

Study on the Institutional Change of Early Childhood Education Quality Assurance in China: From the Perspective of Historical Institutionalism

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중국 유아교육의 질 보장제도 변천에 관한 연구: 역사적 제도주의 관점에서의 분석

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Abstract

This study discusses the institutional change of Chinese early childhood education quality assurance institution (ECEQAI) from the three dimensions of the perspective of historical institutionalism of that refer to the external environment, dynamic mechanism containing with nation-market-society, and the invisible ideology of the institutional change. Chinese ECEQAI was divided into five historical periods, which were 17 years after the founding of China (1949-1966), the Great Cultural Revolution (GCR) period (1966-1976), the early stage of Reform and Opening-up (RO) (1976-1995), the social change period (1995-2010) and the new period (2010-now). This study also concludes five separate change models for Chinese ECEQAI that correspond to the five periods. The first was a compulsory and gradual institutional change model influenced by the Soviet model and dominated by national power. The second was compulsory and radical change model controlled by the counter-revolutionary group. The third was a compulsory and gradual institutional change model dominated by national power. The fourth was induced and gradual^① institutional change model driven by market power and forced by society power. The fifth was a compulsory and gradual institutional change model led by national power and forced by society power. Finally, the future change direction of China's ECEQAI was further pointed out, that was the government-leading and tend to balanced three-pole power model of "Nation-Market-Society", as well as the "three-pole power relationship" of in-depth communication and positive interaction.

Keywords

early childhood education, quality assurance institution, historical institutionalism, institution change, Three-Pole Power Model

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) exists and develops in different forms around the world. ECEC is globally diverse; however, discussion and concern about "quality" also has global resonance. Quality is the foundation for Education for All that determines how well students learn, and the extent to which their education achieves a range of personal, social and development goals (UNESCO, 2015a).

Significant research recognizes that ECEC brings wide range of benefits: better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning, more equitable

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child outcomes and reduction of poverty, increased intergenerational social mobility, more female labour market participation, increased fertility rates, and better social and economic development for society (OECD, 2011). Reynolds et al. (2008) found in the tracking study of ECEC project that the overall return rate of preschool education was as high as 1:17, among which the return rate for children is 1:4, while the return rate for society was 1:13. ECEC can bring a wide range of benefits for children, parents and society. But all these benefits are conditional on “quality” (OECD, 2011). Research has also shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects (OECD, 2015).

The foundation of early childhood education (ECE) in China is weak. Guaranteeing the “quantity supply” (universalization) has been the long-term goal of the government’s ECE policy. Since 2010, the enrollment rate of ECE has grown rapidly. China’s *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (*The Plan*) was announced in October 2007. The main objective of The Plan was to enhance the quality of ECE and make it a comprehensive service. In November *Opinions of the State Council on the Current Development of Early Childhood Education* (*The Opinions*) clarified that “protecting school-age children to receive basic quality of ECE”. In September 2012, the Chinese Ministry of Education of China promulgated the *Guide for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6* to guide the public on understanding the basic laws and characteristics of early childhood learning and development, improve the quality of kindergarten education, and promote the fairness of ECE. The strong promotion of national policies has enabled ECE to achieve remarkable historical progress in quantity and scale. In 2017, there were 255,000 kindergartens nationwide, and the gross enrollment ratio reached 79.6% (Ministry of Education of China, 2018); consequently, the ECE quality crisis has become prominent due to the rapid growth of kindergartens. For example, the lack of qualified teachers and the quality gap of kindergarten education have become increasingly distinct.

The problems of ECE structural quality and process

quality are obvious. Kindergartens with poor structural quality still exist in large numbers. Liu’s (2012) study on the quality of ECE in 11 provinces and cities of China showed that only 47% kindergarten classrooms were qualified. Among the unqualified classrooms, about 6% of kindergarten classrooms’ size was below 25 square meters. In addition, 60% of kindergartens’ outdoor activity time was less than the national standard (more than 2 hours). Even 26% kindergartens’ outdoor activity time was less than 40 minutes. More than half of kindergartens’ teacher–children ratio exceed national regulations, and some kindergartens even exceed by 2–3 times. However, the study results showed that the process quality of ECE was problematic. Kindergartens with “good quality” were only 4.6%, “moderate quality” were 39.8%, “basic quality” were 41.7%, and 13.9% were “disqualified.” In particular, there were still problems in the suitability of materials, the effectiveness of the curriculum, teachers’ attention to children, and the language expression and communication of children. Children’s learning and play was affected due to limited play time and materials suitable for children. In addition, the low quality of kindergarten teachers is also a key factor affecting the process quality of ECE. According to survey results, 53% of the teachers did not have teacher qualification and 17% of directors did not have an appropriate license (Liu, 2016).

The development of education must pursue quality. Short-term plans like the three-year plan are helpful for the progress of ECE. These plans also yield some necessary adjustments for the long-term goals of ECE planning. In the third three-year plan (2017–2020), “improving the quality of early childhood education” was identified as one of three key tasks. Premier Li Keqiang re-emphasized these goals in the 2018 government work report in the 2018 government work reduction.”

The *Opinions on Deepening Reform and Standardization of Early Childhood Education* promulgated in November, 2018 set “establishing a broad, comprehensive and public quality of ECE service system and improving the ECE policy assurance system” as main goals for China in 2020. Improving the quality of ECE and making ECE as universal

service have become core tasks of Chinese ECE reform.

