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## The emergence of continuing education in China

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*This article reports on continuing education in China. It discusses the emergence of the field in the 1980s, the Chinese characteristics of continuing education, recent developments, and limitations. Continuing education became available in China in the 1980s following a change in government policy and economic reform. It caters mainly for training specialist technicians, although the field has recently diversified to include programs for government officials, leaders of public services, teachers and the general public. Continuing education is increasing in popularity due to the developing economy that demands a skilled workforce. However, several problems and challenges limit the field's development, including inaccessibility (particularly for the general public), out-dated curricula and teaching methods, and limited legislation.*

*These issues need to be addressed if continuing education in China is to develop further, be of high quality and meet the needs of society.*

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## **Introduction**

Continuing education as a field emerged relatively recently in China. However, the country has had a long tradition of adult education, grounded in the teachings of ancient Chinese philosophers. Confucianism (traditional Chinese philosophy) emphasises education beyond other values, and the early Chinese state established a feudal imperial exam system to teach and select government officials (Zhang 1995). Education has been highly valued in China since classical times and it continues to play a prominent role in society – a high standard of education is associated with high social status and better opportunities in life.

Nowadays in China, education begins in kindergarten (ages 3–6), and continues through primary school (6–12), middle school (12–18) and then, for the privileged few, higher education. Some adults can also go on with their studies via continuing education, which became first available in China in the early 1980s. There is an important societal role to be played by continuing education in China. The majority of the population is currently not educated beyond middle school, and a large proportion leave education after primary school. Therefore, continuing education has a significant role to play in increasing people's knowledge and skills. It is also important to understand continuing education because of the large number of students (72.8 million in 2005). Since China is the fourth largest country in the world (home to 1.3 billion people), the demand for continuing education could be very high. The importance of continuing education is increasing as China undergoes development and modernisation; in order to meet the needs of the country's growing economy, there

has been an increase in the number of students entering colleges and universities, and a concomitant increase in education provision (Table 1). More and more people are returning to education to update their knowledge and skills because the job market is very competitive; candidates with educational qualifications are favoured.

Despite the increasing importance of continuing education in China, limited information about it is available in the Western literature. To bridge this gap, this article reports on continuing education in China. It begins by summarising the Chinese characteristics of continuing education and its development, and discusses the problems and challenges that face the field. The information is then drawn together to discuss recommendations to develop continuing education in China further.

## **Continuing education with Chinese characteristics**

Continuing education was introduced to China from the West in the 1980s. China's participation in the first World Conference on Continuing Engineering Education in Mexico in 1979 stimulated interest for establishing continuing education (Wu 2006). At that time, the country (and its economy) was opening up after decades of isolation from the rest of the world. A decade later, in 1988, the Ministry of Personnel in the Chinese government was assigned the task of developing a continuing education field. At that time, continuing education was defined as:

education for specialist staff such as technical managers, engineering technicians, those in hospitals, and also some social science specialists. The content of continuing education is to supplement and renew people's knowledge, especially to introduce new technology, new theory and new methods. It also includes other kinds of basic education and specialist education (cited in Wu 2006).

The above Chinese interpretation of continuing education is similar to the Western concept because it focuses on the education of adults who have finished formal education and who are in employment. However, continuing education in China has some distinct characteristics as a result of the country's different social, historical and cultural background.

First, continuing education is almost exclusively for specialist technical staff who work in fields such as the scientific industry. Two major continuing education policies in China<sup>1</sup> define continuing education as education received by specialist technicians or managers who have received a college or university degree. It helps them to improve their knowledge and new skills in order to carry out their jobs, such as learning how to use new technology (Zhang 1998, Wu 2006). Continuing education in China, therefore, refers generally to vocational education available to graduates of universities or colleges; it is generally a type of postgraduate education that enables learners to up-date their knowledge to meet the requirements of their employment (Gu 1998).

The field recently diversified, however, to include training to non-technical staff – continuing education is now gaining popularity among governmental officials, leaders of public services and the Party, senior administrative personnel of enterprises, and teachers (Li 2005). In recent years, courses have become available to the general public. Even so, technical staff continue to be the main recipients of continuing education in China.

Another distinct feature of continuing education in China is its emphasis, as explicitly stated in government policy, on contributing to the country's development as well as the individual. The government, particularly state-owned enterprises, encourages employees to pursue

continuing education in order to meet the needs of the developing economy and society, as well as strengthening their individual capabilities and improving their creativity (Li 2005).

