

## A Content Analysis of Teacher Honor Policies in China

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### ABSTRACT

This study employed content analysis methodology using the 3W1H analysis framework to analyze the text of teacher honor policy in China from four aspects of “why”, “who” and “how”, and summarized its characteristics and problems. Data from the participants was collected to examine 27 teachers' honor policies in 18 provinces in China. The results revealed the following characteristics and problems; (1) Pay attention to the ideological guidance in the purpose of selection, but less attention to honor incentive. (2) There are many restrictions on the non-performance conditions of participating teachers, and the incentive scope is limited. (3) The one vote veto system is implemented in evaluating teachers' ethics, but it lacks operability, and the overall requirements are relatively low. (4) In the performance evaluation, the evaluation of teaching achievement is vague, and the tendency of only paper is obvious. (5) In the selection procedure, the participation of students, parents and society is small, lacking openness. Hence, this study recommends the following measures can be taken to enhance the policy; (1) Give full play to the instrumentality of policy and promote the systematizations and adaptability of functional positioning. (2) Moderately liberalize the restrictions such as age and education, and strengthen the operability of teachers' ethics and teaching assessment.

### Keywords

Teacher honorary title; teacher honor policy in China; teacher evaluation; content analysis method

### Introduction

The award of honorary title is an incentive way to recognize, respect and commend employees. Usually, it is symbolic and spiritual, but once for a while, accompanied by material incentives. From the perspective of psychology, an honorary title can meet the needs of individual respect and self-realization (Maslow, 1943). It can improve their self-efficacy, sense of well-being, organizational commitment and career commitment, stimulating their work engagement and organizational citizenship behavior (Kernaghan, 2001; Robert et al., 2012; Bradler, 2016). In the practice of human resource management in industry and commerce, an honorary award is a common employee incentive method and can substantially increase performance (Gallus, & Frey, 2016). Moreover, awards may affect behavior through several mechanisms: conferring employer recognition, enhancing social visibility, and facilitating social comparison (Ashraf, 2014). In the field of education, Honor reflects the contribution and

value of the titled teachers, which is the recognition of efforts and achievements of teachers and affects teachers' self-growth and psychological capital to a great extent (Collins, 1990; Jones & Moore, 1993). Compared to costly interventions where teachers receive financial incentives, the effects of an honorary award for praised teachers are remarkably large (Cotofan, 2021). Besides, teacher honor awards can positively guide more teachers to learn from honor winners (Chism, 2006). Furthermore, it helps create a positive and healthy teaching atmosphere and form a social fashion of respecting teachers and valuing education.

For a long time, China has attached great importance to the teacher honor system and made a strong deployment to construct the teacher honor system at the national level. As early as 1955, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a national policy to allow schools and educational organizations to identify and recommend prominent teachers. Stepping into the new century, China government has sped to promote the teacher honor system. In 2010, *The Outline of*

*the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)* (National Planning Office, 2010) pointed out, "we should vigorously commend and publicize the advanced deeds of model teachers and establish honorary titles for teachers who have made outstanding contributions". In 2018, *The Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teachers Development in the New Era* (hereinafter called *The Opinions*) (the CPC Central Committee, & the State Council, 2018) further emphasized strengthening the recognition of teachers. "In addition to the selection and recognition of famous national teachers and national teaching achievement awards, all provinces are also required to do a good job in the selection of special-grade teachers (teji jiaoshi) following relevant national regulations, carry out various forms of teacher recognition and reward activities according to local conditions", which promotes the formation of a good trend of respecting teachers and valuing education in the society. According to the latest news (MOE, 2021), *The Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China (Revised Draft)* (Draft for Comments) proposes to explicitly set the teacher honor system into law and require that the government establish a teacher honor recognition system and establish a National Teacher Award. Governments and their relevant departments should also establish and improve the corresponding recognition and reward system to commend teachers with outstanding contributions. Raising the teacher honor from the general policy requirement to the mandatory requirement of the legal level fully affirms the significance and value of the construction of the teacher honor system. The construction of the teacher honor system has gradually become a hot issue concerned by teachers, managers and researchers.

Through the review and analysis of the existing relevant literature, it is found that the research in this field presents the following three characteristics. First, the number of Chinese publications about the teacher honor system is small. Searching in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the most popular Chinese literature base, we found only less than 20 papers published in core journals

about the teacher honor system. Second, the research content mainly discusses the development history of the honor system (Shi, 2017), worldwide honor system (Luo, 2014) as well as the problems in the practice of the current honor system, and there is little research on the policy text itself; Third, in terms of research methods, researchers mostly use theoretical research or normative research paradigm (Zhou, 2012; Zhang, & Zhang, 2021; Liu, & Yao, 2021), there are few empirical studies.

Honor policy is related to the top-level design of the teacher honor system and is an important basis for teacher honor selection in practice. Under the macro social background that the current teacher honor system has attracted much attention, using the content analysis method and based on the 3W1H analysis framework, this paper analyzes the text of teacher honor policy in many provinces from the four aspects of "why", "who", "what" and "how", and summarizes its characteristics and problems. On this basis, it is of great practical significance to provide targeted improvement suggestions.

## Methodology

### Research design

This research employed content analysis and applied the 3W1H analysis framework to analyze the text of teacher honor policy in China from four aspects of "why", "who" and "how", and summarized its characteristics and problem. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (and other meaningful matter) in the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis can prove to be a more powerful method than surveys and interviews because of its unobtrusive nature and its lack of reliance on subjective perceptions (Boettger, 2010). Therefore, content analysis is a scientific method to deeply analyze the text content and see the essence through the phenomenon. In addition, content analysis methods usually go through sampling, content-coding, establishing analysis categories, quantitative processing and so on.

