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Primary school teacher education in China

Schlesier, Juliane [Hrsg.]; Frey, Anne [Hrsg.]; Hoya, Fabian [Hrsg.]; Parade, Ralf [Hrsg.]; Rank, Astrid [Hrsg.]: *Foundations of learning. Unveiling the mosaic of primary education systems worldwide*. Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2026, S. 58-96. - (Grundschule International / Primary Education International)



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Liu, Mei-Ling; Parade, Ralf: Primary school teacher education in China - In: Schlesier, Juliane [Hrsg.]; Frey, Anne [Hrsg.]; Hoya, Fabian [Hrsg.]; Parade, Ralf [Hrsg.]; Rank, Astrid [Hrsg.]: *Foundations of learning. Unveiling the mosaic of primary education systems worldwide*. Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2026, S. 58-96 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-357945 - DOI: 10.25656/01:35794; 10.35468/6239-02

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-357945>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:35794>

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Primary School Teacher Education in China

Abstract

With a legacy of organised education spanning millennia, China's schooling system is shaped by enduring intellectual and administrative traditions. Since the late Qing Dynasty in 19th century, China's primary, secondary, and higher education systems have undergone a modernisation process, adopting Western-oriented principles. Despite the continuous reforms witnessed in the 21st century, there is a paucity of systematic research on the current structures of primary school teacher education, even though China performs exceptionally well in international assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). This article examines the structures of primary education and teacher education in China in recent years, with a particular focus on primary schools. It provides an overview of their historical development, current institutional organisation, status, student selection mechanisms, scale, and curricular frameworks. Drawing on state policies, statistical reports, and institutional regulations and plans, the study identifies key developments and trends in teacher education. The findings reveal that, alongside traditional normal universities and colleges, elite comprehensive universities in China have also begun to offer teacher education programmes aimed at enhancing teaching excellence. The study highlights significant trends shaping primary school teacher education, including expansion, quality enhancement, systematisation, and standardisation, underpinned by both political and financial support. These developments have contributed to the growing reputation of the teaching profession as a meritocratic and increasingly attractive career path. In conclusion, the article summarises and discusses the implications of these developments for the ongoing professionalisation of student teachers in China.

Keywords: Primary School Education in China, Teacher Education in China, Education Reform in China, Normal Universities and Teacher Training, Curriculum and Policy in Chinese Schools.

1 Introduction

For more than two millennia, traditional Chinese education has existed in institutionalised forms of teaching and learning, such as public and private schools as well as universities (known in Chinese as “guoxue”, “xiangxue”, “daxue”, “sishu”, and “shuyuan” throughout different periods) (Lee, 2000; Sun, 2000). Primary education and teacher education for primary schools (as well as secondary and higher education) have developed as modern Western-oriented institutionalised forms in China over the century since the end of the Qing Dynasty (Kong & Chen, 2024; Li, 2012; Shen, 1994). Over this extended and dynamic period, primary schooling in China has undergone profound transformations shaped by cultural traditions, political upheavals, and socio-economic reforms. Rooted in the Confucian principles of learning and moral cultivation, China’s approach to primary education and teacher education has evolved to address modern challenges and aspirations. These approaches have continued to change in the 21st century as a result of numerous reforms (Shi & Englert 2008; Ye et al., 2019; Zhou 2014); however, there are few studies that systematically examine their current structures and organisational forms. This is particularly surprising in view of the fact that China performs excellently in international large-scale assessments (e.g., Mullis et al., 2020; OECD 2019, 2023) and may provide inspiration for the primary school systems and paths of teacher professionalisation of other countries.

This article aims first to describe and clarify the current structures and organisational forms of primary education¹ and primary school teacher education in China, focusing on the latter. It gives a systematic overview of key aspects including a historical introduction as its point of departure. Beyond that, the general characteristics and trends of primary school teacher education in China in the 21st century, especially since 2007, are identified. This date is significant because 2007 can be seen as a turning point for a transformation in Chinese teacher education, which, until now, has not been systematically researched. Characteristics and trends have not been clarified and their importance for teacher professionalisation has not been systematically reflected upon.

To pursue these research objectives, key state and regional policy documents and reports, institutional regulations, and planning texts from exemplary institutions were reviewed. The data was primarily sourced from the official websites of the Chinese central and local governments, the Ministry of Education, provincial education departments, and higher education institutions offering teacher education programmes. The educational political documents issued by the central government and the Ministry of Education are representative in

1 In this article, primary education and primary teacher education refer specifically to education in primary schools and teacher education for primary schools.

providing an overview of the current structures and developments of primary school teacher education. These documents are highly relevant because they offer local governments and education authorities foundational guidelines for formulating regional educational policies and practices. Such documents – especially those produced by governmental and institutional actors – may be regarded as standardised artefacts and means of communication that serve specific purposes. The analysis of such documents can reveal institutional aims, routinised practices, and their transformation over time (Bowen, 2009; Coffey, 2014). A large number of such documents were gathered, primarily from official sources, and the most significant and representative ones were selected, as listed in the bibliography. Their content was examined to identify prominent orientations and recurring themes. The resulting findings are thematically structured in Sections 2.2, 3.2, and 3.3 of this article.

The description begins with an overview of primary education in China (Section 2), including a historical account tracing its roots and significant milestones (Section 2.1). Subsequently, the current structures of primary school education are explored (Section 2.2), highlighting the organisational structures, status, pupils, scale, and curricula. The focus then shifts to teacher education with an emphasis on primary schools (Section 3), outlining its historical phases (Section 3.1), particularly its current structures and developments (Section 3.2) in institutional organisations, current status, student selection, including support for student teachers through teacher education programmes and reforms, curricula and standards for teacher education, scale of teacher education, and qualifications of teachers. On this basis, the characteristics and emerging trends in primary teacher education in China can be identified more clearly (Section 3.3). Finally, the article reflects on the implications of these developments for teacher professionalisation and considers future directions for primary teacher education in China (Section 4).

2 Chinese Primary School Education

2.1 Historical Introduction

Traditional Chinese education draws on more than two millennia of practice and academic exploration. However, to understand the emergence of the modern primary education system, it is necessary to begin with the transformations that unfolded in the 19th century.

During the First Opium War (1839–1842), which culminated in China's defeat by Great Britain and was sparked by disputes over trade imbalances and the illegal opium trade, reform initiatives were launched around 1840 in an attempt to preserve the Qing dynasty. Today, we can see these as having paved the

way for a more comprehensive modernisation process in the education system. Along with the Self-Strengthening Movement, also referred to as the 'Westernisation movement' (1861–1895), efforts were made to form a new education system while still retaining aspects of classical education and the 'old-style schools'². The academies of classical learning (Shuyuan) and middle schools (Zhongdengxuetang) were gradually transformed into modern colleges and secondary schools, while primary schools emerged from the traditional Xiaoxuetang (Zhang & Hayhoe, 2017, pp. 15–16). Missionary schools in the primary sector also expanded as a consequence of the Treaty of Nanking (1842), which forced China to open to foreign influence, although these schools initially lacked broad social legitimacy (Xu, 2002; Zhou et al., 2018, pp. 6–7).

The origins of formal primary education in China are frequently traced to the founding of Zhengmeng Academy (Zhengmeng Shuyuan) in 1778 in Shanghai – the first modern private school established by Chinese educators (e.g., Kong & Cheng, 2024). Nevertheless, although Western concepts of popular education were gaining importance in Chinese discourse, and officials and literati recognised the need to combine traditional and Western ideas of learning, reforms remained rather superficial until the turn of the century. Prevailing structures persisted (Zhou, 2021, p. 318), and a unified state-controlled system of (primary) education with standardised curricula had yet to materialise. This changed with the announcement of Zouding Xuetang Zhangcheng (Presented School Regulations) in 1904, following the abolition of the previous system in 1902. Drawing inspiration from the Japanese Model, the Qing government introduced a four-tier education system (kindergarten, primary, secondary, and higher education), defined subject areas and learning progressions, and prescribed the number of weekly teaching hours in primary schools (Wang et al., 2020, p. 28; Zhou, 2021, p. 322). The curriculum of the junior primary school (Grades 1–5) at this time included moral education, language studies, geography, Confucian canons, arithmetic, natural science, history, and physical education. Where possible, courses in drawing and manual art were also offered (for detailed teaching content and class hours per week in Grades 1–5, see Wang et al., 2020, pp. 29–31).

