

Reconstruction of the teacher education system in China

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This article proposes a conceptual framework to examine the development of the teacher education system in contemporary China. Within the framework, three development periods, including the era of shifan¹, and the era of post-shifan, the era of professional teacher education, are investigated in terms of governance, institutional structures, and resource allocation. With the central government decentralising managerial control over education, the governance issue of teacher education is becoming significant in the era of post-shifan. At the end professional teacher education is suggested as the future long-term goal for reforming the teacher education system.

China, teacher education, reconstruction, governance, professional education

INTRODUCTION

International studies show that teacher education and teacher training programs in many countries have been gradually promoted from low-ranked institutions to universities. In China, with the fast economic growth over the past decades, many normal schools where elementary school teachers are trained and junior teacher colleges where middle school teachers are educated are being upgraded into universities to meet the increasing needs for high quality teachers. For examining the historical and current development of the teacher education system, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that identifies three eras of the teacher education system in China – era of *shifan*, era of post-*shifan*, and era of professional teacher education. In this framework, time is the significant distinction among the three concepts although it is used as a reference in discussion. Two questions are addressed in this study. If there is a transition period between the era of *shifan* and the era of professional teacher education – the era of post-*shifan*, what kinds of changes have occurred to the teacher education system? How should we reconstruct the teacher education system?

¹Shifan refers to teacher education in Chinese, literally meaning “teacher model”. After the Peoples Republic of China was founded in 1949, normal schools, teacher colleges and normal universities where teachers were trained were widely established and called “shifan” schools or “shifan” colleges or universities. Normal schools were four-year institutions that enrolled graduates of junior high schools. They trained elementary school teachers. Teacher colleges had two types: two- or three-year and four-year. Normal universities, the highest rank among the old teacher education system, educated teachers for secondary schools and some junior colleges. However, now there is a discourse change from *shifan* to teacher education, which seems to distinguish the old teacher training system from the newly reconstructed teacher education system.

In the era of post-*shifan* Chinese teacher education programs are becoming diversified while the discourse of *shifan* is still dominant. The key characteristic of this era is the plurality of teacher education programs, which corresponds to different approaches to reforming teacher education programs. The proposed approaches include ending the *shifan* system consisting of normal schools, junior teacher colleges and normal universities, promoting normal schools and teacher colleges into universities, integrating normal schools and teacher colleges into universities, and allowing non-normal universities to involve in teacher preparation. It comes as no surprise that teacher education programs become diversified in the era of post-*shifan* as the teacher education system is being shifted from the old *shifan* model to the new professional teacher education model. The era of professional teacher education means reconstructing teacher preparation programs after the post-*shifan* period. Reconstruction of teacher education programs aims at establishing teacher education programs at universities where a college of education collaborates with other academic colleges to educate prospective teachers. In the scholarly discourse of preparing teachers, teacher education will take the place of *shifan* education. The old teacher education system, the *shifan* system is hierarchical and monopolised. The system is made of normal schools, teacher colleges, and national and local normal universities that respectively trained prospective teachers for preschools, elementary schools and secondary schools.

In what follows, the three eras are examined in several aspects: models of resource allocation, institutional structures of the teacher education system, and models of preparing and training teachers. Especially, the issue of 'governance' of teacher education in the era of post-*shifan* is discussed in detail.

THE ERA OF SHIFAN

In the era of *shifan*, normal schools, two- or three-year teacher colleges, four-year teacher colleges, and normal universities constituted a hierarchical and monopolised teacher education system² that received all kinds of resources allocated by governments. Because governments provided tuition waivers, stipends and fellowship for the students who attended the teacher education programs, many top graduates of junior high schools and senior high schools competed hard to get into these schools, colleges and universities. Internationally teacher education programs are usually housed in public institutions. For example, although in the United States some private research-oriented universities have teacher education programs, state universities and colleges prepare the majority of the teacher pool. Similarly, in China, normal schools, normal colleges and universities were public, managed in accordance with the model of the central planning economy. The resources, recruitment of faculty and enrolment of students, purposes and approaches of teacher education, allocation of graduates were all decided and controlled by governments under the central planning economic system. Therefore, governments were the sole voices that had determinant authority over teacher education programs in the era of *shifan*. The managerial rules made by governments prevailed in the era of *shifan*. Governments exerted exclusive influences on the teacher education institutions, which resulted in a hierarchical and monopolised teacher education system with nationally consistent curriculum and instructional goals. This system was representative of the central planning economy model.