### The development of continuing education in China

Continuing education emerged relatively recently in China, and its development can be divided into four stages: Stage I: from the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1970s; Stage II: from the 1980s to the 1990s; Stage III: the 1990s; and Stage IV: the present situation. The main milestones, policies and regulations concerning the development of continuing education in China are discussed below and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main milestones and policies in the development of continuing education in China

Date	Main milestones and policies
1979.4	China took part in the 1 <sup>st</sup> World Conference on Continuing Engineering Education in Mexico. The concept of 'continuing education' was first introduced to China.
1980.8	The Chinese Association for Science and Technology passed the policy, <i>Comment on the specialized training for scientific technicians</i> , which regulated the objectives, content, resources, and organisation and leadership of continuing education courses.
1984.11	The Continuing Education Association of China was established.
1985	The continuing education college of Tsinghua University was established, the first in the country.
1986	The government's 7 <sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan emphasised that it is necessary to provide continuing education for scientific technicians.
1987	The policy, <i>About the decision of innovation and development of adult education</i> , pointed out that it is necessary to provide continuing education for university graduates.

<sup>1</sup> The policies are 'Decision of innovation and development of adult education' (1987) and 'Further comment on the innovation and development of adult education' (1992).

- 1987.10 The policy, *The temporal regulation for the continuing education of company scientific technicians*, was published. It was the first administrative regulation for continuing education.
- 1987.12 The policy, *About the temporal regulation for the development of continuing education after university graduation*, pointed out more continuing education is needed after university graduation for specialist technicians and managers. Continuing education programs were extended to include all technicians and managers rather than only engineering technicians.
- 1988 The responsibility of continuing education for specialist technicians was assigned to the Department of Personnel.
- 1989 Local governments established regulations for continuing education (*The temporal regulation for national specialist technicians' continuing education*).
- 1991.12 The Ministry of Personnel published *The outline of 8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for national specialist technicians' continuing education*.
- 1993 The Party and State Department published *The outline of the innovation and development of Chinese education*. It was the first policy document that used the term 'continuing education', and considered continuing education as one of the four main constructs of the Chinese educational system.
- 1995 Lifelong education was legalised in China for the first time via *The educational law of the People's Republic of China*.
- 1995 The Ministry of Personnel published *The temporal regulation for national specialist technicians' continuing education*.
- 1999 The Ministry of Education published *The regulation for the continuing education for the elementary and middle school teacher*.
- 2000 The Party's 15<sup>th</sup> meeting passed *Suggestion to making the 15<sup>th</sup> Plan on the development of civil economy and society*, which emphasised completing the educational system and constructing the lifelong educational system gradually.
- 2002.5 The Party General Office and the State Department published *The outline of the Plan for constructing the National Talent People Troop from 2002–2005*. The document pointed out that it is necessary to develop adult education, and promote the socialisation of educational training.

- 2002 The Party's 16<sup>th</sup> meeting pointed out that it is necessary to form the national-learning and lifelong learning society and promote continuing education.
- 2004 Chairman Hu Jintao pointed out in the human resources meeting that there needs to be improvement in the continuing education system.

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Information source: Li, X.L. (2005)

Stage I: from the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1970s

In this period, there was no modern continuing education field in China, but there were some notable examples of adult education. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, during the revolution against the feudalism and fight against the aggression of Western imperialism, educationalists such as Sun Yat-sen and Cai Yuanpei realised the importance of education for the common people, and provided schools to teach them how to read and write (Zhou 2005). Another famous example took place before and shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949<sup>2</sup>, when political education was provided to the participants in the Civil War, and included teachings of the theories of Marxism, philosophy of Mao Zedong and the guidelines of the Communist Party.

Another important event was in 1950, when Remin University in Beijing held an evening school for Marxism (Zhou 2005). There were also some campaigns in the 1950s to reduce illiteracy. However, after 1949 adult education was scant, and consisted of elementary education because of the low education level of the people at that time. Further, all education in China was suspended between 1966–1977 due to the 10-year Cultural Revolution (a political movement when education was disrupted and universities were closed; Unger 1980).

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2 The People's Republic of China was established in 1949 following victory by the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War

### Stage II: from the 1980s to the 1990s

Continuing education as a field emerged in the 1980s after economic and social reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping, the new leader of the country at that time. In April 1979, a Chinese representative joined the first World Conference on Continuing Engineering Education in Mexico, and the term ‘continuing education’ was introduced to China. The next important milestone was in 1980, when the Chinese Association for Science and Technology passed a policy entitled ‘Comment on the specialised training for scientific technicians’ which emphasised the need for continuing education of technicians. Next, in November 1984, the Continuing Education Association of China was founded and, in the following year, the country’s first Continuing Education College (at Tsinghua University in Beijing) was created and approved by the then State Education Commission (now the Ministry of Education). Another important turning point was in 1988 when the responsibility of continuing education was assigned to a government department (Ministry of Personnel).

