



# Advancing Teacher Professionalism in Rural China: An Equality-Oriented Policy Approach

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## Abstract

This chapter examines how equality-oriented teacher policies influence teacher professionalism in rural China. After a critical review of relevant literature, this chapter conceptualizes teacher professionalism as an evolving set of individual teacher qualities, institutional configurations, and social discourses that enable the teaching profession to negotiate with relevant stakeholders to fulfill its ideal of educating students in moral, effective, and developmental ways. Guided by this conceptualization, this chapter identifies the challenges facing teacher professionalism in rural China. Next, statistical data, research literature, and policy documents are used in combination to analyze how the Chinese government's

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equality-oriented policies address the identified challenges and advance teacher professionalism in rural China. The analysis results show that: (1) the targeted recruitment policies channel more and better-prepared teachers to rural schools; (2) the quality assurance policies improve the professional qualities of rural teachers; (3) the professional development policies promote the continuing professionalization of the teacher workforce in rural China. These policy endeavors constitute an equality-oriented policy approach to advancing teacher professionalism. This chapter concludes with a critical reflection on the strengths and issues of using the equality-oriented policy approach to advancing teacher professionalism in rural China and other geographically, economically, and educationally challenging circumstances.

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**Keywords**

Teacher professionalism · Rural education · Teacher policy · Educational equality

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**Introduction**

Being a teacher is a seemingly easy job. Many people believe that teachers' work, especially in primary and secondary schools, is easy because what schools teach is not "rocket sciences." A well-educated person with sufficient subject matter knowledge would teach well. Because of such intuitive, convenient, and pervasive misconceptions, the public treats teaching as a semi- or para-profession. Compared to other more established and mature professions (e.g., medicine, law, and engineering), teaching still lacks widely shared standards for practice, a solid and specialized knowledge base, and consequently a sufficient extent of autonomy in deciding what and how to teach (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). These conditions pose challenges to teachers' work, lives, and continuing development at both individual and collective levels.

But in reality, teaching is complex and challenging. Lortie's (1975) sociological study of teachers' work shows that teaching is a highly contextual practice. An array of student, school, community, and sociocultural contexts simultaneously shapes the purposes, process, and outcomes of teaching, making teachers teach in the face of numerous uncertainties moment after moment. Lortie coins the term "endemic uncertainty" (p. 134) to describe this generic feature of teaching. Many other scholars (e.g., Cohen, 2011) further confirm the contextuality and complexity of teaching. Furthermore, several new conditions taking shape in the twenty-first century (e.g., globalization, industrial revolution 4.0, and the Covid-19 pandemic) pose new and significant challenges to teachers. The disparity between how the public views teaching and what teaching entails speaks to a vital concept in teacher education research – teacher professionalism, which is unpacked further in the next section.

## Teacher Professionalism

The definition of teacher professionalism hinges on the definition of profession and professionalism. In brief, a profession is a type of job that requires special education, training, or skills. Based on their review of a collection of existing definitions in the literature, Tapper and Millett (2015) identify a series of core elements that a profession should possess. These include the following: holding an ideal of service and responsibility to the public good; based on a body of specialized knowledge; operating as a community and is self-regulating; requiring intensive training and formal qualification; and requiring a code of ethics or shared ethics. Accordingly, professionalism can be understood as the combination of the above elements that constitute a profession.

Informed by the general discussions on profession and professionalism, educational scholars (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Goodwin, 2021; Whitty, 2008) have proposed various understandings of teacher professionalism, which converge into three primary perspectives: the compositional perspective (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008), the developmental perspective (Hargreaves, 2000), and the power-negotiation perspective (Whitty, 2008). The compositional perspective focuses on the elements entailed for making teaching a profession. Studies taking this perspective have identified a list of elements that the teaching profession must possess. These include credentials, induction, professional development, specialization, authority, and compensation, among others (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). Studies taking the developmental perspective tend to view teaching professionalism as a process of developing from one phase to another. For instance, Hargreaves (2000) argues that the teaching profession is going through four different ages: the preprofessional age, the autonomous professional age, the collegial professional age, and the postprofessional/postmodern age. The third perspective – the power-negotiation perspective – is mainly concerned with the power dynamics behind the regulations of teachers' work, lives, and development (Whitty, 2008). In particular, this perspective asks who has the legitimacy and power in controlling teachers. While some scholars within this camp advocate that the power should come from teachers themselves, some others recognize the reality and importance of external forces (e.g., political agenda, global trends) in shaping individual teachers' work, life, and development and the overall status of the teaching profession (Goodwin, 2021).

Informed by the above three perspectives, this chapter conceptualizes teacher professionalism as an evolving set of individual teacher qualities, institutional configurations, and social discourses that enable the teaching profession to negotiate with relevant stakeholders to fulfill its ideal of educating students in moral, effective, and developmental ways. This conceptualization highlights that teacher professionalism is composed of several core elements, including individual teachers' qualities (e.g., knowledge, abilities, dispositions, and performances), institutional configurations (e.g., shared standards for teaching practices, a credential system for regulating the entry into teaching), and public discourses (e.g., the social status of teachers and teaching). It also stresses that these elements are not static but constantly evolving, which echoes with Hargreaves (2000), who views teacher professionalism as a fluid

and evolving social phenomenon. Further, this conceptualization points out the politics involved in teacher professionalism. In other words, whether and to what extent teaching is a profession is not a purely scientific question. Instead, it involves the power-negotiations and interest-(re)distributions between the teaching profession and related interest groups, such as government officials who make and enact policies to regulate the teaching workforce, other public servants who compete for fiscal resources, and providers of private, shadow, or extracurricular education outside of the public schooling system. Thus, teacher professionalism inevitably involves how teachers, both individually and collectively, position themselves and are positioned as who they are as they interact and negotiate with other social interest groups to enhance their identity, autonomy, and interests.