This hierarchical teacher education structure corresponded to the public school system that was viewed to be a stratified structure in terms of disciplinary knowledge. Teachers, the important roles in the school system were thought to need different levels of disciplinary knowledge, which

² Graduates from non-normal colleges and universities have been allowed to teach in public schools over the past several decades. For example, a key educational reform document issued by State Council and the Central Committee Party of China in 1985 encouraged graduates from non-normal colleges and universities to take the teaching profession for solving the issue of teacher shortage.

meant that elementary school teachers finished the normal school education equivalent to senior high schools in terms of disciplinary knowledge, junior high school teachers graduated from two- or three-year teacher colleges or three-year programs at some normal universities, and senior high school teachers needed to achieve bachelor degrees in a discipline. This rigid teacher education structure did not allow teachers to move from the “low-ranked” elementary schools to secondary schools. With the economic growth and educational development, the legitimacy of this hierarchical and monopolised teacher education system was challenged. There were calls for a new era – the era of post-*shifan*.

THE ERA OF POST-SHIFAN

In the era of post-*shifan* teacher education programs are becoming diverse. On the one hand, the old teacher education system is being reformed; on the other hand, non-normal universities are being involved in teacher preparation. Normal schools training preschool and elementary school teachers have been gradually changed to secondary schools or promoted to five-year junior teacher colleges that enrol graduates of junior high schools. The number of normal schools has decreased from 892 in 1997 to 430 in 2002 under the backdrop of increasing preschool and elementary school teachers’ education credentials (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2005). Teachers who graduate from these junior teacher colleges are awarded an associate degree. In 2003 about 40 per cent of elementary school teachers held at least an associate degree (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The two- or three-year teacher colleges have been upgraded into four-year teacher colleges, and four-year teacher colleges have been promoted to normal universities. In the meantime normal universities are trying to reshape their orientation from preparing teachers to educating students for all occupations and professions. Some normal universities pursue the aim of becoming research-oriented universities. It is noteworthy that some teacher colleges and normal universities have become multipurpose higher educational institutions by combining with normal schools, other colleges and universities. For example, in 2002 Xingtai Teacher College in Hebei Province was changed into Xingtai University.

To follow the trend of developed countries that the majority of school teachers are trained at comprehensive universities, the central government encouraged establishing teacher education programs in those higher education institutions. In 1999 the State Council released the “Decisions on deepening the educational reform and improve quality-oriented education in an all-round way” that called for multipurpose universities to set up schools of education and prepare schoolteachers. Currently some provincial and local multipurpose universities and a few of the national selective universities responded to this call (Cheng, 2000).

In general, in the era of post-*shifan*, five approaches to changing the institutional structure of teacher education have emerged. The first approach is that selective normal universities are changing from institutes preparing teachers to multipurpose universities.³ Currently there are 36 normal universities in China. Some national selective normal universities are transformed into multipurpose universities by expanding the scope of their programs, such as establishing law programs and schools of business. Some colleges combine with each other to form a new normal university. For instance, Tanjin Normal University is made of Tanjin Teacher College, Tanjin

³ In fact, over the past two decades six national selective normal universities and some provincial selective normal universities have expanded their programs gradually and invisibly for becoming comprehensive universities. In 2002 when Beijing Normal University celebrated its centennial, the ex-president, Jiang Zeming encouraged BNU to pursue the goal of becoming a research-oriented and comprehensive worldwide-known university with specialty in teacher education.