ECE in China now faces a momentum to improve its quality. How to guide and improve the current Early Childhood Education Quality Assurance Institution (ECEQAI) are top tasks affecting all teachers. Some questions should be answered in order to achieve the improvement of current ECE. Is the motivation for change of ECE exogenous or endogenous? Should it be government driven or benefit driven? Is there any precondition for the institutional changes of quality assurance of ECE? What are the factors that influence and shape the generation and change of the ECEQAI? In order to answer these questions, this study analyzes the historical evolution of ECEQAI and further explores the future development directions. The purposes of this study are:

- to explore the inherent law of institutional change of quality assurance in Chinese ECE

- to predict the future reform trend of Chinese ECEQAI

Literature Review

1. Early Childhood Education Quality Assurance Institution

Quality in ECE is an elusive concept that has been discussed and debated in the literature without a conclusion (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Fler & Kennedy, 2006). Sylva et al. (2003) argue that “quality is not a universal concept but depends on national curricula and cultural priorities.” It therefore depends on context. Similarly, Mooney, A., & Blackburn, T. (2003) contend that “definitional issues and differences in government structures, welfare systems, policies and practices make it difficult to compare the quality of provision cross-nationally”. In addition, Dahlberg et al. (1999) “understood quality to be a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept, with the possibility of multiple perspectives or understandings of what quality is”. In summary, these researchers argue that there is no definition of quality in ECEC that is globally accepted; however, there is some consensus and subsequent advances

in the publication of global standards for early childhood learning and development (Scott-Little, 2010).

Many discussions about the quality of ECE in China are aimed at the organizations of childcare and education, especially kindergartens. Liu (2004) directly replaced the quality in ECE with findings of what quality institutionally factors that influence and shape the generation and change of the quality of childcare and education in organizations refers to how much the educational activities meet the needs of children’s physical and mental health development. There is no uniform definition of the quality in ECE; however, there is a broad acceptance about the components of quality in ECE. OECD (2012) divides the quality in ECEC into “structural quality” and “process quality”. Structural quality often refers to central facilities or resources; staff-child ratio and staff qualification that are more easily measurable for cross-sectional observation purposes in determining quality (OECD, 2006). However, process quality focuses on interactions between child and teacher, child and child, teacher and parent, teacher and teacher as well as the nature of leadership and teachers’ pedagogical skills (OECD, 2012). Process quality has a more important impact on the quality of ECE than structural quality. However, some scholars (Donabedian, 1980; Feng, 2011; Guo, 2013; Liu, 2012; Yu, 2013) also define the quality of ECE as structural quality, process quality, and outcome quality. Outcome quality refers to the results of children’s learning and development. However, the information collection on children’s development outcome faces financial and methodological difficulties (Guo, 2013). This study therefore analyzes the quality assurance policy of ECE with more attention given to structural quality and the process quality of ECE. Hence, the quality of ECE in this study will be analyzed into: **structural quality** (hardware conditions, class size, teacher-child ratios, and teacher qualifications) and **process quality** (teacher-child interaction, teacher-child relationship, and curriculum).

ECE in western countries has developed relatively early, and the quality assurance institutions are relatively more developed. Literature about the QAI in ECE can be

divided into three types. The first type of studies analyze the current situation of ECEQAI in various countries from the perspective of components of quality assurance system in ECE (OECD, 2012; Wang & Pi, 2017; Wang & Yang, 2017; Zhao, 2012). The second type of studies focus the hierarchical division and its mutual relationship of ECEQAI from the perspective of system, emphasizing that each system should be coordinated (Guo, 2013; Wang, 2017). The third type of studies analyze influencing factors and driving forces of ECEQAI from the perspective of nation (Liu & Xia, 2015), market and academic (Hong, 2009; Pan, 2014; Wang, 2015; Zheng, 2015). In the third model, some studies analyzed the development process of ECE quality assurance system from the perspective of nation, academic and market. Liu & Xia (2015) used the "Triangle Model" to analyze the development of American ECEQAI. Hence, establishing ECEQAI in this model is the process of coordination market and academy throughout the country. In addition, the theoretical perspective of the nation, market and academy is beneficial to the selection of institutional change dynamics in this study. Yet this "Triangle Model" focuses on analyzing internal causes of institutional changes and ignoring external reasons such as historical traditions and institutional environment.

Historical institutionalism (HI) combines institutional research with historical processes to show the major characteristics of institutions as dependent variables and independent variables that also track historical processes. This theory has a strong explanatory power for institutional changes that conceptualizes institutions into historical development that can explain its formation, influence, evolution, law and future development. Therefore, this study would analyze the institutional change of China's ECEQA from the perspective of HI.

2. Historical Institutionalism

This study analyzes the change process of China's ECEQAI from the perspective of historical institutionalism (HI). The main viewpoints of HI will be briefly explained below.

2.1 Path Dependence and Institutional Continuity: Institutions as Independent Variables

Institutions are regarded as a continuous feature of the historical environment and are seen as a central element that drives historical development along established paths (Krasner, 1988). Historical causation refers to a past event that still affects us now. Path dependence is a past choice that still constrains future choices and indicates an emphasis on the historical process in which the timing and sequence of events significantly impact social outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Path dependence refers to events that occur earlier in time that cascade into the outcome of events that occur later (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000).

Path dependence has different directions. One is that some initial institution has the effect of increasing returns, which promotes the development of the institution and leads to institutional change towards a healthy direction. This is the early stage of path dependence. Another is that the efficiency will be reduced along with the hindrance of production activities after a certain institution has been formed. At this point, the society will fall into an invalid institution and enter the 'Lock-in' state of a vicious path dependence.

2.2 Institutional Change: Institutions as Dependent Variables

The formation and transition of institutions are influenced by two motives. First, the endogenous motive of institutional formation and transition refers internal elements of institutions and the interference and clashes causing institutional changes and replenishment. Second, exogenous motives lead to institutional transformations that are directly or indirectly influenced by changes in the external environment.

