

The Development of Modern Chinese Education System Since 1949 and the Key Factors That Impact It

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Abstract. Modern Chinese education system underwent profound changes since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, over the past few decades. In 2021, for students enrolled in compulsory education, the Chinese government has proposed a strategy to lessen the weight of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring. This so-called Double Reduction policy has laid a hard restriction on the decentralization and the capitalized operation of education system. It is a milestone for Chinese education system reformation. The educational industry in China has also received a knockout, especially for those private-owned education and training institutions focusing on primary and secondary education. Through literature review, this paper examines the trajectory of the Chinese educational system's growth and identifies a number of crucial elements that have shaped the sector, including societal trends, political upheaval, and global and economic trends. These elements are tremendously affecting Chinese education policymaking. Due to the unique influence of the factors, policy-makers should attach more significance to them, which would make the impact more suitable for the society.

Keywords: Modern Chinese education system, decentralization of education, Cultural Revolution; the policy of Reform and Opening up.

1. Introduction

China has a profound tradition of education. The earliest thinking could be traced back to Chunqiu period when Confucius started to lay the foundation of Chinese education system [1]. After thousands of years of development, the Chinese education system has formed a unique theoretical system. However, the modern history of Chinese economy and society is full of huge changes no matter it is the political reformation or economic booming. Meanwhile, Chinese education is under the influence of various key elements during this over-70-year development after the country is founded. In this paper, the key elements which affect the track of education development will be mentioned and carefully analyzed. The connection between them will also be demonstrated.

Modern Chinese education system underwent a huge development since the beginning of the foundation of China. The development after that can be divided into 3 phases [2]. These stages represent different historical contexts of Chinese society respectively. The features of these phases can be generally summarized as foundation laying, Setbacks and damages, and all-round development. This paper will review and discuss how the system shifts over decades and the key factors that affect the direction and extent of the change.

2. Historical Overview of Chinese Education

Table 1. Stages and features of the development of Chinese modern education system

1949 to 1965	1966 to 1977	1978 to 2023
Free fundamental education Foundation laying	Cultural Revolution Setbacks and damages	the Reform and Opening up policy All-round development

As it is mentioned above, the development of the modern Chinese education system can be divided into three phases (see Table 1). The period from 1949 to 1965 is the first stage. During this time, one

of the major goals for education development is to promote fundamental education and closing the gaps between different areas [3]. It is when the compulsory education policy was first put into practice, providing free primary and secondary education nationwide.

The second stage is from 1966 to 1977, Cultural Revolution [4]. During this time period, the education system was under a huge threat of chaos. Schools were closed down. Teachers were under persecution. The education cause of China had literally stopped. One of the developmental features of the time is the extreme political effect that was on the education system.

The third stage of development is from 1978 to 2023. Since 1978, the Reform and Opening up policy has been in effect, reviving the Chinese educational system. Three major changes happened during the stage. They are innovation, internationalization, and digitalization. During this time, the Chinese education system underwent an overall development in both the fundamental and higher education field [5].

2.1. Foundation Laying (1949-1965)

2.1.1 Situation

As China made the shift from a feudal society to a socialist state, the years 1949 to 1965 were crucial for the advancement of its educational system. During this time, the Chinese government made a concerted effort to modernize and enhance the educational system, with an emphasis on expanding educational opportunities and raising teaching standards. These goals were achieved by the building of new schools, the recruitment of more teachers, and the implementation of policies aimed at reducing the cost of education for low-income families.

2.1.2 Factors

During this time several factors contributed to the development and the direction. Among them, ideology is a very key element. The Chinese government at that time had a strong ideological commitment to communism and believed that education was a tool for transforming society [6]. The government also developed a standardized curriculum that emphasized Marxist ideology and socialist values. This curriculum was designed to promote a sense of national identity and loyalty to the party.

Except for ideology, political changes also played an important role. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of the government in 1949, a number of political initiatives to change society were launched. These initiatives, like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, had a significant effect on education because they frequently resulted in modifications to the curricula, instructional strategies, and institutional design [7].

The economic development is both a strong driving force and a significant goal for the development of education system. The Chinese government also recognized the importance of education for economic development. In the 1950s and 1960s, the government invested heavily in education, building schools, hiring teachers, and expanding access to education in rural areas. In the early 1960s, the government introduced the "new education" system, which aimed to provide students with a more practical education.

In summary, the period from 1949 to 1965 saw significant changes in the Chinese education system, driven by a combination of ideological, political, economic, and international factors. The government implemented a range of reforms aimed at improving access to education, promoting socialist values, and developing practical skills and knowledge. These changes laid the foundation for the modern Chinese education system, which continues to evolve and develop today.

2.2. The Great Damage of Education (1966-1976)

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had a major negative effect on the educational system, forcing the closure of many schools and colleges and leading to the persecution of both instructors and students [8]. The conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 marked the beginning of the education system's complete recovery. During this period, the Chinese education system underwent radical changes, as the government aimed to transform the system to fit with the political ideology.