Institute of Education and Tanjin Junior Teacher College; Hebei Teacher College and Hebei Institute of Education combine into Hebei Normal University; Shanxi Normal University incorporates Linfen Teacher College and Shanxi Teacher College. Among 36 normal universities, there are some universities that have been promoted from teacher colleges to normal universities.

The second approach is that municipal normal schools, two- or three-year teacher colleges, institutes of education and teacher training schools⁴ are incorporated into four-year teacher colleges. For instance, Huzhou Junior Teacher College, Huzhou Teacher Training School and Huzhou Normal School combined together to form Huzhou Teacher College. Now there are 60 four-year teacher colleges throughout the whole country.

Thirdly, some normal schools, two- or three-year teacher colleges, institutes of education, teacher training schools and vocational colleges combined together to become three-year multipurpose colleges. For example, Luliang College was made of Luliang Teacher College and Luliang Technology College; Sanming College was established on the basis of Sanming Teacher College, Sanming Vocational College, Sanming Teacher Training School and Sanming Normal School. So far in China there are 61 three-year colleges that have teacher education programs.

Fourthly, some teacher colleges incorporate other kinds of colleges to become universities. Suzhou University was the first case. It was transformed into a comprehensive university from a teacher college in 1982. Hubei University was upgraded from Wuhan Teacher College in 1984. Another case is Guangzhou University that incorporated Guangzhou Teacher College, Guangzhou Junior Teacher College, Guangzhou Institute of Education, Guangzhou Construction University and Guangzhou Vocational University of Architecture Corporation in 2000. Nationally 33 universities take this approach to promote themselves to universities while keeping teacher education programs. The last approach is to establish four-year colleges by merging municipal and provincial four-year teacher colleges, two- or three-year teacher colleges, and institutes of education.

The traditional teacher education system is being transformed into a new direction. Teacher education programs are not solely housed in normal colleges and universities; instead, more and more comprehensive colleges are being involved in preparing teachers. The expansion of teacher education programs into comprehensive colleges and universities is the most radical change in the institutional structure of teacher education in the era of post-*shifan*. This indicates an interim from the *shifan* era to the era of professional teacher education. Not only the structure of the old teacher education system is changed from within, but also outside the system changes have occurred – teacher education programs become seated in many comprehensive colleges and universities. But till now this kind of change has limited impact on the teacher education system as the majority of teachers are still educated in teacher colleges and normal universities. Locating teacher education programs in comprehensive universities is the long-run goal for the reform of teacher education in China.

In the era of post-*shifan* who should prepare teachers becomes one of the major concerns in terms of reforming teacher education. Those institutional changes discussed above occurred under the background of merging and incorporating universities and colleges with various academic focuses in the past decade. Along with the diversified institutions that take responsibility for educating teachers, educational researchers debate over several issues, such as closed teacher education

⁴ Institutes of education, usually supervised and governed by provincial departments of education or municipal bureau of education, provide teacher degree programs in education and professional development programs. Over the past decade many institutes of education have been integrated to universities, but they still keep these two functions, including in-service teacher training. Teacher training schools are located at districts, offering teachers regular in-service training.

system versus open teacher education system, *shifan* students versus teacher candidates, and academic disciplines versus professional education. The diversity of teacher education discourse in the era of post-*shifan* is recognised both in educational research and government documents.

Regional needs for teachers play a significant role in reforming the institutional structure of teacher education as China is a country with regional diversity, including the different development levels of economy. In economically advanced areas, like the eastern parts of China, normal schools no longer exist, teacher colleges are promoted to universities, normal universities become comprehensive universities, liberal art colleges and comprehensive universities are involved in preparing teachers; in the western regions, on the other hand, normal schools continue to play a large part in preparing elementary school teachers. Table 1 shows the numbers of teacher education institutions in different provinces.