Following the fall of the Qing dynasty in October 1911, the new republican government initially retained the existing education system with some modifications. For instance, coeducation became permissible in primary schools

2 These 'old-style schools' mainly centred on the canonical writings of Confucianism, the so-called classics, the number of which changed over the centuries. These included poetry (Shi), history (Shu), rites (Li), music (Yue), changes (Yi, meaning the interaction of yin and yang, the change of the world), spring and autumn (Chunqiu, meaning titles and functions, clarifies great justice and morality). Literary expression skills and broad learning were the focus (cf. Lee, 2000; Guo, 2024, p. 74).

and textbooks were revised. However, the newly developed education system was only adopted by some of the provincial governments (Chou, 2023). In the wake of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, significant reform efforts were directed at the Chinese writing system. The Ministry of Education began to promote simplified Chinese characters to replace traditional ones, beginning in the first and second grades of primary school. This initiative facilitated early literacy and underscored the foundational importance of primary education (Kong & Cheng, 2024, p. 48).

In September 1922, the School System Conference – inspired by debates within the New Culture Movement and influenced by Chinese intellectuals educated abroad – introduced a ‘new system’ of schooling. This model drew heavily on the American educational system, especially through the influence of visiting scholars such as John Dewey and Paul Monroe, who had been active in China since 1919. Notably, primary schooling was restructured into a six-year model, and the curriculum was revised accordingly. Nevertheless, there were still differences between rural areas and cities with regard to the implementation of educational reforms (length of school attendance, subjects, teaching quality etc.; Cheng & Tao, 1925; Zhou & Chen, 2007).

The establishment of the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949 ushered in another phase of fundamental educational reform. Under the new leadership, the six-year primary school was criticised as a bourgeois construct that excluded broad sections of the population from basic education due to the length of schooling and the distinction between lower and higher primary schools, making it difficult to establish schools in rural areas in particular (Chen, 1962, p. 98). Instead, the Soviet education model was adapted based on ideological reasons and a five-year unitary school was introduced. At the same time, most private schools – initially accounting for around one-third of school enrolments – were nationalised. By 1953, their share had dropped to approximately 4%. However, the growing state school system was unable to fully meet the educational aspirations that the government had fostered. As a result, non-state-run institutions known as *minban* (community-managed) schools proliferated. These schools played a pivotal role in the rapid expansion of primary education from the mid-1950s onward. Nevertheless, this expansion was accompanied by a considerable reduction in the quality of education (Chen, 1962; Hawkins & Stites, 1991). While the dramatic increase in school enrolment – from 49.2% in 1952 to 96% in 1976 – was a noteworthy achievement (Hawkins & Stites, 1991, p. 43), it also resulted in a temporary loss of regulatory control, as the number of schools mushroomed.

Following Mao’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, a new phase of educational reform commenced in 1979. One of the aims was to close or merge low-quality *minban* schools by the year 2000 – a process that

proved protracted and complex, particularly in light of the persistent difficulties in securing access to basic education in rural areas. During this period, only a small number of minban teachers – who were generally considered unqualified – were taken on as public-school teachers, while a considerable number were dismissed. In parallel, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a growing market for educational services, which facilitated the re-establishment and expansion of the private school sector. As part of a broader wave of reforms in the mid-1980s, the Compulsory Education Act was enacted in 1986, stipulating for the first time stipulated nine years of compulsory schooling. From then on, children aged six to fifteen were (at least in theory) required to attend school. The law also introduced a decentralised education governance model by delegating administrative responsibilities to local authorities and restructuring the funding system (Lewin et al., 1994; Wang, 2002). By the end of the 1990s, the number of minban schools at the primary level had been significantly reduced. Nevertheless, enrolment rates still varied greatly across regions – from 0% in metropolitan centres such as Beijing and Shanghai to 31.33% in Tibet and 27.76% in Shandong (Wang, 2002, p. 125). In the subsequent two decades, a renewed surge in non-governmental (private) schools occurred, many of which were prohibitively expensive or of questionable educational quality (Chan & Wang, 2024, p. 208).

Given that only 20% of school-age children attended primary school at the founding of the People's Republic (Ross, 2013), it is evident that significant progress has been made in expanding access to and investment in basic education. As Section 3.1 will demonstrate, these advancements extend to the professionalisation of teachers. Since the millennium, curricula have been revised, national evaluation standards introduced, and an educational management system established. A variety of subsequent reforms have sought to improve educational quality and reduce urban-rural disparities (Kong & Chen, 2024, pp. 48-49). Nevertheless, these reforms have not always produced the intended outcomes (e.g., Dello-Iacovo, 2009) and there are still major regional and urban-rural educational disparities as well as differences in educational quality (Lee & Song, 2017, p. 103). Moreover, the continued segregation between common schools and key schools – the latter often requiring not only high tuition fees but also substantial social capital or 'guanxi' for admission – perpetuates a two-tiered educational system (Ruan, 2017). Attending an exclusive primary school increases the likelihood of admission to a prestigious secondary school and subsequently to better colleges, allowing us to speak of a pillarisation of exclusive educational institutions (Ruan, 2017). The fact that only around half of all pupils with disabilities were being taught in regular schools in 2020 shows that significant potential remains for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in

2008 (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2021). While there is still much to be done for the country with the highest number of primary school pupils in the world, China has already made significant progress.

2.2 Current Structures

2.2.1 Institutional Organisation

China's basic education system operates under a decentralised framework of local responsibility and hierarchical management, guided at the macro level by the central government (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2002³). The Ministry of Education in China is tasked with formulating regulations, guidelines, policies, overall development plans and school systems for basic education. It also allocates special funds to subsidise poor regions and ethnic minority areas, and to finance teacher education programmes. Additionally, it supervises and provides overarching direction to local education authorities.

Provincial governments are responsible for the implementation of basic education within their respective jurisdictions. This includes the formulation of development plans, the design of curricula for primary and secondary schools, the administration of quality evaluations, and the provision of financial support to disadvantaged areas, particularly those facing funding difficulties at the county level.

At the county (including city and district) level, governments assume primary responsibility for the implementation of compulsory education. Their roles include the coordination of education funding, the appointment and management of school leaders and teachers, and oversight of teaching and learning processes in local schools. Township-level governments are charged with the delivery of compulsory education in their immediate areas.

The state encourages all sectors of society to participate in the operation and management of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and to gradually establish a school management system with the government as the main body running the schools, alongside the joint development of public and private schools. Furthermore, the government encourages the establishment of community education organisations connecting primary and secondary schools (and kindergartens) with local enterprises, institutions, and street or village committees to promote the development of the community.

The Chinese government places strong emphasis to the universalisation of compulsory education in rural, economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority regions. In 1987, the former State Education Commission and the Ministry

3 The following descriptions are drawn from the same document.

of Finance issued the 'Opinions on Several Issues Concerning the Reform of the Management System of Basic Education in Rural Areas'. Until 2002, rural areas widely implemented a management structure based on a model of schools being operated at county, towns, and village levels, with county-level authorities serving as the principal administrative unit. By 2002, over 95.2% of primary schools, 87.6% of middle schools, and 71.5% of high schools in China were located in counties, towns, and rural communities. Between 1995 and 2000, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance carried out the 'National Compulsory Education Programme for Poverty-Stricken Areas'. The central government allocated 3.9 billion yuan, with additional 10 billion yuan provided by local governments, to improve conditions for compulsory education in underprivileged regions.

2.2.2 Status of Primary Education

Primary education in China is regarded as the stage that lays the groundwork for further (higher) education by imparting foundational cultural knowledge alongside basic literacy and numeracy skills (National People's Congress, PRC, 2000). It constitutes the first level of the national school system and is also referred to as elementary education. Institutions offering primary education in China fall into two main categories: general primary schools, which educate children aged six to twelve, and adult primary schools, which cater to adult citizens⁴ who did not have access to primary education during childhood. The latter primarily focus on literacy and fundamental cultural knowledge. In addition to these, other institutions contribute to the provision of basic education, including centres dedicated to the arts, sports, and specialised crafts for children and adolescents.

Table 1 presents an overview of the current general education system in China, highlighting the role of primary education and the standards for teacher education at the bachelor's level across different school levels. The curricula for teacher education and the qualifications required for teaching staff are outlined and specified in accordance with the standards for primary school teacher education (Section 3.2.4).

