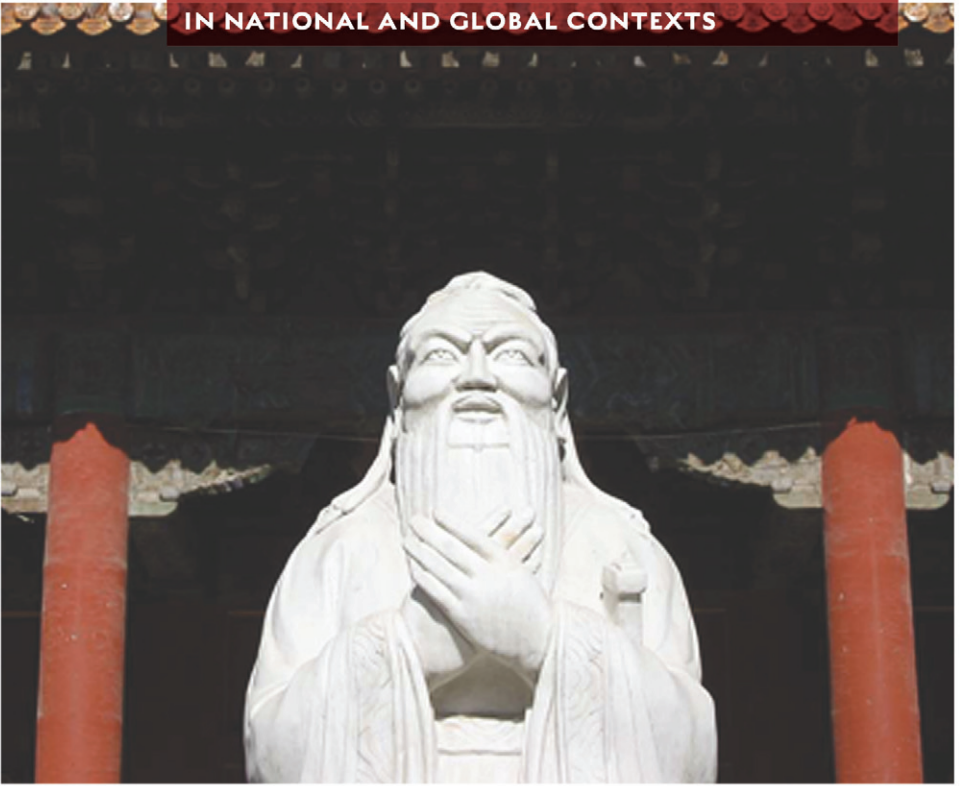


EMERALD STUDIES IN TEACHER PREPARATION  
IN NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS



# Teacher Preparation in China

*A History of Education for  
Excellence and Obedience*

CHRISTINE CUNNINGHAM  
WEI ZHANG

# **Teacher Preparation in China**

# EMERALD STUDIES IN TEACHER PREPARATION IN NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

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# **Teacher Preparation in China: A History of Education for Excellence and Obedience**

BY

**CHRISTINE CUNNINGHAM**

*Edith Cowan University, Australia*

AND

**WEI ZHANG**

*The University of Western Australia, Australia*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## About the Author

**Dr Christine Cunningham** has a PhD in educational leadership from Western Australia's Murdoch University, she is also trained secondary teacher and experienced school principal. Dr Cunningham's research interest focus on educational administration, management and leadership (FOR: 390403); and comparative and cross-cultural education (FOR: 390401). Dr Cunningham holds two elected positions currently as the Academic Staff Member to Edith Cowan University's highest governance council and as branch president of the National Tertiary Education Union.

**Dr Wei Zhang** is a Lecturer and early career researcher at the Graduate School of Education, University of Western Australia. Her work focuses on educational leadership, policy, and teacher education, with particular expertise in the intersection of school leadership, social justice, and culturally responsive practice. Dr Zhang's research examines the lived experiences of leaders from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with an emphasis on gender, equity, and inclusion in educational leadership. She currently co-coordinates the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program at UWA and teaches across undergraduate and postgraduate courses in educational leadership, assessment, and research methods. Her research includes a systematic review on culturally and linguistically diverse women in educational leadership and collaborative work on simulation-based leadership development. Dr Zhang has designed and facilitated professional development for educators in Australia and internationally. Her work bridges research, policy, and practice, with a focus on fostering ethical, inclusive, and socially just leadership in education systems. She brings to her scholarship both practical leadership experience and a commitment to promoting diversity and relational approaches to leadership development.

