

New National Initiatives of Modernizing Education in China

Yiming Zhu

East China Normal University

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to shed light on a latest education policy blueprint in China, titled *China's education modernization 2035*, which was issued by the Central Government of China in February of 2019.

Design/Approach/Methods: This is an analytical policy review.

Findings: The author argues that this new Chinese educational policy was driven by three factors: UN 2030 Agenda, China's national strategy, and Chinese educational reform and improvement. In *China's education modernization 2035*, eight key principles were rooted in the Chinese context and also recognized by international society. According to this policy initiative, 10 specific strategical tasks are outlined to reform Chinese education toward 2035.

Originality/Value: The article will be useful to learn and understand the new directions and the future approaches of Chinese education development and reform toward 2035.

Keywords

China, education modernization, 2035

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Corresponding author:

Yiming Zhu, Institute of Schooling and Development, East China Normal University, 3663 N. Zhongshan Rd., Shanghai 200062, Shanghai, China.

Email: ymzhu@dedu.ecnu.edu.cn



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In February 2019, the Chinese central government officially issued an educational development plan entitled, *China's education modernization 2035* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2019). Developed over the course of 3 years, the plan is intended to serve as the framework for China's education reform and development in the coming period. As such, it systematically describes the concepts, goals, and tasks of this reform and development. This article briefly reviews *China's education modernization 2035*: namely, its background, core concepts and main content, features, and potential risks.

Background

Since China implemented its reform and opening up policy in 1978, educational development has been guided by the idea that “education needs to be modernized, oriented to the world, and oriented to the future” (Gu, 1998, p. 1309). As such, *China's education modernization 2035* was initiated in the new era of educational development, both at home and abroad.

Response to UN's The 2030 agenda for sustainable development

Released in 2015 and endorsed by all United Nations Member States, the *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development* set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for achieving sustainable human development in economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Of these, SDG 4 is related to education and seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015).

In conjunction with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held the World Education Forum in Incheon, South Korea, in May of 2015. Attracting more than 1,600 delegates from 160 countries, the Forum released the *Education 2030 Incheon declaration and framework for action: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all* (UNESCO, 2015a). In 2015, UNESCO published *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?*, reiterating its position on the development of education (UNESCO, 2015b). The same year, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched the *OECD future of education and skills 2030* project (OECD, 2018).

These documents, reports, and actions have shaped China's education planning in some way. In early 2016, Chinese policymakers began developing a medium- and long-term plan for education development. In this process, “ensuring inclusive and equitable high-quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” were assimilated into the goals of China's education modernization.

Response to the Chinese government's demand to build a moderately prosperous society

In October of 2017, the National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed that after the country's reform and opening up, the Chinese government should make strategic arrangements for socialist modernization. It thus proposed the strategic goals of "three steps." The first step involves solving the problem of subsistence for the people. The second step entails achieving the two goals necessary to create a moderately prosperous society, both of which have been accomplished. The third step involves building a modern socialist nation by the centennial year of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of the current international and domestic situation and China's development conditions, the Chinese government will organize the 2020–2050 period in two stages. The first stage, 2020–2035, will involve the achievement of socialist modernization. The second stage, 2035–2050, will involve building China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful (Xi, 2017).

Therefore, *China's education modernization 2035*—not 2030—was created to respond to the requirements of China's national modernization development strategy. The educational plan is to build a powerful education system, which is a fundamental project to bring about a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Moreover, developing education is intended to serve as the support for the fundamental modernization requirements of the country in 2035 and realize the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. Consequently, China will be a modern, harmonious, and creative society (World Bank and the Development Research Center of the State Council, P. R. China, 2013). The modernization of education in China is believed to contribute significantly to realizing such goals in 2035.

Meeting the requirements of educational transformation and improvement in China

In China, industries typically formulate a development plan envisioning over a 5- or 10-year period, such as "Made in China 2025" and "Healthy China 2030." In 2010, the Chinese government formulated the *National medium- and long-term education reform and development plan (2010–2020)*. With 2020 fast approaching, new plans are necessary. China has become the second largest economy in the world and achieved remarkable progress in educational development. Indeed, indicators show that China is moving closer to the global advanced level of education (see Table 1).

However, China's educational development still faces many problems and challenges. In this regard, educational development needs to shift from a focus on quantitative expansion to ensuring a higher quality of education. Such development should guarantee the right to education and learning for all, while providing people with a strong sense of fulfillment, happiness, and security.

Table 1. Major indicators of education development in China, 1978 and 2017.

Indicator	1978	2017
Preschool education gross enrollment rate	10.6	79.6
Primary schools net enrollment ratio	94	99.91
Lower secondary level gross enrollment ratio	66.4	103.5
High school gross enrollment ratio	—	88.3
Tertiary education gross enrollment ratio	2.7	45.7

Source. MOE (2018).