4 As of November 2020, official statistics indicated that the number of illiterate individuals aged 15 and over – defined as those unable to read or write – stood at 37,750,200. This represents a reduction of 16,906,373 compared with data from the sixth national census conducted in 2010. During this period, the national illiteracy rate declined from 4.08% to 2.67%, a decrease of 1.41 percentage points (National Bureau of Statistics, PRC, 2021).

Table 1: Chinese General Education System (own illustration according to data and criteria of Ministry of Education, PRC to school education and teacher education; Liu, 2015, p. 265)

Age	Level of Education	Type of General Education	Grade / Year	Related Teacher Qualification
21-26	Postgraduate Education	University / Research Institute for Master's / Doctoral Level	Master 2 or 3 years, Doctor 3 or 4 years	
18-23	Tertiary Education	University / College	3, 4 or 5 years	
17	Upper Secondary Education	Senior Middle School / High School	12	Four-year bachelor's degree: at least 14 credit points in education + 18-week internship
16			11	
15			10	
14	Lower Secondary Education	Junior Middle School	9	
13			8	
12			7	
11	Primary Education	Primary School	6	Four-year bachelor's degree: at least 32 credit points in education + 18-week internship
10			5	
9			4	
8			3	
7			2	
6			1	
5	Preschool Education	Nursery / Kindergarten		Four-year bachelor's degree: at least 64 credit points in education + 18-week internship
4				
3				

Note. *Nine years of compulsory education (Primary + Lower Secondary). **Students take the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) after Senior Middle School. ***Some vocational paths are available after junior middle school.

2.2.3 Pupils in Primary Schools

Children who have reached the age of six may enrol in a primary school in their neighbourhood. In regions where the conditions for enrolment at age six are not met, children may instead begin school at the age of seven. Moreover, if a six-year-old child is deemed physically unready for school attendance, enrolment can be postponed upon application by the legal guardian and with the approval of the local education authorities (National People's Congress, PRC,

2006, Article 11). Where compulsory lower secondary education has become nearly universal, primary school graduates may transition to lower secondary schools in their vicinity without needing to sit an entrance examination (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2005). Progression to upper secondary level requires students to pass a standardised examination administered by the local education authorities. Various forms of assessment – such as semester, annual, and final examinations, as well as exit tests at the conclusion of compulsory schooling – are used to evaluate student achievement. Upon completing primary school, pupils are assessed in subjects such as language, mathematics, and others (see Section 2.2.5). In the case of lower secondary school-leaving examinations, provinces (including autonomous regions and municipalities directly administered by the central government) determine the subjects to be examined within the framework of national regulations. These regulations prescribe standardised assessments in subjects such as literature and chemistry for graduation-level grades, while other subjects may be evaluated through final examinations or additional tests.

2.2.4 Scale of Primary Schools

In 2021, there were 154,300 primary schools, representing a decrease of 3,700 schools – or 2.34% – compared to 2020 (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2022a). During the same period, the number of small teaching units – typically consisting of a single class taught by one teacher in rural areas – declined from 90,272 to 83,600. In contrast, the number of pupils enrolled nationwide increased by 1.41% from 2020, reaching 17,825,800, while the number of graduates rose by 4.74% to 17,180,300. The number of classes in the primary sector also grew, increasing by 10,200 to a total of 2,870,600. This indicates that, in principle, the average size of schools in 2021 was larger than in the previous year. However, it should be noted that some schools may have been closed, merged or expanded. No literature is currently available to fully explain these trends. Nonetheless, news reports from 2024 suggest that the declining birth rate observed since 2017 has coincided with a period of school closures, particularly affecting rural and private schools, which have faced significant structural challenges. As of 2022, approximately 6,600,800 individuals were employed as teachers and staff in Chinese primary schools. Of these, 99.98% of full-time teachers met the official qualification requirements, with 70.30% holding at least a four-year university degree. The pupil-teacher ratio at that time stood at 16.33:1.

2.2.5 Curricula of Primary Schools

Since autumn 1993, primary and junior high schools in China have implemented the nine-year, full-day compulsory education curriculum (trial version), which includes both a general curriculum framework and subject-specific syl-

labi (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2002). This programme distinguishes between national and local curriculum components, with local content determined by provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly administered by the central government, in accordance with regional circumstances and needs. In 2022, the Ministry of Education published a new curriculum programme for compulsory education (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2022b), which seeks to shift the focus from merely ‘attending school’ to ‘attending a good school’. This reform promotes the development of a compulsory education curriculum system rooted in Chinese characteristics and linguistic standards. It also places emphasis on goal-oriented, problem-focused, and innovation-driven learning approaches. Under this framework, primary education – as a component of compulsory schooling – is structured into three levels: national, local, and school-based curricula. The national curriculum forms the core, providing a shared foundation for all pupils. Local and school-based curricula are designed to extend and enrich this foundation by incorporating regional and institutional specificities. The national curriculum is developed and set by the education administration department of the State Council and must be implemented uniformly. Local curricula are devised by the provincial education administrative departments, which determine the general direction of curricular planning and are encouraged to draw on regional characteristics and educational resources. School based-curricula are created by school organisations, reflecting individual educational traditions and goals, while giving full play to the advantages of specialised educational and teaching resources. In principle, pupils may choose school-based programmes according to their interests and needs.

The compulsory education programmes are implemented over a continuous nine-year period, typically following either a 6–3 or a 5–4 structure – meaning that primary education lasts five or six years, and lower secondary education three or four years, respectively. According to the national curriculum, primary school subjects include ethics and the rule of law, Chinese language, mathematics, foreign languages, science, physical education, health, art, labour, and integrated practical activities.

The primary school academic year consists of 39 weeks, with 35 weeks dedicated to new lesson plans, two weeks allocated for revision and examinations, and two weeks designated for school manoeuvres. The curriculum for Grades 1 and 2 comprises 26 class hours per week, while Grades 3 to 6 are scheduled for 30 class hours per week. A standard class hour in the primary school curriculum lasts 40 minutes.

3 Chinese Primary School Teacher Education

3.1 Historical Introduction

The development of primary school teacher education in China reflects the country's broader historical and social transformations. In pre-modern China, traditional teacher education was primarily based on Confucian models of learning⁵ and apprenticeship, in which prospective educators were guided by experienced scholars through mentorship. However, with the emergence of modern (primary) schools in the late 19th century, the need for a more systematic and institutionalised approach to teacher education became increasingly evident.

The development of teacher education in China is typically divided into four (Li, 2012, 2016) or five phases (Liu, 2022; Yang, 2016). This study adopts the four-phase model commonly found in the literature (see Cong, 2007; Li, 2012; Liao & Zhou, 2020; Liu, 2022; Zhou, 2014), but interprets the fifth phase as ending in 2006, based on our own analysis. Building on this reinterpretation, we propose and delineate a sixth phase in detail from our own perspective in Section 3.2.

3.1.1 Establishment of an Independent but Closed⁶ System of Normal Education (1897–1921)

The first normal schools (shifan xuexiao) – universities specialising in teacher education – were established in China at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Modelled after Japanese and Western systems, these schools contributed to the professionalisation of teaching as an occupation (Li, 2012; Liu, 2022). In 1896, the Qing government founded Nan Yang College (Nan Yang Gongxue, the predecessor of Shanghai Jiao Tong University) in Shanghai (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, n.d.), which included a dedicated institute for teacher education. In 1898, the Qing government constructed Jingshi Daxuetang – the common predecessor of Peking University and the Beijing Normal University – which also housed a teacher training institute, known as Shifan Zhai. For several years, Jingshi Daxuetang even functioned as de facto Ministry of Education, as no independent governmental education authority yet existed.

5 Components that are still relevant today include the practice of rites, the method of memorisation, conformity to authorities and norms as a method of self-discipline, and a broader understanding of the self beyond the individual self of the West (Kwak et al., 2015, p. 1-2).