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# Historical Timeline of Chinese Dynasties and Rulers

## Pre-history China

- Xia Dynasty (2100 BCE–1766 BCE)
- Shang Dynasty (1766 BCE–1047 BCE)
- Zhou Dynasty (1047 BCE–256 BCE)
- Spring and Autumn Warring Periods (256 BCE–220 BCE)
- Qin Dynasty (221 BCE–206 BCE)

## Ancient China

- Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)
- Jin Dynasty (265–420)
- Sixteen Kingdoms or Dynasties (304–409)
- Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589)
- Sui Dynasty (581–618)

## Mediaeval China

- Tang Dynasty (618–907)
- Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960)
- Liao Dynasty (916–1125)
- Song Dynasty (960–1279)

## Conquered China

- Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)

## Semi-Colonised China

- Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)
- Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

## **20th Century China**

Republic of China (1912–1916)  
Warlord Era (1916–1927)  
Nationalist Era (1928–1937)  
War with Japan (1937–1945)  
Civil War (1945–1949)

## **Communist China**

Mao Zedong (1949–1976)  
Deng Xiaoping (1977–1993)  
Jiang Zemin (1993–2003)  
Hu Jintao (2003–2012)  
Xi Jinping (2012 – ongoing @ 2025)

## Foreword

The title chosen by the authors – *Teacher Preparation in China: A History of Education for Excellence and Obedience* – illustrates very well the scope of this excellent and really important book. On this, it constitutes a condensed version of the central theme of the work which relates to centuries of history. Over the lengthy period in question, so the authors contend, education and teacher preparation in China has been based largely upon a mission to foster a civilisation in which a minority of excellent academic scholars are created who can rule over an obedient majority population.

As the contributors illustrate too, while their major proposition applies right up to the present day, it can also be expanded upon slightly to accommodate current efforts aimed at enlarging the number of those who constitute the minority referred to. That is because in recent years, education developments across the land have not only been substantial; they are concerned also with strengthening the area in relation to science and technology, and to cultivating talent, among a greater pool of young people than previously. Moreover, related developments, it is decreed officially, should be harnessed by directing associated actions towards inspiring the nation's youth to engage in the cause of space exploration. This core notion of education being focused on building a strong space nation is somewhat unique when compared to developments on education aims and policy in most other countries around the world.

In harmony with the latter, teacher education in China is now conceptualised to be not only about pre-service professional preparation but also about ensuring that there is continued updating of teachers' academic and professional knowledge and skills. Pointing this out for the English-speaking reader is timely as it opens up new perspectives, notwithstanding the reality that the world is getting ever smaller with globalisation and transnational knowledge circulation taking place like never before, thanks to, much travelling and the use of ICT. Equally on that, the authors stress that there has been no diluting in State policy of the traditional emphasis on the notion that the quality of a good teacher must be grounded in a teachers' political conscientisation. Thus, ideology continues to be central in discussions on policy and practice for all aspects of education, including teacher education in contemporary hyper-nationalistic China.

Three aspects of the book are particularly valuable. First, the exposition on the antecedents to the present situation historically is both outstanding and extremely informative. Through nine chapters, we are brought on a fascinating journey, through the dynastic eras in historical China to the modern era governed by the

Communist Party of China. The book chapters begin with pre-historic China, then in the Ancient and Mediaeval China chapter, we travel through centuries of education based on Confucianism, then later with Daoist and Buddhists teaching influences too. Secondly, the authors draw upon their close knowledge of Chinese history, culture and contemporary developments. They make use of a wealth of sources to enrich their narrative. I was particularly fascinated by the third chapter, which examines a previously under-researched period in Chinese teacher education: the era following the so-called barbarian invasions by the Mongol Khans, who succeeded in conquering large areas of China and greater Asia, culminating in the establishment of the Yuan dynasty in the 1300s. The next chapter covers the final centuries of dynastic rule in China which covers the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911). Thirdly, they have constructed their contemporary story-line in a manner that allows one to sensitively engage in cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons and contrasts on teacher education in China. Thus, the authors offer widely researched analysis from texts in English and in Chinese language that covers the final five chapters: the Nationalist Era (1911–1949), the Mao Zedong Era (1949–1976), the Deng Xiaoping Era (1977–1989), and the Jian and Hu Eras (1990–2010), before arriving at an account of the present Xi Jinping Era (2011–).

