

Poverty Alleviation by Education: Exploration and Experience from China – Analysis Based on China’s Policy of Poverty Alleviation by Education

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***Abstract:** Improving the poor’s overall quality through education and promoting local economic development and social progress is an important way for China to alleviate poverty. At present, China has formed a policy system of poverty alleviation by education with its characteristics and has achieved remarkable results. This article first elaborates the definition and impact of poverty alleviation by education, and then through the use of literature review and other research methods, it combs the policies of China’s poverty alleviation by education in different historical periods. The aim is to summarize China’s poverty alleviation by education, analyze possible policy problems, and finally make constructive suggestions for its future development.*

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POVERTY is a multifaceted economic phenomenon. Alleviating poverty has always been an essential means to promote social equity. The long-term poverty alleviation practice and experience have shown that: to control poverty, we must first control ignorance, and to reduce poverty, we must first support intelligence. Moreover, as an essential driving force of social development, education has played a significant role in promoting economic development. A good education will significantly promote poverty areas' economic development and help construct a harmonious society (Liu, 2019).

The educational development of poverty areas is a global problem. Countries worldwide have carried out much long-term exploration on this issue, providing support for poverty areas from different aspects. It mainly includes the investment of financial and human resources and adopts corresponding supervision mechanisms to ensure investment efficiency, thereby promoting education in poverty areas (Zhang, 2016).

As a public policy, poverty alleviation by education reflects the national will and the value choice of public policy and determines the further allocation of various resources to a certain extent (Zhang, 2020). In China, since 1949, poverty alleviation by education has been included in the national plan. Especially after entering the 21st century, poverty alleviation by education has become an essential measure of China's targeted poverty alleviation strategy. "Let the children of poor families receive fair and quality education and block the intergenerational transmission of poverty" has become a consensus (Li, 2017).

Facing the new situation, new positioning, and new challenges of China's poverty alleviation by education, we should review and summarize past poverty alleviation experiences promptly with a historical perspective, and actively think about and respond to the new propositions that poverty alleviation by education will face and solve (Li & Zhong, 2020).

This article reviews China's poverty alleviation policy at each stage from 1949 to 2019 and divides it into four stages, namely the initial development stage, the comprehensive popularization stage, the consolidation and promotion stage, and the precision breakthrough stage. By analyzing the content and characteristics of the poverty alleviation by education policy at each stage, the future trend of China's poverty alleviation by education in the new era is discussed. To further enrich its theoretical research, improve its practical measures, and enhance its policy effectiveness's theoretical and practical significance (Li & Zhang, 2017).

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The Initial Development Stage of Poverty Alleviation by Education (1949-1978)

In 1949, when China was founded, the situation at home and abroad was too tricky. Economically, due to the eight-year Japanese war of aggression against China and the three-and-a-half years of national civil war, the social economy has almost collapsed, agriculture has not yet recovered, the industry has suffered heavy losses, and the economic foundation is fragile. After that, China's economy gradually recovered and initially developed. The state's fiscal revenues and expenditures are balanced, the incomes of workers and farmers had started to increase, and people's living conditions have also begun to improve. After years of wars, China's education was basically at a standstill in culture and education. The population had a low level of cultural education, and the proportion of illiterate and semi-illiterate in the labor force was high. It can be said that China during this period was still in an inferior stage, and the economy, politics, education, and culture were all in their infancy.

Because the entire country was still in poverty during this period, we can regard any educational measures to promote educational development and improve people's livelihoods due to poverty alleviation by education. Therefore, the period from China's establishment to the beginning of reform and opening-up is called the first stage of China's poverty alleviation by education, that is, the initial development stage.

At this stage, China's education was seriously inadequate in terms of quantity and quality, and it was still at a low level. Therefore, education itself was poor and weak and deep in poverty. Facing this state, China was actively exploring ways to run schools for new educational undertakings. In rural areas, a rural education pattern had been formed in which production brigades run primary schools, communes run middle schools, and "district committees" run high schools. And then, a "government subsidy + communal public funding sharing" all-private education model was created. Although the quality level of rural education at that time was very limited due to the severely insufficient financial resources, China used this method to run the world's largest rural education project with the least amount of money (Li, 2019).