6 The term 'closed' means that teachers were trained exclusively by teacher education institutions.

Following its destruction during the invasion of China by the Eight-Power Allied Forces⁷, the Qing government rebuilt Jingshi Daxuetang in 1901 and re-established its teacher education institute under the new name Shifan Guan, which reopened for enrolment in 1902. In 1908, this institute was granted full independence and renamed Jingshi Superior Teacher Training College (Jingshi Youji Shifan Xuetang). In 1912, it became the Beijing Normal Higher Education School (Beijing Gaodeng Shifan Xuexiao), and in 1923, it was renamed Beijing Normal University – the first normal university in China (Beijing Normal University, n.d.). In parallel, other institutions were founded to meet the growing demand for trained teachers. In 1902, Zhang Zhidong established the Hubei Normal School, the first independent normal school, and in the same year, the Tongzhou Private Normal School began operating as the first private normal school. These schools provided a structured education that combined pedagogical studies with subject-specific knowledge in order to meet the needs of a modernising primary school education system. Moral cultivation and the development of a teacher's personality also played an important role in the curriculum.

Up to this point, only a relatively small number of teachers had been trained in the few normal schools, but this changed abruptly in 1904 with the new policies of Zhang Zhidong and a comprehensive reorganisation of the (primary) school system. The number of schools multiplied within a few years as part of a national mass education campaign, which was accompanied by a rapid expansion of the teacher training system. In addition, the new education system introduced regulations for the selection and training of teachers for both lower and higher primary schools. Curricula were specially adapted to the respective school types, and gradually normal schools began to be established in rural areas as well (Cong, 2007, pp. 40-46).

After the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the Republican Revolution, which deposed the Manchu regime, a new degree of institutionalisation began. In 1912, the Teachers' Education Act and the Normal School Regulations Act were enacted, introducing new goals, programmes, and curricula for teacher education. From this point forward, only normal schools were authorised to educate primary school teachers, while normal colleges⁸ and universities assumed responsibility for the education of teachers at other school levels. Furthermore, the first licensing system for primary school teachers was established in 1916 and women were included in the formal teacher education programme for the first time during this period. Due to countless changes in

7 British Empire (GBR), United States of America (USA), French Third Republic (FR), German Empire (DE), Russian Empire (RUS), Greater Japanese Empire (JPN), Austro-Hungarian Empire (AUS), and the Kingdom of Italy (ITA).

8 Specialised in teacher training for secondary level.

the office of the Minister of Education from 1916 onwards, there could hardly be any talk of a consistent state education policy. Although the primary school sector was expanding in an uncontrolled manner, the teacher education institutions were initially unable to grow to an adequate extent. To summarise this phase, it can be said that the formation of a certain educational autonomy went hand in hand with the professionalisation of educators, who were increasingly able to influence political decision-making processes (Cong, 2007, pp. 71-94; Li, 2012, 2016; Liu, 2022).

3.1.2 Establishment of an Open System of Normal Education (1922–1948)

In 1922, the introduction of the Renxu System of School Education by the government marked a decisive break with the Japanese model (Li, 2012; Liu, 2022). The new point of reference became the American model, and the new reforms were shaped by democratic and liberal aspirations. Western influences – such as the two-year visit of John Dewey and his wife between 1919 and 1921 – provided new impulses for teacher education, particularly at the primary school level. Dewey took part in educational conferences, gave lectures at universities, and met with influential educators and politicians. His writings were enthusiastically received in Chinese teacher education circles. Innovation such as new teaching methods, child-centred curricula, experience-based learning, and revised conceptions of the teacher's role were all influenced by Deweyan pedagogy and further developed in this context (on Dewey's influence on education in China, see, e.g. Su, 2019).

However, these impulses were not implemented across the board and the education reform of 1922 had a rather negative impact on teacher training. Teacher training schools and colleges were merged and reduced in number, and their diminished status was reflected in declining funding. A large proportion of primary school teachers during this period were poorly paid, had not received formal teacher training, and instead replicated the practices of their own former teachers without systematic reflection or theoretical grounding (Cong, 2007, pp. 99-103).

With the emergence of the modern teacher as a professional figure and the institutionalisation of teacher education, the divide between well-qualified, urban primary school teachers and socially marginalised, undertrained rural teachers became increasingly pronounced. At the end of the 1920s, village (primary) teacher training schools began to appear in rural areas, as rural education had moved to the centre of the Nationalist central government's education reform agenda. These were soon followed by other types of training institutions, including provincial, county-level, simplified, and short-term teacher training schools (Cong, 2007, pp. 107-112).

During the Nanjing Decade (1927–1937), the government undertook further nationalisation and imposed tighter control over rural teacher training schools, which had previously operated under local authorities. In the course of the state's increasing efforts at standardisation and supervision to improve the quality of teaching, state-controlled final examinations were also introduced, which contributed to the student protests of the 1930s. It can therefore be concluded that the Nationalist government made great efforts in the 1930s to reverse the decline in teacher education that was initially apparent. Between 1937 and 1946 the number of normal schools nationwide tripled, while the number of students increased fivefold in the same period. Nevertheless, the intensifying civil conflicts led to increasing political instability, undermining the long-term consolidation of these educational advances (Li, 2016).

3.1.3 Restoration of the Old and Closed System of Normal Education (1949–1977)

In the People's Republic of China, primary teacher education underwent profound transformation from 1949 onwards. The Soviet model became the dominant point of reference, and standardised training programmes were introduced, placing particular emphasis on ideological instruction and political education. In some cases, Soviet teaching materials were directly adopted. To address the rising demand for education, normal schools were established across the country, with a focus on training teachers for the primary level. The rapid – and in some places uncontrolled – growth of the school system during this period required a swift 'production' of teachers (especially for rural regions), which led to a significant drop in quality. Concurrently, the teaching profession itself came under increasing criticism, and its social status declined as a result of deteriorating working and educational conditions. Nevertheless, in the 1950s there were various initiatives aimed at improving primary (teacher) education, particularly through in-service teacher training. Between 1966 and 1976, however, the situation became increasingly chaotic: teacher education stagnated, and leading figures in the field were at times subjected to persecution. In general, teachers' professional autonomy was severely restricted during this period (Li, 2012; Liu, 1971; Liu, 2022).

3.1.4 Recovery of Teacher Education, Consolidation and Continuous Improvement (1978–1993)

After the death of Mao teacher education gradually recovered and was elevated to national priority under the new government and against the backdrop of new endeavours to modernise the country's education system (Shen, 1994). The requirements and standards for the preparation of primary school teachers were significantly raised, and the high priority of teacher education was

repeatedly emphasised in political proclamations. Notable examples include the *Instructions for the Reinforcement and Development of Teacher Education* in 1978, the *Communist Party Central Committee's Decision on Reforms of Educational System* in 1985, and the *Instructions for the Strengthening and Developing of Teacher Education* in 1986. Teacher education became the 'cornerstone for national reconstruction' (Liao & Zhou, 2020, p. 111) during this time. In the wake of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, school enrolment figures rose rapidly, generating an urgent demand for new teachers. These were now available in greater numbers and with improved qualifications, thanks to the expansion of teacher education institutions and the re-establishment of a closed, three-level system. The stigmatisation of education as a consequence of the Cultural Revolution was brought to an end, teachers received new benefits, and their working conditions improved significantly (Liao & Zhou, 2020). The enactment of the Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China in 1993 marked a further milestone, as it introduced formal qualification levels and professional standards for the teaching profession. In general, this period can be characterised by a flood of reforms in the area of teacher education, which aimed to professionalise teachers, improve teaching quality, establish binding standards of qualification, and thereby, also increase the social status of teachers.

3.1.5 Towards a More Open Market-Oriented Teacher Education at One's Own Expense (1993–2006)

At the beginning of the 1990s, China embarked on a reform movement aimed at transforming the planned economy into a market economy. These marketisation reforms also affected the education sector, including higher education and teacher education more broadly. In this context, parts of the teacher education infrastructure were restructured and redefined. By opening up the teacher education 'market' to new providers – such as universities and comprehensive universities – it was also hoped that the competitive pressure would foster diversification and improve quality. New education models emerged and the role of teacher education gradually shifted from being an engine of economic growth to a problem-solver for increasing inequality and an authority for harmonisation (Li, 2012; Rao, 2020).