Overall, this is a stimulating, very scholarly, and thought-provoking book and should be widely read and quoted. It is also a work that reinforces my own long-standing and long expressed view that it is vital that we consider the historical background to contemporary developments in education if we are to understand the current situation properly. Moreover, it is a major contribution to the corpus of work that is based on a view that people from across nations need to listen to one another so that they can move from what are sometimes inward-looking positions to a situation where exchanges on them are valued.

Professor Emeritus Tom O'Donoghue  
Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences Australia  
Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (UK)  
The University of Western Australia

# Introduction: Teacher preparation in China

## Introduction

Welcome to *Teacher preparation in China: A history of education for excellence and obedience*. We are excited to invite you, dear Reader, into this short volume which covers one of the oldest civilisations on Earth with the largest population of humans ever seen on our planet.

The long history of Chinese education across millennia offers lessons for the rest of the world about what can be achieved when education and teachers are important roles in society. This is because, as China's current leader Xi Jinping views it, China has been the economic, cultural and education centre of the world for 18 consecutive centuries in history until the late 19th Century and China is back on the rise as a global superpower (Merkel, 2024).

To make sense of thousands of years of history about teacher preparation in China, we required a theme or narrative arc through which we could order and condense the information. Ultimately, we decided we could argue that, throughout its history, Chinese education and teacher preparation have been fundamentally based upon a dual mission: to create a civilisation that makes a minority of excellent academic scholars who can rule over an obedient majority population. So, in each chapter of this book, we use these two goals of excellence and obedience to compare and contrast each the then Chinese governments' ability to balance or weight one of the goals against the other.

We have separated the thousands of years of Chinese history into nine discernible historical epochs and written them as nine separate chapters. The first chapter covers a vast period of time we call Pre-History, which covers Chinese origin legends and myths from the great mists of the beginning of time that cannot be verified as facts but have held long sway on the theology of Chinese culture. Then the second chapter covers the Ancient and Mediaeval periods in China starting from before the Common Era in 206 BCE and moving into the Common Era of history through the first 1,000 years of the mediaeval era as Chinese literacy and numeracy advances equal the best in the comparable ancient world empires and when Confucius teachings begin to hold great sway. Next comes quite a unique period of Chinese history when the neighbouring Mongol 'barbarians' turn their ambitions towards conquest of China and as much of Asia and

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Teacher Preparation in China, 1–8

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## 2 *Teacher Preparation in China*

Europe as possible. So in Chapter 3 we explore Genghis to Qubilai Khans influence on Chinese culture and especially their brilliant military training skills and advances in weaponry and warfare during the Yuan Dynasty in the 1300s. Chapter 4 ends our examination of the pre-20th century history, and it covers both the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911) that witness the crumbling of ancient Chinese power and educational might as the semi-colonialism of some islands and coastal areas of China advances in this period by Western Christians and mercantilists.

The next five chapters' scope shrinks down to the analysis of decades rather than centuries, as arguably history speeds up and far more research material was available to study that allowed us to provide much greater detail about education in China in general, and teacher preparation specifically, during each of these periods. Chapter 5 starts at the beginning of the 20th century and covers this short and complex era when Nationalists attempted to create a long-term Republic of China but which ended in ruin after two global wars and a terrible Civil War too (1911–1949). Then, the rest of the chapters document the last 76 years of teacher preparation history while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has led China. Chapter 6 encapsulates the years of Mao Zedong's rule (1949–1976) and Chapter 7 examines teaching during Deng Xiaoping's rule (1977–1993). The eighth chapter discusses teaching in the time of two historically, relatively forgotten leaders – Jiang Zemin from 1989 to 2003 and then Hu Jintao 2003–2012. Chapter 9 is our final substantive chapter, and it documents teaching and education advances during Xi Jinping's rule until the beginning of 2025, when we were finishing writing this book.