The Comprehensive Popularization Stage of Poverty Alleviation by Education (1978-2000)

Reform and opening-up is a policy of economic reform and opening to the outside world that China began to implement in the late 1970s. Reform and opening up include internal reforms and opening to the outside world. China's internal reforms first started in the countryside; opening to the outside world is a basic state policy of China and a powerful driving force for development.

Economically, as of 1978, China's GDP reached 362.4 billion CNY, more than double the 171.6 billion CNY in 1965, with an average annual growth rate of 6.8%, and

an independent, complete industrial system has been established. With the continuous deepening of education reform and the continuous development of education, China's education system has been gradually restored, improved, and optimized, and the level of public education service and educational governance capabilities have also been continuously improved. The quality of open education has also been continuously improved, and a basic education system full of vitality, efficiency, more open, and conducive to scientific development is being formed (Zhang, 2020).

Therefore, in the context of reform and opening up, China's poverty alleviation by education has also entered a new era. During this period, the government introduced, improved, and updated relevant policies to make China's poverty alleviation by education business successfully entered the stage of full popularization (Che, 2018).

In 1984, the "Notice on Helping Poverty Areas Changed the Status Quo as soon as possible"¹ put forward the policy requirement of "poverty alleviation by education" for the first time, emphasizing the intellectual investment for the people of the poverty areas, the improvement of the overall education level of the poverty areas, and The necessity of popularizing vocational education in rural areas. The promulgation of this policy marks the official launch of China's poverty alleviation by education work. Poverty alleviation by education is combined with rural education and overall poverty alleviation, and it mainly centers on universal primary education, literacy, and so on.

In 1986, the Fourth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress focused on research on education development in backward and remote areas and included this discussion in the "Seventh Five-Year Plan."² Therefore, the requirements for the overall improvement of the population quality of the poverty areas and education for poverty alleviation measures have been placed in an important position. Carry out "Spark Plan"³, "Harvest Plan"⁴, and "Lighting Plan"⁵ in poverty areas, focusing on poverty alleviation to popularize primary education and vocational education in poverty areas to promote and popularize scientific and technological knowledge and improve the development ability of the poor.

In 1988, the promulgation of the "Regulations on the Elimination of Illiteracy"⁶ put forward exact requirements for the improvement of the artistic quality of all young and middle-aged people and played a role in improving China's artistic quality and promoting the construction of the material and spiritual civilization.

In 1994, the State Council issued a notice on the *National Eight-Seven Poverty Alleviation Plan*⁷. The plan proposed to concentrate human, material, and financial resources mobilized all sectors of society and strived to use about seven years to solve the rural poor's food and clothing. The plan set the change of the backward education status in the poverty areas as one of the critical goals; provided for the management and use of funds, the tasks of various departments, social mobilization, international cooperation, organization, and leadership; provided for the substantial development of poverty alleviation by education with strengthening mechanism.

In general, poverty alleviation by education is still in its initiation stage during this period. Driven by policies, poverty alleviation by education has gained strong legitimacy support and unprecedented development momentum. However, due to regional

differences and education funding, the interpretation of poverty alleviation by education in related policies is still relatively vague. Most of them focus on literacy, compulsory education, etc., insufficient attention is paid to preschool education and rural teachers (Yao, 2019).

Consolidation and Promotion Stage of Poverty Alleviation by Education (2000-2013)

After entering the 21st century, China's economy has continued to maintain steady and rapid growth. The market economy has been initially established. The market plays a decisive role in allocating resources, and the macro-control system is becoming more and more perfect. In education, we have achieved the goal of "poor countries run big education." The development of education has achieved "two major leaps": the first leap was the realization of "two basics," that is, basically universalizing nine-year compulsory education and eliminating illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults; the second leap was the transition from elite education to the popularization of higher education.

In this period of "dual development" of economy and education, the food and clothing problems of the rural poor in China had been solved, and "consolidating food and clothing for comprehensive poverty alleviation" had become the main problem of poverty alleviation after entering the new century. In the direction of poverty alleviation, it had shifted from regional poverty to regional and class poverty. The poverty alleviation work had entered the stage of "great poverty alleviation," in which absolute poverty and relative poverty were addressed, and urban and rural development was coordinated. Poverty alleviation by education had also changed, from full popularization to some regions' consolidation and promotion stage. At the same time, in the practice of continuously advancing poverty alleviation by education, we had become more and more aware of the pros and cons of the "education process" that determined the effect of poverty alleviation by education, and paying attention to the "education process" was precisely to solve the problem of "improving the quality of education" (Ye, 2020).

