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A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CHINESE EDUCATION SYSTEM

ABSTRACT

The article offers a brief overview of the structure and main areas of development in the Chinese education system. The transition period in China's education system can be characterized by the following slogan: "On the way to modernization, world and future". Indeed, systemic reforms pave the way in which the state's policy is playing a guiding role and schools and universities a leading role in the gradual search for special Chinese ways of education development. The focus of the article is mainly on the types of education in China and the conditions for obtaining education (preschool, primary, secondary, upper secondary and postgraduate education). Besides, it is crucial to consider the structure of vocational education, which is implemented in the following types: primary, secondary, higher vocational education and vocational training. Moreover, the article describes the features and forms of education for children with special needs as an important part of general education. Emphasis is placed on the level and conditions of higher and postgraduate education in China (bachelor's, master's, doctoral degrees). It must be noted that the article highlights several specialized projects and comprehensive plans in the field of education aimed at reforming and improving the status of education, including "Project No 211" and "Project No 985". It also outlines the main milestones of "The Implementation Plan" and "The Plan until the Year of 2035", as well as the measures taken to realize many other goals despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Particular attention is paid to the support provided by the Chinese government to the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has affected all its levels to not allow the educational process to become radically different and manage to strengthen in the global crisis. Finally, the article addresses several controversial issues in China's education sector, including reforming the system of education quality assessment and reformatting private education.

Keywords: education, China, preschool and primary education, secondary education, education for children with special needs, higher education, professional education, adult education, educational projects, "gaokao".

АНОТАЦІЯ

Стаття пропонує огляд структури та основних напрямів розвитку системи освіти КНР. З'ясовано, що перехідний період перетворень в освітній галузі Китаю здійснюється під гаслом «Повернутися обличчям у бік модернізації, до зовнішнього



світу та майбутнього», де системні реформи прокладають шлях завдяки виваженому політичному курсу держави щодо пошуку особливого «китайського шляху» розвитку освіти. Проаналізовано види освіти в КНР та умови їх здобуття, зокрема: дошкільна, початкова, середня, вища освіта. Розглянуто структуру професійної освіти (початкова, середня, вища професійна освіта і професійне навчання). Описано особливості та форми навчання дітей з особливими потребами, як важливої складової базової освіти. Зосереджено увагу на умовах організації вищої та післядипломної освіти в Китаї (бакалавр, магістр, доктор). Схарактеризовано спеціалізовані проекти та комплексні плани в освітній галузі, спрямовані на реформування та підвищення статусу освіти у КНР, зокрема «Проект 211» та «Проект 985». Окреслено основні напрями Плану модернізації освіти до 2035 року, робота над багатьма цілями та завданнями яких розпочалася у 2019 та на початку 2020 року, незважаючи на пандемію COVID-19. Окрему увагу приділено заходам, які запроваджено китайським урядом для підтримки системи освіти під час пандемії COVID-19, зокрема удосконаленню навчального процесу та консолідації зусиль всіх зацікавлених сторін в умовах глобальної кризи. Окреслено суперечливі питання та проблеми, які мають місце в освітній галузі КНР, зокрема реформування системи забезпечення якості освіти та переформатування шляхів здобуття освіти в приватних закладах освіти.

Ключові слова: *освіта, КНР, дошкільна та початкова освіта, середня освіта, освіта дітей з особливими потребами, вища освіта, професійна освіта, освіта дорослих, освітні проекти, «гаокао».*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the written history of mankind, China has always been on the world stage. At the same time, its role and significance in different periods of history were completely different. The Chinese, as people, and China, as a country, is a nation with the oldest culture, as well as an integral part of the world community. During the last two decades of the 20th century, the world has witnessed not only an impressive strengthening of China's position in politics and economics but also modernization in all domains of human life. Nowadays, almost no one doubts the primacy of China in the international arena.

