

## Challenges of Modern Education Reforms in China

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### Abstract

The education system in China is of paramount importance, as it is considered the key to personal success, social mobility, and national development. It has been continuously adapting to the country's evolving needs and policies. In modern China, the government is striving to keep pace with global challenges by making major investments in education, promoting STEM fields<sup>29</sup>, and introducing innovation and rigorous academic standards to create a skilled workforce.

This article aims to examine the major educational reforms underway in contemporary China, with particular focus on the “Double

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<sup>29</sup> STEM encompasses four closely related fields: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

reduction<sup>30</sup>” policy (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2021), the popularization of vocational education, and the integration of digital technologies into the education sector. These reforms reflect the Chinese government’s recognition that future economic competitiveness, innovative capacity, and social cohesion depend on creating a more balanced, equitable, and forward-looking education system.

Amid growing social pressures, inter-provincial disparities, and a shifting labour market, China’s approach to reform demonstrates a bold ambition: transforming education today is not merely a response to current issues but a strategic effort to secure the nation’s future. This article offers a comprehensive view of how China is reshaping its educational landscape to meet the demands of the 21st century—balancing tradition and innovation, pressure and progress.

**Keywords:** Chinese education reform, double-down policy, educational technology, examination-oriented culture, modernization of Chinese education.

## Introduction

In recent decades, China has emerged as a global economic powerhouse, with education playing a crucial role in this transformation. As the world’s most populous nation and home to one of the most competitive academic environments, China’s education system has long been viewed as a key driver of national progress. Today, however, China stands at a crossroads: whether to abandon its trad-

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<sup>30</sup> The "Double reduction" policy (双减政府) - involves reducing the amount of homework for elementary and secondary school students and restricting the institution of private tutoring.

itional education model - characterized by rigorous standardized testing, rote learning, and a rapidly growing private tutoring industry - or to embrace modern education reform.

This shift is not merely about changing curricula or adjusting exam formats; it reflects a broader ambition to cultivate innovative talent, reduce social inequality, support students' psychological well-being, and align education with the country's strategic national development goals. These reforms are unfolding amid rapid technological advancement, widening socio-economic disparities, and shifting demographics - factors that demand a more flexible, inclusive, and future-oriented approach to learning.

### **Method**

This article adopts a qualitative research and policy analysis approach to examine the current landscape of educational reforms in contemporary China. It draws on a comprehensive review of official government policy documents, academic literature, media reports, and international educational standards to analyse both the objectives and observed outcomes of major reforms.

### **Discussion**

To understand the significance of modern educational reforms in China, it is necessary to consider the historical development of its education system. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, education has been closely tied to the country's political, economic, and ideological objectives, evolving through distinct phases marked by reforms and revolutions. Among these, the following phases are particularly noteworthy (Zhang & Xie, 2016).

- **Maoist Era (1949–1976):** During this period, education functioned primarily as an ideological tool. In the early decades of communist rule, it was used to disseminate socialist ideology and

promote mass literacy. The focus was on political indoctrination, labour-oriented education, and class struggle. While access to education improved significantly-particularly in rural areas-academic rigor and merit-based advancement were often subordinated to ideological loyalty. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had a devastating impact on education. Schools and universities were closed, intellectuals were persecuted, and academic activity was largely halted. During this time, formal education was largely replaced by revolutionary training and manual labour (Liu & Dunne, 2009).

- **Post-Mao Reforms and Economic Opening (1978–2000s):** With the launch of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening" policy, education became a cornerstone of China's modernization efforts. The "**gaokao**" <sup>31</sup> system, which had been suspended during the Cultural Revolution, was reinstated in 1977, reintroducing meritocracy and competition into the education system. During the 1980s and 1990s, the government invested heavily in rebuilding educational infrastructure, expanding access to universities, and promoting science and technology. Key policies during this period focused on improving literacy, strengthening vocational training, and enhancing higher education.
- **21st-Century Education:** Since the early 2000s, China has experienced rapid growth in higher education, marked by a dramatic increase in university enrolment. In response, the government has launched initiatives such as **Project 211** and **Project 985**<sup>32</sup> to deve-

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<sup>31</sup> Gaokao – China's national university entrance examination. Translated into Georgian as "the highest exam."