Transitions in institutions can be divided into radical institutional change, gradual institutional change, induced institutional change and compulsory institutional change. First, institutional change is a punctuated equilibrium radicalized by external environmental factors that then persists in a path dependence while maintaining stability (Pierson, 2004). Krasner (1984) explains in terms of

punctuated equilibrium that institutional changes are made in rapid changes after long-term stability. The institutions do not involve gradual changes, but abrupt changes in the external shock of a historical juncture caused by economic and political crises. The punctuated equilibrium also explains that the institution works fast and flexibly with external shocks, as well as remains balanced until other external shocks occur. HI considers the moment of becoming a critical juncture as an external shock, so that the political and economic crisis is considered a historical turning point in the reformation of social relations and institutions. Second, gradual institutional change is progressively made in the dynamic relationship of the internal elements of the institution. Gradual institutional transition can be caused by conflicts and cracks in the elements of the institution, and internal causes such as the will and power of the actors. Third, induced institutional change refers to bottom-up institutional change initiated by social individuals or organizations according to their own needs. Therefore, this kind of change has the characteristics of bottom-up, close to democracy, and long time. Fourth, compulsory institutional change refers to the change that is “introduced and carried out by government orders and laws”. The subject of compulsory institutional change is the nation and government. From design to implementation to change, the institution is realized by the power of nation or government; and the implementation of the system is from top to bottom. The characteristics of compulsory institutional changes determine that government power plays a decisive role in institutional changes (Lin, 2003).

The Change Progress of Chinese ECEQAI

1. 17 Years After the Founding of China (1949–1966)

From the beginning of the establishment of the New China, the proletarian regime established through revolutionary methods began to overthrow old institutions, establish a new government and implement new institutions. During this period, Chinese ECEQAI experienced a top-

down, government-led compulsory change process, in which the government’s power gradually increased and seized the absolute control force of ECE.

1.1 Exogenous Actors: Experience of the old Liberated Areas—Influence of Soviet Model—Centralized Political Institution

HI believes that institutions have strong dependence, and later institutions are evolved and developed on the basis of the original ones. The experience of ECEQAI in the old Liberated Areas before 1949 had certain impacts on the evolution of ECEQAI in New China. The Communist Party of China has formulated guidelines and policies for ECE since its establishment. In accordance with the principle of public care of children, the Communist Party had established management organizations and various ECE services according to the policy that education serves politics and production, which laid the foundations for ECEQAI in New China.

The lack of experience in managing ECE resulted in the transplantation of the Soviet management system from the Soviet Union after 1949. The managing systems as well as the guiding ideology, education policies and educational practices in ECE of New China are all imitated by the Soviet Union.

The New China implemented a highly centralized planned economic system under the influence of Soviet model; in addition, the government allocated resources and material production along with economic power that was controlled by political power. The central government under Zedong Mao established the political system of a “people’s democratic dictatorship”, that emphasized the class nature of democracy and dictatorship as well as the stated political line of “taking class struggle as the target”. The highly centralized political form of New China for more than 30 years affected the development of education.

1.2 Endogenous Actors: Power Imbalance in Institutionalization Process

In the early days of New China, in the “nation-market-

society” triangle model, national power gradually became decisive force in the institutional changes, while the market and society gradually disappeared in the process.

The socialist transformation of kindergartens in 1954 resulted in the state ownership of all private kindergartens and church kindergartens. In addition, the planned economic system also determined that private capital could not intervene in the field of education; only state-owned enterprises and rural production cooperatives could run “non-government” kindergartens after 1955. However, “non-government” did not mean private because the funding source of these kindergartens came from the “public”. They must accept the leadership of government along with a curriculum provided by the education authority. The provision of ECE was almost entirely from political power, and economics were completely ruled by political power; in addition, the “market” power of this period was almost weakened to zero. The social field of this period was under the strict control of the government along with a society ruled by politics. Ordinary people had no voice and intellectuals were undermined.

In contrast to the disappearance of social and market forces, the government relied on the existing political institutional framework to occupy the most favorable position in the power structure of ECEQAI in order to become the absolute leader of ECEQAI. Under the circumstance of years of war and political instability, the ruling Communist Party of China fully recognized the instrumental characteristic that education can consolidate state power. The central government must grasp the management power of education in order to cultivate a large number of intellectuals and talents who were loyal to the new regime.

1.3 The Compulsory and Gradual Institutional Change Model

Through the above analysis, it can be found that the ECEQAI in the early 17 years of New China experienced the process that government power “strongly intervened” and gradually monopolized. In the early days, because of the limited economic strength, the state allowed private kindergartens. Thus private kindergartens in the urban

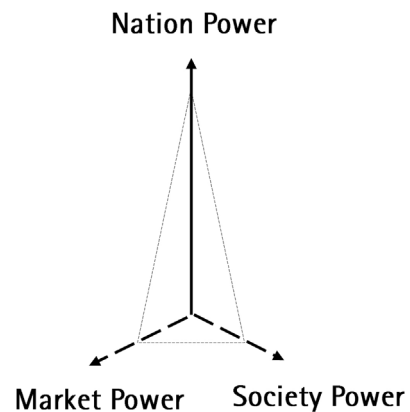


Figure 1. The change model of ECEQAI from 1949 to 1966.

area accounted for a large part, and the market had some influence on ECE. As the social demand for women’s labor force has been increased, there has been strong demand for institutional ECE. The government was also aware of the value and significance of social groups for the quality assurance of ECE. At that time, social power had the opportunities to make suggestions in the field of ECE, but this kinds of chances were limited because of the strict political control. With a series of ideological movements, the government gradually controlled people’s freedom of thought, and the government gradually gained dominant position in the process of institutional changes, and comprehensively controlled educational contents, the rights of policy formulation and kindergartens-running. Therefore, the quality assurance institution for ECE during this period experienced top-down compulsory change. And ECEQAI in this period was almost a “barometer” of the political situation. Any policy change of politics can have an outsize effect on the reform and development of ECE.

As can be seen from the figure(Figure 1), it is a typical government-led institutional change model. In addition to the early days, the market and society had certain impact on the quality of ECE, in the next ten years, the government controlled almost all the resources of ECE, and the market power and society power almost disappeared.