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## Challenges About Teacher Professionalism in Rural China

The status of teacher professionalism varies significantly across contexts. Rural China is one of the contexts that witness persisting and severe challenges in relation to teacher professionalism. In the past few decades, China has been drastically developing its economy, education, and overall living conditions for the Chinese people. Nevertheless, the development is quite unbalanced due to the traditional urban-rural divide of Chinese society. In particular, the rural regions of China, including small villages, townships, and suburban areas surrounding county seats, are significantly lagging behind their urban counterparts in many respects, such as economy, living conditions, job opportunities, health care, education, and other respects (Whyte, 2010).

In the field of education, two specific types of the urban-rural divide – the household registration system (*hukou*, 户口) and the urban-rural schooling system – have been the main drivers of educational inequality in basic education in China. In the 1950s, the state started the modernization process with industrialization as the focus and chose the development strategy of giving priority to heavy industry and urban areas. Agriculture and the rural regions play the role of providing primitive accumulation for industrialization by providing low-cost agricultural products to ensure low-cost food supply, low wages, and low costs in cities. The structural transformation of this period mainly relies on three institutional arrangements: the collective purchase and sale of agricultural products, the people's commune system, and the household registration system (*hukou*). The *hukou* system assigns people to rural *hukou* versus urban *hukou* according to one's place of residence and parents' *hukou* status, corresponding to the kind of taxes one needs to pay and public goods and social welfare one can enjoy, including education. The urban-rural divide in *hukou* status and prourban and industry policy strategy has created a social hierarchy with rural residents at the bottom. Despite the drastic economic reform since 1978 – the beginning year of the Reform and Opening-Up Campaign – the *hukou* system has remained relatively stable over time and is still a structural problem facing the development of a regional balanced and urban-rural integrated education system today.

While the *hukou* system stratifies the obligations and rights of people according to their *hukou* status, the urban-rural schooling system stratifies the educational resources and opportunities at the institutional level. The rural schooling system has been separated from the urban schooling system since the implementation of the *hukou* system in the 1950s. The division and prourban policies have created a significant disparity in education. Rural schools suffer from the lack of funding and qualified teachers. The passage of “Decision on Educational System Reform” (1985) and “Compulsory Education Law” (1986) entrenched the urban-rural gap, which specified a decentralized compulsory education system in which local governments were held responsible for providing compulsory education. Local governments, mainly the township (乡, *xiang*) governments, were responsible for raising not only budgetary funds for schools but also extrabudgetary funds through businesses, communities, and households. As a result, the educational resources were further tied to local economic and social development. Under the urban-rural schooling system, rural and underdeveloped areas were disadvantaged, and the disparity was exacerbated by marketization reform and rapid urbanization.

The *hukou* system and separate schooling practices reflect historical and structural discriminations on teachers working in rural schools, which have posed significant challenges to teacher professionalism in rural China. First, the lack of sufficient and high-quality teachers renders the status of teacher professionalism in rural China relatively low as compared to the situation in urban China. Given the harsh work conditions and low incomes, rural regions are always the last choice for those who want to become a teacher. On the other hand, with the enforcement of the Compulsory Education Law beginning in 1986, rural schools have been needing a great number of more teachers to educate the vast and growing number of school-aged children in rural China. As a result, rural schools are constantly facing teacher shortages. Relatedly, because of the unfavorable conditions of rural China, teachers who ended up teaching in rural schools are generally underprepared for teaching. Compared to their urban counterparts, teachers in rural China have received fewer years of education, mastered less professional knowledge for teaching, and demonstrated lower-level of teaching performance and outcomes (Li et al., 2019). These facts render the overall status of teacher professionalism in rural China relatively low.

Furthermore, the urban-centered value orientation in schools and society makes it challenging to advance teacher professionalism in rural China. In schools, the curriculums and textbooks prioritize people’s values, jobs, and lives living in metropolitan areas (Wu & Yang, 2008; Wang & Chen, 2019; Yao & Zheng, 2019; Zheng, 2021). Rural students are encouraged to study hard to “escape” their rural hometowns someday in the future. Rural teachers are often sent to urban regions to learn from their urban counterparts the most “advanced” and “progressive” teaching ideas and techniques, assuming that what works in urban schools would be equally effective in rural schools. In society, preferring the urban over the rural is more apparent and pervasive. One extreme but telling example is that some people in blind-dating markets use “non-rural *hukou* (非农村户口)” as a criterion to rule out the candidates from rural regions. Given the discriminatory attitudes and actions

toward the rural within and outside schools, improving teacher professionalism in rural China is challenging.

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## **Equality-Oriented Policy Approach to Advancing Teacher Professionalism in Rural China**

According to the education reform agendas in the past few decades, the Chinese government seems fully aware of the teacher professionalism related challenges, namely the inadequacy and underpreparedness of teachers, in its rural schools. The government has been issuing a series of policies and programs to address these challenges, aiming to improve the overall teacher professionalism in rural China (Liao & Yuan, 2017). Three main types of equality-oriented teacher policies have been enacted: targeted recruitment policies, quality assurance policies, and professional development policies. Each type of policies has played a particular role in shaping the teacher workforce in rural schools of China. These policies together have advanced teacher professionalism in rural China.

