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The Chinese education system and choosing to study in Europe

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01 Brief introduction to the People's Republic of China



China from outer space

Source: computerhoy.com

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is one of the largest countries in the world, covering an area of 9,596,916 km². According to the World Population Prospects published by the United Nations in 2019, the PRC is also the most populous country in the world, with a population of more than 1.4 billion.

Although in recent years there have been major waves of internal migration to urban areas by people hoping to be able to benefit from better education and health care services and to have an overall better quality of life, most of its population still lives in rural areas.

This fact has shaped the culture, economy and politics of the country by obliging China's leaders to enact laws to control high birthrates, fast population growth and internal migration (Berengueras, 2012).

The Chinese Communist Party has been the only political party in power since the foundation of the PRC in 1949. The 1982 Constitution is the supreme law of the Chinese legal system, which all public authorities and citizens have had to follow since it came into force.

The highest organ of the national legislature of the PRC is the National People's Congress, with almost 3,000 members representing every Chinese province and every ethnicity in the country.

The chief administrative authority is the State Council. Government at a local level is represented by the administrative authorities of the state for their corresponding locations. Below you can see a diagram showing the departments and committees that make up the State Council.



01 Brief introduction to the People's Republic of China

The PRC is divided into 23 provinces, four municipalities under direct state control (Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Tianjin) and five autonomous regions (Tibet, Xinjiang, Guangxi, Ningxia and Inner Mongolia).

Hong Kong and Macau are special cases, as they were colonies of the United Kingdom and Portugal respectively, so when they returned to the control of the PRC, they were given special administrative region status, which allows them to maintain a high degree of economic and judicial autonomy.

56 different ethnicities coexist within the PRC. 90% of the population belongs to the Han ethnicity, while the other 10% belongs to the remaining 55 ethnic minorities. The country's official language is Mandarin Chinese or Putonghua. In line with the country's size and ethnic diversity, many varieties of Chinese coexist with the official language: Northern Chinese (Beifanghua), Jin, Wu, Hui, Gan, Xiang, Hakka or Kejia, Cantonese (Yue), Ping and Ming (Ramírez, 1999; Rovira, 2010).

Chinese is not only the official language of the PRC, but also of Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan, making it the language with the most native speakers in the world (Berengueras, 2012). According to the 1982 Constitution, Mandarin Chinese is the official language of the state. In October of 2000, the National People's Congress passed a law establishing Mandarin Chinese as the "Countrywide Spoken and Written Language" to be used in every aspect of public life (Espín, 2013).