2. The GCR Period (1966–1976)

The period of Great Cultural Revolution (GCR), is from

1966 to 1976 which is both a historical period and a kind of ideology itself. After the founding of New China, countless critical movements, educational revolutions, and the Great Leap Forward finally evolved into the GCR in 1966.

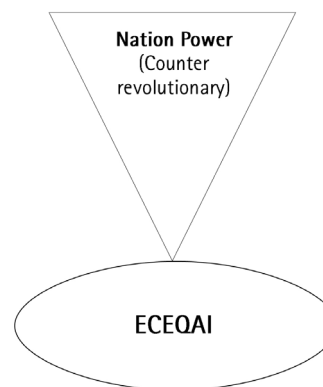
In China, administration is the most important means of shaping the educational power structure. The administrative division of power is often random, and the power structure often shows the characteristics of instability, transitivity and non-normativity (Lin, 2006). Before the Reform and Opening-up (RO, 改革開放), China's system was a top-down pyramid structure. The top of this pyramid was the leader, the middle was the Communist Party and government military system, and the bottom was the rural production brigade and the city's enterprises and institutions, street offices and residents committees. This system controlled not only the country's politics, economy, and society, but also everyone's life. Political power was everywhere. After the GCR broke out, Zedong Mao re-established the state-centered system, the Central Committee of Communist Party of China (CCCCP) established the Central GCR Group and the local Revolutionary Committee as the organizational form of political power at all levels. The Revolutionary Committee abolished the distinction between the Committee of the Communist Party (CCP) and the government, and adopted the approach of "three-in-one" to control the personnel. The "three" meant representatives of mass organizations, representatives of former party and government leading cadres, and representatives of resident troops. This local government, once regarded as a "temporary authority", was enshrined in the Constitution in 1975 and established its legitimate identity. Since then, the institutional framework for the unity of the Communist Party and the government during the GCR basically formed.

Under the call of "education needed revolution", the power of the Revolutionary Committee quickly spread to education. Educational administrations at all levels and various ECE institutions were "occupied" and "taken over power" by the Revolutionary Committee under the leadership of the Counter-revolutionary Group, leading ECE into a state of "anarchy". In 1968, the state get rid of the Ministry

of Education and established a military control group, then central government had neither an educational leadership nor an ECE leadership institution, and local educational administrations at all levels were "ineffective". There was no management organization for ECE, and quality could not be guaranteed. Historical facts also proved that during the decade of the GCR, there was no law or regulation on ECE.

In addition, the content of ECE was full of "class struggle" and "political struggle", and ECE had become a propaganda tool for political struggle. Most of the urban kindergartens established the "Zedong Mao Thought Propaganda Team". Through the form of song and dance, teachers and children walked together on street or entered the factory to promote the revolutionary route. The public was not only restricted from "what can't say", but also was stipulated "what must be said". Under the oppression of political power, people also had to self-criticize, report and criticize other people's thoughts and behaviors. Everyone can be an informer, and everyone can be a victim. "Comprehensive politicization" was an important feature of this era, and all events had "political meanings". Under such a special political situation, the public cannot be an effective force to contain the regime. Therefore, in the institutional framework of Party and government integration, there was no power to compete with the Communist Party power.

During the GCR, the counter-revolutionary group rapidly integrated politics, economy and society, and penetrated the power into all areas of society from top to bottom, becoming



Nation Decision Change Model

Figure 2. The change model of ECEQAI from 1966 to 1976.

the decisive force of ECEQAI. Therefore, the ECEQAI during the GCR period experienced compulsory and radical institutional change model (Figure 2).

3. In the Early Stage of Reform and Opening-up (1976–1995)

In 1976, smashing the counter-revolutionary group was an extremely important turning point of China. Since then, Reform and Opening-up (RO) has become the key word for China's development. Political and economic has taken on an entirely new look, and ECE has also ushered in the spring of flowers were blooming. After that, China's economy, politics, and society had undergone extensive and profound changes, which led to tremendous changes in the power structure of China.

3.1 Critical Juncture: Reform and Opening-up

HI divides institutional changes into the normal periods and the punctuated period which is broken from the "critical juncture" (Stionmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992). And this theory regards mal periods and the punctuated period ken on an entirely new look, and ECE has also ushered in the impact on the historical development since then. After GCR, Chinese leadership gradually renewed, the "second generation of leaders" analyzed the situation and began to carry out comprehensive social reforms. "Without RO, not developing the economy, and not improving people's lives, it can only be a dead end (Document editing committee of CPC, 1993)." In fact, the reforms launched in 1978 were unprecedented and extensive, not only in the economic sphere, but in all areas including education.

In 1985, the *Decision of the CCCPC on the Reform of Education System* proposed to establish an education system that was compatible with the socialist commodity economy and vigorously promote social forces to run schools. Since then, private ECE institutions have gradually emerged. In the political field, with the reform of management system, the government had transformed from "omnipotent government" to "limited government", and its management of social field gradually relaxed. However, the social forces

in this period were extremely weak, and political power still dominated society. The three-pole power model formed by nation-market-society would had profound impact on the changes in ECEQAI.

3.2 Power Source: Social Structure Transformation

After RO, China's social structure had undergone fundamental changes, which referred to the change of Chinese society from the "unipolar power model" to "three-pole power model". The essence of change was the process that economic field and social field gradually "liberated" from political field. More precisely, it was the process that economic field and social field gradually obtained economic power and social power from the political sphere. The result was a gradual increase in autonomy in the economic and social sphere.

In China, reforms in the economic field were first carried out. The greatest significance of economic system reform to ECE lied in the emergence of non-public capital in the ECE market. Private kindergartens, that were, market forces, as one of the driving forces for the advancement of ECEQAI, had become an important pole of the "three-pole power model". The political system reform was the process of decentralization and transfer of government power. "Decentralization" referred to the empowerment of local governments, and "transfer" referred to the economic power and social power was partly transfer from government to economic field and social field. Among them, ECE associations, organizations and research institutions belonging to the social field had gradually resumed reconstruction and formed the third pole power in the "three-pole power model".