### **Targeted Recruitment Policies Channeling More Professional Teachers to Rural China**

Though teacher professionalism mainly focuses on the qualities and performances of teachers, it also concerns the size and adequacy of the teaching workforce. In other words, teacher professionalism involves both the quantity and quality of teachers in a given context. Often, policymakers and school administrators would prioritize the task of staffing schools with a sufficient number of teachers over the task of staffing schools with high-quality teachers. The logic applies to the Chinese government's effort to improve teacher professionalism in rural China. Chinese rural schools face chronic teacher shortages, and staffing rural schools with sufficient teachers have become the focus of the first type of equality-oriented policies undertaken by the Chinese government. Those policies have channeled more teachers with higher professional qualities to Chinese rural schools, which have helped advance teacher professionalism in rural China. Meanwhile, through these policies, the central government has gradually stepped into the field of educational administration traditionally dominated by local governments.

#### **1. Traditional Way of Teacher Recruitment**

During the 1980s to 2000, the teacher labor market was localized within each county. Most teachers were locally born and trained in county-level secondary normal schools (*zhongdeng shifan xuexiao*, 中等师范学校), hired by the township education office (There are five levels of governments, including central government, provincial government, prefecture government, county (municipality in the city) government, and township (district in the city) government. Township education offices are under county education offices in rural areas,

similar to district education offices in urban regions), and paid by the local government. In addition to regular public-school teachers, there were also large number of contract teachers. Because local governments could not afford the regular teacher payroll during the period of universalizing nine-year compulsory education (*pujiu*, 普九), less-qualified and less-expensive contract teachers (*daike jiaoshi*, 代课教师), often villagers with higher-than-average education levels, were hired to fill the vacancies. Another reason was that regular teachers were not willing to work in remote rural regions, especially when there was no additional compensation for tough working conditions. By recruiting contract teachers, the goal of universal compulsory education was achieved in 2000 with low cost and low quality.

In sum, under the traditional way of teacher recruitment (Table 1), the county-level government is the employer of primary and secondary school teachers, and the recruitment standards and recruitment process are dominated by the personnel department of the county-level government. Therefore, there are large regional differences in teachers’ initial training, teacher evaluation, and compensation. Due to the limited fiscal capacity of the county government, public school teachers recruited through formal processes need to meet the demand of urban schools first, and then the demand of rural schools. Also, schools’ demand for main subject teachers (Chinese and mathematics) are considered first. As a result, the shortage of qualified teachers and structural shortage in rural schools is more serious than their urban counterparts under the traditional way of teacher recruitment.

**Table 1** Traditional way of recruiting rural teachers and the “Special Post Teacher Project”

	Traditional way of recruiting teachers	Special post-teacher project
Employer	County government/personnel department	Central-provincial-municipal-county (Education department)
Salaries and benefits	Paid by county government, large regional differences	Central + county governments
Positions	Regular public teachers + contract teachers	Guaranteed public post after 3 years of service
Appointment of teachers	First to schools in the county seat, then town and rural schools	Rural schools
Teacher education	Large regional differences, determined by county governments	Bachelor’s or college degree, according to national common standards
Subject needs	Mainly the main subject teachers, determined by county governments	Aggregated to the provincial level
Teacher candidates	Normal school/college/university graduates who are local residents within the county	Graduates within province
Teacher training	Large regional differences, depending on training received in normal school/college/university	Short-term training before teaching
Monitoring	County government	Central-provincial-county

## 2. Targeted Teacher Recruitment Policies

During late 1990s and 2000s, the changes occurred in the higher education system and rural basic education system made the original teacher preparation and supplement mechanism unable to meet the demand, resulting in a serious shortage of rural teachers nationwide. In 1999, the Ministry of Education promoted the transition of the teacher education system from three levels to two levels (The three-level teacher education institutions refer to secondary-level teacher schools (*zhongshi*, 中师), three-year normal colleges (*shizhuan*, 师专), and four-year normal universities (*shida*, 师大). In this hierarchical system, *zhongshi* was mainly responsible for preparing kindergarten and primary school teachers (grades K–6), *shizhuan* for preparing middle school teachers (grades 7–9), and *shida* for preparing high school teachers (grades 10–12) (Liao & Zhou, 2020)). The number of secondary-level teacher schools, which had contributed greatly to the universalization of compulsory education during the mid-1980s and 1990s, was reduced from 1064 in 1978 to 132 in 2011 (Liao & Zhou, 2020). In addition to the reform of higher education institutions, the rural education system also experienced dramatic changes due to the rural tax reform since 2000. The rural tax reform introduced a package of policies to alleviate financial burdens on rural residents, including the levy of education surcharges to finance rural schools. As a result, teachers' payment was often delayed, and local governments did not have enough funding and willingness to recruit new teachers.