In 2000, to solve remote areas' development problems and narrow the development differences between regions, China implemented China's Western Development Program's strategic decision. The establishment of a poverty alleviation model of vocational education cooperation and assistance between China's eastern and western parts has promoted regional vocational poverty alleviation by education mechanism. Under the guidance of the "National Eight-Seven Poverty Alleviation Plan," China has concentrated its efforts on the governance of poverty areas and the problem of food and clothing for the poor. Minorities and ethnic regions in western China have become the main battlefield for professional poverty alleviation by education. Occupational poverty alleviation by education policy showed more apparent characteristics of poverty alleviation. This was China's first policy on poverty alleviation by education in the new era. This policy pointed out the general direction for poverty alleviation by education in this period.

Subsequently, the country has successively introduced a series of related policies concerning poverty alleviation by education. Furthermore, continue to enrich and improve the guiding ideology, work content, and implementation methods of poverty alleviation by education. As thus, a set of policy systems of poverty alleviation by education with Chinese characteristics was formed.

In 2003, the State Council promulgated the *Decision on Further Strengthening Rural Education*.⁸ The decision emphasized the importance of developing rural education in China's overall education department and the importance of continuing to consolidate and develop primary education and vocational education. The implementation of this decision has accelerated rural education development, deepened rural education reform, and contributed to promoting the rural economic society and the coordinated development of urban and rural areas.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the *2003-2007 Educational Revitalization Action Plan*.⁹ The plan proposed two new measures: First, strengthen the construction of the teaching staff, and improve the teaching level and quality of teachers; Second, promote the sharing of high-quality educational resources. This plan's proposal was conducive to China's early realization of the historic tasks set forth by the 16th National Congress of China and establishing a modern education system with Chinese characteristics.

In 2005, China began implementing the "Two Exemptions and One Subsidy" for rural children in compulsory education. This measure has improved the out-of-school status of rural children to a large extent, allowing poor children to receive education funding.

In 2010, the State Council promulgated the "Outline of China's Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development (2011-2020)".¹⁰ The outline put forward three requirements: First, to achieve universal preschool education. Second, it is based on consolidating compulsory education, developing vocational education, promoting centralized education, and increasing boarding schools. Continue to implement various tuition reduction and exemption policies and subsidy policies to promote rural elementary and middle school students' health and nutrition. Third, it was necessary to strengthen cooperation between the east and the west in China to help rural laborers receive skill training and employment export.

According to statistics from the China Education Development Commission, as of 2012, China had 282,000 compulsory education schools; the enrollment rate of compulsory elementary schools reached 99.85%, and the gross enrollment rate of middle schools reached 102.1%. These data indicated that China's education development had entered a new stage (Wang, 2020). Through the development of education and the implementation of a series of preferential education policies that target poverty and underdeveloped areas, the conditions and capabilities for poverty alleviation have been continuously improved (Wu, 2017).

In this period of consolidation and improvement, China's practical exploration of poverty alleviation by education has entered a stage of large-scale and systematic development. The convergence of China's poverty alleviation by education policy

shows a trend of balancing fairness and efficiency, tending to be systematic and comprehensive under the established framework. The links between the systems are more closely coherent, and the gradual institutional changes are completed. The overall policy is moving towards system and scale. However, the disadvantage is that during this period, the overall policy implementation still has the drawbacks of “overwhelming flooding” injection, and there are still shortcomings in precise assistance for deep poverty areas and marginal, vulnerable groups.