After being pushed from the upper echelons of political priorities and taking into account the profession's loss of appeal due to low wages and increased burdens, teacher education returned to the agenda in the early 2000s. In 1993, the Chinese higher education administrators had introduced the policy of tuition-based study for all newly-admitted students, including those enrolled in teacher education programmes (State Council of China, PRC, 1994). By 1997, the era of tuition-free higher education had come to a complete end (Zhou,

2023, p. 4). From 1949 until that point, teacher trainees had received their education free of charge (Beijing Times, 2007), although a small number of other university students had paid their own way since 1985 (Zhou, 2023, p. 6). With the expansion of higher education in the late 1990s, China began to move from an elitist to a mass system of higher education. University graduates – including alumni in teacher education – were no longer guaranteed job placements by the state. Instead, they were required to enter the labour market independently and secure employment on their own initiative (Meng et al., 2019).

3.2 Current Structures Since 2007

3.2.1 Institutional Organisation

The institutional organisation and function of teacher education form one of several key dimensions for understanding the current structures of teacher education in China. They constitute the first analytical focus in this section, providing a foundation for examining how teacher education is currently governed, coordinated, and supported at the national level.

Functions of the Ministry of Education in Teacher Education. According to the State Council of China, the Ministry of Education holds the following core responsibilities for teacher education within the broader domain of higher education (State Council of China, PRC, 2008):

- (1) To formulate guidelines, policies and plans for the reform and development of teacher education, to draft relevant laws and regulations, and to supervise their implementation.
- (2) To plan and coordinate the management of teacher education, to formulate the standards for the establishment of teacher training in conjunction with the relevant departments, to provide guidance for the reform of education and teaching, and to be responsible for the statistics, analysis and implementation of basic information on education. Additionally, the Ministry of Education is tasked with the collection, analysis, and dissemination of fundamental data related to the field of education.
- (3) To be responsible for the comprehensive administration of financial resources allocated to this sector, and to participate in the formulation of policies pertaining to the financing of and the distribution of funds to education, and investment in education infrastructure. Furthermore, the Ministry is tasked with the compilation of statistics on the investment of education funds on a national scale.
- (4) To supervise the work of teachers throughout the country, to formulate standards for teacher qualifications at all levels and in all categories in con-

junction with the relevant departments and to guide their implementation, and to direct the building of human resources in the education system.

The State Council also recommends that the reform of the management system of colleges and universities be deepened, and that the autonomy of colleges and universities in the management of education be further implemented and expanded. In accordance with the principle of ‘two-tier management by the central and provincial people’s governments, with management by the provincial people’s governments as the mainstay’, efforts are being made to enhance local coordination.

Institutions Involved in Teacher Education. At present, teacher education in China is provided by 215 normal (Shifan) universities and colleges, as well as by more than 500 non-normal universities and colleges. Six normal universities are directly overseen and funded by the Ministry of Education. These are: Beijing Normal University, East China Normal University, Central China Normal University, Northeast Normal University, Shaanxi Normal University, and Southwest University (Southwest Normal University prior to 2005).

In 2023, the Ministry of Education initiated a programme known as the ‘National Excellence Programme’ to promote high-level universities in order to train highly qualified teachers at the graduate level for primary and secondary schools (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2023c). Since then, thirty universities selected under the ‘double first-class’ construction project⁹ – including five of the six normal universities directly administered by the Ministry of Education – have assumed leading responsibility for teacher education (see Section 3.2.3 for further details).

In addition, since 2022, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the National Development and Reform Commission, has provided financial assistance to approximately 50 normal colleges and universities with the objective of enhancing the quality of their teaching and research facilities (Feng, 2022). Each institution has received a one-off grant of 100 million yuan. All other universities and colleges involved in teacher education are supported and financed primarily by their respective provincial governments.

3.2.2 Status of Teacher Education

Teacher education has gained more and more importance and political attention in China, especially since 2007, when the government introduced the policy of free education for students enrolled in teacher education at normal

9 The World First-Class Universities and First-Class Academic Disciplines Construction (世界一流大学和一流学科建设), together known as Double First-Class Construction (双一流建设), is a higher education development and sponsorship scheme of the Chinese central government, initiated in 2015. It replaces the ‘211 Project’ and ‘985 Project’. There were 137 universities and colleges in 2017, and 147 universities and colleges selected in 2022 to be part of the programme.

universities directly under the Ministry of Education (State Council of China, PRC, 2007). This initiative, spearheaded by the State Council, was designed to emphasise the importance of education and to provide institutional and financial support for the teacher education sector. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education allocated a greater proportion of its resources to teacher education and related reform initiatives (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2007). Since then, the Chinese central government and the Ministry of Education have introduced a series of policies, standards, and programmes for teacher education aimed at enhancing teacher education and improving school education more broadly (see Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4).

In August 2024, the Chinese Government published a policy document outlining its views on sustaining the ethos of educators and strengthening the development of a highly qualified and professional teaching force for the contemporary era (State Council of China, PRC, 2024b). The social and cultural importance of the teaching profession is well recognised and valued at the beginning of the document: “Teachers represent the cornerstone of any educational system. A robust national education system is contingent upon a robust teaching force.” The policy sets out two temporal stages for achieving its objectives: In the short term – over a period of three to five years – the aim is to promote the spirit of educators vigorously, to achieve tangible progress in building a high-quality professional teaching force, to foster a renewed ethos of teachers’ moral cultivation and commitment to their vocation, and to cultivate a stronger social climate of respect for the teaching profession. By 2035, the policy envisions that the majority of teachers will consciously embody the educator’s spirit, that the governance system and professional capabilities of the teaching workforce will be fully modernised, and that digitally empowered teacher development will become the norm. The status of teachers is expected to be both consolidated and improved. Accordingly, the teaching profession will become one of the most socially respected profession. In this envisioned scenario, talented individuals will actively compete for teaching positions, and excellent educators will continue to emerge and thrive.

3.2.3 Student Selection and Teacher Education Programmes: Orientation of Excellence and Passion

Since 2007, the Chinese government has paid greater attention to improving the recruitment and development of future teachers. This has included reforms in student selection, financial support, training quality, and improvement of institutional provision for teacher education. In addition, the Chinese Government attaches importance to supporting and guaranteeing the employment of student teachers after graduation. These improvements in the conditions of teacher education and employment aim to increase the appeal of the teaching profession and have led to a growing number of high school graduates enroll-

ing in teacher education programmes. Several recent policies and initiatives reflect the effort to attract top-performing students into the teaching profession. Table 2 provides an overview of these initiatives.

Table 2: Teacher Education Policies and Programmes in China Since 2007 (Own Illustration)

Time	Programmes	Institutions	Goals	Selection	Measures
Since 2007	Free Teacher Education (in 2018 renamed as Publicly-Funded Teacher Education)	Six ministry-affiliated normal universities	To increase teacher quality and status, to reduce regional disparities	Advance batch after Gaokao (permission for an exit or entrance during the study since 2018)	Full funding from central government during bachelor's degree
Since 2016-2018	Nationwide Extension of Free Teacher Education	Local normal universities and colleges	To increase teacher quality and status, to reduce local regional disparities	Advance batch after Gaokao	Full funding from local governments during bachelor's degree
Since 2021	Excellent Teacher Programme	Collaboration between ministry-affiliated and local normal universities and colleges	To enhance the quality of primary and secondary school teachers in less-developed areas of central and western China	Advance batch after Gaokao	Full funding from central government and local governments
Since 2023	National Excellence Programme	Thirty 'double first-class' construction universities	To ensure teachers with the highest possible standard	Selection of graduate students in science and engineering	Combination of postgraduate education in science and engineering and teacher education, publicly-funded
Since 2024	Promotion of Publicly-Funded Teacher Education to master's level	Six ministry-affiliated normal universities	To promote teacher quality and status, to reduce local regional disparities	According to achievements, performance during bachelor's degree	Full funding from central government during master's degree