To cope with this situation, the central government has been increasing its financial investment and policy influence on rural compulsory education, including the establishment of a long-term mechanism to address the shortage of qualified rural teachers. A series of new measures to supplement rural teachers were carried out, including the “Voluntary Service of College Students in the Western Regions (大学生志愿服务西部计划)” (2003), “The Teacher Training Plan for Master of Education in Rural Schools (农村学校教育硕士师资培养计划)” (2004), “The Project of Recruiting College Graduates to Take Community-Level Posts in Education, Agriculture, Health Care, and Poverty Relief in Rural Areas (三支一扶)” (2006), and “Free Teacher Education Project (免费师范生教育)” (2007).

In particular, the “Special Post Teacher Project for Rural Compulsory Education (农村义务教育阶段学校教师特设岗位计划)” launched in 2006 has become the major form of alternative teacher recruitment, and changed the traditional way of local recruitment of rural teachers. Compared to the traditional way of teacher recruitment in rural regions, the project has involved central, provincial, municipal, and county governments, and mobilized resources from all levels to address the shortage of high-quality teachers in rural schools (Table 1). From 2006 to 2021, the project has recruited over 1 million teachers to teach in more than 30,000 rural schools and become the main source of novice teachers in a number of underdeveloped provinces. Meanwhile, it has gradually changed the composition of rural teachers. The implementation of the “Special Post Teacher Project” has greatly alleviated the shortage of rural teachers in the central and western regions, and improved the educational background, age structure, and subject structure of rural teachers.



In sum, since the mid-2000s, a series of policies have been initiated to address the shortage of educational resources and address the problem of teacher shortage in rural regions. These top-down equality-oriented policies have alleviated the shortage of rural teachers and reduced the reliance on contract teachers and other substitute teachers. The targeted teacher recruitment mechanism has also gradually changed the composition of rural teachers from residents who graduated from county-level secondary normal schools (*zhongdeng shifan xuexiao*, 中等师范学校), recruited and paid by county governments, to non-native graduates from three- or four-year-college recruited through more standardized and transparent procedure, with financial support from central and provincial governments. In addition, the targeted teacher recruitment mechanism has also promoted the standardization of traditional way of teacher recruitment mechanism in rural areas.

### **Quality Assurance Policies Enhancing the Extent of Teacher Professionalism in Rural China**

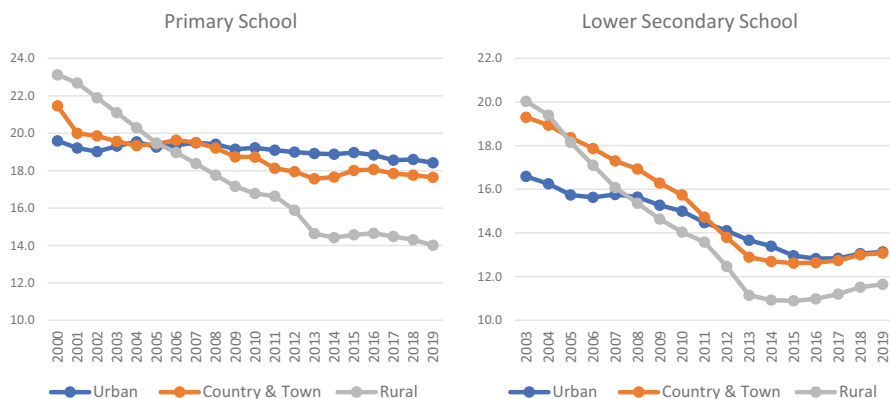
The second type of equality-oriented policy focuses on assuring the quality of teachers in rural China. From the compositional perspective of viewing teacher professionalism, teachers should possess an array of qualities to teach in moral, effective, and developmental ways. While teacher quality is found to be crucial in raising student achievement, it is difficult to measure the quality of a teacher. Some studies find little evidence of significant and positive effects of measurable teacher characteristics, such as educational background and teaching experience, on student achievement. Studies often use teachers' educational background, the selectivity of teachers' undergraduate institution, teaching experience, and licensure as proxies for teacher quality. Some others find that teachers' noncognitive attributes such as personality and self-efficacy can be considered proxies for teacher quality. In this chapter, student-teacher ratio, teachers' education level, and teachers' professional rank are used as teacher quality indicators not only because of the availability of these data in the Educational Statistics Yearbook but also because they are the focus of quality assurance policies to improve the quality of teachers in China's primary and secondary schools, including those located in rural regions, during the 1990s and the 2000s. Furthermore, teacher professionalism is conceptualized as an evolving set of core elements, including teacher qualities, institutional configurations, and public discourses that enable teachers to work professionally. The student-teacher ratio is an indicator of the adequacy of a teacher workforce; education level is an indicator of teacher quality; and professional rank is an institutional arrangement and sometimes also used as an indicator of teacher quality. The three indicators are also frequently discussed in the public discourses around teacher professionalism in rural China.