Moreover, educational development should help establish a more pluralistic and transparent system of education governance in order to stimulate the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of every school and teacher.

China's education modernization 2035 plan was developed within this context and to address these broader aims. In addition to proposing solutions to the current problems facing educational development, the plan provides a blueprint for the modernization of education in China. In doing so, it emphasizes the goal of achieving high-quality education in China, as detailed in the following section.

Core concepts and main content

China's education modernization 2035 comprises five parts: strategic background, overall thinking, strategic tasks, implementation path, and guarantees. This section provides a brief overview of the plan's core concepts and main content.

The concept of development is rooted in Chinese practice while incorporating international consensus on education

China's education modernization 2035 sets out eight basic concepts emphasizing ethics as the priority of education, well-round development, people-orientation, lifelong learning, personalized teaching, integration of knowledge and practice, integrated development, and co-construction and sharing.

These concepts reflect the series of education proposals by General Secretary Xi Jinping since he took office in 2012. According to Xi, both virtue and leadership should be fostered through education, educational development should be rooted in China's system, and focused on people-centered development. Claiming that education should facilitate the great rejuvenation of the nation, Xi further advances the need to deepen educational reform and innovation. In this regard, he notes that teacher development is a fundamental domain of educational development (Xi, 2018). These beliefs are fully reflected in *China's education modernization 2035*.

In developing *China's education modernization 2035*, the Chinese government considered the views of the international community in numerous ways, including holding thematic discussions at UNESCO headquarters, inviting World Bank experts to provide technical support reports (World Bank, 2016), and organizing international symposiums. New ideas such as educational equity, quality of education, lifelong learning, and integrated development—to which the international community attaches great importance—are fully reflected in *China's education modernization 2035*.

Reflecting the characteristics of education modernization in China

China's education modernization 2035 proposes that the overall modernization of education will be achieved by 2035, resulting in China entering the ranks of the most powerful countries in terms of education. Consequently, China will become known for its learning, human resources, and talent, thereby laying a solid foundation for the creation of a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful socialist nation by the middle of the 21st century.

The main development goals of educational modernization in China include the establishment of a modern education system that provides lifelong learning for all, the universalization of quality preschool education, the achievement of high-quality and balanced compulsory education, the complete universalization of upper secondary education, the significant improvement of vocational education services, marked improvement in the competitiveness of higher education, the provision of the appropriate education for disabled children, and the formation of a new pattern of education management involving the participation of society. These development goals fully demonstrate the characteristics of a powerful educational system.

Specific strategic tasks to ensure faithful implementation

China's education modernization 2035 sets out the strategic tasks, implementation paths, and guarantee measures required for the realization of China's educational reform and development by 2035.

The strategic tasks focus on the following areas: education development concepts, advanced quality of education, the universalization of education at all levels, balanced educational system services, lifelong learning systems, talent development, the development of a teaching force, the informationization of education, the opening up of education, and educational governance systems. These areas comprise specific tasks and content requiring further reform and development. The implementation paths emphasize the need to consider local conditions in the step-by-step advance, implementation, and exploration of reforms intended to stimulate reform and innovation in education modernization. These measures place significant emphasis on strong leadership at all levels

of government, an institutional guarantee of sufficient educational expenditure, and a mechanism ensuring the participation of the whole society.

It is worth noting that *China's education modernization 2035* clearly identifies the specific requirements for “raising the level of education input.” These requirements include improving the long-term mechanism for ensuring the sustained growth of financial investment, as well as guaranteeing that the general public budget for expenditure in education increases each year, that the average cost per student in school increases each year, and that the national fiscal education expenditure is at least 4% of the gross domestic product. These requirements, which were never clarified in the past, demonstrate the determination and courage of the Chinese government to develop high-quality education as well as the strong economic basis for this development.

Key features

Chinese characteristics of education development

In the past 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, China has always paid attention to the integration of national development and personal development in education. According to *China's education modernization 2035*, the guiding philosophy of education modernization is “uniting the hearts of the people, comprehensively developing integrity, developing manpower, nurturing talents, benefiting the people as the goal, foster all-round moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic grounding with a hard-working spirit in the socialist builders and successors” and “serving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as an important mission of education, consolidate and develop a socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and to serve as a driver for reform and opening-up and socialist modernization” (MOE, 2019).

Clearly, these ideas reflect both China's adherence to the people-centered concept of development and the contribution of education to the development and prosperity of the country. They are also indicative of China's self-confidence in building a socialist education system with Chinese characteristics.

Experience of China prioritizing educational development

Following its reform and opening up in 1978, China adopted a strategy of prioritizing the development of education. This prioritization of education has made significant progress over the past four decades (Yuan, 2018).

