

# Evaluating China's Retired Teacher Re-employment Programs from the Perspective of Human Capital Theories

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**Human capital is the most crucial to social development among all forms of resources. The exploitation of high-quality human capital in retired teachers is of vital significance for China's socio-economic development. This article described the implementation of China's retired teacher re-employment programs and examined their practical significance from the perspective of human capital theories with the purpose of providing implications for the reform of teacher staffing and optimization of human resources utilization in China.**

**Keywords:** Human Capital; Professional Capital; Retired Teachers; Retirement Policy; China

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## Introduction

**I**N AUGUST 2023, the Ministry of Education of China and other nine government departments jointly announced the “National Gray-haired Teachers Program”, advocating the establishment of a national platform for the re-employment of retired teachers to fully utilize them as quality human resources and enable them to contribute to the construction of a powerful nation in education (1). This was subsequent to the releases of the “Gray-haired Teacher Instruction Program” (2) and the “Retired University Professors Supporting Education in Western China Program” (3). This series of government papers shares a common objective: to leverage the valuable expertise and experience of retired teachers to improve the development level of education in targeted schools and areas included in the programs.

The 2018 “Gray-haired Teacher Instruction Program” is

intended to recruit excellent retired principals, teaching and education researchers, prestigious teachers, and senior teachers to teach in rural compulsory education schools to help enhance their instructional quality and educational management capabilities (2). 2020’s “Retired University Professors Supporting Education in Western China Program” aims to assist western higher education institutions in their building of specialties that are highly demanded by local industries and enterprises. Prestigious retired university professors have been selected under this program to offer western regions assistance in teaching and research, to help strengthen teacher education and training and scientific research innovation, and to support the construction of “Double First-Class Universities” in western China by utilizing their political influences, professional knowledge, and experience (2). The latest “National Gray-haired Teachers Program” focuses on selecting retired specialists who are renowned in

their respective disciplines to work in colleges and universities according to their specific needs (1).

China's retired teacher re-employment programs are endeavors to build an open, systematic framework to draw on the human capital of retired teachers to suit the educational needs of the nation and the public, benefiting a wide range of areas such as general higher education, vocational education, and basic education (4). In the context of the exacerbation of the aging population issue in China, the implementation of these programs is an innovative application of human capital theories and a meaningful experiment in how to transform the increasing elderly population into demographic dividends.

### **A Practical Application of Human Capital Theories**

According to the American economist Schultz, human capital comprises the abilities and skills acquired by individuals through education, training, and work experiences. It is a crucial component of personal assets in the form of knowledge, competencies, health, etc. (5). Gary Becker, another renowned economist, focused on examining the impact of education on individual economic functioning, claiming that human capital spanned not only knowledge, skills, and health but also time and lifespan (6).

Existing research agrees that human capital is the composite of a wide variety of human abilities as a result of investments in it. Zhang posited in his study that human capital could be divided into three dimensions: physical qualities, represented by physical strength, endurance, and lifespan; cultural competencies, including but not limited to knowledge and creativity; and "virtues," or spirituality, indicated by moral commitment and strength of character (7). The higher level of human capital stock an individual has, the stronger their ability to engage in economic and social activities, and the larger output they can produce for themselves and society (8). Furthermore, the productivity of human capital depends on the extent to which it is exploited. The more fully it is utilized, the more it will output. On the contrary, if left unused, human capital will deteriorate in quality and quantity. Like other forms of reproducible capital, it depreciates when it is idle (9).

As a result of the advancement of Chinese education and social development, the proportion of highly educated elderly people will continue to increase (10). The elderly group is a valuable pool of human capital. In the context of the worsening aging population issue, the re-exploitation of human capital by elderly people should be placed high on the government agenda to avoid the waste of human resources (11).

The re-exploitation of human capital refers to the practice of individuals of retirement age continuing to participate in the workforce by employing the skills and knowledge accumulated before retirement to attain fuller realization of personal value and contribute to the development of the organization involved. Retired, high-quality teachers are a special group among the elderly. To re-exploit the human capital in them, new positions in teaching, scientific research, management, or public affairs are offered to them after their retirement. With the expertise and experience built into their lifelong careers, they can lead a highly productive life in old age by devoting themselves to the de-

velopment of schools that are short on talent. In this process, their self-worth and life value are further enhanced (12). China's retired teacher re-employment programs are nation-level efforts to engage high-quality retired teachers in front-line instruction or other types of education work to make the old age of this category of teachers a time for ongoing participation rather than a time of retirement and withdrawal from society.