Since the early 1990s, the central government began to pay attention to teacher quality in primary and secondary schools. In 1993, the Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China was passed, signaling the beginning of a teacher certification system. Teachers are required to pass the national teacher certification exam. At the same time, the government attempted to gradually reduce the number of contract

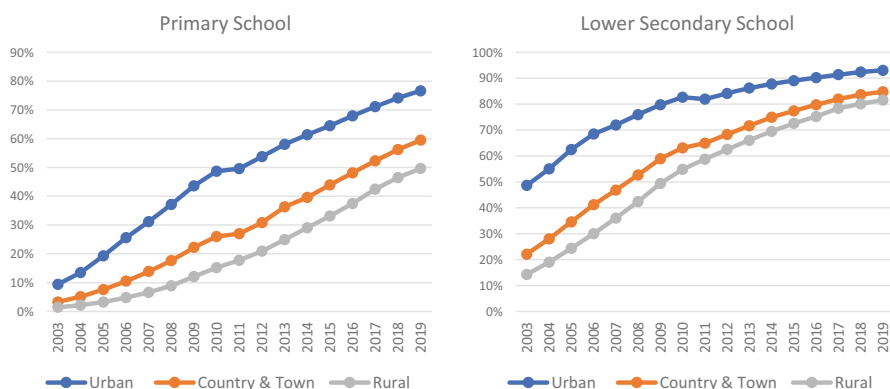
teachers. In 1985, the contract teachers composed 42% of all teachers in primary and secondary education. The percentage of contract teachers in rural areas was even higher. In 2001, only 6.6% of the rural primary and secondary school teachers were contract teachers (Robinson & Yi, 2008). As the entry requirement for teachers was tightened and contract teachers decreased, the quality of teachers greatly improved.

Meanwhile, policymakers also try to improve the education level of primary and secondary school teachers. “Education Reform and Development in China” (1993) set the standards that by 2000, 95% of primary teachers should be graduates of normal schools, 80% of secondary school teachers should be graduates from normal colleges, and 70% of high school teachers should be graduates from 4-year normal universities. To meet the standards, in 1999, the Ministry of Education promoted the transition of the teacher education system from three levels to two levels. In the two-level system, 3-year college is responsible for preparing primary school teachers, and 4-year university is responsible for preparing secondary school teachers. At the same time, the Ministry of Education initiated one of the largest expansions in college enrollments in history. The number of students who could attend college increased from 1 million to 5.7 million, or from 6% to 22% of the age cohort from 1998 to 2007. As a result of the reform of teacher education system and the college expansion, the supply of teachers with college degree increased greatly.

This chapter uses the student-teacher ratio and teacher education level to measure teacher quality. The two measures are widely used as an indicator for teacher quality in previous studies (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). Most of the studies on the student-teacher ratio (Schwartz et al., 2012) show a negative relationship between the student-teacher ratio and students’ academic performance. Figure 1 shows the changes in student-teacher ratios of primary and lower secondary schools from 2000 to 2019. The student-teacher ratios have been decreasing over time, especially for rural schools. The student-teacher ratio of rural primary schools has reduced from



**Fig. 1** Student-teacher ratio of primary and lower secondary schools. (Source: Calculation based on China Educational Statistics Yearbook)

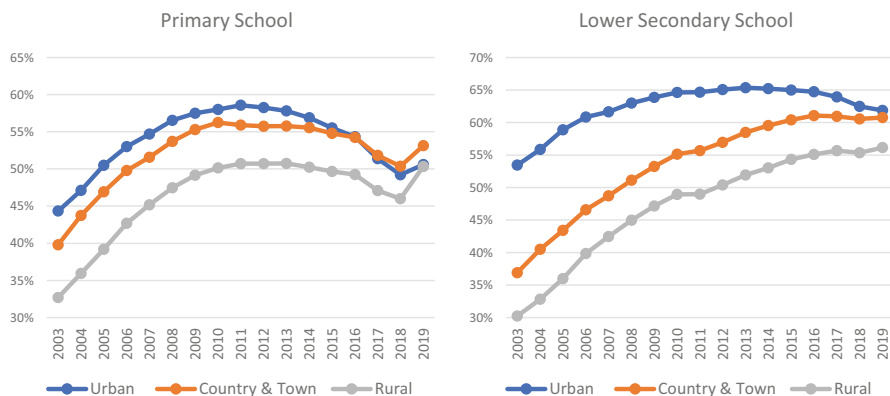


**Fig. 2** Proportion of teachers with a bachelor's degree or above in primary and lower secondary schools. (Source: Calculation based on China Educational Statistics Yearbook)

23:1 in 2000 to 14:1 in 2019. The student-teacher ratio of rural lower secondary schools has reduced from 20:1 in 2003 to 11.7:1 in 2019.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of teachers with a bachelor's degree or above. In 2003, only 1.4% of rural primary school teachers and 14.4% of rural lower secondary school teachers had a bachelor's degree or above. In 2019, 50% of rural primary teachers and 81.5% of rural lower secondary school teachers had a bachelor's degree or above.

In addition to student-teacher ratio and teacher education level, we use teachers' professional rank to measure the change of teacher quality in rural regions. Teachers' professional rank is one of the most important institutional mechanisms used to evaluate and incentivize teachers in China. There are five ranks in primary and secondary schools, including level 3, level 2, level 1, subsenior, and senior (The current five-level professional rank system has been used since 2015, after years of reforming the professional rank system for primary and secondary school teachers. Before 2015, the professional rank systems for primary and secondary school teachers were separate, and they each included four ranks, namely level 3, level 2, level 1, and the senior level). The basic wages are mainly determined by teachers' educational background, professional rank, and teaching experience: (1) The level of wage is based on teachers' professional rank. Teachers with a higher professional rank get higher wages regardless of educational background; (2) the difference in the amount between ranks increases with educational background; and (3) based on teacher's level, the wage increases over time with experience. As a result, teachers have strong incentive to be promoted. Because the total amount for level 1 and senior ranks available within a district is limited, teachers must compete for promotions (There are rules on the years of teaching experience before a teacher can apply for promotion to the next level. All the teachers start as interns. They can apply for promotion to level 3 in the next year. The years required for the eligibility of application for promotion to level 2 and level 1 differ according to the educational background of the teachers, and they also differ among regions). Studies in rural