<sup>32</sup> Project 985 – A government initiative focused on promoting innovation, attracting and retaining top talent, improving general education, policy, and internationalization. Project 211 – Aims to enhance university infrastructure, develop academic disciplines, improve public services, and expand access to higher education.

top world-class universities and enhance global competitiveness. However, the rise of private tutoring, intense parental pressure, and a highly test-oriented culture have sparked widespread concerns about students' mental health, educational inequality, and intellectual burnout. These developments have laid the groundwork for current reforms that seek to address structural issues, redefine the goals of education, and promote a more equitable and holistic approach to learning.

### **Key driving factors behind ongoing reforms**

The wave of educational reforms in modern China is driven by the interplay of economic demands, social challenges, demographic realities, and political imperatives (China State Council, 2019). Analysing these driving factors is crucial to understanding why reforms are necessary now and why they are taking their current form. When discussing the need for modern reforms, it is important to distinguish between economic transformation and workforce requirements. As China transitions from a labour-intensive manufacturing economy to one driven by innovation, services, and high-tech industries, its education system must produce graduates with new and adaptable skills. In today's China, rather than students trained in traditional, mechanical learning, there is a growing need for individuals with digital literacy, creativity, critical thinking, and technological proficiency. The Chinese government recognizes that without a modern, flexible workforce, long-term economic growth may stagnate. As a result, current reforms aim to align education with national strategies such as "*Made in China 2025*"<sup>33</sup> and the "*Dual circulation*"<sup>34</sup> model, promoting vocational education, STEM training, and entrepreneurial thinking.

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<sup>33</sup> "Made in China 2025" (MIC25) was introduced in 2015 as a large-scale industrial policy aimed at transforming China into a global leader in advanced manufacturing by 2025.

The need for reform is also driven by social pressures and public discontent. One of the defining characteristics of Chinese education has long been intense academic pressure. The obsession with entrance exams, prolonged study hours, and the booming private tutoring industry has created a system in which both students and parents are heavily burdened. This pressure has been widely criticized for harming students' mental health and increasing social anxiety (Sixth Tone, 2021).

In addition, educational inequality-particularly the gap between urban and rural areas-has led to widespread frustration and the perception that academic success is determined more by family background than by merit. In this context, educational reform has emerged as a form of social policy aimed at reducing inequality and restoring public trust in the fairness of the system.

China's demographic challenges should also not be overlooked. The country's declining birth-rate and aging population are forcing the government to create a more supportive environment for families. The high cost of education and intense academic competition have discouraged many young couples from having children (OECD, 2016). By reducing homework and banning private tutoring, the government aims to ease the burden of parenthood and encourage family growth as part of its long-term demographic strategy.

Political and ideological priorities also remain a significant pillar of China's education system. Education in China has traditionally served both political and practical purposes. Under President Xi Jinping, the emphasis has shifted toward ideological education, national unity, and the cultivation of "morally upright and politically loyal"

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<sup>34</sup> "Dual circulation" is China's economic strategy that prioritizes strengthening domestic demand and innovation ("internal circulation"), while maintaining engagement with global markets ("external circulation"). Its goal is to enhance economic self-sufficiency.

citizens. Recent reforms have increased the presence of patriotic content in textbooks, emphasized moral education, and promoted traditional Chinese culture alongside Marxist thought.

These reforms also reflect the broader goal of the Chinese Communist Party to regulate the influence of private capital in sensitive sectors such as education. For example, the crackdown on private tutoring companies is not only aimed at reducing academic pressure, but also at reinforcing state control over ideological and social development.

In light of these factors, China has embarked on a series of significant education reforms aimed at creating a more balanced, equitable, and future-oriented system. One of the most high-profile initiatives is the “double reduction” policy, introduced in 2021, which seeks to reduce excessive homework and limit out-of-school private tutoring for primary and secondary school students. The primary goals of this policy are to ease academic pressure on students, lessen the financial burden on families, and curb the commercial tutoring industry. While the reform has achieved some initial success, it has also led to challenges, including the emergence of informal tutoring markets and lower academic performance among students in rural areas.