Division of China into provinces

Source: orangesmile.com

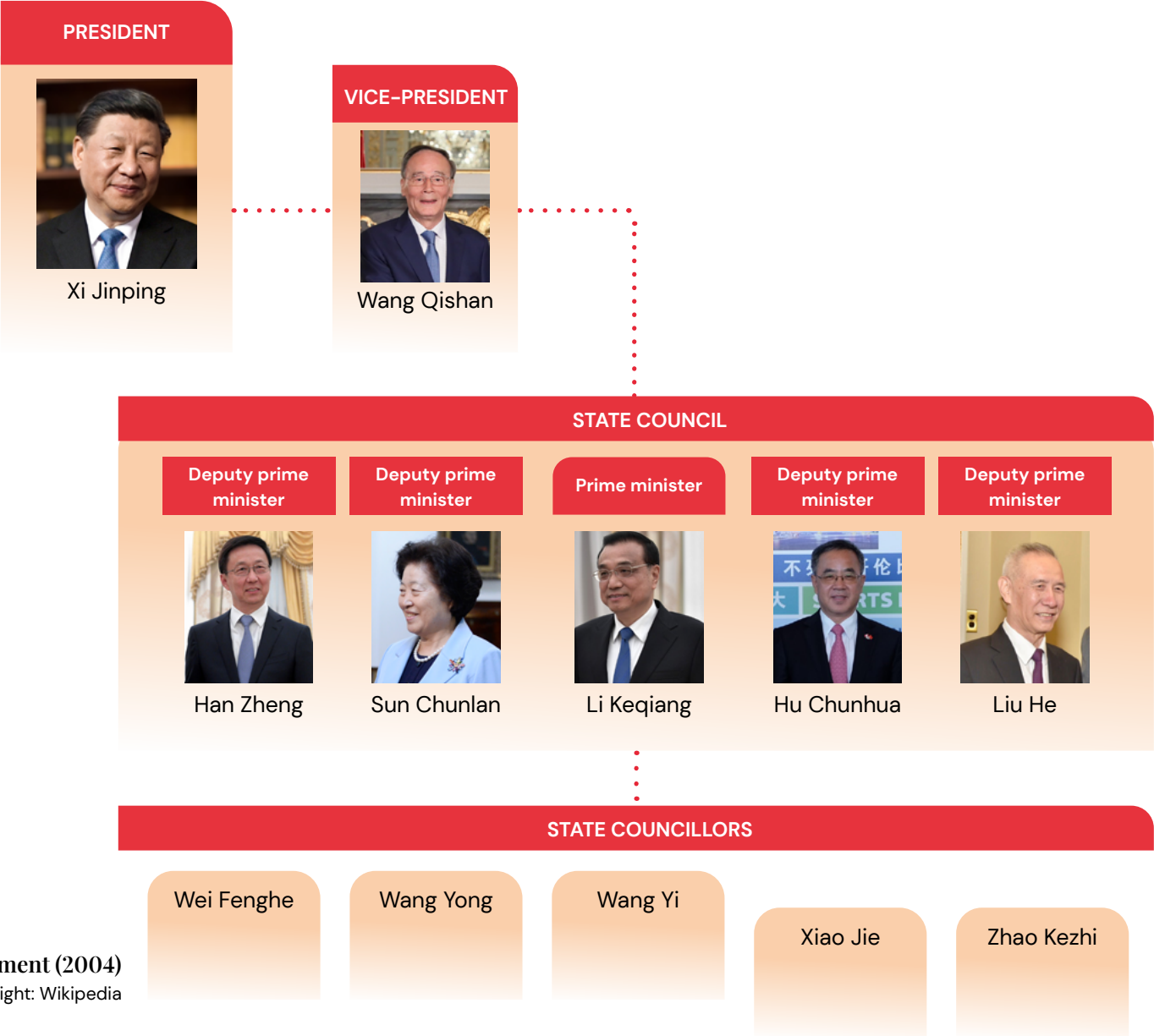


01 Brief introduction to the
People’s Republic of China



National People’s Congress of the
People’s Republic of China
Source: apilledaily.com.tv

Structure of the Chinese government (2004)
Sources from left to right: Wikipedia



02 The Chinese education system



Painting depicting a test

Source: elpais.com

The following is a brief description of the main characteristics of the education system of the PRC, based on information from MEC (2016), ICEX (2016), Rodríguez (2018), Berengueras (2012) and Espín (2006).

Up until the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, education was a privilege only a minority could afford, so more than 80% of the population could neither read nor write. One of the main goals of the PRC government was to end illiteracy. Between 1949 and 1966, many schools were built and education was promoted among all age groups.

Between 1966 and 1976, the Cultural Revolution took place. This decade had adverse consequences for education, especially higher education, as the education system was brought to a halt and many middle schools and universities were closed. As a result, an entire generation of professionals, academics and researchers was lost and Chinese society suffered a lack of professionals able to meet the educational needs that arose at the end of this period.

Starting in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping introduced a new economic development strategy and an open-door policy, the government launched a series of reforms resulting in many changes to the education system. The goals of these reforms were to increase the number of schools and qualified teachers, introduce professional development, and standardise curricula, exams, textbooks and teacher qualifications, especially at middle-school level (Espín, 2006).



02 The Chinese education system



Nowadays, the Ministry of Education (MOE) is the agency that regulates all aspects of education within the PRC. The MOE is responsible for passing education laws and supervising the central education system of the PRC. Laws made by the MOE are implemented by the government authorities of each province. At all levels of education, the curriculum is compulsory and used across the whole PRC. However, with prior authorisation, it can be modified at a local level with the goal of adapting it to the location. This allows the modification of optional subjects and activities. The number of hours of education provided by education centers is also regulated by the provincial authorities.

