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Introduction

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NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: CHINA

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General Historical Background of ALE and LLL

Lifelong learning has long been deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition. More than two thousand years ago, the great philosopher Confucius proposed the idea of *learning without stopping until the coffin is closed*. As China began to develop a modern schooling system in the early twentieth century, Tsai Yuanpei, the renowned educator and then Minister of Education of the Republic of China, established the *Division of Social Education* within the Ministry of Education, which was responsible for providing literacy education and cultural enrichment to the public outside the formal schooling system (Hou & Guo, 2019).

In the 1920s and 1930s, official social education was increasingly complemented by bottom-up efforts led by pioneering intellectuals who promoted mass education and *learning by doing* at the grassroots level. For example, Yan Yangchu (Y. C. James Yen) integrated literacy, livelihood, health, and civic education into a comprehensive blueprint for rural reconstruction and put his ideas into practice in Ding County, Hebei Province, which later became the only county free of illiteracy at the time (Zhang, 2013). He subsequently extended his model of mass education and rural reconstruction to the Philippines, Korea, Colombia, Ghana, and other countries, and was appointed as a lifelong consultant to UNESCO (Luo et al., 2026). In short, nation-building and the cultivation of citizens through education were persistent themes in social education in the first half of the twentieth century (Zhou, 2021).

After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the government launched large-scale literacy campaigns. Peasants were mobilized to learn reading and writing during the

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winter and in their spare time, and various study groups were organized within factories. From 1949 to 1965, more than 100 million illiterate people became literate (Ministry of Education of China, 2004). Building on this foundational work in adult education, the period from the late 1970s to 1993 marked a new phase during which lifelong education began to take shape institutionally.

In 1979, the Central Radio and Television University was established, followed by the creation of branches nationwide (State Council, 1979), forming a comprehensive distance education network that greatly expanded access to learning. In 1981, the higher education self-study examination system was introduced (State Council, 1981), offering a new pathway for individuals without access to traditional universities to obtain academic credentials. A key milestone occurred in 1986, when the State Education Commission formally recognized adult education as an integral part of the national education system, placing it alongside basic, higher, and vocational education (Wu, 2018). Finally, in 1993, the *Outline for China's Educational Reform and Development* explicitly stated that adult education represented a new type of educational system transitioning towards lifelong education, marking a crucial shift from concept to national policy.

Current relevant national legislation pertaining to adult and lifelong learning (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL)

While the Chinese Constitution does not include any clause on continuing or lifelong education, the Education Law included a few provisions pertaining to lifelong education when it was first enacted in 1995. For example, the State “*establishes and improves lifelong education system*” (Article 11), and “*the State encourages schools and other institutions of education as well as social organizations to take measures to create conditions for citizens to receive life-long education*” (Article 41) (National People’s Congress, 2018, pp.8, 12). In addition, Article 19 of the Education Law juxtaposes vocational education and adult education. The amendment to the Education Law in 2015 further reflects the notion of lifelong learning. It replaces the term adult education with continuing education and explicitly incorporates the term lifelong learning into the law. Section 3 of Article 20 stipulates:

“The state shall encourage the development of varied forms of continuing education so that citizens receive appropriate forms of education in politics, economics, culture,

science, technology, profession, and other respects, promote the mutual recognition and connection of outcomes of learning of various types, and promote life-long learning for all the people.” National People’s Congress (2015, p. 2).

In the past two decades, bills have been frequently proposed to enact a law specific to lifelong education or lifelong learning in the state legislature. A statute on lifelong learning or lifelong education may be enacted in the future.

China aims to become a leading learning society in which lifelong learning is available for everyone, anywhere, and anytime (Xi, 2023). To build a lifelong learning system for all, China’s Education Modernization Plan towards 2035 (2019) identifies the following strategies: streamlining the pathway for talent growth; improving enrolment mechanisms; offering flexible learning and continuing education; enabling transfer between different channels; establishing a national qualifications framework; establishing a national credit bank system and a learning achievement certification system; reinforcing provision of continuing education and training by vocational and higher education institutions; expanding the supply of community education resources; enhancing education for senior citizens; and promoting the building of learning organizations of all kinds. Similar ideas are echoed in the *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024-2035)* – the most recent national blueprint for educational development – which outlines the construction of “*a ubiquitous and accessible lifelong education system*” as the core mechanism for achieving a comprehensive “*learning society*” by 2035 (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2025). China also adopts a national strategy of education digitalization and promotes AI-assisted educational transformation.

The Ministry of Education (2023) identified five areas of major tasks for building a learning society.

