

Poverty Alleviation through Education: A Crucial Move in Combating Poverty

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Abstract: Poverty alleviation through education is counted as a critical move in China's campaign against poverty, aiming to elevate the education levels of the underprivileged population, halt the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and assist social equity and economic development. This article is a review of the evolution of China's policies on poverty alleviation through education and an encapsulation of its major efforts in this area. Also discussed are the outcomes and challenges of the move. The study finds that it has significantly improved the educational standards in poverty-stricken areas and bolstered the financial states of the disadvantaged persons, while issues, such as the problematic implementation of policies, illegitimate notions of education in the underprivileged, and high turnover in rural teachers, remain. Corresponding suggestions are proposed for further advancement of poverty alleviation through education in China.

Science Insights Education Frontiers 2025; 27(1):4453-4467

DOI: 10.15354/sief.25.re491

How to Cite: Zhou, D. (2025). Poverty alleviation through education: A crucial move in combating poverty. *Science Insights Education Frontiers*, 27(1):4453-4467.

Keywords: Poverty Alleviation through Education, Poverty Alleviation Policy, China

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Conflict of Interests: None

Funding: No funding sources declared.

AI Declaration: The author affirms that artificial intelligence did not contribute to the process of preparing the work.

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Introduction

POVERTY is a major hindrance to the development of the individual as well as the society as a whole. The campaign against poverty has been ongoing in the People's Republic of China since its founding, and poverty alleviation through education (PATE) has been treated as a fundamental move in combating poverty (Wu, 1987). The goal of PATE is to eliminate poverty across the board by significantly raising the education levels of underprivileged people and enhancing their economic power (Wei, 2019). Specifically, PATE is intended to improve the knowledge and skills of people in impoverished areas through heightened educational standards. Education has been widely perceived as the primary avenue for the individual's knowledge development and cultivation of core competences, which is crucial for adapting to social and economic development and attaining financial independence. In the meantime, education is also a critical device for boosting social equity (Zhan, 2005). Underprivileged persons often have less access to desirable educational opportunities, resulting in exacerbated social inequality. PATE is an endeavor to close the urban-rural, inter-region, and inter-class disparities in education by equalizing educational resources for building a more equitable and inclusive society.

Additionally, PATE can play a pivotal role in halting the intergenerational transmission of poverty, which refers to the issue of transmission of poverty from generation to generation within a family due to adverse factors like low education level, low income, and poor health (Li, 2006). PATE has the potential to break this vicious cycle by elevating the education levels of children from impoverished households, which can help them secure better employment opportunities and higher incomes. According to Zhang's (2024) study, enhancing education levels in persons with lower economic status can significantly increase occupational mobility; a greater improvement of the education level often means a bigger scale of the mobility. The study also argues that education can halt the transmission of other unfavorable factors, such as health problems and low social status, from parents to children, in addition to stopping the transmission of economic disadvantages. Andersen et al.'s research findings (2021) provide evidence from Denmark that education can disrupt the intergenerational transmission of a variety of adverse factors, revealing that investment in youth education can stop the continuation of disadvantage within the family and mitigate health issues and inequalities in the society.

This study focuses on surveying China's PATE policies and implementation practices. In addition to showcasing the significant achievements China has made in PATE over the past few decades, it also summarizes the lessons learned, with the view of providing implications for poverty alleviation work in the future.

Connotations of PATE

In China, the role of PATE is two-fold: to alleviate “poverty” in the sphere of education per se through addressing the inadequacies in educational infrastructure and teaching resources in underdeveloped areas to ensure the rights of underprivileged children to up-to-par education standards; and to combat regional poverty by providing high-quality educational services to the local population to help them acquire essential knowledge and skills and become better qualified as labor force participants.

