal deliberation. This design catered to dual demands: paperbacks remained budget-friendly for everyday readers, while hardcovers provided collectible value for enthusiasts. The combination of cost-effective production and aesthetic appeal enhanced the series' market versatility, appealing to both practical users and book collectors. ④ Curriculum integration. Collaborations with universities like Fudan University turned the ABC Series into essential textbooks, guaranteeing steady sales.

For leftist writers, the series offered a strategic terrain for ideological infiltration under the guise of commercial collaboration. Financial stability was a primary incentive: exiled or underground activists relied on ABC Series royalties during periods of political persecution, enabling them to sustain underground organizing while producing texts. For example, Mao Dun relied on ABC Series earnings during his exile in Japan (1928–1930). More significantly, the series's mass appeal transcended narrow leftist circles: as *Shi Shi Xin Bao* noted, its status as a "knowledge treasury" for youth created a pipeline of recruits for subsequent revolutionary movements, demonstrating how commercial success could translate into organic ideological mobilization. Crucially, the association with non-leftist scholars like Zhang Junmai provided a "legitimacy shield," allowing works like Yang Xianjiang's Marxist analysis of education to circulate under the umbrella of mutual academic consensus.

By democratizing knowledge, the series aimed to challenge elitist institutions and foster a critical citizenry. The left-wing movement sought to counter the dominance of bourgeois culture by promoting proletarian aesthetics and ideology. The ABC Series contributed to this effort by presenting alternative narratives in fields like history, literature, and science. For example, works on art education, such as Feng Zikai's *Art Education ABC*, emphasized the social function of art, advocating for art that served the masses rather than elite audiences. Many titles in the series implicitly addressed class issues. Yang Xianjiang's *History of Education ABC* criticized the bourgeoisie's control over education, arguing that true education should empower the working class. Similarly, Mao Dun's literary analyses highlighted the role of literature in reflecting social contradictions, encouraging readers to question capitalist exploitation. And many authors, including

Chen Wangdao, were active in these organizations, using their contributions to the series to advance the movement's goals. The series also published works by leftist educators and activists, further solidifying its ties to the broader cultural movement.

The ABC Series was a commercial and cultural success, selling thousands of copies and influencing subsequent publishing ventures like the Commercial Press's Library of Universal Knowledge. Its impact extended beyond intellectual circles, reaching students, teachers, and self-educated workers. The series' emphasis on accessibility and interdisciplinary learning set a precedent for popular education in China, inspiring later initiatives in socialist education. Beyond its historical context, the ABC Series underscores the dialectical relationship between education, capitalism, and political change. World Book Company's commercial success demonstrated that ideological propagation could coexist with market-driven publishing, revealing how progressive ideas might infiltrate mainstream culture through seemingly apolitical channels. Moreover, the series' emphasis on "cultural popularization" prefigured later Communist strategies to align intellectual labor with proletarian interests, laying groundwork for the eventual synthesis of Marxist theory with Chinese revolutionary practice. In this light, the ABC Series emerges not merely as a publishing phenomenon but as a pivotal moment in modern Chinese history, where the pen became a weapon as powerful as the sword, and where the infiltration of left-wing ideology through cultural production shaped the trajectory of social transformation.

This symbiosis between profit and propaganda revealed the dialectical relationship between capital and ideology in Republican China: World Book Company exploited leftist intellectuals' cultural influence and popularity to dominate the educational publishing market, while leftist writers used the company's commercial clout to propagate ideas forbidden in overtly political forums. Leftist intellectuals transformed Marxist critiques into "universal knowledge" palatable to both state institutions and urban masses. In doing so, it prefigured later 20th-century examples of "subversive compliance," where marginalized ideologies negotiate power structures through seemingly complicit commercial practices. Ultimately, the ABC Series stands as a testament to how capitalist enterprises, when driven by both profit and historical contingency, can become agents of cultural revolution—a paradox that continues to inform studies of ideology, commerce, and resistance in modern Chinese history.

5 Conclusion

The ABC Series emerges not merely as a publishing phenomenon but as a multifaceted historical artifact that encapsulates the dialectical tension between commercial capitalism, intellectual activism, and political repression. Its success revealed how a profit-driven enterprise became a clandestine vehicle for leftist ideological dissemination, illustrating the profound capacity of cultural production to subvert hegemonic structures under the guise of academic and educational neutrality.

At its core, the ABC Series exemplifies a strategic synthesis of covert resistance and market pragmatism. Leftist intellectuals, including Mao Dun, Yang Xianjiang, and others, skillfully embedded Marxist critiques of class, imperialism, and feudalism within ostensibly apolitical scholarly frameworks—reinterpreting myths through sociological lenses, analyzing education as a tool of class domination, and invoking historical materialism in studies of history and geography. Through pseudonyms, comparative methodologies, and the rhetoric of "scientific inquiry," they navigated the KMT's censorship regime, transforming commercial publishing into a site of cultural warfare. This "subversive compliance"—where radical ideas were packaged as universal knowledge—highlighted the malleability of capitalist institutions when confronted with ideological imperatives, offering a critical case study in how marginalized discourses can negotiate power through seemingly complicit practices. Commercially, the series' success underscored the symbiotic relationship between profit and propaganda.

World Book Company's aggressive marketing strategies—affordable pricing, dual-format editions, and curricular integration—turned the ABC Series into a mass-cultural phenomenon, reaching beyond intellectual elites to engage students, teachers, and self-educated workers. This commercial viability not only sustained leftist writers financially during periods of political persecution but also expanded the reach of Marxist ideas, creating a "pipeline" of ideological mobilization that prefigured later revolutionary movements. In doing so, the series challenged conventional binaries between commercial enterprise and political activism, demonstrating that capitalist mechanisms could be harnessed to advance anti-imperialist and anti-feudal agendas. Historically, the ABC Series occupies a pivotal position in 20th-century Chinese cultural history as a precursor to socialist education models. Its emphasis on "cultural popularization"—democratizing knowledge to foster class consciousness—foreshadowed the Communist Party's later strategies of aligning intellectual labor with proletarian interests, laying groundwork for the synthesis of Marxist theory with Chinese revolutionary practice. Moreover, the series' interdisciplinary scope and commitment to accessible scholarship established a precedent for popular education that influenced subsequent initiatives, from the Commercial Press's Library of Universal Knowledge to mid-20th-century socialist publishing projects. Theoretically, the ABC series enriches the understanding of ideology in material culture. As both a commercial product and a cultural project, it reveals how ideas

are embedded in everyday artifacts to shape social consciousness. The series' ability to blend academic rigor with popular appeal challenges narratives that frame leftist activism as exclusively elitist or confrontational, instead highlighting the importance of "stealth" ideological dissemination in authoritarian contexts. It also contributes to debates on the role of publishers as historical agents, illustrating how commercial entities, when driven by both profit and historical contingency, can inadvertently become catalysts for cultural revolution.

In conclusion, the ABC Series stands as a testament to the power of intellectual ingenuity and institutional flexibility in times of political upheaval. Its legacy lies not only in its immediate impact on knowledge dissemination and leftist mobilization but also in its broader revelation of the complex, often paradoxical, interplay between capital, ideology, and resistance in modern Chinese history. As such, it invites further exploration into how similar dynamics of subversion and compliance have shaped other periods of cultural and political transition, both in China and globally. Also, the series not only democratized knowledge but also indirectly contributed to the broader social movement. It exemplified the intersection of publishing, education, and political activism and its legacy endures as a model of how popular literature can challenge hegemonic structures and foster critical engagement.

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