China's teacher education has come a long and glorious way. In all historical periods, it has been closely linked with the socio-economic structure of the country, the values of society, laws and legislation in the field of education, historical and pedagogical development in the world. Starting with the pedagogical ideas of Confucius, the system of teacher training gradually acquired the features that are still groundbreaking today.

The analysis of China's education system has been the subject of several studies. As a result, a vast experience has been gained: relevant information on the content, structure and functions of teacher education; the features of the multilevel education system; the organization of the educational process and postgraduate education; the main trends in higher education.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

China is one of the countries, with the oldest traditions in the education field. Therefore, the article aims to analyze the features of China's educational policy, structure,



content and trends throughout its history and explore the problems and prospects of its development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

The authors of the article have processed the accumulated data via the methods of analysis and synthesis, hermeneutic interpretation and searching, deduction and induction, generalization, systematization, interpretation, comparative analysis. It has allowed them to present their findings within the scope of this article. Moreover, they have conducted a theoretical analysis of the data contained in relevant scientific sources.

Nowadays, researchers pay more attention to the specifics of the Chinese education system, which makes this topic increasingly important.

A detailed analysis of scientific literature shows that several studies have been devoted to the problem of China's education. The Chinese educator Huang Yan Pei (1985) was the first to propose the theory of the education system and put it into practice in 1917. The gained experience in reforming the education sphere for the last 30 years has led to diverse results on the development of pedagogical doctrine and education in China. The scientific works of the following researchers are quite influential: Tao Xinji (1991), Yuan Zhenguo (1998), Zhao Yun (2017), Chen Zhaoming (2010), Zhang Xulan (2008), Yunxin Zhu (2021), Su Xiaohuan (2002), Huang Zhongjing (2020).

Chen Zhaoming (2010) notes that "China, as one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, is actively reforming its education system". Determining the direction of reforms, the Chinese government assume that education should be considered as a part of the development of the nation. They have also presented several slogans, such as "science and education lead the nation to prosperity", "human potential will ensure the power of the country", "to the world and the future". Besides, "reforms in China are a good way to transform the education system. Being rather consistent, they reflect the combination of development and stability, current trends and theories with their national tradition" (Zhaoming, 2010).

RESULTS

To pursue the course of science and education in China, the Chinese government did not solely follow bare political orders but recognized the need to create constitutional and legislative guarantees. As a result of twenty years of efforts, the country established a legal structure in the field of education. In 1980 and 1986, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China and Standing Committee enacted the academic degree law and compulsory education law, followed by the "Teacher's Law of the People's Republic of China" (1995), "The Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China" (1996), "Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China" (1996), "Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China" (1998), "Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language of the People's Republic of China" (2000), "Non-State Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China" (2002). The State Council of the People's Republic of China has also published "Working Regulations on the Elimination of Illiteracy", "Regulations on the Management of Preschool Institutions", "Regulations on Education for the Disabled People", "Regulations on Teacher Qualifications", "Regulations on the Establishment of Public Institutions by Public Forces", "Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities in China".



The Ministry of Education has developed approximately 200 normative instructions, which almost completely cover all aspects of education. The regions have also elaborated about 150 regulations on local education. These laws, regulations, provisions and guidelines have provided a solid legal basis for activities in all major areas of education. These radical changes have played an important role in the course of the country's revival based on science and education.

In China, there are such types of educational institutions as regular public schools, private schools and international schools. The last two institutions are most preferred by foreigners since they provide an opportunity to gradually learn the culture and linguistic features of the country together with native speakers.

The Chinese education system includes preschool (学前班), primary school (小学), incomplete secondary education (九年义务教育), complete secondary education (普通高级中学) and higher education (高等教育). The state organizes the education system on a scientific basis. It is the State Council or education administration with appropriate authorities that determine forms of education, duration of study, enrollment, objectives of education, as well as other components of the educational system.

Preschool education is currently represented by two- or three-year education, implemented in kindergartens and preschool groups. At the same time, parents are expected to pay tuition fees for kindergartens and preschools, both in public and private schools.