The implementation of PATE is a complicated and demanding task, involving macro-level resource allocation and micro-level assistance to impoverished individuals, which necessitates the engagement of multiple entities. At the macro level, the central government and regional governments have been deemed the central actors in driving PATE since they are the policy makers for the introduction of PATE. Earlier researchers argued that the government, in the context of the socialist market economy in China, has control of educational resources and thereby should be solely responsible for the PATE programs (Wei, 1997). As PATE advances, a popular perception has emerged that PATE requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including higher education institutions, businesses, third-sector organizations, and more. Higher education institutions, for instance, can provide quality educational resources like vocational training using their repertoire of expertise (Li, 2019) while also purveying specialist consultations to policy makers. At the micro level, multi-entity assistance is also ideal for individuals who are beneficiaries of PATE programs. For example, Qingyun County in Shandong Province advanced an innovative approach to PATE by creating voluntary assistance groups, each of which consists of an official from a public agency, an experienced teacher, and a volunteer, for every parentless child in the county (Li, 2020). This model is an illustration of the effective integration of local resources in supporting school-age children in need.

The beneficiaries of PATE programs include educational institutions, teaching staff, and underprivileged students. The main function of PATE at the school level is to improve the conditions of school buildings in underdeveloped areas to ensure their safety and usability and to equip these schools with basic educational facilities, including teaching aids and reading books, to meet the instructional needs. In the meantime, PATE bolsters teacher staffing in disadvantaged schools by increasing the supply of qualified teachers as well as providing targeted in-service training for their teachers. At the individual level, the primary role of PATE is to safeguard the right to basic education of children in impoverished areas or from poverty-stricken families through subsidies, tuition fee concessions or waivers, and provision of living allowances. Additionally, efforts are made

to ensure that underprivileged children have access to higher education through specialized financial assistance policies (Liu & Liu, 2018).

A Review of Policies Relevant to PATE

Over the past 70 years, China's PATE policies featured four marked stages, and numerous policy papers relevant to PATE have been released by the central and local governments. Only those of vital significance will be included in our discussion.

The First Stage (1949-1978): This period spans the first 30 years of New China before its initiation of the reform and opening up policy, during which the concept of PATE and the PATE policy in its strict sense had not yet emerged. Yet, moves intended to drive educational development in that period did play a positive role in tackling the poverty issue pervasive in the early years of the P.R. China. Hence, these moves might as well be counted as special forms of PATE. At the beginning of New China, the illiteracy rate among the popular Chinese was extremely high, with only 20% of them having received primary education (Li, 2019). Thereby, the most pressing task at that time was to launch a "literacy campaign" to popularize basic education in the Chinese masses. 1949's *The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (functioning as the provisional constitution at the time and holding the highest legal authority) explicitly states that it is imperative to universalize basic education in a planned and progressive manner to meet the needs of revolutionary work and national construction (Qu, 1991). *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, enacted in 1954, establishes the right of every Chinese citizen to education as a constitutional right, further promoting popularized education and having a positive impact on educational development in the country's impoverished areas (Liu & Liu, 2018). The focus of *The Decision on Eliminating Illiteracy*, released in 1956, is on the elevation of the education levels of the nation across the board. The release of this paper helps reduce the number of illiterates and mitigate poverty in China to some extent (Hu et al., 2024).

The Second Stage (1979-1999): This phase covers the period from the initiation of the reform and opening up policy to the end of the 20th century, during which educational development became a national strategy, and the issues of low educational standards and undereducated populations in the impoverished areas drew more attention from the government. The state's educational focus in this period was primarily on universalizing primary education, wiping out illiteracy, and improving educational infrastructure in underdeveloped regions. *The Circular on Prompting Changes in Impoverished Areas*, issued by the Chinese government in 1984, first officially advanced the concept of PATE. It emphasizes the importance

of universalizing primary education in a systematic manner and vigorously developing agricultural vocational education (Yuan & Zhang, 2018). At that time, despite the significant decrease in the national average illiteracy rate, the number of illiterates in backward regions remained large. The undereducated young and middle-aged laborers became an impediment to the economic development of these regions. In response to this issue, the State Council announced the *Provisions on the Elimination of Illiteracy* in 1988, which proposes specific recommendations for eradicating illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults and enhancing the average education level of the Chinese population (Yuan & Ding, 2019). *The National Poverty Alleviation Program 1994-2000*, released in 1994, was a landmark policy in this phase (Hu et al., 2024), serving to be the guiding paper for nationwide poverty alleviation efforts. This governmental paper incorporated PATE into the national poverty alleviation program, calling for pooling all resources available to advance educational development in impoverished areas. Inspired by this paper, the State Council of China launched the “Compulsory Education Project in Impoverished Areas” in 1995, initiating the specialized funding for infrastructure improvement of compulsory education schools in these areas.