### **Writing This Book**

We, the co-authors, are currently Australian-based academics who specialise in educational leadership history, and while we prepare new generations of teachers here in Australia, we also have experience teaching in modern day China too. Dr Christine Cunningham is based at Edith Cowan University and first visited China in 2011. She is an Australian with convict ancestry on both sides of her Irish-Catholic ancestry. Dr Wei Zhang is now based at the University of Western Australia, though she was born in China in the Shandong province. She is also an Australian citizen and first came to Australia in 2006 after a long career as a teacher in Jinan. We met as PhD supervisor and student and developed a lifelong friendship over our intellectual curiosity about China and our love of research and teaching.

Emeritus Professor Tom O'Donoghue approached us both at the end of Wei's doctoral thesis and invited us to contribute to the book series on *Teacher Preparation around the World*. Tom's first book in the series, *Teacher Preparation in Ireland*, was the standard we sought to emulate, and we both leapt at the opportunity to add the biggest nation on Earth into the collection.

Over the last 2 years, we have worked hard to research and write this book and try and do justice to such a mammoth topic. There are so many excellent recent

and contemporary research texts on Chinese teacher preparation that we relied upon when writing this book. We think all are worth reading in full, and so at the end of our book we have a list of the texts we used to reference each chapter's contents, and many are hyperlinked so you can read these sources too if you would like.

Now we invite you, dear Reader, to read all of the chapters of our book in their entirety so as to learn about, or reconsider information you were taught previously, teaching in China throughout its entire and remarkable history. If you do not have the time to do this, or would like a taste of what is to come before leaping in, we present you a brief summation below of the contents of each chapter in our book, *Teacher preparation in China: A history of education for excellence and obedience*.

## Chapter Outlines

After this brief introductory chapter our book cover nine detailed chapters, which we encourage you to read all the way through from first page to last. However, you may be keen to focus on a specific period of Chinese history that aligns to your own research interest areas, so we have written a concise summary of what we cover in each chapter, to help you better navigate through all the information we have provided about modern day and historical Chinese society, education, teachers, schools and curriculum.

### Chapter 1

Chapter 1 focuses on China in the pre-historical time when exact time measurements are difficult to confirm, but covers several millennia before the Common Era. We trace the emergence of China as a unique historical entity and demonstrate that the prehistoric Chinese were eager to learn, and who invented amazing new things such as writing and mathematical tools such as abacuses. They were also skilled farmers and miners, cultivating silk and rice while mining for jade and bronze.

Our first chapters cover the history of the five unique periods in China of long, long ago: the Xia Dynasty (2100–1766 BCE); then the Shang Dynasty (1766–1047 BCE); followed by the Zhou Dynasty (1047–256 BCE). Next comes the bloody Spring and Autumn Warring Periods (256–220 BCE) and we finish with the unification of China by the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE).

The education goals of pre-history China can be viewed through the binary of unification and excellence goals. We describe mythical origin stories and legendary tales that bonded Chinese clans to a belief that they were a unique and superior group of humans compared to other human groupings they had so-far encountered. Then, we examine the sophisticated technological advances of the pre-historic Chinese including military, agriculture and scientific advances.

## 4 *Teacher Preparation in China*

### **Chapter 2**

This chapter examines the many and sometimes overlapping dynasties that ruled China during, what we have termed as, the Ancient and Mediaeval era of Chinese history. Ancient China includes the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE); the Jin Dynasty (265–420); the 16 Kingdoms or Dynasties (304–409); the era of both the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589) and then the Sui Dynasty (581–618). We attribute the following dynasties to Mediaeval China: the Tang Dynasty (618–907); the five Dynasties and 10 Kingdoms period (907–960); then the sometimes coinciding Liao Dynasty (916–1125) and then Song Dynasty (960–1279).

In relatively sporadic, peaceful periods over these centuries, Chinese teachers and scientists invented and discovered many things including astrology and astronomy. And throughout most of these dynasties, teaching was considered a revered profession where they were seen not merely as instructors with deep and broad intellectual knowledge, but most importantly role-model exemplars whose behaviour students were expected to emulate.

The chapter 's education goals centre around Confucian philosophy and its surviving role as a teacher preparation system that shaped both the cultural and intellectual fabric of many Middle Kingdom dynasties. His philosophy becomes a deeply respected, ingrained part of elite Chinese society and the *kējū* civil service examination system became the primary pathway to elite bureaucratic positions. We also consider two ancient education academies from this time: the *Taixue Imperial Academy* and the *White Deer Grotto Academy*, which produced many Chinese and foreign scholars and teachers of great repute.