General education is provided at the level of preschool, primary and secondary education. Preschool education involves studying in kindergartens or preschools. Primary education takes place in primary schools and private training centres. Secondary education is associated with general secondary schools (first and senior levels). Education for children with special needs refers to general basic education in primary and secondary special (correctional) schools.

In China, the education of children with special needs is an important part of basic education. There are two forms of education for this social group. The first one includes special schools for children with vision and hearing conditions. It must be noted that such schools were established after the proclamation of the People's Republic. The second one encompasses special classes at regular schools or in general groups, which is a more common case. For a long time, the government have been organizing special classes in regular primary and secondary schools, as well as arranging for children with special needs to attend school in the general flow. All these regulations have significantly influenced the development of special education. They also cover large rural areas, especially mountain villages and poor suburbs, where there are serious obstacles for such children to attend schools. Classes for people with special needs have already become a major form of compulsory education.

In China, they implement compulsory nine-year education (Education Law of the People's Republic of China (article 18), "The Law of Nine-Year Compulsory Education"). Nine-year education is compulsory, universal, free of charge and uniform (in terms of educational resources, teaching staff and educational levels) throughout the country). After graduating from general secondary school of the first level (receiving nine-year education), students can enter the general secondary school of higher education or obtain vocational education.

The Education Law of the People's Republic of China also provides for vocational education (技工教育) and adult education (成人教育). There are the following levels of



vocational education: primary, secondary, higher vocational education and vocational training. In cities, vocational school graduates usually work as technicians, accountants, paramedics, nurses and technicians. In villages, professional technical training is closely connected with the popularization of agronomic equipment and directly serves agricultural production.

Vocational training at the primary level means vocational training at the first stage. This involves acquiring educational and non-educational qualifications within vocational schools. The system of education for educational qualifications is scheduled for three or four years. Students mainly pass the basic educational subjects of the lower secondary school, along with vocational training and technical skills during one year. This is one of the forms of promoting compulsory nine-year education. Training for non-educational qualifications prepares workers who have certain basic professional knowledge of the first stage and certain professional technical skills.

Secondary vocational training is based on compulsory nine-year education, which refers to the teaching of the secondary school stage of higher education. It aims to train employees with comprehensive professional skills on a diverse level that can be used directly on the first line of service, technology and management. Currently, vocational secondary education can be obtained within secondary vocational schools, technical colleges, vocational secondary schools and vocational secondary schools for adults. Secondary vocational schools mainly enrol low secondary school graduates (the term of study is 4 years). It must be noted that some schools accept high school graduates (the term of study is 2 years). Technical schools (the term of study is from 2 to 3 years) accept high school graduates, as well as train employed and unemployed youth. Vocational high schools of higher degree accept graduates from secondary schools of a lower level (the term of study is from 2 to 4 years).

The purpose of higher professional education is to train specialists who are specially used in technical fields and universities. This training is an integral part of higher education in China. Undoubtedly, higher education is at the forefront of China's national priorities.

The reforms in the higher education system are determined by the main world trends, according to which education becomes a source of development of society and the nation, thus ensuring a high rate of economic development. In the context of the focus on the global educational space in the Chinese higher education system, the key trend is to spread innovations while preserving national traditions and national identity.

China's higher education is represented by such educational institutions as universities and vocational colleges.

In China, students take the National College Entrance Examination, called "gaokao" (高考) to enter university. High scores can help students to enter the best educational institution and thus give them a chance to climb the social ladder.

The main levels of higher education study are as follows:

– The first level – bachelor's degree (本科) with the term of study of 4 years (medical degrees – 6 years). To apply for a bachelor's degree, applicants must have a document of 12 years of compulsory education. Students receive an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree, depending on the chosen programme. An associate's degree can be obtained after 2–3 years of study. A bachelor's course lasts from 4 to 6 years. Medical students must study for a year more and have another year of practice;



– The second level – master’s degree (硕士) with the term of study from 2 to 3 years.