Table 1. GDP of provinces ^a and numbers of teacher education institutions

Provinces	GDP (RMB)	Number of Teacher Education Institutions				
		Normal University	Four-year Teacher College	Two- or three- year Teacher College	Comprehensive University	Liberal or Comprehensive College
Beijing	19846	2	0	0	0	1
Tanjin	15976	1	1	0	0	0
Hebei	6932	1	1	3	0	5
Shanxi	4727	1	3	0	0	3
Inner Mongolia	5350	1	0	1	2	2
Liaoning	10086	2	1	5	3	3
Jinlin	6341	2	4	0	2	0
Heilongjiang	7660	1	2	0	2	2
Shanghai	30805	2	0	0	0	0
Jiangsu	10665	2	3	3	4	2
Zhejiang	12037	1	3	1	1	5
Anhui	4707	1	5	4	0	5
Fujian	10797	1	2	3	1	2
Jiangxi	4661	1	3	1	0	4
Shandong	8673	2	2	2	4	6
Henan	4894	1	6	3	1	4
Hubei	6514	1	2	2	3	4
Hunan	5105	1	1	2	3	8
Guangdong	11728	1	2	0	2	5
Guangxi	4148	1	2	6	0	1
Hainan	6383	0	1	1	1	0
Chongqing	4826	2	1	0	0	1
Sichuan	4452	2	3	3	1	3
Guizhou	2475	1	2	6	0	1
Yunnan	4452	1	3	4	0	3
Tibet	4262	0	0	0	1	0
Shanxi	4101	1	2	2	0	5
Gansu	3668	1	1	4	0	2
Qinghai	4662	1	0	2	0	0
Ningxia	4473	0	0	1	0	0
Xinjiang	6470	1	2	1	1	1
Total (258)		36	60	61	33	78

^a Source: Hu, A. (2003). *The second transformation: Reconstruction of national systems*. Beijing, China: Tsinghua University Press.

Meanwhile, in the post-*shifan* era the central government seeks to control the professional quality of teachers by creating standards for teacher preparation. In 2004 the Ministry of Education launched *2003-2007 New Action Plan to Revitalise Education* in which drafting standards for accreditation of teacher education institutions, curriculum of teacher education and quality of teacher education was outlined. But teacher quality can be controlled and standards can be

established and implemented only when a new professional teacher education system is established. That is to say that the nationally consistent teacher education system is the premise of creating and implementing standards for teacher education. During the post-*shifan* era with much diversity, it is hard to guarantee teacher quality by one standard. However, we do not say that the central government cannot set up standards to control and improve teacher quality. The post-*shifan* era is a period in which we experiment at establishing professional standards for teacher education. A professional standard for teacher education that spells out purposes and rationales aims at professionalising teaching and teacher education. The history of teacher education in some developed countries such as the United States (Clifford and Guthrie, 1988; Herbst, 1989) demonstrates that teacher education coming into universities paved the way for professionalising teaching and teacher education.

CHANGES IN GOVERNANCE OF TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF POST-SHIFAN

It is clearly seen that changes of the teacher education system have led to changes in governance of teacher education programs. Currently more players claim their parts in the governance of teacher education compared to the exclusive governments' control over teacher education in the past several decades. Professional organisations, colleges and universities, social organisations and market all begin to involve in governing teacher education programs. The Department of Teacher Education at the Ministry of Education, the highest office to manage teacher education programs, is transforming its role from making regulations to monitoring quality of teacher education through professional standards. Several steps have been taken to proceed to the role transformation since 2001, including establishing a teacher certification system, creating teachers' professional development certification and connecting this certification with renewal of teacher certification, and setting off to develop accreditation standards of teacher education institutions, and curriculum and assessment standards of teacher education programs. At the same time the Department of Teacher Education is decentralising its management of teacher education through allowing institutions of teacher education to have autonomy in enrolment, curriculum design, instructional methods, and job allocation of graduates. In the future for the purpose of professionalising teaching and teacher education, the department needs to control standards of teacher certification for exerting influences on goals and graduate requirements of teacher education institutions.