Under these programs, numerous retired, excellent teachers have contributed to improving the educational system at all levels. In the sphere of general higher education, they focus on supporting general higher education institutions with significant development potential and unique disciplines and those newly established in ethnic minority regions that are eager to heighten their development levels, with the aim of serving the national strategic needs; In the field of vocational education, they work to boost industry-school collaboration, concentrating their efforts on those vocational schools and colleges closely connected with local industrial needs and with the necessity of further improving their educational conditions; In the area of basic education, they focus on improving the quality of teaching in disadvantaged primary and secondary schools; With public lifelong education projects, they help train teachers for elderly-specific education institutions, community-based education centers, and open-access education services at all levels. They also offer support to private schools, especially privately-run general education universities and vocational colleges, where the shortage of quality teachers is a typical issue (13).

### **Reinforcing the Significance of Professional Capital in Education**

Educators are the most crucial resources for educational development and the main actors in the building of pools of talents. The recruitment of retired, high-achieving educators to augment teacher supply is a reasonable application and extension of the professional capital theory (14). The concept of "professional capital" was introduced in 2012 by Hargreaves and Fullan, two famous scholars in education, who described it as the confluence of human, social, and decisional capital. The interaction of these components results in teachers who are talented, collegial, and thoughtful in their educational activities (15).

In this theory, human capital includes the individual educator's qualifications, knowledge, preparation, skills, and emotional intelligence; social capital comprises elements such as trust, collaboration, collective responsibility, mutual assistance, and professional networks in educational settings; and decisional capital is related to teachers' judgment, case experience, practice, and reflection (15). It can be argued that retired, top-tier teachers own enormous stocks of professional capital. In terms of human capital, they are experts in their respective domains and have the ability to conduct instruction creatively, with profound knowledge of the characteristics of their students and extraordinary emotional intelligence. Regarding social capital, they are skilled at teamwork and capable of encouraging partnership and mutual trust among teachers of all ranks and promoting the professional development of younger teachers through the "mentoring" approach. The formation of decisional capital is a complicated process, requiring long-term practice, observation, reflection, and summary. That is why older teachers generally

have more decisional capital. Retired, excellent teachers can make differential professional judgments for students of varied characteristics and draw on their rich work experience to develop appropriate educational strategies according to different educational contexts (16).

China's retired teacher re-employment programs highlight the value of professional capital. By 2022, a total of 907 retired, top-notch university professors had been dispatched to 11 universities in western China (17). According to the recent "National Gray-haired Teachers Program," 120,000 retired teachers will be recruited in the following period to serve educational development at various levels. These re-employed high-quality teachers will leverage their professional networks to support young teachers in their professional development and utilize their expertise and experience to drive the advancement of teaching and management in the recipient schools by means of course demonstrations, instruction on teaching, project-based research, and team building. They will also employ their decisional capital to exercise personalized teaching and help each student fully develop their potential (18).

### Driving the Reform of China's Retirement System

The national retired teacher re-employment programs in China not only serve as a broad platform for its senior, high-quality educators to remain active in the education sector but also provide implications for the reform of its retirement system (19).

The aging of populations is an unavoidable result of the social and economic development of human society (20). According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) report, the global population aged 60 and older will grow to 2 billion in 2050 from 900 million in 2015 (21). In response to the increasingly grave issue of an aging population, the concept of "positive aging" was raised at the United Nations' Second World Assembly on Aging in 2002 and gained worldwide recognition (22). Addressing the aging of populations positively has been widely acknowledged as an optimal coping strategy by the international community. Successful examples include but are not limited to Japan's "Gray-haired Human Resources Center," the UK's "Re-employment Service Center," and Singapore's "Third Party Committee for Re-employment of Elderly Groups," jointly established by government departments, the National Workers Union, and the Employers Association, which are intended to increase dialogue and cooperation between the government and society, eliminate societal prejudice against the elderly labor force, and support the education, employment, and re-employment of the elderly (10).

Among the most severely aging nations, Japan has had exemplary experiments in "positive aging." It had 36.27 million elderly people aged 65 and older, representing 29.1% of its total population, according to data from 2022 from its Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (23). Against the backdrop of an aging population that has a longer lifespan as well as improved health, the Japanese government has revised the retirement age several times in relevant laws, including the "Stable Employment for the Elderly Law" and the "Pension System Reform Law." It has also implemented the delayed retirement scheme with the help of measures such as the re-employment of

the elderly, mandatory or voluntary postponement of eligible age for retirement pension, and renewal of social culture. Data show that among the age group of 65 and older in Japan, 25.1% are still working; those aged 65 to 69 have an employment rate as high as 50.3%, constituting the most significant component of the elderly labor force. As a result, issues such as national labor force shortages and the financial pressure of pension expenditures have been effectively mitigated (24).