Free Teacher Education. The State Council has introduced the programme of free teacher education at six normal universities directly administered by the Ministry of Education (see section 3.2.1), the purpose of which is to “further develop a strong climate of respect for teachers and to make education the most respected endeavour in society; to train a large number of excellent teachers; and to promote educators’ education and inspire more outstanding young people to become educators themselves” (State Council of China, PRC, 2007). Initially known as the ‘Free Normal Students’ scheme, it was renamed in 2018 as ‘Publicly-Funded Education for Normal Students’. The student teachers enrolled in this programme are exempt from tuition fees, accommodation costs, and living expenses during their studies. The programme’s objectives go beyond improving training quality and also aim to recruit and place well-qualified (prospective) teachers in unpopular rural regions, thereby reducing educational disparities, whereby an orientation toward excellence is reflected in the selection of institutions for teacher training and the recruitment of student teachers. Starting from the autumn of 2007, six ministry-affiliated normal universities have been designated to provide free teacher education for undergraduate student teachers. These normal universities, considered to have the best teacher training in China, are tasked with educating high-achieving students to be teachers. They should also provide experiences for other universities and colleges to educate a large number of outstanding teachers and educators. Student teachers in this programme are mainly selected from the western provinces and, by regulation, are required to serve in educationally underdeveloped regions for ten years after graduation – a period reduced to six years since 2018. The selection process does not only pay attention to academic excellence, but also on candidates’ commitment to and enthusiasm for education. As stated in official policy: “The teacher-training programmes of the ministry-affiliated normal universities are admitted in an advance batch, selecting on the basis of merit outstanding senior secondary school graduates who are passionate about education and who aspire to teach for a long period of time and throughout their lives” (State Council of China, PRC, 2007). In order to understand how students enter these programmes, it is necessary to first outline the general structure of university admission in China. After completing high school, graduates are encouraged to take the college entrance examination (in Chinese: Gaokao), if they wish to pursue higher education in a Chinese university or college. Following the exam, students select the institutions and subjects, they wish to study based on their scores. Undergraduate students are typically admitted in three batches: the advance batch, undergraduate batch 1, and undergraduate batch 2 (in some provinces there are only two batches such as early batch and undergraduate batch to reduce the inequality of admission) (China Education Online, 2024).

All high school graduates who meet the undergraduate cut-off score are eligible to apply for the three batches, provided they have not yet been admitted elsewhere. The early or advance batch was established to enable specific institutions and disciplines to recruit students in priority order. These include general colleges and universities, military colleges and universities, public security colleges and universities, judicial colleges, as well as civil aviation and air force recruiting colleges and universities (Xinlang Education, 2012). Admission to advance batch institutions requires strict medical examinations, with most also demanding higher academic scores than the general college entrance benchmark. Students who meet the physical criteria are ranked according to their Gaokao score and their institutional preferences. If unsuccessful, candidates may still apply for admission in subsequent batches. However, once a candidate has already been admitted into an advance batch recruitment plan of an institution, they will no longer be eligible to participate in other batches of admission.

The admission process for free teacher education in the advance batch is particularly demanding, involving physical assessments, medical examinations, and interviews. For example, before admissions each year, Beijing Normal University publishes a systematic and detailed description of the physical and medical examinations, as well as the selection criteria for applicants. Since 2007, the selection of student teachers for the free teacher education programme has been strongly guided by academic excellence, passion for education, and physical and psychological health, positioning these programmes as matters of national importance.

These trends are also reflected in other policy documents. For instance, an updated education policy issued in 2018 allows student teachers in the free teacher education programme to pursue a master's degree without taking the Graduation Examination after completing their bachelor's degree – an option previously unavailable (State Council of China, PRC, 2018). More recently, the 2024 policy (State Council of China, PRC, 2024a) stipulates that student teachers enrolled at the six ministry-affiliated normal universities will receive full state financial support for tuition, living costs, and accommodation costs, integrated into a six-year programme. In the fourth year of the bachelor's degree, students may be selected for the master's degree track based on their academic performance. Those who successfully complete all coursework and assessments are awarded both bachelor's and master's degrees.

Since 2018, publicly-funded student teachers have been allowed to exit from the teacher training programme during their first year of study and to pursue non-education majors, if they are found not to be suitable for teaching (State Council of China, PRC, 2018). Outstanding students who are interested in pursuing a career in teaching and who are qualified may be eligible for transfer

to a teacher training programme. This transfer is permitted within two years of enrolment in accordance with the plan that has been approved by the Ministry of Education and the university for students enrolled in publicly-funded teacher training programmes.

Since 2007, student teachers in free teacher education programmes have been exempted from tuition fees, accommodation costs, and living expenses during their studies. Currently, free teacher education is not only funded by the central government, but student teachers enrolled at local universities and colleges are also financed by provincial governments. This arrangement is known as Provincial Publicly-Funded Teacher Education. Since 2018, it has gained increasing popularity, particularly after the Ministry of Education's renamed the publicly-funded teacher training programmes. One example is Shandong Province, where the policy of publicly-funded teacher training candidates has been put into practice since 2016. So far, the province has recruited the largest number of publicly-funded student teachers, with approximately 6,000 in 2018 (Shandong Provincial Department of Education, 2018). Admissions for publicly-funded student teachers in Shandong Province are conducted via the advance batch system.

Special Plan for Higher Education. It is worth mentioning that a higher education funding programme for underprivileged areas has been implemented since 2015 (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2015). Although this programme was not initially designed to fund teacher education explicitly, student teachers have nonetheless been included in its broader funding scope. In its 2015 policy statement, the Ministry of Education outlined three key objectives within the framework of this funding programme, aimed at improving access to higher education for students from underprivileged areas.

Firstly, the implementation of the National Special Enrolment Plan for poverty-stricken areas, which includes an annual enrolment quota of 50,000 students, continues to be supported by the colleges and universities financed by central government or Ministry of Education, as well as '211 project' local colleges and universities. Universities, primarily those enrolling undergraduates, are responsible for implementing the plan for 832 poverty-stricken counties and are encouraged to accept more students from Henan, Gansu and ten other provinces and regions.

Secondly, the Rural Student Enrolment Programme, under the administration of the Ministry of Education and independent pilot colleges and universities, seeks to ensure that at least 2% of undergraduate places are allocated to students from remote, impoverished, ethnic, and other disadvantaged areas within the county. The programme primarily targets academically high achieving students from rural communities. Its specific implementation within each regi-

on is determined by the relevant provincial authorities, including autonomous regions and municipalities.

Thirdly, the local key colleges and universities are required to continue with the implementation of the special programmes for rural students (i.e., local special programmes). These are conducted by the provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) in collaboration with the key colleges and universities. The enrolment plan is to be, in principle, no less than 3% of the undergraduate enrolment of a group of colleges and universities. As with the other components of the programme, the concrete implementation, application requirements, and admission procedures are determined by the respective provincial authorities (autonomous regions and municipalities).

Excellent Teacher Programme. In 2021, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with eight other governmental departments, issued a circular outlining the 'Excellent Teacher Training Programme in Less Developed Areas in Central and Western China', commonly referred to as the Excellent Teacher Programme (Ministry of Education, PRC & eight other governmental departments, 2021). The programme's aim is to implement a targeted strategy to educate and prepare approximately 10,000 student teachers annually for deployment in primary and secondary schools across 832 poverty-stricken counties (formerly concentrated contiguous counties). This is to be realised through cooperation with normal universities directly affiliated with the Ministry of Education, as well as local normal colleges. The programme specifically targets areas and counties that are nationally designated for poverty alleviation and development, including border counties located in central and western regions. Its dual objective is to improve the overall quality of teachers in these less-developed areas of central and western China while simultaneously cultivating a significant number of highly skilled educators. Student teachers enrolled in the Excellent Teacher Programme are admitted through the advance batch of undergraduate programmes.

For example, the 2024 enrolment plan of Beijing Normal University encompasses the recruitment of student teachers for three teacher education programmes: publicly-funded teacher education (Free Teacher Education), Excellent Teacher Programme, and University-funded Special (Beijing Normal University, 2024a). It should be noted that the recruitment for teacher education programmes in this enrolment plan varies across provinces and municipalities. In certain areas, student teachers are recruited only for one or two teacher education programmes via the advance batch, while no student teachers are recruited from municipalities and provinces such as Beijing, Shanghai and Zhejiang. According to the 2024 undergraduate admissions plan of East China Normal University, student teachers are classified into publicly-funded students and those enrolled in the Excellent Teacher Programme (East China

Normal University, 2024). In the provinces and municipalities directly administered by the central government, the enrolment quota is also different. Most student teachers come from Shanghai. East China Normal University does not recruit student teachers from certain provinces and municipalities directly under the central government, such as Beijing and Guangdong.

National Excellence Programme. In 2023, the Ministry of Education issued its “Opinions on the Implementation of the National Outstanding Primary and Secondary School Teacher Training Programme”, commonly referred to as the ‘National Excellence Programme’ (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2023c). The primary aim of this initiative is to ensure that those who are responsible for educating the next generation of teachers achieve the highest standard of academic preparation themselves. As a postgraduate-level programme, the National Excellence Programme has been positioned as a key task within the framework of universities engaged in the national ‘Double First-Class Construction’. This programme is currently being piloted and is expected to be progressively expanded in the future.