The Third Stage (2000-2012): As a result of the accelerated growth of its economy, China saw a gradual decline in the number of impoverished areas in this period. Problems with access to education still existed in remote, backward areas and in rural, poverty-stricken households. PATE at this stage became more institutionalized and targeted, and a succession of significant policy papers was published. For example, 2003’s *The Decision on Further Strengthening Rural Education Work* by the State Council of China specifies concrete PATE measures for remote areas in western China (Hu et al., 2024). *The Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003-2007*, announced by the Ministry of Education of China in 2004, emphasizes the necessity of enacting distance education in impoverished areas for more equal sharing of high-quality educational resources (Yuan & Ding, 2019). *The Circular on Implementing the “Two Exemptions and One Subsidy” Policy in Targeted Counties under the National Poverty Alleviation Programs* was released in 2005 to ensure compulsory education students from underprivileged families have access to financial assistance to avoid poverty-induced dropping-out (Yuan & Ding, 2019). *Opinions on Establishing and Improving the Financial Aid System for Financially Struggling Students at General Universities, Higher Vocational Colleges, and Secondary Vocational Schools*, announced by the State Council of China in 2007, are aimed at promoting PATE through expanding vocational education and developing specialized financial assistance mechanisms for students of low socioeconomic status (Yu & Zhao, 2020).

The Fourth Stage (2013-Present): With the dwindling population living in poverty, the cost-effectiveness of the traditional region-based approach to poverty alleviation became a concerning issue. In this context, the concept of “precision poverty alleviation” emerged, which emphasizes the importance of precise identification of disadvantaged persons, effective use of resources, and adoption of proper methods, as well as measurable outcomes (Yu & Zhao, 2020). The introduction of this concept led China’s PATE into a new era. In 2013, the Chinese government issued the *Opinions on Implementing Poverty Alleviation through Education Projects*, a central policy document guiding precision PATE efforts and followed by other relevant ones, such as *The Circular on Combating Dropouts and Improving the Retention of Compulsory Education Students* and *The Implementation Plan for PATE in Extremely Impoverished Areas (2018-2020)*. These policies focus on special groups, such as migrant children, left-behind children, children with special education needs, children from disadvantaged families, and underage children of prisoners, aiming to ensure they receive equitable and quality education. To guarantee the legitimate allotment and effective use of PATE funds, the *Ministry of Education of China* formulated the *Regulations on Managing “Specialized Funds for Poverty Alleviation through Education”* in 2020, which explicitly stipulate that local governments must use the specialized funds for their respective purposes, such as improving facilities of underserved schools, enhancing rural teachers’ instruction levels, and optimizing educational infrastructure in impoverished areas. During this period, provincial governments, in response to the state-level policies formulated by the central government, advanced regional PATE policies based on their local circumstances, such as the *Poverty Alleviation through Education Action Plan of Qinghai Province 2016*, *Hubei Province’s Action Plan for Precision Poverty Alleviation through Education (2015-2019)*, and *Shanxi Province’s Poverty Alleviation through Education Action Plan 2018* (Liu & Guo, 2022). Provincial-level policies like these are important supplements to the national PATE policies, making the enactment of PATE more pertinent to the local needs.

To recap, China’s PATE policies, over the past seven decades, have undergone a transition from general to be targeted. The formulation and implementation of these policies have significantly advanced educational development in Chinese underdeveloped regions and have substantially enhanced the education levels of its underprivileged population.