According to the latest seventh census, China has approximately 890 million people aged between 15 and 59, which account for 63.35% of the total population; 260 million people over 60 years old, representing 18.70% of the total population; and 190 million aged 65 and older, making up 13.50% of the total population (25). The trend of aging in the population is evident. National demographic statistics suggest that China will become a severely aging society by 2030 and will have more than 400 million people aged 60 and older by 2035 or so, according to the National Health Commission of China (26).

The current retirement policy in China stipulates that male members of management of governmental organs, businesses, and public institutions can retire at the age of 60 and their female counterparts can retire at the age of 55; and that the retirement age of male manual workers is 60 and that of their female counterparts is 50 (27). Nevertheless, according to relevant estimates, the average life expectancy of male Chinese will reach 74 years or more and that of female Chinese will approach 80 by 2050. That means the retirees are left with about ten "surplus" active years without being properly employed after retirement (28). There are problems with the existing retirement system: increased burden of elderly support on younger generations, rising national expenditure on pension payments, exacerbated imbalance between labor supply and demand, and waste of human resources, which are instigating new social conflicts and impairing social stability (9).

On the other hand, the expanding elderly population has enormous potential to provide quality human capital for society, despite the challenges and complications it brings to social development. With social and economic advancements, the older generations are becoming healthier, more skilled, and better educated. Their continued involvement in society can potentially increase its productivity, boost demands, and, in the meantime, augment their own human capital (29). The development trends show that an increasing proportion of elderly people will remain active in the workforce, making the judicious utilization of elderly human resources a significant strategy for building a healthy aging society (10).

Currently, the "relatively younger" age bracket constitutes a considerable proportion of the total elderly population. A sizeable portion of them is well-educated, experienced, and in good health. In reaction to the increase in the human capital stock of older generations and the shortage of a younger labor force, a more flexible retirement system is warranted, which allows those elderly people with work capacities and willingness to remain in employment (30).

According to the director of the Ministry of Education's Department of Teacher Education, China will experience a rush period of teacher retirement between 2021 and 2025. In the formulation of the retired teacher re-employment programs,

policymakers view the later years of individuals positively and see retired teachers and academics as a valuable pool of talents. The programs encourage them to continue to engage in educational and social development with their repertoires of professional knowledge and practical experience (1). Therefore, China's implementation of retired teacher re-employment programs is an innovative experiment in the reform of the out-of-date retirement system and a purposeful endeavor to release the potential of an aging society and contribute to national education development (13).

The Ministry of Education's Department of Teacher Education comments that those retired teachers re-employed under these programs have played an important role in supporting and accelerating the professional development of younger teachers. Their advice on the construction of specialties is particularly valuable to newly established schools in that it saves them unnecessary trials and errors. In addition, they have also contributed to closing the gap in educational development between the western regions and the relatively developed eastern regions (31). Due to China's large population and vast territory, as well as historical factors, the aging of its population has its own characteristics: significant geographical differentials and uneven distribution. Specifically, eastern, central, and northeastern China have a higher level of population aging, while that in the western regions is relatively mild (32). The initial purpose of China's retired teacher re-employment programs is to recruit retired teachers to support basic education in underdeveloped areas. For western regions and rural areas, the engagement of a large number of senior, high-quality teachers gives renewed impetus to their basic education. These senior teachers from developed regions can play the role of "mentors", which offer

the potential for alleviating the current shortages and balancing the distribution of high-quality educators (4). The "National Gray-haired Teachers Program" underscores that one of its focuses is to establish collaboration mechanisms between eastern and western regions as well as targeted inter-school partnerships in vocational education to assist vocational colleges in improving their educational levels to meet the development needs of local industries (4).

## Conclusion

China's national retired teacher re-employment programs reinforce that human capital is a fundamental source of wealth and social progress for a country. They are positive reactions to the aging of the Chinese population and valuable experiments that can offer implications for advancing the reform of the retirement system. The resumption of educational careers by retired educators is a meaningful practice for the alleviation of shortages of high-quality teachers, who have always been scarce resources in all societies. The ongoing participation of "gray-haired" talents, including retired excellent teachers, will give new impetus to China's social and economic development.

The demand of Chinese society for an active workforce and the intensifying aging of its population make the established retirement institution contradictory to its social status. To actively respond to demographic changes, it is necessary to explore more positive measures, like the national retired teacher re-employment programs, to provide opportunities for older people to remain involved in society. Fully utilizing the valuable resources of elderly people's skills, knowledge, and experience will unquestionably benefit the individuals concerned, the community, and the nation as a whole. ■

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