During the 1980s, continuing education was generally limited to engineering technicians, although it later became available for other types of technicians and technical managers. Continuing education policies were gradually set up in other cities, as local governments encouraged their universities and colleges to provide continuing education.

### Stage III: the 1990s

The development of the continuing education field in the 1990s was characterised by further recognition by the government. In 1993, the Chinese government incorporated continuing education into the country’s official education framework, and labelled it as one of the four main constructs of the education system (along with basic education, career education and higher education). In 1995,

in ‘The law of education of the People’s Republic of China’, lifelong education was legalised for the first time; it emphasised that specialist technicians should have the right and responsibility to receive continuing education during their careers (Wu 2006). The law also emphasised the need for continuing education in order to meet the needs of the developing economy and society (Li 2005). To aid this, the Ministry of Personnel issued regulations that prescribed the tasks, content, method, duration and organisation of the management and administration of continuing education. The subjects available via continuing education also diversified during the 1990s, and included education in the fields of engineering, technology, agriculture, literature, law, management and so on.

### Stage IV: the present situation

Currently, the continuing education field is undergoing rapid development and growth. The main driving forces are recent education reform, which permits universities and colleges to set up continuing education programs, and the developing economy that is creating a demand for trained staff.

There have been changes in the government’s attitude. The government now views continuing education as part the economy’s development strategy, which has resulted in further support. In 2000, 2002 and 2003, continuing education was an important issue discussed in several of the country’s top government meetings. In 2000, the government issued regulations that highlighted the need to create a lifelong learning education system, and to provide more resources to improve training and continuing education for different groups of people (Li 2005, Wu 2006). In September 2004, the Chairman of China, Hu Jintao, pointed out that the country needs to improve its continuing education system (Wu 2006). Since then, the government has viewed continuing education strategically, which has encouraged further development of the continuing education field.

### Categories of continuing education

There are two main types of continuing education in China: ‘diploma education’ and ‘non-diploma education’ – also known as academic credential education or non-credential education (Shang & Zhang 2005, Li 2005, Yu 2005, Chen & Li 2005, Lin 2003). Diploma education usually refers to adult higher education for graduates, and emphasises the learning of new knowledge and theoretical issues, rather than vocational training, and learners often receive a diploma after completion of their courses (Shang & Zhang 2005). In contrast, non-diploma education pays less attention to theory, and is more practical in nature; it concerns learning skills that can be put into practice directly and immediately. It includes training about computers, business English, modern management and training for farmers (Shang & Zhang 2005, Zhou 2005, Chen & Li 2005). It is usually provided by vocational training organisations or colleges, and the content, duration and place of study are more flexible in accordance with the needs of students, the market and society (Wang & Sun 2005, Dong 2006, Yu 2005). Accredited diplomas are usually not awarded after course completion, although students may receive certificates of attendance.

Diploma and non-diploma continuing education also differ in their popularity. According to recent government statistics<sup>3</sup>, most continuing education students are enrolled in non-diploma courses, and there are also more organisations and faculties in non-diploma education (Table 2). This is because, as previously mentioned, continuing education in China has traditionally focused on the training of highly skilled staff such as technicians. Another interesting difference shown in these official statistics is that a higher proportion of non-diploma students successfully complete their courses, although reasons for the difference have not yet been researched.

<sup>3</sup> *The Public Report of the Statistics of the Development of National Education of China 1990–2005* (Table 2 and Table 3)

Table 2: Statistics for continuing education in China from 1990 to 2005 (unit: ten thousand)

Year	Diploma courses			Non-diploma courses			
	No. of graduates	No. of schools	No. of faculty	No. of graduates in Ordinary Higher Schools	No. of graduates in Adult Technology Training Organisations <sup>b</sup>	No. of Adult Technology Training Organisations	No. of Faculty in Adult Technology Training Organisations
1990	—	—	—	—	1545	—	—
1991	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1992	51.77	1198	20.6	177.21	4958.51	28.41	—
1993	—	1183	—	156.72	5706.8	29.83	—
1994	45.53	1172	21	133.7	6625.38	34.48	37.94
1995	63.61	1156	21.34	157.64	7698.19	39.88	45.43
1996	—	1138	21.42	157.16	7698.19	44.28	42.57
1997	—	1107	21.46	239.99	8579.26	45.20	46.29
1998	—	962	20.39	279.5	8682.41	46.48	51.02
1999	88.82	871	20.01	255.28	10156.88	53.42	53.71
2000	88.04	772	18.7	252.12	9396.22	48.56	49.40
2001	93.06	686	17.38	257.69	9270.44	50.79	48.50
2002	117.50	607	16.81	427.39	8118.81	38.95	39.74
2003 <sup>a</sup>	159.34	558	15.35	353.25	7242.08	23.06	45.72
2004	189.62	505	15.50	318.84	6957.34	27.71	51.45
2005	166.79	481	14.89	373.39	6743.87	19.86	52.62

<sup>a</sup> No students were recruited in 2004 due to the SARS, and therefore 2002’s figure is listed

<sup>b</sup> Adult Technology Training Organisations provide training for workers and farmers

Note: Data for non-diploma education only include students from schools, and the workers and farmers who receive technology training. It does not take into consideration other kinds of adult education, such as adult self-learning qualifications and adult junior school and high school. Data source: Public Report of the Statistics of the Development of National Education of China, 1990–2006.