Reforms have also impacted vocational education, which has long been underdeveloped. Through increased investment, partnerships between schools and relevant industries, and practical training programs, China aims to raise the status of vocational education, expand its reach, and align it more closely with the needs of a developing economy. In this context, access to education and equity are particularly important. As part of the reform process, significant efforts are being made to reduce the gap between urban and rural areas, increase

funding, rotate teachers, and integrate technology into rural education systems (Yu, 2020).

Finally, the reform of China's national entrance exam, the **"Gao-kao,"** should be highlighted. These changes move beyond the traditional test-oriented model and introduce more flexible criteria for subject selection and holistic assessment, aiming to encourage students to develop their individual strengths. Taken together, the above reforms reflect the Chinese government's desire to create a more inclusive, skills-based, and less stressful education system-though their implementation still faces practical challenges.

## **Technologies and Innovations in Education**

Technology plays a key role in China's education reform, as it helps expand access and foster pedagogical innovation. The Chinese government is actively promoting digital learning platforms-particularly by modernizing classrooms with artificial intelligence, equipping schools with high-speed internet, and implementing smart classroom technologies. The new digital environment enables differentiated instruction and provides access to a wide range of learning resources, even for students in remote provinces. Artificial intelligence is also being used to support personalized learning experiences, including online testing, instant feedback, and early identification of students at risk of burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of online education, leading to the rise of platforms such as DingTalk and MOOCs, which have played a central role in remote learning. However, this technological shift has also raised concerns about data privacy, especially among students. In response, the government has tightened regulations on the educational technology sector-most notably with the 2021 crackdown on tutoring companies-



to curb excessive commercialization and ensure alignment with national priorities. While China has embraced technological advancements in education, it does so within a framework of oversight designed to balance innovation, social equity, and state control (BBC News, 2021).

The ambitious goals of China's education reforms have nonetheless drawn significant criticism. The enduring dominance of an examination-oriented culture continues to undermine efforts at holistic assessment, and grades remain the primary measure of success within the education system. Inequality persists between provinces, with urban schools generally implementing reforms more effectively than under-resourced rural schools (The Economist, 2022). Meanwhile, the underemployment of young people and the growing mismatch between academic performance and labour market demands are raising concerns about the system's effectiveness. The „double reduction“ policy has also heightened parental anxiety and inadvertently fuelled underground tutoring markets, further limiting equal access to education. Simultaneously, the crackdown on private educational institutions has constrained innovation and shaken investor confidence. These challenges underscore the complexity of education reform in a large and diverse country like China. While the government's intentions are commendable, the outcomes remain uneven.

### **Future prospects and conclusion**

Going forward, China's education reforms will require a major effort to transform the system into one that is more equitable, innovative, and aligned with national priorities, while also addressing the

legacy of the past and the pressures of a rapidly changing global landscape. Educational equity and accessibility are expected to remain central to the reform agenda. The government plans to increase investment in rural and remote provinces to improve infrastructure, ensure a fair distribution of teachers, and narrow the gap between urban and rural education. Additionally, current enrolment systems for secondary schools and universities are expected to be reviewed, with the aim of improving access to quality education and reducing both geographical and socio-economic disparities. Vocational education will also receive increased focus, as the country seeks to build a workforce equipped with practical skills - an urgent need in light of an aging population, the rise of automation, and the growth of sectors such as artificial intelligence, green energy, and advanced manufacturing. Ideological education has been further emphasized under President Xi Jinping, with a stronger focus on socialist values and patriotism. The shift toward hybrid education models in the post-pandemic era may continue to accelerate, but these innovations must be accompanied by safeguards for data privacy, platform regulation, and digital equity.

However, perhaps the greatest challenge remains cultural. Reform fatigue, public pressure, and deeply entrenched teaching practices continue to resist change at the grassroots level. There is an ongoing risk-particularly among parents, teachers, and students - that many reforms may be implemented only superficially. Ultimately, the success of these reforms will shape not only the future of China's workforce, but also its social cohesion and its standing as a global educational leader in the decades to come. China's education system stands at a crossroads of ambition and contradiction. Its future will depend on how effectively it can transform long-standing practices while maintaining both social harmony and educational excellence.

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