In Chapter 2, we also consider the ways in which education goals in this millennia tried to make the Chinese population obedient to their rulers. However, we end by examining rebellions and unsanctioned influences that have also had an outsized impact on China in those times and then throughout its entire future history, including two influential quasi-religious ideologies: Daoism and Buddhism.

### **Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 explores quite a unique period of Chinese history when the neighbouring Mongol empire and its famous barbarian warrior leader, Genghis Khan, and then his sons, repeatedly invaded China and eventually conquered it in 1271. Genghis' grandson, Qubilai Khan, then establishes the Yuan Dynasty which rules over China, and its expanded territorial footprint, until 1368. We decided to create a separate chapter just for this one dynasty because we think the Great Khans, as the first foreign invaders to rule over China, deserve to be studied in depth.

So we examine the excellence and obedience goals in this era and show how they were intertwined in the military training that dominated Mongol education. We consider how Mongol youth of both genders trained for battle and their skills in conquest resulted in the creation of the largest empire the world had ever seen

from the European Caspian mountains all the way through China and into the Korean Peninsula. We consider their exceptional skills in animal herding and horsemanship, marvel at their use of decimal based mathematics to create incredible armies numbered in their tens and thousands.

Finally, we discuss how there was a code of law, the Great Yasa, which expected to be followed throughout the Mongol Empire under the punishment of death. Then we consider the ways Confucianism was suppressed during the Yuan Dynasty and how the teachings of the Buddhist monk, Phags pa Lama, and then the Christian traveller, Marco Polo, held some influence over Qubilai Khan and his court.

#### ***Chapter 4***

Chapter 4 cover the centuries after the Mongol Empire had been defeated, thus when the Ming and then Qing dynasties ruled over the Middle Kingdom. The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) occurs roughly equivalent to the European Middle Ages and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) occurs when European powers not only visited China but tried to impose their will on the ancient Asian civilisation.

In the Ming Dynasty, the Great Wall of China is ‘finished’ but this does not stop more and more Christian missionaries and European merchants, with their emerging theories of markets and capital, to travel to China by Marco Polo’s land and sea routes to trade and proselytise. This forever changes China’s view of itself as *the* Middle Kingdom of Earth and by the Qing Dynasty many elite families send their children abroad in order to seek better teachers to prepare them for an education that would help them survive the new era when even neo-Confucianism is *not* adequate a preparation for European’s colonial imperatives underpinned by its rapid renaissance in technological advancements and educational innovations.

We end the chapter at the end the 19th century, when European’s visits go from incursions to conquests over Chinese controlled islands and coastal areas, including Macau, Hong Kong and Taipei. The imperial system of rule cannot withstand the better educated foreigners and the escalating internal rebellions from various Chinese. These factors lead to the fall of the Chinese dynastic era in Chinese history in the Xinhai Revolution of 1911.

#### ***Chapter 5***

Chapter 5 was hard to synthesise because of the accelerating speed in which historical episodes occurred in the first half of the 20th century. The 1911 revolution ends the imperial dynasties in China and brings about the short-lived democratic period of the Republic of China under the first president, Dr Sun Yat-Sen. Warlords take over some parts of China, Yat-sen dies and the CCP is established in 1921. Global events are momentous in these short four decades, including World War One, the Karl Marx-inspired Communist Revolution in Russia in 1918 and the Sino-Japanese war that is named in the West as World War Two.

## 6 *Teacher Preparation in China*

This is a chapter, where we try to explain how Chinese teacher preparation attempts to modernise and keep up with the scientific and technological advances that are continually made in this early, horrific nuclear weapon age era. One interesting way they did this was by embracing the pedagogic ideas advocated by an American teacher, John Dewey and in this chapter, we consider his perceived influence at the time and from retrospection in recent research.