**Fig. 3** Proportion of teachers with senior/middle professional ranks in primary and lower secondary schools. (Senior/middle professional ranks include “senior secondary (中学高级), senior primary (小学高级), level 1 of secondary school (中学一级).” In 2015, the category of teacher professional rank has been changed from “senior secondary (中学高级), senior primary (小学高级), level 1 of primary/secondary school (小学/中学一级), level 2 of primary/secondary school (小学/中学二级), level 3 of primary/secondary school (小学/中学三级), no ranking (未定职级)” to “senior (正高级), sub-senior (副高级), middle (中级), associate (助理级), junior (员级), no ranking (未定职级),” which resulted in a jump for primary and secondary school teachers). (Source: Calculation based on China Educational Statistics Yearbook)

China find that many teachers respond to promotion incentives by working harder (Karachiwalla & Park, 2017), and teachers with higher professional rank are better at improving student achievement compared to those having a college degree (Chu et al., 2015).

Figure 3 shows the proportion of teachers with middle- or senior-level professional ranks in primary and secondary schools from 2003 to 2019. Overall, with the change of time, the proportions have been increasing. Although the gap between urban and rural schools has always existed, the gap has been narrowing over the years. For primary schools, it narrowed from 11.64% in 2003 to 3% in 2019; for lower secondary schools, it narrowed from 23.22% in 2003 to 6% in 2019.

In sum, since the early 1990s, a series of quality assurance policies have been initiated to improve the quality of primary and lower secondary school teachers. By establishing teacher certification system, the government set a standardized entry requirement for teachers. By reducing the number of contract teachers, the quality of in-service teacher workforce had been improved greatly. By the reform of teacher education system and the college expansion, the supply of teachers with college degree increased greatly. The student-teacher ratio of rural schools has been reduced and become lower than urban schools, and the urban-rural gaps in teacher education level and professional rank have been narrowed. The improvement in these indicators has laid a good foundation for teachers’ professional development.

## **Professional Development Policies Advancing the Professionalization of Teachers in Rural China**

The third type of equality-oriented policy focuses on continuous development of in-service rural teachers. According to the developmental perspective, teacher professionalism in a specific context is not static but is transforming over time under various internal and external factors. The Chinese government has issued a series of professional development policies and programs to advance the continuing professionalization of teachers in rural China.

In particular, the scale, contents, and approaches of Chinese rural teacher development have been drastically changing over the past few decades. In terms of scale, the situation has been changing from a small portion of rural teachers seeking professional development to nearly all rural teachers being required to participate in 360 hours of professional development activities every 5 years. Meanwhile, the contents of professional development have been expanding from focusing on enhancing education degrees and instructional techniques to encompassing a variety of new contents, such as educational beliefs and ethics, curriculum standards, and student-centered pedagogies. As for the approaches of professional development, Chinese rural teachers initially relied on school-based teaching research groups and distance education as the main approaches to improving their professional qualities. With the technological and scholarly advancements in education, many Chinese rural teachers today begin to capitalize on several additional approaches, such as action research, online programs, and professional learning communities, to learn and develop. All these positive changes result from the overall development of rural regions and the Chinese society, rural teacher supporting policies, and the emergence of progressive theories and practical models in the research field of teacher education.

The scale of rural teachers engaging with professional development has been significantly expanding over time. In the first few decades, few rural teachers participated in professional development activities. Several reasons accounted for this phenomenon. Given the harsh and challenging conditions, rural schools often faced serious challenges in recruiting sufficient numbers of teachers. As a result, adequacy, as opposed to quality or professional development of teachers, became the primary concern of many rural schools in the early decades. The Chinese idiom “Something is Better than Nothing” (*liao shengyu wu*, 聊胜于无) could well explain why it was not a problem back then that few rural teachers sought professional development.

However, drastic changes in socioeconomic, professional, and policy discourses have been pressing rural teachers to seek professional development. With the overall economic and societal development in China, the labor markets are expecting workers to possess greater knowledge and competency. The new and higher expectations for students ask for higher-quality teachers. Professional development has been identified as a critical method of improving teacher quality. As a response to the changing socioeconomic discourse in China and beyond, the teaching profession has also been raising its bars for its members. In particular, teachers, including the ones

in rural regions, are urged to seek lifelong learning to adapt to the fast-changing world and elevate the overall status of the teaching profession in comparison to other “hard” professions such as medicine and law (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). Coupling with changes in the socioeconomic and professional discourses, the education policy discourses have been shifting too. As the teacher shortages in rural schools have been significantly alleviated, the education policies began to target more at improving rural teachers’ qualities through professional development policies and programs (Liao, 2019). For instance, beginning in 2013, all Chinese teachers, including the rural ones, are required to renew their teaching certificates every 5 years, and one prerequisite for renewal is that the teacher has completed 360 hours of professional development activities in the past 5 years (Ministry of Education, 2013). Furthermore, many recent teacher policies (e.g., Rural Teacher Support Plan; Ministry of Education of China, 2015) and programs (e.g., Young Rural Teacher Training & Award Plan; Ministry of Education, 2020) have been channeling high-quality resources directly to high-need rural regions, which has also contributed to the scaling up of rural teachers’ professional development.