The first pilot phase supports 30 Double First-Class Construction universities in undertaking postgraduate training tasks, including five normal universities directly under the Ministry of Education and 25 other learning institutes which are high-level comprehensive universities or universities of science and technology, such as the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences. These academic institutions select students who have demonstrated exemplary professional performance and a proclivity for pedagogy as graduate students under the auspices of the National Excellence Programme.

From 2023 onwards, each participating university will annually select at least 30 outstanding graduating undergraduates in science and engineering to study for academic degrees, professional degrees in relevant disciplines of science and engineering, or master’s degrees in education. In parallel, a second selection process for graduate students in science and engineering will be carried out, with an emphasis on cultivating a group of high-quality science teachers at the graduate level for primary and middle schools, and strengthening the cultivation of innovative students at the basic education stage.

The implementation plan of the 2024 National Excellence Programme at Beijing Normal University outlines two ways for selecting candidates for the master’s programme (Beijing Normal University, 2024b):

(1) *Recommendation-Based Exemption Selection:* Outstanding candidates are selected from among graduating undergraduates who qualify for exemption from the graduate entrance examination. Upon successful completion of their undergraduate studies, they are admitted to the National Excellence Programme to pursue a professional master’s degree in education alongside their academic studies in science and engineering.

(2) *Secondary Selection of Current Graduate Students*: Each year, the university conducts a competitive selection among its enrolled postgraduate students in science and engineering. This process involves a comprehensive examination of teaching potential, integrating the results of students' professional courses and interviews. In accordance with the principle of 'selecting the best among the best and strictly regulating the standard', candidates admitted via this route pursue a dual-track degree, combining a professional degree in education with their academic master's degree in a STEM discipline. The programme specifically seeks students with strong subject specialisation – such as physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, or geography – who are both willing and well-suited to pursue the teaching profession. These students will take part in the Outstanding Teachers' Development Programme, a dual master's programme in science/engineering and education (Beijing Normal University, 2024c).

In essence, the aforementioned admission and selection policies and programmes for teacher education at bachelor's level are designed to identify high school graduates who demonstrate academic excellence, a passion for education and teaching, and the physical and psychological readiness required for teacher training and the teaching profession. Furthermore, they aim to provide adequate financial, policy, and institutional support for student teachers, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the quality of teachers throughout the country, particularly in less affluent provinces and regions. A similar logic underpins the selection of graduates from normal universities for publicly-funded postgraduate studies in teacher education, while the National Excellence Programme is open to outstanding undergraduate students from all first-class universities, particular those in mathematics, natural sciences and related disciplines, who all demonstrate a clear passion for education and teaching.

In addition, from 2022 onwards, eight governmental departments – including the Ministry of Education – have enacted a plan to strengthen teachers in basic education for the new era (Ministry of Education, PRC & seven other governmental departments, 2022). By 2025, a number of national teacher education bases will have been established, a set of replicable and scalable reform experiences and practices in teaching force development will have been formed, and a cohort of master's-level teachers and education leaders for primary and secondary school will have been trained. The initiative also aims to enhance the rural teacher education support system – anchored by ministry-affiliated normal universities and coordinated through local teacher education institutions – while ensuring a steady supply of outstanding teachers for under-resourced regions in central and western China. It anticipates progressive improvements in the academic calibre of teacher education candidates, a gradual reduction of teacher shortages in less developed areas, greater professionalisation and standardisation of teacher training, robust

support for career development, and significantly improved management and service standards within the teaching profession.

3.2.4 Curricula and Standards for Teacher Education

In 2011, the Ministry of Education issued the 'Teacher Education Curriculum Standards (Trial)' for the field of education at the national level. These include curriculum standards for early childhood teacher education, primary teacher education, and secondary teacher education. Notably, these standards are exclusively applicable to teacher education programmes (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2011).

The curriculum standards for primary school teacher education (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2011, p. 12) provide a national framework for all teacher education institutions offering primary school teacher education programmes. According to the guidelines, primary school teacher education should equip future teachers with an understanding of the developmental characteristics and individual differences of primary school pupils. Furthermore, they should be capable of designing supportive and challenging learning environments that satisfy the desire for expression and curiosity typical of this age group. Student teachers are expected to acquire the skills necessary to design and implement suitable activities that foster independent, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning, as well as promote the formation of positive learning habits. They should also be able to appreciate the value and uniqueness of interpersonal interaction in the development of primary pupils.

The state objectives of the curriculum are structured around three core dimensions:

- (1) *Educational Beliefs and Responsibilities*, encompassing appropriate views of learners, teachers and education, and corresponding behaviours;
- (2) *Educational Knowledge and Competencies* for understanding and educating pupils (one of the points is to be familiar with the content and methods of teaching at least two subjects), and continued self-development;
- (3) *Educational Practices and Experiences*, comprising observational, participatory, and research-based educational practices and experiences.

Table 3 presents an overview of the structure and scope of the teacher training modules for primary schools, including the scope of credits and workload across various teacher education models according to programme duration.

Table 3: Curricula for Primary School Teacher Education (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2011, p. 15)

Areas of Study	Proposed Module	Credit Requirements		
		Three Year Pro-gramme	Speciality Five Year	Speciality Four Year Undergrad-uate Pro-grammes
(1) Child De-velopment and Learning	Child Development; Cognition and Learning of Elementary School Students, etc.	Minimum Compul-sory Cred-its – 20 credits	Minimum Com-pulsory Credits – 26 credits	Minimum Compulsory Credits – 24 credits
(2) Fundamen-tals of Primary Education	Philosophy of Education; Cur-riculum Design and Evaluation; Effective Teaching and Learning; School Education Development; Classroom Management; School Organisation and Management; Education Policies and Regu-lations.			
(3) Primary Subject Educa-tion and Activi-ty Guidance	Research on curriculum stand-ards and teaching materials of primary school subjects; teach-ing design of primary school subjects; interdisciplinary educa-tion in primary school; integrat-ed practical activities in primary school, etc.			
(4) Mental Health and Moral Educa-tion	Psychological counselling for primary school students; char-acter development and moral education for primary school students.			
(5) Ethics and Professional Development	Teachers' Professional Ethics; Educational Research Methods; Teachers' Professional Develop-ment; Application of Modern Educational Technology; Teach-ers' Language; Writing Skills, etc.			
(6) Educational Practices	Educational Apprenticeship; Educational Internship.	18 weeks	18 weeks	18 weeks
Minimum total credits of teacher education pro-grammes (including elective courses)		28 cred-its + 18 weeks	35 cred-its + 18 weeks	32 credits + 18 weeks

Note. * One credit is equivalent to 18 hours of coursework under the supervision of a teacher and the successful completion of an assessment. **The areas of study are compulsory for every learner; the modules proposed by the Ministry of Education may be selected and combined either by teacher education institutions or by learners, and may be compulsory or elective; the number of credits for each area of study or module is independently determined by teacher education institutions in accordance with the relevant regulations.

Standards for Teacher Qualification. Following the promulgation of the Teacher Education Curriculum Standards (for Trial Implementation) by the Ministry of Education in 2011, a set of Professional Standards (for Trial Implementation) was released in 2012 for kindergarten, primary, and secondary school teachers (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2012). These standards establish the basic concepts of ‘student-centredness, teacher morality, competence, and lifelong learning’ and put forward specific requirements for the development of teacher education at different levels and types of teacher education institutions. In 2021, the Ministry of Education initiated a reform that exempts student teachers from the national teacher qualification examination for primary and secondary schools (General Office of the Ministry of Education, 2021). In its place, a competency-based evaluation system was established to assess student teachers’ educational and teaching abilities. Furthermore, the Ministry has formulated trial standards for vocational competencies in five specialisations: Pre-school Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, Secondary Vocational Education, and Special Education (Trial).