The current education system, under which today's Chinese overseas students have studied, began with the reforms that took place between 1977 and 1980. These reforms included an extension of compulsory education up to the age of 12, the creation of a national university entrance exam and the establishment of four-year bachelor's degree courses and three-year master's degree courses (EP-Nuffic 2015).

The reforms continued in 1986 with the goal of improving and modernising education. The Education Law (1995) and the National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) are the main tools used nowadays to achieve these objectives. To complement this national outline, there are a series of specific regulations and five-year plans setting concrete goals in this field.



Different stages of education in China

Source: chinaservice.com.mx



03 Laws that regulate the Chinese education system

According to Berengueras (2012), Espín (2006) and ICEX (2016), the laws that currently regulate education in China are the following:

- Regulations on Academic Degrees (1986), amended 2004.
- Compulsory Education Law (1986), amended 2006.
- Law on Protection of Disabled Persons (1990).
- Teachers' Law (1993).
- Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities (1994), amended 2008.
- Education Law (1995).
- Vocational Education Law (1996).
- Higher Education Law (1998).
- Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (2001).
- Law on Promoting Private Education (2002).
- Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (2003).



Source: Reuters/Jason Lee



04 General principles of education in the PRC



Emblems of various Chinese
universities

The 1982 Constitution establishes education as a way to promote love for the motherland, for the people, for labour, for science and for socialism. According to the constitution, education must lead to patriotism, collectivism, internationalism and communism and combat capitalism, feudalism and other opposing systems.

According to the Law on Education of 1995, education in the PRC must be aimed at socialist modernisation and must mix production and work, with the purpose of satisfying the needs of the socialist society through the development of morality, intelligence and good physical condition. Education must promote patriotism, collectivism and ethnic unity, and must help preserve China's historic heritage.

The foundation for these principles can be found in the theories of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Karl Marx (MOE, 2006; Qingdao Education Bureau, 2006). According to these

theories, the goal of education is to help the country's economic, social and ideological development. According to Marx (1868, quoted in Marx and Engels, 1978) education must cover all intellectual, physical and technological aspects. Good physical condition is achieved through gymnastics and military-style physical exercise drills. Physical education is compulsory from primary education up until university.

During the first year of university, students take part in military-style physical exercise sessions. Technological and scientific education covers principles and knowledge useful in industrial production processes.

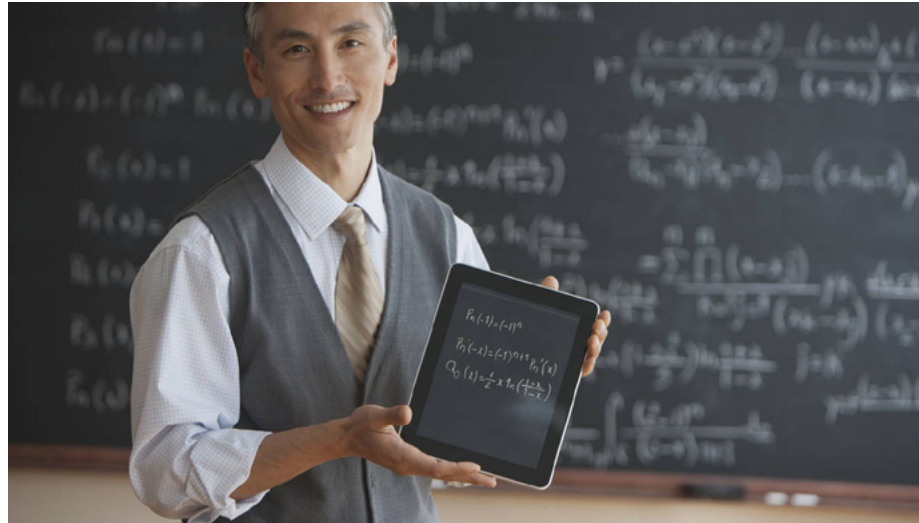
In article 3 of the Education Law, it is specified that throughout their education, students must learn the principles of Marxism and Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and the theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.



04 General principles of education in the PRC

The three basic principles of Chinese education, according to the 1982 Constitution and the 1995 Education Law, can be summarised as follows:

- The State conducts education.
- Education serves political interests. At every educational level, ideology is a big part of the academic curriculum.
- Education is to be combined with work.