PATE Programs in China

To successfully enact the state’s policies relevant to PATE, governments of all levels and educational institutions in China have introduced a variety of PATE Programs, which serve various areas including preschool, compulsory,

Table 1. Representative PATE Programs in China.

Areas	Names	Objectives and Components	Starting Years
Preschool Education	Three-Year Preschool Education Action Plan	To increase the number of public kindergartens and generally affordable private kindergartens and to enhance the quality of care and pre-primary education in rural and remote areas, by expanding the supply of generally affordable preschool education resources and preschool teaching forces	2011
	Preschool Education Funding Scheme	To offer subsidies, such as care and tuition fee concessions or exemptions and living allowances, to preschool children of financially struggling families, orphans, and children with disabilities to ensure they have equal access to pre-primary education.	2011
Compulsory Education	"Two Exemptions and One Subsidy" for Compulsory Education Students	To exempt compulsory education students in rural areas from miscellaneous fees and textbook charge and to give living allowances to boarding students with financial distress, in order to guarantee the rights of rural school-age children to compulsory education.	2005
	Nutrition Improvement Scheme for Rural Compulsory Education Students	To improve the nutritional states of rural students and enhance their physical fitness and learning outcomes by providing them with nutritious meal subsidies.	2011
	Facility Improvement Program for Underserved Compulsory Education Schools in Impoverished Areas	To provide better learning environments to compulsory education students at underserved schools in impoverished areas by improving the school buildings, teaching facilities, and provision of reading materials.	2013
General Secondary Education	Financial Assistance Scheme for General Secondary School Students	To provide financial assistance, including grants, scholarships, tuition waivers, living allowances, etc., to general secondary school students from financially struggling families to ensure their successful completion of schooling.	2016
Vocational Education	Institution-to-institution Assistance in Vocational Education	To enhance vocational education standards and employability of students in underdeveloped regions by instigating assistance from vocational education institutions in developed regions to their counterparts in underdeveloped regions, in terms of teacher training, curriculum development, and construction of training bases.	2016
	Tuition Exemptions and Living Allowances for Secondary Vocational Education Students	To fuel interest in vocational education by granting tuition exemptions to students from rural areas, agricultural majors from urban areas, and disadvantaged students in the first, second, and third grades of full-time secondary vocational schools and providing living allowance to financially struggling students at these schools.	2009
Tertiary education	Specialized College Admissions for Impoverished Areas	To increase access to high-quality tertiary education in adolescents in impoverished areas by allowing universities to enroll students from these areas with separate admission requirements, with the purpose of cultivating more talents to serve the economic and social development of these areas.	2012
	Tertiary Education Student Subsidy Scheme	To help disadvantaged students complete their college education by providing national scholarships, national student loans, tuition compensations for military service, school-based scholarships, work-study programs, financial relief, food allowances, tuition waivers and more.	2007
	Participation of Central Department-Affiliated Universities in Targeted Poverty Alleviation Programs	In participating in targeted poverty alleviation programs, central department-affiliated universities leverage their strengths in education, technology, talent, etc. to assist impoverished areas in developing economy, improving the quality of life, and enhancing education standards, contributing to rural revitalization in China	2013
Ethnic Minority Education	Specialized Classes for Minority Children	To engage prestigious secondary schools in developed regions to set up classes for students from ethnic minority areas to boost national unity and common prosperity as well as cultivating talents with cross-cultural communication skills and senses of national identity.	1984
	Introduction of the "9 + 3" Free Education Scheme in Ethnic Minority Areas	To increase the schooling years and employability of minority students and support socioeconomic development of minority regions by universalizing nine-year compulsory education and providing three-year free secondary vocational education in these regions.	2009
Teacher Education	Rural Teacher Support Scheme	To retain qualified rural teachers and enhance rural education standards by improving compensations and increasing in-service training for rural teachers.	2015

general secondary, vocational, tertiary, ethnic minority, and teaching force education. **Table 1** displays a few representative ones.