3.3 Invisible Power: The Trend of Science Education

Along with the reform of political and economic system and the transformation of social structure, Chinese political culture/ideology had undergone democratic and scientific transformation after RO. While western countries had the democratic political concept first and then generated the democratic political system later, China carried out the

ideological emancipation movement first for preparation of RO, then western science, education, and culture have been imported into China through RO.

Ideas are often the precursors of institutional change. For institutional changes, “the general source of ideas is experts in the relevant fields and past experience, whether domestic or foreign” (Hall, Peter, & Taylor, 1996). Ideas play an important role in promoting institutional change, which is particularly prominent at the critical juncture of institutional change. The change of ideas is the precondition for the change of ECEQAI. Every time the institution changes, there are corresponding international environment and domestic political and economic system reform as the background, but without the renewal and change of ideas, the reform of ECE cannot be fully carried out. During this period, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development and Rogers’ humanistic education theory had a great impact on China’s quality assurance policies in ECE. In particular, the *Kindergarten Education Guidelines (Trial Draft)* emphasized the teaching according to age groups and respected the law of physical and mental development of children, *Regulations for Kindergarten Working (Trial)* emphasized the importance of activities, games, environment and other factors. These policies directly affected the daily teaching of kindergartens and had a direct impact on the process quality of ECE. After RO, China had entered into the process of globalization. The changes in ECEQAI, especially the changes in the process quality assurance institution, had shown to some extent the trend of being close to the development of international ECE.

3.4 Compulsory and Gradual Institutional Change Model

China’s social system can be expressed by “strong government”. After socialist transformation (1956), political power completely dominated the economic and social fields. During GCR decade, the control of political power reached its peak and the “unipolar power model” formed. After RO, “unipolar” gradually evolved into “three poles”, the forces of politics, market and society developed unevenly, but rather developed with a “government–led” change pattern of

“nation strong, market and society weak”.

On the one hand, political power occupied the dominant position in economic sphere. By the end of 1996, private kindergartens accounted for 13.06% of the total number of kindergartens in the country, and the number of children in private kindergartens accounted for 4.89% of the children in the kindergartens. Although the private kindergartens had been prospered, the share of non–public capital in ECE market was still small.

On the other hand, political power dominated in the social sphere too. Society power mainly consisted of higher education institutions, research institutions, social groups, and mass media. Higher institutions and scientific research institutions were mostly set up by the government and their revenues consist of government grants. Scientific research results can not harm the interests of the government, otherwise they would face the danger of financial severance. China implements a “dual management” system for social groups, that is, the association must have two management institutions at the same time. One is the “registration management agency”, that is, the civil affairs, and the other is the “business executive agency”, which is generally a government agency or its authorized organization. In this way, the legal social groups were completely under the control of the government. Therefore, the associations had the “dual attributes” of “semi–official and semi–civil”.

In contemporary China, the models of institutional

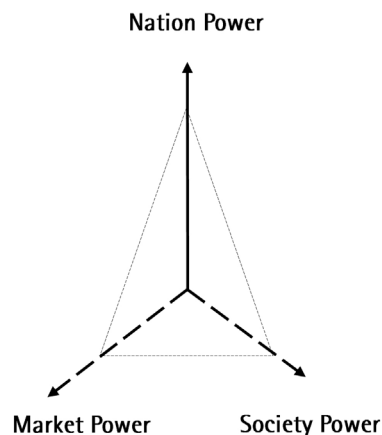


Figure 3. The change model of ECEQAI from 1976 to 1995.

change in different fields differ greatly. In the early days of RO, the quality assurance policies in ECE were almost formulated and implemented through top-down mandatory changes. Moreover, this process lasted for nearly ten years, during which policies were continuously improved, and continued to develop towards the direction of scientific, standardized and institutionalized. Therefore, the ECEQAI in this period experienced compulsory, gradual institutional change model (Figure 3).

4. The Social Change Period (1995–2010)

The supply structure of ECE underwent tremendous changes with the development of socialist market economy and the promotion of economic system reform. The number of private kindergartens grew year by year and became the main body of ECE supply. State-owned enterprises and institutions had separated their educational functions. Hence, the kindergartens that were originally attached to them had been shut down or directly transferred to private kindergartens. In the transition from public to private, the size of kindergarten has been increased but the quality level has been decreased. Therefore, the development of ECE faced a major crisis, and the voices of whole society on reforming ECE were growing stronger.

4.1 Promoter: Rapid Rising Market Power

The supply structure of ECE in this period underwent qualitative changes. On the one hand, with the reform of enterprises and kindergartens, government supply had gradually decreased. On the other hand, with the development of market economy and the encouragement of national policies, market supply gradually became strong and the mainstay of ECE supply. From 1995 to 2009, the number of private kindergartens increased from 20,300 to 89,300, and its proportion increased from 11.53% to 64.62%. The “extraordinarily powerful” market power in the process of ECEQA can be seen from two aspects.

In this situation, market was the main power for the quality assurance in ECE. Hence, parents’ choice of educational services that is demand in ECE market was

the core force to regulate the quality of education. From 2000 to 2001, there was a survey administered by the ECE Department of the Ministry of Education in 14 provinces and cities nationwide. And the results showed that the total income of nationwide ECE, the government’s financial allocation accounted for 28%, enterprises and institutions’ financial allocation accounted for 11%, childcare and education expenses accounted for 54%, and the other accounted for 7% (Cai, 2007). It showed that government invested less in ECE, and the family bore most of the ECE cost. In 2010, Beijing University conducted a survey of 591 kindergartens in 25 counties of Hebei, Anhui, and Zhejiang provinces. The results showed that the government’s average cost-sharing ratio for all kindergartens was less than 30% and that for public kindergartens was less than 40% (He, 2011). In this context, the quality assurance of kindergartens was basically conducted by kindergartens through communication and game with parents to meet market demand and win market competition.