The Precise Breakthrough Stage of Poverty Alleviation by Education (2013-2020)

In the early stage of poverty alleviation in China, restricted by the country’s large-scale poverty situation, poverty alleviation’s primary goal was to solve poverty and the population’s raw food and clothing problems. In terms of anti-poverty countermeasures, the primary form of “external blood transfusion” in the form of “overflowing flooding” was adopted. Mainly took poverty-stricken counties and poverty-stricken areas as units to promote various poverty alleviation actions as a whole. The same was true of poverty alleviation by education. Because there was no unified poverty alleviation information system in China, the number of poor people was unclear, the situation was not exact, the specificity was not healthy, and poverty alleviation funds and projects were inaccurate. Many blind spots in the assistance work for specific low residents and poor farmers, and some impoverished people were not helped. The government had gradually realized that crude poverty alleviation was now unable to solve poverty assistance truly. Point-to-point targeted and precise assistance could effectively realize the value of poverty alleviation and achieved twice the result with half the effort (Zhang, 2016).

In response to this phenomenon, in 2013, President Xi Jinping, investigating the poverty alleviation situation in Xiangxi, proposed “targeted poverty alleviation” for the first time. He asked governments at all levels to use scientific and practical procedures to accurately identify, assist, and manage poverty alleviation targets based on the environment in different poverty areas and the conditions of different poor farmers. Since then, “targeted poverty alleviation” has become an important direction for China’s poverty alleviation at this stage.

Under the guidance of the “targeted poverty alleviation” theory, China’s poverty alleviation by education has also begun to pursue precision. The Ministry of Education, the Poverty Alleviation Office of the State Council, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, and other departments have concentrated their efforts to strengthen poverty alleviation by education. Accurately focus and continue to exert efforts in concentrated contiguous and impoverished areas. They directly confronted specific issues such as poor school conditions, the need to upgrade the teaching staff, the weak vocational education, and the poverty of students’ families in higher education, preschool education, compulsory education, vocational education, teacher education, and ethnic education and other education levels and types. More than 20 poverty alleviation by education policies, including the “*Rural Teacher Support Plan*

(2015-2020)”¹¹ and “*Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Poverty Alleviation in Education*”¹² have been implemented.

The inclination of policies has been effectively implemented, and policy mechanisms have been established and improved. Increased capital investment comprehensively improved the conditions for running schools in the Poverty areas and continuously improved the student scholarship and enrollment reduction and exemption system. Consolidated and enriched the pastoral teaching team, deepened the education cooperation between the east and the west of China, and vigorously carried out counterpart assistance to universities. This, in turn, achieves the whole-stage coverage of the poverty alleviation by education, the diversification of content, and the precision and fairness of the purpose. A relatively comprehensive policy system of poverty alleviation by education with Chinese characteristics has been initially established.

In 2015, the “*Decision of the State Council on Winning the Tough Battle for Poverty Alleviation*”¹³ made overall arrangements for poverty alleviation and further implemented the targeted poverty alleviation ideas. The goal of the decision is to stably realize that by 2020, the rural poor will have no worries about food and clothing; compulsory education, primary medical care, and housing safety are guaranteed; and the increase in the per capita disposable income of farmers in poverty areas is higher than the national average. The indicators in the main areas of essential public services are close to the national average; to ensure that the rural poor under China’s current standards are lifted out of poverty, all impoverished counties are removed from the poverty label. Overall, regional poverty is resolved. In this process, the real value of poverty alleviation by education has attracted significant attention from the country.

In 2016, China’s first education poverty alleviation plan, “*Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Educational Poverty Alleviation*”¹⁴ was released, and the overall design of poverty alleviation by education was carried out. The plan’s main objectives are to develop preschool education, consolidate and improve compulsory education, and popularize high school education. By 2020, the overall development level of education in poverty areas will be significantly improved, achieving full coverage of essential public services for education for the poor, such as establishing files and establishing cards. Guarantee the full funding for all education stages from enrollment to graduation, ensure that children from low-income families can go to school, and prevent a student from dropping out of school due to family difficulties. Everyone can achieve family poverty alleviation through vocational education, higher education, vocational training, and education to serve regional economic and social development significantly. The plan’s proposal sincerely implements the spirit of the government’s poverty alleviation and development work conference. It will help China complete several important tasks such as developing education and alleviating poverty as soon as possible and block the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

In 2017, Xi Jinping pointed out in the report of the 19th National Congress of China that it is necessary to mobilize all social forces to adhere to targeted poverty alleviation and poverty alleviation; adhere to the working mechanism of central coordination, provincial responsibility, and city and county implementation; adhere to the over-

all poverty alleviation pattern, focusing on poverty alleviation and Combining aspirations and intelligence, in-depth implementation of poverty alleviation cooperation between the eastern and western regions of China, focusing on poverty alleviation tasks in deep poverty areas; ensuring that by 2020, China's rural poor people will be lifted out of poverty, all poverty in poverty-stricken counties will be lifted, and overall regional poverty will be resolved.