These programs can be classified into two categories. One is to strengthen direct financial support for schools and students in impoverished areas by putting in additional educational investment, establishing specialized funds, and providing subsidies. The other is to prioritize the allocation of educational resources to underdeveloped regions, including upgrading the schools' facilities, enhancing the teaching staff supply, giving preferential treatment in university admission, etc.

In the meantime, Chinese educational researchers have also engaged in exploring pathways to successful implementation of PATE. For instance, inspired by the idea of “focusing rural education on rural economic development,” Zhu (2005) advanced the “double certificates” PATE model, which aims to tap into the potential of those high school graduates who choose to return to their rural home places to join the agricultural labor force after failing to proceed to higher education. With this model, rural junior and senior secondary schools combine the national and school-based curricula, enabling the student to acquire both a regular graduation certificate and a “green certificate” for agricultural technical qualification. Considering the actual needs of the rural areas, the model integrates basic knowledge education and vocational training and ensures that every graduate has a sound mastery of practical agricultural technologies. Despite its limited introduction due to factors like regional disparities in the educational environment and educational resources, the model is deemed a meaningful experiment in PATE.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, advances in information technology (IT) have provided impetus to all sectors, including education. PATE has also benefited a lot from IT in terms of its efficiency and productivity. Leveraging educational technology, educational departments in China have created a “second learning space” for students in rural, impoverished areas, which integrate high-quality educational resources from urban areas (including curricula, teacher resources, teaching culture, etc.) into the teaching environment of rural schools via internet-based technologies. The virtual learning space complements the physical school environment (Zhang, 2016). By introducing non-traditional learning modalities, such as remote teaching, online courses, and the virtual laboratory, the “second learning space” breaks down the constraints of time and space, giving underprivileged students in rural areas access to top-notch educational resources.

PATE's Outcomes and Impacts

Recent years have seen increased interest in evidence-based research on PATE's effects. Drawing on provincial-level panel data (2002-2016), Peng (2019) investigated the relationships between educational investment and changes in farmers' incomes in different areas with distinct income levels in China and compared the effects of educational investment with other poverty alleviation measures such as industrial development and ecological compensation. Peng's study finds that educational investment has a significant positive effect on farmers' incomes and that the productivity of PATE funding is higher in poverty-stricken areas than in middle- and high-income areas, indicating that PATE is more impactful in backward areas. The study also underlines that increasing educational investment, compared to other poverty alleviation measures, is more effective in combating poverty and is crucial to halting intergenerational transmission of poverty. Fu and Zeng (2019) conducted field studies of more than 180 rural primary and secondary schools in 18 targeted counties in six central and western provinces under the national poverty alleviation and development program. Their questionnaire surveys and structured interviews reveal that there is an institutionalized financial aiding mechanism in place in China's education system from preschool to higher education, which is effective in lightening the education-induced financial burden on impoverished families, alleviating the malnutrition issue among students, and improving school infrastructure in poverty-stricken areas. Duan's (2024) study is an investigation of the long-term impact of PATE on the living standards of families in underdeveloped, rural areas with children enrolled in colleges. Such households from a county under a PATE program were established as the experimental group, and those from a relatively better developed county not covered by the program as the control group, for an analysis of the changes in living capital of the two groups between 2012 and 2022. According to the study's research findings, the experimental group experienced a significant increase in material, human, and financial capital, and their overall scores of living capital were progressively approaching those of the control group. Evidently, the PATE program was effective in sustainably improving the living standard of rural households with children receiving higher education.

It must be emphasized that PATE's impact is not confined to relieving poverty. For underprivileged individuals, PATE helps safeguard their rights to basic education and increase their chances to receive higher education while also assisting them in adapting to the ever-changing modern society by broadening their knowledge horizons. For underdeveloped regions, PATE is a driving force for the transformation of their industrial structures and economic development by enhancing their human capital. At the same time, the elevation of education levels of the residents leads to reduced social conflicts and unlawful acts, contributing to the safety and security of the community. At the national level, PATE is crucial for

improving the overall quality of the nation and expanding the country's talent pool for further economic, social, and cultural development. Furthermore, PATE is of vital significance for China's long-term stability due to its role in bridging social divides, promoting social justice and harmony, and enhancing national cohesion.