On the other hand, the “powerful” market causes problems too. In the ECE market, parents were consumers and they had to pay for ECE services, children were regarded as both consumers and the subject of business. In order to maximize profits, private kindergartens try their best to cater for parents. However, parent choice is not always better than professional solutions. Parents, in addition to that, are not capable to recognize and the quality of ECE. And the education administration was “forced” to make various policy decisions in the chaos.

4.2 Passive Respondent: Absence of Government Responsibility

During this period, the “weakness” of government in ECEQAI was not having “no power” or “small power”, but “not using the power”. And the “weakness” was mainly reflected in the absence of management responsibility and the laissez-faire to market. On the one hand, Chinese government did not well assure the right of preschool child to education. The Article 28 of *Convention on the Rights of the Child* clearly states that States Parties recognize the right of child to education, and with a view to achieving this

right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity. As one of the earliest parties to the convention, China had not achieved the expected results in assuring the right to education of preschool children. Although Article 46 of China's 1989 Constitution stipulates that citizens have the right and obligation to education, and Article 19 particularly places that the State should develop early childhood education, in that special period, the total number of kindergartens and teachers declined, and the quality of ECE was low. In 1997, *the National Opinions on the Implementation of Ninth Five-Year Plan for Development of Early Childhood Education* clearly stated that "By 2000, the enrollment rate of three-year kindergartens (including preschool classes) reached more than 45%. However, during the *Ninth Five-Year Plan* period, the highest rate was 41.0%, and it declined to 37.7% in 2000. Instead of growing, the enrollment rate kept declining from 41.0% in 1996 to 35.9% in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 1996–2010).

Through reforming the public kindergartens run by enterprises and institutions, the government transferred the responsibility of ECE supply to "market." Hence, the parents should pay the ECE costs. The financial power was moved up through tax reform. Consequently, the central government decentralized the responsibility of developing ECE to local governments, mainly county-level governments. During the entire period of social change, the government, especially the education administration, showed a clear tendency of "negative government", which can be clearly seen from the characteristics of problem-oriented and passive nature of ECEQAI.

4.3 "Forced" Mechanism: Gradually Powerful Society Power

During this period, the development of ECE showed obvious fluctuations and frequent problems. In the 1990s, local governments reformed the public kindergartens, even changed them to shareholdings or sold them. After 1996, the number of kindergartens nationwide fell year by year, even to the lowest point after RO by 2001. There are several typical events that had caused widespread public concern and lasting discussion. In 2006, the Shenzhen

City successively transformed the municipal and regional public kindergartens into enterprises, which was strongly resisted by the public kindergartens. In 2008, Kunming City stipulated that "In 2010, the proportion of children in private kindergartens (preschool classes) will reach over 90%; non-compulsory public schools can try the running model of 'state-owned, privately-run'; non-compulsory public schools can run or participate in running private schools; public schools of non-compulsory schools can be converted into private schools." These events had sparked heated discussions about whether "ECE marketization" needs to be corrected. Education administrative officials, ECE experts, and ECE social groups criticized the current government's promotion of ECE marketization. They also called for the government should actively assume the responsibility for the development of ECE and promote ECEQAI.

In the beginning of 21st century, the problems of "kindergarten crunch" and "expensive tuition" of private kindergartens broke out in all around China. The newspaper articles were titled such as "Child bound in chains" and "Hubei school bus traffic accident", "Young children were forgotten in the school bus and died." The government's ruling style, which appreciated economic development and neglected the improvement of people's livelihood, had repeatedly been criticized. Public opinion had become strong power that forced the government to take measures to improve the quality in ECE.

4.4 The Induced and Gradual Institutional Change Model

The change of ECEQAI in this period was completed under the impetus of market power and the force of social public opinion. The government lacked responsibility in the process, and its performance was negative and passive. Therefore, the institutional change of this period was induced change (Figure 4).

Moreover, the policies of this period were characterized by obvious of market power and the force of social public opinion. The government lacked responsibility in the process, and the change of ECEQAI in this period was gradual change.

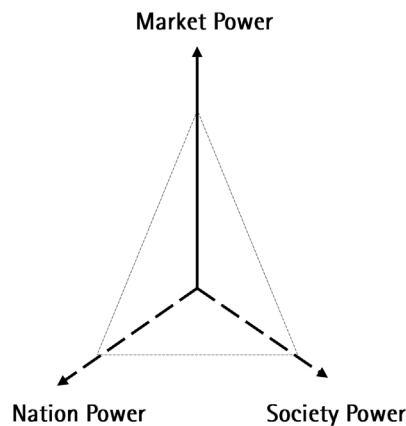


Figure 4. The change model of ECEQAI from 1995 to 2010.

5. New Period (2010–now)

After ECE had experienced a disorderly development for more than a decade, the necessity and urgency of institutional change has been highlighted. In 2010, the State Council promulgated two important documents, *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (hereinafter referred to as the *Plan*) and *Opinions of the State Council on the Current Development of Early Childhood Education* (hereinafter referred to as the *Opinions*), and systematically designed the reform and development of ECE. The promulgation of these two documents marked that Chinese ECEQAI entered a new period of rapid development. The beautiful and bright “spring of ECE” finally arrived (Qian, 2015).

5.1 Exogenous Actors: International Experience of ECEQA

HI believes that the international background in a certain period will greatly impact on the political and social development of a certain region, which makes all human beings develop together as a close-knit whole, and each country, institution and civilization will influence and restrict each other. Institutional evolution and civil development are no longer independent, but are dominated by both internal and external forces. People choose the institutions that best meet their demands by comparison and identification. The “external” competition just stimulates

the transformation requirements of the social members through “demonstration”, leading to internal instability and institutional change.