Second, the contents of Chinese rural teachers’ professional development have been enriched over time. Initially, rural teachers’ professional development was mainly focused on lifting educational degrees and improving instructional techniques. As shown above, rural teachers had relatively lower educational qualifications compared to their urban peers. Many people with secondary school or lower-level degrees were recruited to staff rural schools as a provisional measure to tackle teacher shortages in rural regions (Robinson & Yi, 2008). Due to their insufficient preparation in content knowledge, instructional skills, and educational beliefs, many of them experienced a more serious and longer time of challenges as they were being socialized into the teaching profession. Furthermore, educational background was used as a major factor in determining the professional promotion of teachers. Thus, many rural teachers were motivated to improve their educational backgrounds to a higher level to be qualified for promotion. As a result of the external pressure and intrinsic motivation, many rural teachers attended distant degree education programs as the contents of their professional development (Robinson, 2008). Within these degree-based education programs, rural teacher attendees took courses on subject knowledge, educational theories, and pedagogical strategies. For many other rural teachers, the contents of their professional development centered around daily classroom teaching. Hinging on the teaching-research system established in the early 1950s, rural teachers were able to work with their colleagues to plan lessons, develop curricular materials, and participate in different levels of teaching contests as the contents of their professional development. However, the frequency, intensity, and depth of the teaching-research activities significantly varied across different schools and regions. Due to the chronic challenges and constraints that rural schools faced, rural teachers’ teaching research activities tended to be less inquiry-driven, systematically organized, or collaboratively enacted.

With the education system’s new expectations for rural schools, rural teachers begin to engage with more diversified contents of professional development. The newly emerging contents include educational beliefs and ethics, national curriculum

standards, standard mandarin, and student-centered pedagogies, among others. For instance, as a response to the high attrition rates of the rural teacher workforce, some professional development programs purposefully focused on fostering rural teachers' sense of belonging to rural communities and their commitment to working in rural schools for a long time (Zheng et al., 2021). Some other programs are aimed at helping rural teachers understand the newly made national curriculum standards and guiding them to tailor the standardized curriculum for local uses (Zhou, 2014). Still, others are targeted at improving the Putonghua (i.e., standard Mandarin) proficiency of rural teachers, especially in ethnic minority regions where local dialects are traditionally used for classroom instruction (Wang & Yuan, 2013). Also, as the student-centered pedagogies have become a new "norm" in the Chinese school system, many professional development programs are carried out to support rural teachers to understand such a pedagogical approach and enact it in their rural classrooms. In short, these and other newly emerging programs reflect the increasingly rich contents of rural teacher professional development resulting from the changing discourse in education and society.

Third, coupled with the enriched contents, the approaches of rural teacher professional development are also getting increasingly diverse. Traditionally, face-to-face teaching research in schools and correspondence-/television-based education were the two main approaches of professional development for rural teachers. In the 1950s, China established a four-level teaching-research (*jiaoyan*, 教研) system based on the Soviet Union's in-service teacher development. The four-level teaching-research system includes province, prefecture, county/district-level teaching-research offices, and school teaching-research groups. Since its establishment, the system has been serving as a major approach to advancing Chinese primary and secondary school teachers' professional development, including those working in rural regions (Lu et al., 2020). This approach was particularly important for rural teachers' professional development because other approaches (e.g., lectures by educational experts, visiting high-performing schools or related social institutions) were either scarce or unaffordable to rural teachers back then. Another traditional approach was distance education through correspondence or television programs. This approach was mainly used for lifting rural teachers' educational backgrounds (Robinson, 2008).

In the last two decades or so, China and elsewhere have been witnessing tremendous progress in information technologies. The theories and research on teacher learning and development have also been advanced toward more self-directed, collaborative, and situative ways of learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These new technologies and ideas have been penetrating education and giving rise to several new approaches to advancing rural teachers' professional development. For instance, some programs adopted participatory action research or lesson study, which were featured with evidence-based inquiry and collaborative learning, to improve rural teachers' capacities to address practical problems in their own contexts. As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the remoteness of rural schools, several online training programs were enacted to provide professional support to many rural teachers across the country. A telling example was the

“Young Rural Teacher Support Plan (*qingjiao jihua*, 青椒计划).” *Qingjiao Jihua* was initiated by Beijing Normal University, Hujiang EdTech, and China Social Entrepreneur Foundation. It provides a one-year online professional development program exclusively designed for rural teachers. To date, about 80,000 young rural teachers from 17,000 rural schools across China have attended and benefited from this program (Yu, 2021).

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## Strengths and Issues of the Equality-Oriented Policy Approach

The equality-oriented policy approach adopted by the Chinese government has presented several strengths and issues in advancing teacher professionalism in rural China. In terms of strengths, the equality-oriented policy approach targets several easy-to-measure components of teacher professionalism, has significantly enhanced the targeted components, and showcases a government-led, systemic, and powerful approach to advancing teacher professionalism in challenging contexts.

First, from the compositional perspective, teacher professionalism consists of a long list of elements, including teacher qualities (e.g., mastery of specialized knowledge), institutional arrangements (e.g., shared standards for practice), and social discourses (e.g., social respect) (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Goodwin, 2021; Tapper & Millett, 2015). The equality-oriented teacher policy approaches selectively focus on several specific elements (e.g., teacher-student ratio, education degree, and professional rank) that are relatively easy to measure, monitor, and change by the government-funded policies and programs. Such an approach has changed general, abstract, and idealized discussions of teacher professionalism into specific, concrete, and measurable actions of improving teacher professionalism on the ground.