Responding to changes in how the Department of Teacher Education manages teacher education institutions, Bureaus of Teacher Education in the provincial and municipal governments have minimised their decision-making powers, which gives local teacher education institutions certain autonomy in operation and administration. However, one coin has two sides. On the one hand, along with the decreasing control from bureaus of teacher education, institutions of teacher education are expected to enjoy certain autonomy; on the other hand, bureaus of higher education begin to involve in governance of teacher education while more and more teacher education institutions are promoted to colleges and universities that should be under the governance of bureaus of higher education. Therefore, some researchers are concerned that power transition and allocation would result in a dilemma in which bureaus of teacher education exert influences and bureaus of higher education do not know how to manage. Not surprisingly, they worry that quality of teacher education is damaged under this predicament. During the ongoing curriculum reform, conflicts also occur between bureaus of teacher education and bureaus of basic education that are supposed to take charge of the curriculum reform. They compete for the power to prepare and train teachers in the reform.

In market economy parents and students are important players in the governance of teacher education. Because public teacher colleges and normal universities charge tuition and no longer

provide stipends and fellowships for students, attending those colleges and universities is not attractive any more for those students from economically disadvantaged families. Those students used to constitute the majority of prospective teachers in teacher education institutions. Thus some teacher education programs have difficulty in enrolling enough students or recruiting top students.

THE ERA OF PROFESSIONAL TEACHER EDUCATION: PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITIES⁵

Reconstruction of teacher education refers to educating professional teachers in four-year colleges and universities. Reconstruction does not mean discarding the previous teacher education system; instead, governments need to re-organise teacher education institutions and re-create a new teacher education system. In the era of post-*shifan* the old teacher education system – the *shifan* system consisting of normal schools, teacher colleges and normal universities coexist with comprehensive colleges and universities that involve in teacher preparation. In the era of professional teacher education, a new system will be established while normal schools, teacher colleges and normal universities will be incorporated into or promoted to comprehensive colleges and universities. As a result, reconstruction of the teacher education system indicates the end of the *shifan* system. We propose that universities establish professional teacher education programs in professional schools of education. As a professional school at universities, schools of education will enjoy as much respect as other professional schools do.

The reform of teacher education came along with the reform of higher education in China. In the reform, institutions of post-secondary education were re-organised, re-constructed into different levels of colleges and universities, which was also reflected in the teacher education system. Recently some research-oriented universities have become involved in teacher preparation. Teacher education at graduate school level is expected to become a trend in the future, which helps improve quality of teacher education and research on teacher education.

CONCLUSIONS

In China the closed old teacher education system is being transformed into a more open system to improve teachers' educational credentials and quality, which responds to the need of preparing qualified talents for the booming market economy and comes along with the reorganisation of higher education institutions. Calls for reconstruction of the teacher education system aim at establishing a new system that has diversified teacher education programs housed at universities and implemented according to national standards of accreditation and curriculum. In this paper we suggest that the long-term goal of the teacher education reform is to educate prospective teachers in professional schools of education at universities.

However, some caveats have to be taken into account in the process of reforming the teacher education system. Huge economic discrepancy among regions is a significant factor that has a say in how to reconstruct the teacher education system in different regions. It is unrealistic that all regions adopt the same approach to reforming teacher education. Some researchers (Cheng, 2000; Zhou and Reed, 2005) suggest that normal schools should be retained in poor and rural areas because college graduates usually find no attraction to work in these regions. Each province is suggested to support a key normal university with multipurpose while keeping those single-purposed teacher colleges to prepare elementary and junior high school teachers. In addition, since the Teacher Act (1993) claimed teaching as a profession, professionlisation of teachers has

⁵ In 1954 the central government divided comprehensive colleges and universities into special higher institutions with concentrations on certain disciplines. Since then in China colleges and universities had become liberal arts colleges or professional colleges.

occurred in the discourse of educational policies and studies. But it is necessary to define clearly what that means in a social context in which national curriculum standards and textbooks are prescribed, and student test scores are highly emphasised, whereby we can reorganise and redesign teacher education. Studies on how to keep the alignment between teacher education programs and teaching practice at schools, between national curriculum standards for teacher education and national curriculum standards for elementary and secondary education, are urgently needed.

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