At this stage, students must obtain profound knowledge of particular subjects. Before enrolling in the master’s programme, students choose the field of study and the topic of the future dissertation, which should correspond to the chosen field of knowledge. During the study, Master students prepare projects and scientific publications. Each activity is evaluated by the appropriate number of points required to obtain the right to obtain a PhD;

– The third level – doctoral degree (博士) with the term of study from 2 to 4 years.

Doctoral students can have a full-time job or part-time job. Education of specialists of the first category lasts up to 3 years. As a rule, the age of the applicant should not exceed forty years. The term of study of a specialist with a doctorate is 3 years, and age restrictions are up to 45 years. The preparation of the dissertation is supervised by the curator. At the same time, the intervention of the supervisor in the work must be minimized. The main requirement for the finished dissertation is its uniqueness. Works containing more than 15% of plagiarism are not allowed. Even though doctoral studies are not free of charge, current students can count on government grants.

Education reforms in China have affected all major areas of university education: admission requirements; models of education; the content of the pedagogical process; forms and methods of teaching and learning; the features of the educational process and research.

The main priorities of the Chinese government in the field of education are the following: establishing several universities under advanced international standards; turning them into platforms for developing the most important and prioritized scientific disciplines and innovative research; providing them with additional funding. The most famous are “Project No 211” (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 1995), aimed at creating hundreds of the best universities in the country, and “Project No 985” (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 1998), which covers 39 universities to bring them to a world-class level and get into the first hundred in the world rankings. Other leading projects for which the government allocates special-purpose budget funds are “The Plan of Scientific and Technical Innovations in Higher Education”, “The Project to Improve the Quality of Education and Its Reform in Higher Education”, “The Innovative Project of Postgraduate Education” and some others.

An important milestone in the reforming of China’s higher education system became the decision on 21st of September, 2017, to approve the number of the universities in the “世界一流大学和一流学科建设” project, translated as “The World-Class Universities and First-Class Professionals”. A total of 42 first-grade universities and 465 first-class disciplines were selected from 140 universities (Wikipedia, 2022).

In 2015, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and State Council of the People’s Republic of China announced a new stage in higher education reforms. Priority was given to the plan for developing world-class universities and first-class disciplines. Initially, it was planned that the “World-Class Universities and Disciplines” project would gradually replace “Project No 211” and “Project No 985”. So far, they continue to operate simultaneously.

In 2019, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China published two important plans to advance reforms and develop China’s education sector based on several previous reforms since China’s opening in 1978. These documents (China’s Education Modernization Plan till 2035 (2035) (Australian Government, 2020), Implementation Plan



for Accelerating Education Modernisation (2018–2022) (2019)) are aimed to substantially modernize China’s education system by 2035. It follows that the country intends to fulfil socialist modernization and become a centre of education.

The Comprehensive Vocational Education Reform Plan (plan till 2035) seeks to raise the status of vocational education. The country attempts to eradicate the common belief that vocational education is the “second choice” after obtaining a degree. With this plan, China intends to reform the entire vocational education system, including professional standards, assessment and evaluation mechanisms, teacher education and recruitment. The reform has been monitored by the National Vocational Education Guidance Advisory Committee (“国家职业教育指导咨询委员会”), established by the State Council.

In 2019, the coronavirus pandemic suddenly and dramatically changed the lives of people around the world and caused significant changes in the educational process, too. Many high-ranked universities have been actively developing online courses and systems. Qinghua University in China continues working only online. In a short time, they have developed 4000 courses that are widely available throughout China. The Ministry of Education has funded top universities to develop and implement online programmes in the country. Particular attention is paid to informing students and applicants about the peculiarities of the new format of education.

Creating an environment for distance education and online learning in the higher education sector was a priority during the pandemic. The main principle of public policy was to do everything possible to ensure the continuity of educational activities. This has led to initiatives in four areas: the creation of specialized platforms, teacher training, the transition to digital content and access to digital resources for both teachers and students. The main part of support in this area was the introduction of emergency technological solutions to ensure continuity of learning. The focus was mainly on supporting universities without virtual educational platforms, technological solutions and resources for teaching courses remotely.