- First, embedding the building of learning cities into urban development and expand the coverage of learning cities to 50% in the East and Middle part of China and to 30% in the West region by 2025.
- Second, for rural areas, establishing a three-tier (county seats - township - village/community) learning centre system within the jurisdiction of each county.
- Third, innovating and digitalizing the diploma-granting continuing education programs offered by higher education institutions.
- Fourth, regulating and invigorating the non-degree continuing education.
- Fifth, encouraging integration and coordinating innovation between vocational education, higher education, and continuing education.

(Ministry of Education, 2023).

Lifelong education is supposed to play an important role in virtually all social policy areas, such as special education, education for women, cultivation of digital literacy and skill formation for all, and vocational education. For example, ageing is regarded as posing serious challenges to national development, individual well-being, and social harmony and stability. Article 71 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (revised in 2018) stipulates that the elderly have a right to receive continuing education and that the state shall incorporate elderly education into the lifelong education system. The state also released a specific policy on Strengthening the Work on the Elderly in the New Era in December 2021, which lays out the plan for expanding the supply of educational resources for the elderly in multiple ways. Furthermore, educational agencies are charged with taking the lead in researching and formulating policies and measures for the development of education for the elderly. Educational institutions, industry organizations, as well as private businesses, are encouraged to open schools for the elderly or provide relevant services. Additionally, the state intends to establish the National University for the Elderly and to build a national platform for sharing educational resources and public services for the elderly. In 2022, the State Council set the goal that every county shall have at least one elderly college by 2025. Vocational skill training for the elderly and the establishment of a lifelong vocational skill training system are also on the policy agenda.

Extent of devolution of powers in ALE and LLL to regions and cities, and to social partners

Despite the lack of specific national legislation on lifelong learning, some provinces or cities in China have issued local legislation or regulations on lifelong learning. The first provincial legislation on lifelong education was passed in Fujian Province in 2005, followed by Shanghai in 2022 and Hebei Province in 2024. In addition, Taiyuan City (the provincial seat of Shanxi Province) and Ningbo City (one of the manufacturing and business centres in Zhejiang Province) passed local legislation on lifelong learning in 2012 and 2015, respectively. All of this provincial and local legislation contains the phrase “*lifelong education promotion*” in its title, indicating that lifelong education is a cause that should be actively pursued.

Social organizations have played an important role in lifelong learning promotion, research, and delivery. For example, the China Adult Education Society is a national non-profit organization and a partner organization of the International Adult Education Association. It

has subdivisions that cover all major areas of lifelong learning and more than 1300 membership organizations spreading across China (China Adult Education Society, 2024). Another example is Shanghai Municipal Institute for Lifelong Education, which is the first research institute on lifelong education in China (Shanghai Municipal Institute for Lifelong Education, 2025).

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

The initial establishment of the continuing education system took place after the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping met with the former British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, who championed the success of the UK Open University. The Central Radio & Television University was then opened in 1979 to provide continuing educational opportunities to those whose schooling was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution.

More recently, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action have, to an extent, shaped China's educational planning. *China's Education Modernization Plan towards 2035* (2019) has reflected the notion of ensuring inclusive and equitable high-quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, which has been the cornerstone of SDG4. The OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Project is also likely to have had some impact (Zhu, 2019).

Building learning cities is an important strategy for promoting lifelong learning internationally (Yang, 2012). Indeed, China has played an instrumental role in the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities. The first International Conference on Learning Cities took place in Beijing in 2013 and adopted the *Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities* and the *Key Features of Learning Cities*. In 2016, Hangzhou became the first Chinese city to be included in the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities. As of March 2025, eleven other cities have also joined the network, including Beijing, Changzhou, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Suzhou, Taiyuan, Wuhan and Xi'an (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2025).

Financing of LLL

The financing responsibilities for lifelong learning are not clearly stipulated in state law or policy in China (Wu, 2019). The total fiscal expenditure on education constitutes 4% of the

total GDP of China in 2023. Yet the annual National Educational Expenditure report posted at the Ministry of Education website does not contain a separate section on lifelong learning, continuing education, or adult education (Ministry of Education et al., 2024). In China, adult lifelong learning can take place in general higher education institutions, vocational colleges, adult education colleges, community educational centres, educational companies, and public and private employers, which current educational statistics can hardly cover. Research has shown that even for community education alone, such expenditure is difficult to calculate and has not necessarily been included in the public education budget at the local or regional levels (Yu & Hu, 2022).