Standards for Teacher Training. In order to regulate and guide the construction of teacher education majors and establish a sound quality assurance system, a series of measures were introduced in succession. These include the Interim Measures for the Qualification Examination for Primary and Secondary School Teachers (August 2013), and the Implementation Measures for the Certification of Teacher Training Programmes in General Colleges and Universities (Interim) (October 2017) (Zhou, 2019). For instance, the Implementation Measures for Certification of Teacher Training Programmes in General Colleges and Universities include detailed regulations for primary school teacher education (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2017). In addition to aligning with the Teacher Education Curriculum Standards, they stipulate accreditation requirements such as: a minimum of 10% of total credits in courses on humanities, social sciences, and scientific literacy; a minimum of 35% of credits in subject specialisation courses; and a maximum student-to-practice site ratio of 20:1 for internships.

Faculty and institutional infrastructure requirements are also precisely defined. These include:

- a maximum student-teacher ratio of 18:1;

- at least 40% of teacher education staff being full-time university teachers dedicated to teacher education;
- a minimum of 60% of these teachers holding a master's or doctoral degree; and
- at least 20% of the teaching staff in teacher education programmes being part-time primary school teachers.

Minimum thresholds are also set for funding, library resources, and other teaching infrastructure. These criteria define Level 1 accreditation, while Level 2 and Level 3 accreditations entail progressively stricter requirements. Notably these include the implementation of a dual-mentor system, in which university lecturers and outstanding primary school teachers jointly supervise student teachers during their practice placement.

Objectives of Teacher Education: In 2018, the Ministry of Education issued its official guidelines for the implementation of the Teacher Excellence Programme 2.0. The objectives of the policy are:

"After about five years of efforts, to set up a number of high-level and distinctive teacher education colleges and teacher education majors, to significantly enhance the relevance and effectiveness of teacher education, to significantly update the curriculum system and teaching content, to form a new form of education and teaching centred on student teachers, to improve the quality of practical teaching, to improve the mechanism of collaborative training, to optimise the teacher education faculty, and to establish a culture of quality in teacher education. The quality culture of teacher education is basically established. By 2035, the comprehensive quality, specialisation level and innovation ability of teacher educators will be significantly improved, and a solid foundation will be laid for the training and development of millions of backbone teachers, hundreds of thousands of outstanding teachers, and tens of thousands of educator-type teachers." (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2018)

Overall, the standards for the professional qualification of primary school teachers have been further elevated. A licensing system, standardised certification procedures, and a comprehensive evaluation mechanism for teacher education institutions have been established. In parallel with the nationwide expansion of teaching quality and quality assurance frameworks, additional emphasis is placed on strengthening teachers' moral education, expanding access to online teacher training, and piloting innovative initiatives.

3.2.5 Scale of Teacher Education and Qualifications of Teachers

The scale of teacher education for schools at all levels in China has continued to expand in the 21st century. This growth is reflected not only in the increasing number of practising teachers, but also in recent data on prospective teachers.

The number of full-time faculty members in the nation has doubled, from approximately 9,319,000 in 1985 to 18,918,000 in 2023 (Ding, 2024). Since 2021, the Ministry of Education has begun publishing annual statistics on student teachers. The data for two consecutive years reveals a steady increase in both the enrolment and graduation figures for student teachers enrolled (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2022c, 2023b) (see Table 4).

Table 4: Number of Teacher Training Students (own illustration according to data provided by the Ministry of Education, PRC)

Year	Graduates	Entrants	Enrolment
2021	426,665	467,046	1.981,164
2022	498,854	495,436	2.132,596

To further improve the preparation of outstanding educators, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with relevant governmental departments, has launched a range of initiatives across three principal domains (Ding, 2024). Most notably, the implementation of publicly-funded education schemes for prospective teachers has led to the enrolment of approximately 167,000 high-achieving students in these programmes since 2007. Although the overall scale of teacher education has grown, the scale of primary teacher education programmes has remained relatively stable. Nevertheless, there has been a significant improvement in the academic qualifications of teaching staff. While official data specific to primary teacher education programmes are unavailable, the trend is evident in the number and qualification levels of full-time primary school teachers in recent years. In 2000, there were 5,860,316 full-time teachers and 551,429 substitute teachers employed in primary education (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2000). By 2022, the total number of educational personnel had increased to 6,246,969, with 5,818,633 identified as full-time regular primary school teachers (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2023a). Significantly, in 2000, only 1% of full-time primary school teachers held a bachelor’s degree or higher. By 2023, this figure had risen to 78% (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2024; see Table 5), demonstrating the success of long-term efforts to professionalise the primary teaching workforce and raise qualification standards across the system.

Table 5: Breakdown of Full-Time Primary School Teachers by Educational Attainment (own illustration according to data provided by the Ministry of Education (2000, 2024))

Year		Total	Bachelor's Degree or higher	College Graduate	Specialised Secondary Education	High School Graduate	Below High School Graduate
2000	No.	5,860,316	58,765	1,116,057	4,175,722	325,659	184,113
	%	100.00	1.00	19.04	71.26	5.56	3.14
2023	No.	6,656,261	5,194,003	1,412,665	--	48,902	691
	%	100.00	78.03	21.22	--	0.01	0.0001

3.3 Characteristics and Trends

Teacher education in China – including but not limited to the primary level – has seen significant progress over the past two decades, particularly in terms of scale, quality, systematisation, and standardisation:

1. The status and scale of teacher education in China have reached unprecedented levels. The teaching profession is increasingly viewed as a meritocratic and respected profession.
2. Teacher education and early-career teachers receive strong political and financial support from both the central government and local authorities. This sustained investment has enhanced the attractiveness and stability of the teaching profession.
3. The institutions engaged in teacher education have expanded significantly in number and improved in quality, reflecting a national orientation towards excellence in teacher preparation.
4. Recent developments highlight a strong emphasis on selectivity: teacher education programmes now prioritise candidates who demonstrate not only academic excellence in their subject areas, but also a genuine passion for teaching and good physical health. Admission criteria increasingly reflect these expectations.
5. Curricula and professional qualifications for teacher education have been systematically standardised and differentiated nationwide in accordance with the school types. These standards now serve as the guiding framework for all universities and colleges offering teacher education programmes.
6. Looking ahead, both the academic calibre of student teachers and the professional expertise of teacher educators are expected to rise. There is also a marked trend towards the acquisition of postgraduate qualifications among future teachers.

4 Conclusion and Implications for Teacher Professionalisation

China's primary education system and teacher education system have made remarkable progress in recent decades, achieving near-universal enrolment and significantly enhancing teacher qualifications. The government's sustained investment and reform efforts – particularly its initiatives targeting rural areas and underprivileged communities – demonstrate a clear commitment to reducing inequalities and promoting equity.

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist. Regional inequalities in education quality, resource allocation, and teacher distribution continue to hinder equitable outcomes, with the urban-rural divide representing a major obstacle. Moreover, the dual imperative to uphold high academic standards while advancing holistic and inclusive education presents a complex balancing act – one that requires continued innovation and critical reflection.

Looking ahead, the professionalisation of primary school teaching must remain a national priority. This involves the ongoing development of teacher education curricula, an emphasis on the moral and professional ethos of educators, and the effective integration of technology to support teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, fostering international collaboration in teacher education can yield valuable perspectives and strategies for navigating the complexities of globalisation and technological transformation.

In sum, although China's advancements in primary education and teacher education are commendable, sustainable and equitable progress will depend on systemic innovation, enduring policy commitment, and a shared dedication to cultivating the next generation of teachers and learners.

This paper analyses current structures and development trends of primary education and teacher education in China, with a particular focus on primary school teacher education, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The analysis of the current structures draws primarily on policy documents issued by government and educational institutions, as well as on programme descriptions and official reports that outline the orientations and general conditions of school and teacher education in China. Although a small number of studies (Zhao & Liao, 2024; Zhi et al., 2025; Zhou, 2019) examine reform discourses concerning the development and challenges of professionalisation, and individual investigations (You et al., 2020) provide insight into the perspectives of teacher educators and teachers involved in particular reform initiatives, there remains a notable gap in research regarding the actual practices of teacher education in relation to the development and challenges of teacher professionalisation. Future research should include a systematic investigation of current practices in primary education and primary teacher

education in China, in order to foster a more comprehensive understanding of their development, challenges and specific issues.

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Areas of Expertise: Research on Educational Inequality, Teacher Professionalisation and Teacher Education, Exhaustion and Suffering in the Teaching Profession, Subjectivation and Alienation, Qualitative Research Methods and Methodologies, Diversity and Inclusion

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