### *Chapter 6*

Chapter 6 focuses on the period when the CCP wins the Civil War and Mao Zedong became the first Communist leader of China in 1949, through to his death in 1976. In this chapter, we cover the ways China's elite and military sector of education rapidly modernises with the help of Stalin's Soviet Union in Mao's first years of rule. But a too-rapid push to modernise the agricultural sector fails, and the populace suffers with a deep famine across the whole of China from 1959 to 1961. Then, we do not justify but show how the Mao-initiated Cultural Revolution completely decimated Chinese education from the grassroots to the tertiary level. We reflect on this era as such a strange time in modern Chinese history because teachers were vilified, humiliated and even killed because of their profession. The generation of children who studied under Mao are now very elderly, but their memories are vivid. We feature some of their stories in this chapter and reflect upon the legacy of being taught to idolise Mao and endure his vicious methods of indoctrination.

### *Chapter 7*

Chapter 7 focuses on education during the time of the rule of Deng Xiaoping from 1977 to 1993. Deng was a CCP leadership rival with Mao his whole life, so when Mao died Deng finally got to rule China and he made quite a few changes to the status quo. In this chapter, we discuss how the Deng era was one where excellence rather than obedience took most precedence in educational goal-setting, and we reveal how the USA, under Jimmy Carter at that time, agreed and supported the pivot. By 1982, the population of China reaches one billion and in 1985 China becomes a nuclear power (Vidal-Naquet, 1987, p. 291) and has enough Chinese experts now trained to run French bought reactors. We argue in this chapter that Deng's legacy is a leader who very successfully re-established and modernised education to the benefit the one child in each family who was allowed to be born in a time of forced contraception use and mandatory sterilisations after birthing. This chapter ends in 1989 which, proved a momentous year in global circumstances. On June 4 of that year, Deng authorises the Tiananmen Square Massacre of Chinese students who were no longer obeying his government and demanding democratic reforms. While the massacre silences the rebelliousness of that generation of Chinese youth, only a few short months later student protests help end the Cold War, starting with the Berlin Wall rebellion and then the fall of the Soviet Union.

## Chapter 8

Chapter 8 focuses on a period in Chinese history when Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao lead China throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. We see this global era as a time of Western democratic dominance and an eye in a storm of decades of chaos. It's an era when two relatively historically inconsequential leaders lead, but also a time when China begins to accelerate up the ladder of global education achievements. In this chapter, we document 23 years of prosperity when the imperative of economic globalisation takes precedent in China and schools, universities and private intellectuals engage in state-sanctioned Western collaborations for help in advancing their educational goals. It was also a time of relative peaceful period, including when the Western colonised lands handed back Macau and Hong Kong to the CCP while it was live-streamed on TV across the globe.

## Chapter 9

Chapter 9 focuses on the ongoing era when Chairman Xi Jinping rules China and has arguably made Chinese great again. We argue that Xi's leadership has advanced excellence in education as a cornerstone of Xi's vision and this has propelled China to the forefront of global advancements in space exploration, military capabilities and medical research. In the field of computing and advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI), this era has also seen China thrive and the cheap and incredibly advanced *DeepSeek* open-access large language model (LLM) model, launched in January 2025 (Jamali, 2025), is perhaps just the first example of an event when Chinese inventors will shock the world with how advanced Chinese education and technology have become!

In this chapter, we argue that these advances have occurred due to the fact that the Xi era has been a period in Chinese history when teaching and education has been exquisitely balanced between the policy pursuits of excellence *and* obedience. In this era, China's education goals remain multitudinous, so we have only focused on just some prime examples of excellence and obedience in this era. In the excellence area we focus on the achievement of compulsory K-9 schooling being funded by the government; space and military advances; as well as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and digital education.

In terms of goals for obedience, we think Xi has been successful in attacking private education in advancing patriotic education and in developing surveillance technology such that the CCP seems to have now gained total control of the country and its peoples.

Our final chapter ends predicting the short, middle and distant future of Chinese education and how teachers prepare their ongoing mission to achieve learning by their students.

## **Read On**

We finished writing this book at the very beginning of 2025, when Xi Jinping controls Chinese society and leads a Communist dictatorship that is now one of the only two superpowers on Earth whose actions are capable of profoundly impacting the rest of humanity. We build an argument throughout the book that China has been an exemplar society for teacher preparation in so many periods of its literate history and finish the book with evidence that we think suggests China is currently the world-leading educator of students as measured by global standardised tests. We are now more certain than ever that this book is needed, and we are so excited to offer it to you for reading. Again welcome to our book, *Teacher preparation in China: A history of education for excellence and obedience*. As you turn each page of each chapter that follows, we hope you find interesting and thought-provoking facts and analysis.