The government believed that the education system was promoting bourgeois and revisionist ideas, so they aimed to purge these ideas from the education system through Cultural Revolution [8]. During this period, students were sent to the countryside to work with peasants. The government believed that this would help to "reeducate" students and teach them the values of the revolution. This policy had a profound impact on education, as it disrupted the education system and left many students without access to education. The government also implemented policies aimed at promoting ideological purity in the education system. Textbooks were rewritten to reflect Maoist ideology, and teachers who were perceived as being politically unreliable were dismissed or persecuted. The government also established a system of "Red Guards," which were groups of students and young people who were tasked with enforcing political correctness in schools and universities.

However, the Cultural Revolution was also a time of significant experimentation in education. The government aimed to develop a new form of education that was more in line with Maoist ideology. This new form of education emphasized practical skills and knowledge and focused on the needs of workers and peasants. The government also aimed to promote self-reliance and encourage students to become politically active [9].

Overall, the Cultural Revolution had a significant impact on the Chinese education system. While the government aimed to use the revolution to transform the education system to fit with Maoist ideology, it also disrupted the education system and left many students without access to education. It was not until after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 that the Chinese education system was able to recover and resume its development.

2.3. Recovering and Booming (1976-2023)

2.3.1 Situation

As China began to move towards a more market-oriented economy following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the education system experienced major changes [10]. A number of political and economic initiatives carried out by the Chinese government led to significant changes in the educational landscape of the nation. These reforms aimed to modernize the education system and align it with the needs of a rapidly developing economy, improving the quality of education, increasing access to education, and developing a workforce that was better prepared for a modern, globalized economy [10].

2.3.2 Factors

One of the most important measures to recover from the disruption of Cultural Revolution is the reintroduction of entrance exams for universities and colleges. These exams were designed to ensure that students were selected based on their academic ability, rather than political connections or class background.

The expansion of higher education also contributed to the recovery greatly [5]. The Chinese government made a concerted effort to expand access to higher education during this period. They increased the number of universities and colleges and established a system of national key universities that received extra funding and resources to promote academic excellence. They also introduced policies aimed at improving the quality of higher education, including the recruitment of more qualified teachers and the establishment of research centers.

Apart from the higher education, the government also recognized the importance of vocational education for economic development. During this period, they established vocational schools and training programs to provide students with the skills and knowledge needed for employment in specific industries. This helped to address the skills gap in the labor market and promote economic development. This investment in education was seen as a key part of the country's drive to modernize.

The expansion of the required schooling program was another notable development. The number of kids registered in elementary and intermediate schools greatly grew after the Chinese government enacted a legislation requiring nine years of obligatory education for all children in 1986. This policy

helped to reduce the education gap between urban and rural areas, as more rural children were able to access education.

Another significant change in the Chinese education system during this period was the emphasis on foreign language education. The government realized that foreign language education is beneficial to global competitiveness and started to introduce English language education at an early age [11]. They also encouraged the recruitment of foreign teachers and the establishment of international partnerships with universities around the world. Furthermore, the Chinese government introduced policies aimed at promoting academic development, including the establishment of key universities and research institutes.

These changes led to significant improvements in the Chinese education system, with increased access to education and a focus on developing a workforce that was better prepared for a modern, globalized economy. However, there were also challenges during this period, including disparities in education quality between urban and rural areas and the pressure on students to perform well in exams. Nonetheless, the Chinese education system has continued to develop in the years since, with a focus on promoting innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship.

One of the significant changes in the Chinese education system during this period was the decentralization of education management. The government shifted responsibility for education from the central government to local authorities, giving them greater autonomy and flexibility in managing their education systems. This allowed for greater diversity and experimentation in education, as local authorities were able to tailor their education systems to the specific needs of their regions.

The Chinese government has maintained its emphasis on schooling in recent years. In order to advance STEAM education (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics), digital literacy, and professional education, they have instituted regulations [12]. Additionally, they have created programs to support international educational interactions and draw foreign pupils to study in China.

Overall, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there have been major alterations to the Chinese educational system. From the doctrinal training under Mao to the modernization and internationalization under Deng, the education system has continuously evolved to meet the needs of a changing society and economy.

3. Conclusion

The education policy is under the profound influence of political changes and economic development along with other societal elements. Meanwhile, education is also a strong engine for societal reformation and economy. This mutual stimulation between education and political changes to some extent formed a dilemma of further development. However, it is inevitable to take political factors into consideration in the process of policy-making, which makes the education system and the education policies naturally possessed with political leanings. As for the relationship between education and economic development, it is simpler. High-quality education would contribute to the development of economy greatly. So did the economic development to education system. However, during the process of Chinese education system development, it cost too much for the system to comply with the political changes at the time, which to a rather extent has negative effect to the quality and efficiency of educational progress. So, it is important to promote education system without over considering political correctness. Furthermore, a more complete legitimate system would certainly improve the quality of the education system development. Besides, the trend of globalization is stronger and stronger. While Chinese economy is gradually embracing the world, Chinese education system must do the same. Only Chinese education system keeps up to the world, it can fully exploit the advantages of its traditions and bring those edges into innovation.

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