In 2018, the “*In-depth Poverty Area Education Implementation Plan for Poverty Alleviation (2018-2020)*”¹⁵ was released. It further clarified the critical areas of poverty alleviation by education and made overall arrangements for winning the battle of poverty alleviation by education. The work goal proposed by the plan is that by 2020, the overall development level of education in deep poverty areas such as “three regions and three prefectures” will be significantly improved, and full coverage of essential public services for the education of the poverty-stricken population will be achieved. It guarantees that all the students who set up files at all stages of education are funded from enrollment to graduation and that children from low-income families can go to school, and no student will be dropped out of school due to family financial difficulties. More impoverished students who have established documents and registered cards receive better and higher-level education and have the opportunity to achieve family poverty alleviation through vocational education, higher education, or vocational training. The ability of education to serve regional economic and social development and poverty alleviation has been significantly enhanced. This plan's implementation will help the Chinese education system and the poverty alleviation system fight the in-depth poverty area education poverty alleviation battle with more concentrated support, more effective measures, and more effective work.

Subsequently, China introduced more than 20 policies of preference alleviation by education. In the short term, poverty alleviation measures were implemented intensively at multiple levels and from multiple angles. From the overall plan to specific assistance measures, the state has established a comprehensive policy support system from preschool education development, compulsory education popularization, vocational education collaboration, special education promotion, ethnic education development, teacher team support, and weak school construction.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the “*Notice on Student Financial Aid during the Prevention and Control of COVID-19*”. The notice emphasized that during the critical period of COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control, the education departments (education commissions) and finance departments (bureaus) of all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities should attach great importance to student funding during the epidemic prevention and control period, and actively support families suffering from financial difficulties. Students, fully implement various student funding policies. This notice's issuance will help to thoroughly implement and virtually guarantee the necessary learning and living needs of students from families with financial difficulties and fully help win the battle against the COVID-19 epidemic.

By implementing a series of targeted poverty alleviation policies, China's poverty alleviation by education has been qualitatively improved; the institutional structure, content system, and capacity building have been adjusted and optimized in an all-round way. In terms of concept, China combines education priority with the concept of targeted poverty alleviation and strives to promote the balanced development of education, thereby reducing the education gap between regions and urban and rural areas; allowing people in poverty areas to enjoy the benefits of poverty alleviation by education in economically developed areas. The same high-quality educational resources ensure the fairness and justice of education. In terms of content, it has shifted from traditional primary education as the center to equal emphasis on basic education, vocational education, and ideological and cultural education. In terms of scope, gradually expand the coverage of poverty alleviation by education so that people in poverty areas can enjoy lifelong learning opportunities. In terms of methods, it combines poverty alleviation with academic support and poverty alleviation with aspirations to achieve targeted poverty alleviation (Xiang, 2020).

Conclusions and Suggestions

Throughout the development history of China's poverty alleviation by education, China has achieved a significant leap from the initial development stage, the comprehensive popularization stage, to the consolidation and promotion stage, and the precise breakthrough stage. Through the formulation and promulgation of relevant policies, the government reflects the national will and the value choice of public policies and provides direction and support for implementing poverty alleviation by education (Cheng & Zou, 2019).

Since 1979, China's poverty alleviation work has made considerable achievements. This improves the poor's quality of life in China and contributes to the UN's poverty reduction work. With the realization of comprehensive poverty alleviation in 2020, poverty alleviation by education will usher at the end of the policy sense, but the policy goal of helping the disadvantaged and promoting social equity will not change. Simultaneously, the promotion of rural revitalization strategies and regional coordinated development strategies also requires continuous follow-up of education equity policies (Wang, 2019). Fairness in the absolute sense does not exist. The task of educational development in the new era is to continuously approach society's relative fairness through multiple channels of educational rights, opportunities, and development equality. Fairness and quality are the eternal value pursuit of education policy. The education policy of the new era with "fairness and quality" as its goal will continue to play new roles in China's journey towards a prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful modern country, and to realize China's great rejuvenation and shared prosperity (Zhao, 2019).