At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, Xi once again emphasized that:

We must give priority to education, further reform in education, speed up its modernization, and develop education that people are satisfied with. The establishment of an educational power is a fundamental project for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, so education must be given priority. (Xi, 2017)

In 2018, the People's Republic of China held the first "National Education Conference" (formerly the "National Education Work Conference"). During the conference, Xi once again stressed the need to prioritize educational development in the new era as a gambit to advance the endeavors of the Party and state in all areas. He also stressed the need to constantly adapt education to the requirements of the Party and state, ensuring that it aligns with the expectations of the people, as well as supports China's comprehensive national strength and international roles. A core strategy of China's modernization, the prioritization of educational development is clearly reflected in *China's education modernization 2035*.

Innovation-driven Chinese educational development

Innovative reform is the fundamental driving force in the modernization of education in China. Indeed, "adherence to innovative reform" constitutes one of the basic principles of *China's education modernization 2035*.

At present, China's educational development remains unbalanced and inadequate. It is not fully adapted to the new expectations of the country's socioeconomic development and the growing demands of the people. As such, *China's education modernization 2035* identifies the actions required to adapt and improve the country's educational development. This includes establishing a modern education governance system by deepening comprehensive educational reform, fully utilizing new technologies and mechanisms, and innovating in both educational services delivery systems and school running and management systems. Three strategic tasks are directly related to these actions: "upgrading first-class talent development and innovation skills," "building a team of highly qualified professional and innovative teachers," and "accelerating education reform and innovation in the era of ICT" (MOE, 2019).

However, *China's education modernization 2035* is not a refined design procedure or project but a development guideline and outline. Chinese provinces and cities have begun developing corresponding *Local education modernization 2035* plans, which are intended to implement the national requirements and achieve the national goals set out in *China's education modernization 2035*.

Open development of education in China

As an active participant in the UN's *The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, China has proposed initiatives to build a community with a shared future for mankind, including the "Belt and Road" initiative. In this regard, *China's education modernization 2035* proposes that

it is necessary to provide a higher level and more open education, to strengthen educational and humanistic exchanges, to promote the exchange of hearts and minds among people for civilized exchanges, and make greater contributions to the creation of a better future for mankind. (MOE, 2019)

One of the strategic tasks of *China's education modernization 2035* is to “create a new prospect of opening up to the outside world in education” (MOE, 2019). This will actively contribute to the “Belt and Road” initiative; comprehensively strengthen cooperation with all countries and international organizations; enrich the meaning of openness, as well as increase the level of openness and its international influence; and contribute to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. To this end, China seeks to comprehensively enhance international exchange and cooperation in education, attract outstanding international teachers to teach and students to learn in China, and actively participate in global education governance.

As such, in addition to focusing on education in China, *China's education modernization 2035* places significant emphasis on exchange and co-development in the international context.

Potential risks

In the current fast-changing world, it is not easy to grasp changes and trends. *China's education modernization 2035* fully reflects China's current understanding and requirements for the development of national education. Appropriateness and feasibility of such understanding and requirements will be tested in practice. In any case, however, the development of such systematic policy planning in the context of rapid change carries a certain degree of risk.

Uncertainty about future education development and change

It is not entirely clear what kind of changes will emerge in the future of education and what form of education will take in China. In addition to ensuring external conditions for educational development, the modernization of education should consider the impact of changes in teaching and learning on school development and individual development. Indeed, the scale of China's educational system makes it even more necessary to diversify educational development.

During the third Global Conference on Education and Research (GLOCER) in May 2019, the topic of “Education Think Tank 2030” asked the following questions: “Will the professors be replaced by artificial intelligence-supported robots? Will universities disappear? Will the traditional transfer of information in the form of lectures be a thing of past? Will universities only offer online courses?” However, there is a significant difference between *China's education modernization 2035* and the international academic community in terms of the potentially revolutionary impact of modern technology—such as artificial intelligence—on education.

Caution of youth engagement in the future

China's education modernization 2035 focuses on guaranteeing equitable and quality education, learning, and development for everyone. This understanding is based on national development needs and traditional cultural perceptions of education. At present, the modernization of education

in China needs to move beyond the traditional thinking of a “poor country running big education,” pursuing the concept of a “great country constructing strong education” instead. With the rise of China, the Chinese people have become more proactive, active, open, and enterprising. The living and development conditions and needs of young people in a globalized world are unpredictable. Moreover, an open China may be attracting an increasing number of international youth with educational requirements.

It is clear that *China's education modernization 2035* does not fully grasp the engagement and development needs of the youth in a globalizing world. As such, educational planning needs to work with and for the youth (Hopma & Sergeant, 2015).

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