**The educator is the subject of
the learning process**

Source: elconfidencial.com

According to observations made in primary and middle schools, as well as universities of the PRC, by analysing teaching methods used in the PRC based on theories formulated in Western countries, it has been established (Espín, 2006) that:

- Education is based on the transmission of knowledge;
- Learning is meticulously planned;
- The teacher speaks and the student listen, so there is little room for discussion or active participation;
- The student must follow the rules put in place by the teacher;
- The teacher chooses what the student will learn based on the state curriculum. Emphasis is placed on information as opposed to concepts;
- In the learning process, the teacher is the subject and the student is the object;
- Student experience is not regarded as an important aspect of the learning process.
- Information must be memorised. Student-generated content is not used to any significant extent, as it is considered a mistake to let students generate content.
- Exams are a vital part of the learning process. Competition is encouraged among students and cooperative work is almost nonexistent.



05 Structure of the education system

As mentioned above, this system is standardised at all levels, and the curriculum and the functioning of schools are both regulated at a national level. Although everything is regulated by the central government, governments at a provincial and local level have some jurisdiction over education.

The Chinese education system is very similar to the current Spanish education system. Preschool is not obligatory, although in urban zones more families are enrolling their children in preschool and kindergarten. Compulsory education begins at the age of six and lasts until the age of fifteen, making a total of nine years. In Chinese, this is called the *Jiunianyiwujiaoyuzhidu* (九年义务教育制度, or nine-year compulsory education system).

Preschool is not compulsory. It begins at the age of three or four, depending on work units, businesses and local authorities. The 1985 law states that primary education must be free of charge in order to facilitate access to school centers for every child, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Children begin primary school at the age of six. The subjects taught are Chinese language, mathematics, physical education, English, art, natural sciences, morality and ethics. Moral training gives special emphasis to the love for the motherland, the political party and Mao Zedong. Respect and group work (at a social level, not an academic one) are important aspects of the academic curriculum. At the end of primary school, students are required to pass a graduation examination in the subjects of Chinese and mathematics. Access to a good middle school depends on these results.

School textbooks

Source: aliexpress.com



05 Structure of the education system



Chinese students at graduation

Source: 20minutos.es

Secondary education lasts six years, although only four of them are compulsory. As mentioned above, education is compulsory between the ages of six and fifteen. Secondary schools are divided into “key” schools and “regular” schools. Key schools receive special funding, better equipment and priority in the assignment of teachers. “Key school” status is dependent purely on the students’ overall performance, which means that these schools receive more funding and better facilities the better their academic results. The subjects taught at this level are Chinese, mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology, English, history, geography, politics (i.e. the abovementioned political theories), biology, music, fine arts, and physical education.

One of the main goals of education in China is good physical condition, so secondary-school pupils begin their day with physical exercises, including eye exercises. Classes are usually held in the morning and evening and, during the last two years of secondary school, schools organise study camps to help their students pass the university entrance exam. We must not forget that the better the students’ results in this exam, the more funding their school will receive the next academic year and the more prestige it will attain. Vocational training stopped being taught in regular secondary schools in 1960, when specialised centres were created for vocational and technical education.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution period, vocational courses played a crucial role in the training of qualified professionals.

Access to higher education is available at the age of eighteen to students who have completed their non-compulsory secondary education and passed and the university entrance exam, known as the *gaokao* (高考).

Just as in the West, higher education is composed of bachelor’s and master’s degrees and doctorates. Bachelor’s degree courses are four years long, while master’s degree courses are usually between two and three years long, and doctoral courses last three years. An entrance exam must be passed to gain a master’s degree or a doctorate. Alongside the specialist subject, degree courses include classes in politics and English. Doctoral degree courses do not have a taught component.



05 Structure of the education system

The school year is divided into two semesters, each nine and a half months long. During the months of July and August, students may choose to take classes offered to all specialisations, including computer science, English and politics. Students are increasingly encouraged to spend a short period of time abroad to deepen their knowledge, but unfortunately only a few can do so.

There are public and private universities in the PRC. Public universities are the most prestigious, as their entrance requirements are the highest, and the top academics teach there. Private universities typically accept students who scored low in the gaokao but have the resources to pay the high cost of tuition. In some cases, this kind of student chooses to study abroad. Attending a European university costs about the same as attending a private university back home, and a European degree has more cachet.