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

The understanding of the stakeholders engaged with lifelong learning has evolved gradually. The initial provincial and local legislation on lifelong education in China excludes formal schooling, which was regarded as a drawback of such legislation. Now open universities, colleges and conventional universities, vocational schools or colleges, schools or colleges for the elderly (independent or affiliated to an organization or business entities), schools that help students to pass the National Self-Study Exams or provide vocational training, facilities such as libraries and museums, and the business industry all play an indispensable role in building a lifelong learning society.

Open universities in China are *“the new type of universities carrying out open and distance education mainly for adults supported by the use of modern information and communication technology”* (Ministry of Education, 2012: p. 1). They were transformed from the earlier radio & television universities in 2012. Open universities can use open enrolment and can grant degrees. They are also among the major content providers in adult education and continuing education. In November 2022, when the state established the Elderly Universities of China, it used the resources and delivery system of the Open Universities of China.

General higher education institutions offer degree and non-degree continuing education. Such activities are part of the service function of modern universities. At the same time, they often generate considerable revenue. In the past few years, the Ministry of Education has tightened the regulation of such activities.

Recently, the Ministry of Education (2022) adopted a three-tier classification to regulate the granting of diplomas for continuing education in general higher education. This is selective and is based on their areas of expertise. Some selective universities no longer offer continuing education that can lead to a diploma. Only small-sized programs that reflect the selective universities' expertise can be sustained. Local universities can provide diploma continuing education *"to an appropriate scale"* but need to cater to local needs. In comparison, vocational colleges are encouraged to provide diploma-granting continuing education programs in the areas of manufacturing, service and rural development. In addition, the Ministry of Education also requires that the applicants pass the National Adult College Entrance Examination to be enrolled in these programs. In addition, the Ministry of Education (2021) issued a policy to regulate the non-degree continuing education offered by the general higher education institutions. Higher education institutions shall distinguish the schools or divisions that run non-degree continuing education programs and the division responsible for regulating non-degree continuing education within the university. The regulating division acts as an internal quality control and risk management body.

Adult higher education institutions were designed specifically to meet the need for lifelong learning. Its modes of study include full-time, part-time and by correspondence. Students join the programs by taking the National Adult College Entrance Examination. Those who have fulfilled all program requirements can receive a diploma.

In addition, China has a self-study exam system through which individuals can obtain a diploma if they pass exams for all the subjects in their program of study (State Council, 2014). By design, individuals don't have to be enrolled in a school. Public enterprises and private businesses can provide educational services to individuals, helping them to pass the exams.

Vocational schools and colleges are playing an increasingly important role in lifelong learning. The Vocational Education Law was amended in 2022. Section 1 of Article 14 stipulates:

"The state shall establish and improve a modern vocational education system meeting the needs of economic and social development, deeply integrating industries with education, equally emphasizing vocational school education and vocational training, achieving convertibility between vocational education and regular education, effectively integrating different levels of vocational education, serving the lifelong learning of each person."
(National People's Congress, 2022, pp. 3)

Some local regulations, for example, those of Chongqing Municipality, set goals and provide financial incentives for vocational schools and colleges to provide technical and vocational training to the larger society.

Another important type of player is business organizations, and many of them are Internet companies. Some offer a platform for learning, for example, the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) companies, and video-sharing and posting websites. Others provide content-based educational services ranging from general education courses to vocational skills training and licensure exam preparation.

Nonformal entities such as museums, libraries, and parks are also required or encouraged to provide lifelong education. For example, the Regulation on Museums (2015) requires museums to make age-appropriate explanations available and provide funds to those open to the public free of charge (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

The Ministry of Education requires all higher education institutions that are involved in continuing education to file an annual report. Such institutions include general higher education institutions, independent adult education colleges, and open universities. The Ministry releases a checklist for such a report, which includes orientation and the management system, the development of degree and non-degree continuing education, social impacts and innovation, challenges and suggestions. In addition, provincial education departments compile their provincial report, and the Ministry of Education compiles a report for the whole country. Regarding diploma-awarding continuing education programs offered by general higher education institutions, the Ministry of Education also issues guidelines for the development of programs of study.

Broadly, local governments are evaluated based on their efforts and achievements in promoting vocational education and engagement in building a learning society. The Ministry of Education disseminates good examples of lifelong learning programs and practices to showcase *best practices*.

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Additional Resources: Online Platforms and Associations on Lifelong Learning

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- The Week of Lifelong Learning for All [全民终身学习活动周专题网站]. (n.d.). <http://www.llaw.org.cn/> [Note: The annual lifelong learning week, which was initiated in 2005, usually runs in late November]