Challenges of PATE in China

Despite its marked outcomes, PATE in China faces various issues. First off, the implementation of PATE policies has encountered serious challenges. A PATE policy typically needs to go through multiple links from its formulation by the central government to its enactment by local agencies, likely resulting in a deviation from its original purposes. The incidents of resource waste and insufficient input during the execution of PATE programs are not rare (Wu & Wang, 2017). In the meantime, governmental funding for PATE entails hefty amounts of money, which is a temptation to certain fraudulent agencies and individuals, who may take advantage of policy loopholes to cash in on PATE funds (Li, 2019). This is not only a waste of precious educational resources but also undermines public confidence in the PATE move.

Furthermore, current PATE policies and actions primarily focus on the poverty issue in its material sense; few of them are intended to address the backward mentalities of underprivileged persons regarding the meaning of education. A portion of rural households undervalues the significance of education, disregarding its long-term value for the younger generation. In effect, the effects of education on employment and wealth acquisition are not direct and instant (Hao & Li, 2017). Often, the return of educational investment is delayed and varies among individuals. Sometimes, home educational input may even temporarily exacerbate poverty in the household. Hence, fostering a legitimate understanding of education in parents and their school-age children should become an integral part of the PATE work.

In addition, the gap in the educational standard between developed and underdeveloped regions remains huge, and the low retention rates of teaching staff are a severe challenge in impoverished areas (Qiu & Yang, 2024). The working environment of schools in rural, underserved areas is typically unfavorable for the professional development of teachers there, resulting in their low identification with the teaching profession and lower job satisfaction. Thereby, they are eager to leave to seek better job opportunities in urban or relatively prosperous areas. The high turnover of teaching staff exacerbates the workloads of teachers still working in those rural schools, who often need to teach multiple subjects but cannot receive compensation that matches their efforts. This, in turn, magnifies the turnover rates among them. On top of that, a portion of rural schools cannot ensure

the inclusion of subjects like English, music, art, and PE in their curricula because they have difficulty recruiting teachers of these majors (Wu & Xu, 2020). The staffing issues severely hinder the improvement of the quality of basic education in underdeveloped regions.

Conclusion

PATE is a critical move in China's poverty alleviation campaign as well as being crucial for its efforts to build an equitable and generally accessible education system. PATE policies in this country have matured considerably over the past decades and have produced substantial outcomes, having significantly improved education standards in underdeveloped regions and having provided substantive support for the academic success of underprivileged children. In response to existing challenges of PATE, we propose the following recommendations: (i) Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for the implementation of PATE policies. It is important to clarify the division of responsibility among all governmental agencies and educational institutions to ensure that all problems arising in PATE's enactment are addressed in a timely manner and that the goals of PATE policies can be successfully achieved. (ii) Fostering positive perceptions of education in the underprivileged population. It is necessary to guide this group to develop a legitimate understanding of the value of education for the development of individuals and families through diverse devices, including publicity, demonstration of role models, exchanges of relevant experiences, etc., to fuel their motivations to actively participate in PATE programs. (iii) Elevating the level of home education in backward regions. Providing home education guidance services and parent training can help enhance education awareness in underprivileged parents and increase their capacity for creating child growth-supportive home environments. (iv) Supporting teacher professional development. It is important to ensure that teachers in backward regions receive high-quality in-service training for career advancements. Also, institutionalizing job security and increasing compensations for teachers working in rural, underserved areas can help improve the retention rates among them. Highly qualified teaching forces are essential for bolstering the quality of education in underdeveloped regions.

PATE deserves the involvement of all stakeholders due to its far-reaching significance for Chinese society despite its current challenges and difficulties. It is key to the endeavors of the underprivileged to change their lives. To give full play to PATE, it is imperative to enhance the efficiency of its implementation, make precise inputs, and continuously modify the policy framework for further advancing educational equity and ultimately eradicating poverty.

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Received: February 11, 2025

Revised: February 14, 2025

Accepted: March 05, 2025