One of the most important experiences in the construction of quality assurance system in international ECEC is to strengthen government’s leadership. After the blind “marketization” in the social change period, Chinese ECE was regressed compared with other countries. For a regressed country, institutional change is actually a process of transforming its “backward system” by studying and learning from the “advanced system” of “advanced countries”. Therefore, after 2010, the Chinese government began to attach importance to its leading role in improving the quality of ECE.

5.2 Realistic Pressure: Social Public Opinion Forced

During the period of social change (1995–2010), when market power continued to enter the ECE field and became the main body of supply, the quality problems caused by the disorderly development of market were also increased. In the market society, parents are the “consumers” of ECE. What kind of ECE a child can receive depends entirely on the market and the family ability to pay, the public welfare attribute of ECE has been abandoned, and the child abuses were frequently happened in kindergarten. When the collective resentment of the public has been accumulated to a certain extent, the protective reverse movement of the people to resist the market will inevitably start (Wang, 2015). From 2008 to 2010, Ministry of Education solicited opinions for *the Plan*, and the opinions of ECE are the most, which suggested that the public rationally, consciously and legally began to carry out “protective reverse movement”. In addition, the mass media continued to expose the quality problems of ECE that people care about. Scholars, media and the public have reached an unprecedented consensus on curbing the blind development of market power, they called for the government to play the leading role of improving the quality of ECE. Thus the increasing pressure of public opinion forced the government to develop ECE.

5.3 Endogenous Actors: Transformation of Government Governance

Under the international background of continuous enhancement of government's leading role in ECEQAI, and the pressure of public opinion inside the country, the government continuously encountered the "legitimacy crisis". Considering political stability, the government needs to constantly adjust the interaction of state, market and society.

On the one hand, as the main supplier, the government must adjust the relationship with market. After the disorderly development of "market society" during the social change period, the reverse movement has emerged and the "social market" began to develop. Market is still the main mechanism for resource allocation, but the power of Chinese government has gradually become prominent. Through redistribution, the government tried its best to "de-market" in the fields related to human rights, let all the people share the benefits of market operations, and let all the society share the cost of market operations.

"Public interest kindergarten" is an effective means implemented by Chinese government since 2010 to promote the fairness and improve the quality of ECE. Before that, the government's limited ECE funding allocation was seriously uneven, almost all of which were invested to public kindergartens, and rarely benefited private kindergartens. Through this policy, however, the government can support the public interest private kindergartens through financial allocation, tax incentives, rent reduction, and teacher research funding support. As of 2017, 28 provinces and 5 separate cities in the country have introduced the recognition and management policies and formulated specific financial support measures for public interest private kindergartens. This policy effectively restricted market power by the government through financial leverage. It was the "invasion" of national power to the market field. By "de-marketing" government alleviated cost-sharing pressure of parents and guaranteed the "public welfare" of ECE.

On the other hand, absorbing social forces to participate in educational governance has become an effective way

for nation to manage education. 2010 *the Plan* clearly stated that it was necessary to "actively play the role of various social organizations such as industry associations, professional societies, and foundations in the public governance of education". As mentioned earlier, educational NGOs such as the *21st Century Education Institute* and the *Yiyang Education Research Institute* have played an increasingly important role in promoting educational policy reform and development. In addition, the government also paid attention to the role of public opinion in ECE policy-making process. Public opinion can reflect and guide public emotions, effectively promote the progress and development of ECE policies. It can also guide the public to reasonably understand the policies, which is conducive to the implement of ECE policy (Lv, 2018). From 2012 onwards, the Ministry of Education has designated May 20th to June 20th as the *National Preschool Education Awareness Month* to popularize scientific parenting knowledge for the whole society.

In summary, the strong government realized the penetration of national power into the market and social fields by gradually controlling the market and society power in ECEQAI, and promoted ECEQAI to develop towards the direction of guaranteeing "public welfare".

5.4 Compulsory and Gradual Institutional Change Model

In order to maintain the "legitimacy" of political rule, the characteristics of "strong government" in the new

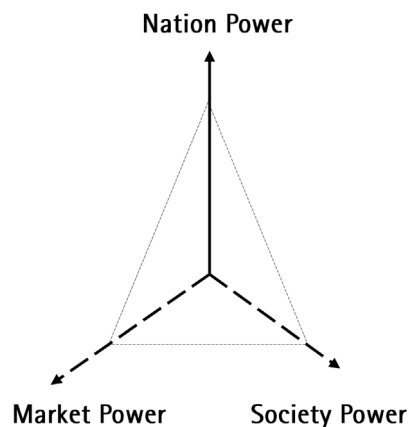


Figure 5. The change model of ECEQAI from 2010 to now.

Table 1. Change Models of China's ECEQAI

Historical period	Change model	
17 years after the founding of China (1949-1966)	Compulsory change	Gradual change
GCR period (1966-1976)	Compulsory change	Radical change
Early stage of RO (1976-1995)	Compulsory change	Gradual change
Social change period (1995-2010)	Induced change	Gradual change
New period (2010-Now)	Compulsory change	Gradual change

era became prominent once again. By enacting and implementing more than 40 powerful ECE policies, national power gradually penetrated into the market and social fields. In the new era, the quality assurance policies in ECE were mostly promulgated and implemented through top-down, government-led forms, thus belonging to the compulsory change model (Figure 5). Different from the previous period, in the new era, market power was gradually weakening, but it was still the main force, and although the social power was gradually rising, overall its strength was still weak.

Conclusion and Suggestion

1. Conclusion

Further in this study, corresponding to the five periods, five separate change models were concluded for Chinese ECEQAI. The first was compulsory and gradual institutional change model influenced by Soviet model and dominated by national power. The second was compulsory and radical change model controlled by the counter-revolutionary group. The third was compulsory and gradual institutional change model dominated by national power. The fourth was induced and gradual institutional change model driven by market power and forced by society power. The fifth was compulsory and gradual institutional change model led by national power and forced by society power. It was found that the “three-pole power model” constituted by nation, market and society power determined the general path of institutional change, and it was also the fundamental driving force and decisive factor of the institutional change.