In recent years, although China's poverty alleviation by education work has achieved specific results, due to poor and weak foundation, and extensive historical

debts, we must also urgently optimize and improve poverty alleviation by education. Specifically, it can be done through the following three points.

China should ensure that the right to education of the poor is strictly guaranteed in the practice of poverty alleviation by education.

In terms of the nature of education and the pursuit of sustainable human development, poverty alleviation by education fundamentally supports and guarantees the fundamental rights and sustainable development rights of the poverty population to lay a solid foundation for them to get rid of poverty sustainable development. The function of poverty alleviation by education also depends on the actual development of education in poverty areas. Only education based on continuous development can form real poverty alleviation relying on education. Educational poverty is precisely the full manifestation of poverty in poverty areas; that is, educational poverty in poverty areas hinders the function of poverty alleviation by education (Liu, 2016). Also, in the reality of poverty alleviation by education, people's right to education is often not guaranteed (Li, 2017). With the deepening of building a well-off society in an all-around way and the increasing demand of the people for high-quality education, the allocation of high-quality education resources and high-quality education has increasingly become higher the poverty population-based on pursuing education equity.

Because apparent equality is only superficial equality, it cannot guarantee that people in a disadvantaged position will realize equal education rights. Therefore, to achieve equality in education rights of the poor, it is not enough to have the apparent equality of education rights. We should also achieve true equality in their education. Only when the equal right to education is strictly guaranteed in poverty alleviation by education can the actual equality of the right to education be realized.

Schools should genuinely care for left-behind children and fully care for rural teachers.

In the system of targeted poverty alleviation through education, left-behind children can be regarded as vulnerable groups. They are the critical monitoring targets for schools to control dropouts, and schools should take care of them. First, the lack of family education makes left-behind children physically and mentally vulnerable. Their personality and temper are different from non-left-behind children, and their academic performance is also unstable (Sun, 2018). Second, compared with urban teachers, the school's care for rural teachers has to show unique advantages: provide rural teachers' living allowances and township post allowances in full and on time, and gradually narrow the income gap with urban teachers; besides, let the excellent teachers in cities be willing to go to the countryside and be able to stay, to promote the orderly exchange of urban and rural teachers (Yu, 2019).

Society should cooperate in many ways to improve the long-term plan for poverty alleviation by education.

Poverty alleviation is a work that requires the cooperation of multiple parties to ensure the results. As far as local governments are concerned, the achievement of political achievements in poverty alleviation reduces a series of preferential policies such as public expenditure. Therefore, the attitude of local governments will also affect the efficiency results of poverty alleviation. Besides, in the long-term plan for targeted poverty alleviation through education, preschool education and compulsory education are not enough. We should focus more on empirical research on the effect of poverty alleviation by education in the future. Through the analysis of specific cases, the policies and experience of the 40 years of reform and opening up are detailed and summarized. In the year of a decisive victory, we will put forward a guide plan for better-eradicating poverty and promoting society's overall development (Wei, 2019).

Eliminating poverty and realizing shared prosperity are our universal aspirations and unremitting pursuit. As China's poverty alleviation work has entered the final stage, the poverty alleviation by education work will also continue to reform and innovate. The poverty alleviation by education policy is gradually systematic and comprehensive, more in line with the poverty areas' actual situation, meeting the poor's diversified needs, and finally achieving multi-level and multi-dimensional poverty alleviation.

Notes

1. State Council. *Notice on Helping Poverty Areas Change the Status Quo as soon as possible* [Z].1984-9-29
2. National People's Congress. *Seventh Five-Year Plan* [Z].1986-3.
3. State Council. *Spark Plan* [Z].1985-5.
4. State Council. *Harvest Plan* [Z].1987-3.
5. State Council. *Lighting Plan* [Z].1988.
6. State Council. *Regulations on the Elimination of Illiteracy* [Z].1988-2-5.
7. State Council. *The National Eight-Seven Poverty Alleviation Plan* [Z].1994-3.
8. State Council. *Decision on Further Strengthening Rural Education* [Z].2003-9-17.
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