### **The problems and challenges that face continuing education in China**

There are several problems and challenges that face the continuing education field in China. First, the percentage of people who receive continuing education is very low. There are more than 300 million technicians and managers in China but only about 10 million currently receive continuing education (Li 2005, Zhao 2003). This means that many technicians do not have the opportunity to update their skills. Further, the general public is largely excluded from continuing education, although some colleges offer courses.

Another problem is that continuing education, particularly non-diploma courses, is still looked down upon in China (Wen 2005, Xue 2004). Although school and higher education is highly valued, continuing education is considered amateurish and of less value (Wu 2006, Zhang & Zhang 2002). This is because it is considered less developed and lacks rigour (Zheng 2005, Yu 2005). Also, some colleges consider continuing education to be a way to make extra profit or to use redundant resources, and focus more on collecting the tuition fee than teaching quality (Lin 2003, He & Wang 2004). This view may discourage people from pursuing continuing education. There have also been complaints that the continuing education field does not respond to the market and competition, and that the quality of the students does not meet the requirements of the market (Wu 2006, Zhou 2005).

The quality of continuing education is not as developed as other education sectors (Wen 2005, Zhou 2005, Wu 2006). Teaching methods, curricula and equipment are outdated and not established adequately (Zhou 2005, Zhang & Zhang 2002, He & Wang 2004). Most of the continuing education curriculum is replicated from higher education – it is the same in content and teaching method (He 2002, Hao 2006, Wu 2006, Zhou 2005, Qiu 2006). This means that students in continuing education learn the same courses as higher education students, even though their needs and background

differ. Most continuing education still relies on traditional education methods, and lacks innovative teaching methods (Li 2005, Qiu 2006). An effective assessment system for ensuring teaching quality of continuing education teaching is still unresolved (He 2002, Zhou, 2005). Moreover, the salary of continuing education teachers is low (He 2002, Zhou 2005), which does not attract talented staff.

There is also a lack of legalisation and national coordination of continuing education (Li 2006, Ma & Zhao 2004, Dong 2006, Wen 2005, Lei 2004). There is no special national and local government organisation taking charge of continuing education (Fang & Yi 2006, Qiu 2006). There is also no long-term plan for developing the field (Li 2005). Although the government has officially recognised and emphasised the importance of continuing education, few formal laws or regulations have yet been proposed to support its development (Ma & Zhao 2004, Wu 2006). Furthermore, there is limited regulation of existing guidelines issued by the government. For example, although in 1995 the government issued regulations<sup>4</sup> that required all technicians in certain fields to complete a certain number of lessons of continuing education every year, their attendance is not checked because of the lack of management (Qiu 2006). All of these issues mean that there is legal ambiguity surrounding continuing education in China.

Finally, research about continuing education in China is limited (Ma & Zhao 2004). Most studies are discussions of the problem/challenges that face the field, yet little research is being done to solve them, such as increasing access, optimising the teaching process or enhancing teaching quality. Most studies lack a theoretical background, and there has been no empirical research published.

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4 The Temporal Regulation for National Specialist Technicians' Continuing Education (1995)

## Recommendations

Continuing education is developing quickly in China. The situation reviewed in this paper leads to the following recommendations to promote its development.

- Access to continuing education should be increased, especially for the general public. The majority of the Chinese population is currently excluded from continuing education.
- The level and quality of continuing education should be improved. Modern teaching methods should be introduced and used (Wen 2006, Zheng & Xu 2006, Pan & Wang 2006, Li 2005).
- An effective assessment system should be established to monitor the quality of continuing education (including the quality of teachers, materials and so on) (Pan & Wang 2006, Sun 2004).
- An official assessment system should be introduced for students, such as that used in high schools (Davey *et al.* in press).
- Continuing education colleges should investigate the needs and requirements of society to ensure that the curriculum is driven by society and market (Yang *et al.* 2005, He & Wang 2004, Zhang 1998, Wang 2003). This is particularly important because the economy and country are modernising at a fast pace, and the types of skills required in the job market are changing constantly.
- The government should provide clarity about the legalisation and management of continuing education, and issue a long-term development plan for the field (Sun 2004, Li 2006, Lu 2006, Wen 2006).

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