In February 2020, to support the transition to online learning, the Ministry of Education of China published “The Guide to the Organization and Management of Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Institutions”. The document contains a list of 22 digital educational resources offering 24000 free online courses recommended for use in Chinese universities. At the request of the Ministry of Education, a platform for the National Project of Virtual Modeling of Experiments, offering more than 2000 experimental modelling courses, has been opened for wide use. Private institutions were recommended to provide free online resources to universities and offer individual solutions for online learning. Distance learning institutions were expected to provide technical assistance and resources to facilitate online learning in universities.

Besides, the Ministry of Education has prepared a list of actions aimed at protecting and supporting teachers during the pandemic. It was announced that they would be trained in new educational software based on MOOC and other resources. Lecturers of the National Open Online Courses were asked to create model classes to help teachers improve their online learning skills. Chinese students studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic were faced with the fact that their qualifications, obtained online, might not be confirmed by the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) affiliated with the Ministry of Education in China. On the 19th of March, 2021, the CSCSE announced that



the qualifications of Chinese international students, who were forced to partially or fully finish online courses due to the impact of COVID-19, might be validated (recognized) in the usual manner if they met the foreign degree requirements. This was the first time that the CSCSE had made an exception for qualifications obtained through online learning (Australian Government, 2021).

During the pandemic, China has become a relatively safe country. The country's higher education system has recovered much faster than those in Europe or North America.

As noted by Huang Zhong Jin (2020), there is now widespread criticism of education assessment, represented by the entrance examination to higher education and the unified national university entrance examination. China's education is constantly criticized as "exam-oriented education", "memorization-based education", given that memorization is considered to be enough to obtain good exam results. Concerning admission to universities, tests are mainly used to check students' knowledge with the help of the questions that must be answered in a certain time. As a result, a method of teaching with the help of many tasks appeared. Since ancient times, China has had a tradition of learning and repeating what has been learned, which emphasizes the role of exercises in the learning process, because exercises can significantly increase the effectiveness of answering questions. Task-based teaching is a product of exam-oriented education. Furthermore, it is a method that teachers use under the pressure or to meet the demands of exam-oriented education. Traditionally, teachers, students and their parents believe that mastery is born in hard training: the more exercises you do, the higher the accuracy and speed of answering questions will be (Zhong Jin, 2020).

The current reform of private education is also controversial. According to the order of the State Council of the People's Republic of China No 741-2021 "Law on the Promotion of Non-public Schools of the People's Republic of China", which came into force on 1st of September, 2021, several measures restricted educational activities of private institutions. It follows that educational programmes of private schools should now be almost the same, as in public schools; foreign organizations are prohibited from owning part of the property of private schools; adherence to national educational programmes is required; schools are prohibited to use foreign textbooks; private schools can continue to exist but with stricter restrictions on income (Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2015 Amendment), 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, among the many areas that were reformed in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese education stands out for its achievements. After recovering, it gained rapid and long-lasting achievements, made a leap-frog, due to the comprehensive changes that have taken place since 1993. China's policy to increase the competitiveness of national education is in line with global trends in education policy. However, the analysis of China's education policy shows that the country's leadership has quite ambitious goals: to turn China's elite universities into global centres for leading scientists from around the world by creating the most favourable working, research and living conditions for foreign professionals. China has created a highly effective mechanism for attracting Chinese experts who have studied abroad and is skillfully selecting the best graduates of their universities.

At the same time, the country's leadership pays great attention to the formation of a sense of patriotism and national dignity among students of Chinese universities.



Available data on the development of human capital and innovation potential of the country shows that China is actively involved in international competition for “talents”. Promoting Chinese education is becoming an important factor in China’s geopolitical influence.

Further research should aim to analyze didactic principles of specialist training in China.

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