Second, the equality-oriented policy approach has significantly enhanced the targeted elements of teacher professionalism in rural China, which reflects the developmental perspective of teacher professionalism. As shown by the nationally representative statistics, the equality-oriented policy approach has staffed rural schools with more and better-prepared teachers, elevated the education degrees of rural teachers, and promoted the continuing professional growth of rural teachers. Multiple reasons seem to have contributed to this favorable outcome. One reason is that the approach targets the core elements of teacher professionalism, including the initial preparation, recruitment, and continuing development of rural teachers. Another reason seems to be the use of both generous incentives (e.g., various forms of monetary and nonmonetary inputs) and strict regulations (e.g., the Special Post Teacher Project participants need to teach in targeted rural schools for at least 3 years) to improve the teacher workforces in rural China.

Third, the equality-oriented policy approach showcases a government-led, systemic, and powerful approach to advancing teacher professionalism in geographically, economically, and educationally challenging contexts. From the power-negotiation perspective, teacher professionalism involves different interest groups constantly negotiating with each other to influence teachers. The existing discussions on teacher professionalism, which are mainly embedded in Western societies, tend to



either highlight the improvement of specific elements of teacher professionalism or focus on the elevation of teachers' autonomy, social status, and reputation in comparison with other professions (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Hargreaves, 2000; Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). In contrast, the equality-oriented policy approach displays a systemic and powerful approach to improving teacher professionalism in rural China. The equality-oriented policy approach acknowledges the teaching profession's moral obligations and potentially crucial roles in bettering education and society (Liao & Zhou, 2020). In the case of rural China, the teaching profession has been leveraged to enhance educational and social equality and make contributions to China's undergoing modernization reform.

While the equality-oriented policy approach has presented the above advantages in supporting teacher professionalism in rural China, it also brings up several issues that center on the purpose, value orientation, and improvement strategies. The first issue is about the purpose of teacher professionalism. What is teacher professionalism for? Is it for individual teachers and their students? For school and parents? For the teaching profession? Or for a purpose that can bring greater meanings? Although these purposes are not mutually exclusive, they prioritize different values as reflected in different purposes. From a sociological perspective, the teaching profession functions as part of society (Lortie, 1975). It is intuitively valid and empirically verifiable that society as a parental entity of the teaching profession can significantly influence teachers and teaching. In rural China, the historical urban-rural divide, the governance system's emphasis on equality, and the ongoing modernization reform agenda have significantly shaped Chinese rural teachers and their professionalization. In particular, those social factors have rendered equality a core value to guide the recruitment, practice, and development of teachers in rural China. Societies with different political infrastructure, history, and sociocultural conditions may exert different degrees and kinds of influences on teaching, but the influence is always there. Therefore, we call for future research on teaching professionalism to recognize social influences more explicitly and examine how the teaching profession is being shaped by and, in return, shapes broader social discourses in various settings.

Another issue is about the value orientation of teacher professionalism. If teacher professionalism cannot be value-free, what values should be prioritized? Different societies may choose different values in different periods. To date, a wide range of social values has emerged from the history of human beings, such as efficiency, equality, justice, innovation, and sustainability, among others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rokeach, 1973). In the case of China, equality has been significantly advocated in teaching and other sections of society in the past few decades. However, other values have been taken up and stressed in different historical and sociocultural contexts. The plurality of social values and differing ordering of those values in contexts call for researchers to identify the social values that explicitly or implicitly penetrate the teaching profession and shape the understandings of and practices related to teacher professionalism. Such lines of research can help place teacher professionalism in a larger coordinate with which the temporal, geographical, and socio-cultural dimensions of teacher professionalism can be examined and understood more thoroughly.

The third issue is about the practical strategies for advancing teacher professionalism. Teacher professionalism can be viewed as a process of improving individual teachers' qualities and the teaching profession toward certain underlying values. What actions can be effective in advancing that process? This chapter examines teacher recruitment practices, teacher quality improvement, and teacher professional development for promoting educational and social equality in China. However, studies have shown that other practices can be effective in advancing teacher professionalism too. Those include but are not limited to professional entity construction (e.g., opening, sustaining, and improving teacher education institutions), professional knowledge production (e.g., conducting research activities, providing publishing outlets, and establishing/updating research paradigms), professional workforce development (e.g., professionalizing teacher educators and administrators), and professional social networking (e.g., partnering with other professions, advocating teaching in political agenda-setting) (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Goodwin, 2021; Hargreaves, 2000; Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). Future studies should examine how these and other potentially promising practices shape teachers, their work, and the status of teaching as a profession in specific contexts.

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## Conclusion

This chapter identifies various and supportive roles of the Chinese government's equality-oriented policies in elevating teacher professionalism in rural schools of China. The equality-oriented policy approach targets maneuverable components of teacher professionalism, uses generous incentives and strict regulations to advance teacher professionalism, and situates the improvement of teacher professionalism in broader educational and social reforms. It is concluded that the equality-oriented policy approach has significantly advanced teacher professionalism in rural China. This approach can be potentially useful in advancing teacher professionalism in other geographically remote, economically lagging, and educationally under-resourced contexts after cautiously and adequately considering the purposes, values, conditions, strategies, costs, and benefits of applying this approach in a new context.

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