The following is a diagram of the levels of the Chinese education system.

Age	School year	Stage	Type
3 to 6		Preschool	Voluntary
6 to 8	1st and 2nd	Primary education	Compulsory
8 to 10	3rd and 4th		
10 to 12	5th and 6th		
12 to 14	1st and 2nd	Compulsory secondary education	
14 to 15	3rd		
15 to 16	1st	Non-compulsory secondary education and technical or vocational training	Non-compulsory
17 to 18	2nd and 3rd		
18 upwards	Bachelor's degree (4 years)	Undergraduate and postgraduate university degrees and higher vocational training	
	Master's degree (2 or 3 years)		
	PhD (3 years)		

Diagram of the Chinese education system
Source: Adapted from Espín, M.C., 2006



06 Reasons why Chinese students choose to study abroad



Chinese students at Nottingham Trent
University (NTU), UK

Source: Nottingham Trent University (NTU) Image Library

According to a study published by the ICEX in 2016, the reasons that lead Chinese students to study abroad are as follows.

- The Chinese education system is one of the biggest in the world because of the number of students and schools that make it up. According to data published in 2015, 9.42 million students sat the gaokao that year. Only the highest-achieving students can enter China's most prestigious universities. The rest must either choose one of the less-prestigious public or private universities in China, or go abroad to continue their studies.
- We must keep in mind that, because of the one-child policy and the "little emperor" phenomenon, families typically allocate a large portion of their resources to the education of their only child, upon whom they rest their hopes for the future.
- Aware of the great demand for university education and the limited provision within the country, the Chinese government offers support and a great deal of flexibility to students who decide to take university degrees abroad.

Another reason is the general awareness in China of the importance of learning a foreign language – and not just English – in addition to one's degree specialism. For example, an engineer who wishes to work in South America and can speak English and Spanish will get a job faster and with a better salary than another engineer whose only foreign language is English.

07 Reasons why Chinese students choose to study in Europe

Chinese students choose European universities mainly for their friendly study environment, research support, academic excellence and quality of life. They also take into account that the student visa policies of European countries are less restrictive than those of other countries, such as the United States (Xinhua, 2019).

It should be noted that European universities have a long history in education, with many world-renowned universities, a well-established higher education network and international research centres. China values the high quality of European universities, especially their teaching methods, and the cultural and linguistic environment.

In addition, degrees awarded by European universities enjoy worldwide recognition. This helps students to find employment after completing their studies. Students can choose to stay in the country of study, travel to another country or return to China.



Source: education.ec.europa.eu

07 Reasons why Chinese students choose to study in Europe



Chinese students at Nottingham Trent
University (NTU), UK

Source: Nottingham Trent University (NTU) Image Library

Moreover, the fact that the EU is increasingly cooperating with China in areas such as commerce, electronics, chemistry, biology and medicine, means that Chinese students with a European degree have access to a wider range of career prospects.

Mastering a European language brings also additional advantages. For instance, as trade and economic exchanges between China and Spain and South America become more frequent, the demand for Spanish-speakers in China increases, providing a wide range of career prospects for students familiar with Spanish and European culture.

Another factor in the increase of Chinese students at European universities is the relative low cost of studying in Europe. Tuition fees are lower than in other destinations, and sometimes, depending on the country chosen, there may even be no tuition fees at all.

There is also an added financial incentive to study in Europe. Tuition fees, living expenses and insurance costs for the first year of study are lower than in countries such as the USA and Australia.



07 Reasons why Chinese students choose to study in Europe

The financial requirements for living and studying in the EU are low compared to other destinations. In addition, it should be noted that it is generally easy to combine study and work in Europe.

Both, China as a country as well as Chinese students, are looking for a diversified education. The signing of agreements between Chinese and European universities is on the increase, and when students have to choose a destination for their studies, they prefer to choose universities that already have educational cooperation programmes with Chinese institutions. It should not be forgotten that many of these cooperation agreements are accompanied by financial support for students (Jia Fu, 2019).

The policy of many EU universities is to promote student and faculty exchanges with Chinese universities.



Source: Nottingham Trent University
(NTU) Image Library

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