For convenience, this study divided the history of

Chinese ECEQAI into five major periods. In fact, the whole change was a continuous process with its own continuous development path. Overall it experienced a development path of “self-reinforcing—locking-in—path breaking and self-development—re-locking-in—re-self-reinforcing”. With the RO as the critical juncture in 1978, China’s ECEQAI can be divided into two development paths: one was traditional path based on Chinese historical tradition, and the other was modern path based on Chinese modern social development.

Feudal society in China lasted for more than 2,000 years. The soil of feudalization did not buried the seeds of democracy, but it accumulated deep-rooted ideas of centralization. After the founding of New China, through a series of socialist transformations, market power represented by private kindergartens had gradually been weakened to zero. Together with the ideological and political movement prevailing in society at the time, society power also gradually disappeared. As a result national power gradually became the decisive force in institutional changes. During the ation, through the rapid “integration” of the political, economic and social fields, the national power controlled by the counter-revolutionary group penetrated into all areas of society. From the early days of New China to the GCR, the change path of ECEQAI was consistent. The institutions in the former period were the foundation and preparation, and the institutions of the latter period were the inevitable result. The change of Chinese ECEQAI before the RO was a process of power concentration. The state completely controlled the market and social fields during the game and formed a “unipolar power model”. Due to the path dependence effect, if there was no reform, the change

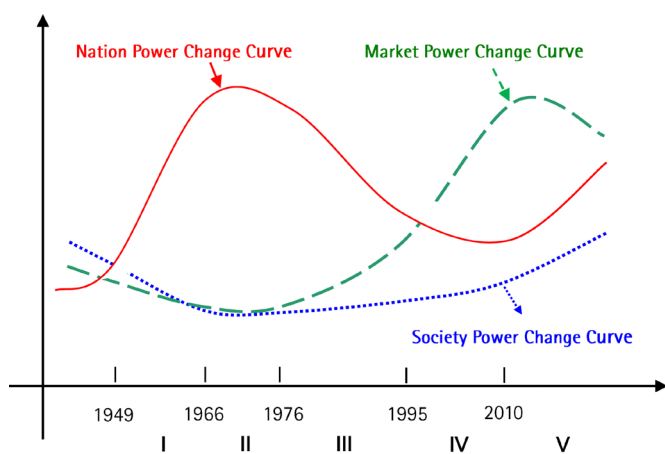


Figure 6. Actor power change trend of ECEQAI.

of Chinese ECEQAI can only fall into a vicious circle and eventually entered the lock-in state and collapsed.

The RO in 1978 completely changed the traditional change path. Chinese society changed from “unipolar power model” to “three-pole power model”, and the market and the society power were gradually “liberated” from the national power. More precisely, the modern path of Chinese ECEQAI was the process of power transfer. The power in the market field gradually shifted from nation to market, and the society power gradually shifted from nation to society. Different from the “unipolar power model”, the change of ECEQAI after RO was a game process in which the power of nation, market and society were changing. It is worth noting that, unlike the tortuous development of the nation and market power, society power has been on the rise. Today, educational organizations, non-profit organizations, research institutions, and mass media have become important forces in the quality assurance of ECE.

The history of changes in ECEQAI is also the process of power game between nation, market and society. Before 1978, national power gradually replaced the market and society power, and occupied the monopoly position. After 1978, national power gradually weakened, and the market and society power gradually increased (Figure 6).

2. Suggestion

In recent years, “strong government” is the most

obvious feature of Chinese ECEQAI. However, according to the institutional change theory of HI, the government-led ECEQAI will enter another state of imbalance after a period of balance, that is, there would be a risk of failure in ECEQAI led and controlled by government. The best way to “avoid” this risk is to gradually balance the “nation-market-society”, and the power balance of the three is the foundation for the institution to remain stable. At present, the national power is “naturally strong” and the market power is relatively stable. Only society power is relatively weak due to “congenital deficiency”. In the West, society power first emerged, and gradually there was political countries. Unlike the Western countries, society power in China was produced within the socialist countries. In the past 40 years of RO, although society power was quietly rising in China, we must admit that there is no “a free mass organization that is not subject to control of national power” in contemporary China (Deng & Alexander, 2006). In other words, China’s society power still need to be further developed. Society power mainly refer to mass organizations, research institutions, NGO organizations, and mass media related to ECE. To promote the development of society power, the government should continue to transform its functions, play the role of “limited government”, strengthen the macro management of ECEQA, and improve the governance effect. The development of society power is the basic condition for the three-pole power equilibrium pattern of China’s ECEQAI.

The essence of ECEQA is a game that conducted by nation, market, and society in order to achieve their respective interests and quality demands. In this process, the responsibilities of nation, market, and society are different and independent. However, the power of these three poles is limited and cannot shoulder the sole responsibility of ECEQA. Therefore, the direction of the future ECEQAI should be that the three poles “maintain a balanced state of mutual cooperation and restraint (Mo & Huang, 2006)”. Therefore, regardless of China, the United States, Australia or South Korea, it is in the “three-pole power integration stage” led by government. As

mentioned above, the ECEQAI in China at this stage shows the characteristics of “strong government, weak market and society”. Under the background of the international community’s continuous enhancement of the government’s leading role in ECEQAI, and the pressure of public opinion inside the country, Chinese government has continuously encountered the “legitimacy crisis”. Starting from political stability, the government needs to constantly adjust the interaction between the state, market and society in the field of ECEQA. The public interest policy currently being implemented is a strong proof that government adjusts the relationship with market. And in recent years, the government has deliberately strengthened expert consultation and public opinion collection when formulating ECE policies, which is also a concrete manifestation of government adjust the relationship with society.

Nevertheless, the interaction of nation, market and society, both in scope and depth, needs to be further reconstructed. Communication and positive interaction will be the development direction of nation–market–society relationship.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the authorship or publication of this paper.

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