Research setting

This research chose 18 regions (municipalities and autonomous regions directly under the central government) from the eastern, central and western regions as sample regions, including 6 provinces such as Shanghai and Zhejiang in the East, 8 provinces such as Jiangxi and Hubei in the middle, and 4 regions such as Chongqing and Gansu in the West as a setting. There were three main stages examined in the regions and first stage constituted the level of social and economic development of China. Second, search for relevant policy texts through the official website of the Ministry of Education, Peking University Fabio and the provincial-level official websites of education departments of all the sampling provinces. The criteria for text selection are as follows: (1) issued by the provincial government or provincial education administrative department, excluding the documents of provincial special committees. (2) Documents related to the honorary selection of teachers at the below-provincial level shall not be included. Some are not related to front-line teaching, or temporary honorary titles are not included; (3) The selection of honorary titles involving special-grade teachers, discipline leaders (xueke daitou ren) and backbone teachers (gugan jiaoshi), all of which have the widest impact on teachers in China. (4) The policies are still in use. Finally, 27 valid policies were selected, including 8 documents related to the selection of special-grade teachers, 12 documents related to selecting discipline leaders, and 7 documents related to the selection of backbone teachers.

Content coding

Following the phases of data collection, content coding was based on the text’s common coverage and structure of the teacher honor policy text, which is completely consistent with the 3W1H framework. Therefore, four first-class codes were set, including selection purpose, selection object, selection standard and selection procedure (see Table 1). Learn from the policy analysis framework of advice, incentive, capacity-building and systematic change put forward by American scholars Astin and Anthony (2012), and based on the theoretical construction of analyzing teacher honor system by Chinese scholars Liu Yue and others (2021), who divide teacher honor system into four legal functions: reward, encouragement, guidance and politics. Consequently, the selection purpose is divided into four secondary codes: ideological guidance, ability development, system reform and incentive. According to the common demographic variables, the selected objects are divided into five secondary codes: age, teaching age, professional title, position, educational background and basic honor. The second-class codes of the selection criteria are divided into basic criteria and priority criteria. The basic criteria refer to the basic items that teachers need to obtain an honorary title, including teachers' ethics, teaching style, teaching performance and scientific research performance, all of which are requirements for obtaining the honorary title. At the same time, the priority criteria are an additional condition for teachers to obtain the honorary title under the same basic criteria, which is not a must. The second-class codes under the selection procedure are divided into the bottom-up selection and top-down selection. Sort out and count relevant literature information with N-vivo12 software.

Table 1. Policy text analysis framework

First-class coding		Second-class coding
Why	selection purpose	ideological guidance, ability development, system reform and incentive
Who	selection object	age, teaching age, professional title, position, educational background and basic honor
What	selection criteria	basic criteria and priority criteria

How	selection procedure	bottom-up selection and top-down selection
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Reliability and Validity

In order to ensure the reliability of the selected policy samples, we strictly implement the standard research procedures. Firstly, the coders are trained on the research purpose and coding standards. Next, a policy text is randomly selected and coded by two coders according to the previous training. Then, holistic formula  $K = (2M / N1 + N2)$  is used to calculate the consistency ratio of content analysis, where M is the column that both agree, N1 is the number of columns analyzed by the first coder, N2 is the number of columns analyzed by the second coder, and the K value in this study is 0.88, indicating good reliability. Based on ensuring the coding consistency, the two coders will complete the coding of other policy texts independently. Because each policy text has a relatively clear content structure, and this study has a clear research purpose and a pre-determined first-class and second-class coding, it better ensures that the representation of the classification plan or classification scope to the research hypothesis and the scope of the research results meet the expected purpose, and the internal and external validity can be guaranteed.

Results

The teacher honor policies of different provinces are formulated according to related policy frameworks, and they also have great similarities in text structure and content. Coding analysis shows the following common characteristics and problems in the current teacher honor system. Selection purpose: more attention is paid to the ideological guidance, but less to the honor incentive. Teacher honor policy in China has many purposes, mainly including ideological guidance, ability development, system reform, incentive, etc. Through the analysis of policy purpose coding, it is found that most policies emphasize the multiple purposes of the honor system, especially the ideological orientation, but

less incentive for the honor. The specific performance is as follows. The average response percentage of ideological guidance is 91.7%, ranking first among the four policy objectives. It emphasizes that teachers' work lies in the basic political nature of educating people for the country. China's political system determines that honorary teacher must have excellent ideological and political quality and excellent teachers' ethics, and drive the self-construction of teachers' political literacy and professional ethics through the ideological guidance of honor policy. Promoting teachers' ability development is also an important purpose of implementing the teachers' honor system, and the response percentage is 67.9%. Relevant departments focus on the long-term development of teachers and look forward to further promoting the development of teachers' teaching level, scientific research level and radiation driving ability through teacher honor policy. For example, Chongqing's selection of backbone teachers puts forward to building a high-quality professional and innovative teaching team. The purpose of implementing the honor system also includes supporting weak schools, rural education and the formation of teacher echelon development. The response times are 9, 15 and 11, respectively, accounting for an average of 41.7%. In terms of specific evaluation criteria, this purpose is generally concretized as a priority to promote educational equity and the construction of teachers. The incentive is the basic function of the honor system. Some places have also put forward corresponding measures. For example, discipline leaders in Zhejiang province enjoy the treatment of provincial Advanced Workers and Model Workers and also enjoy the financial subsidies provided by the provincial government. Shanghai and other places have also determined that special subsidies are available for special-grade teachers, which are still effective after retirement. However, the study found that the average response ratio to



motivate teachers was 32.1%, accounting for the lowest proportion among the four main purposes.

**Selection object: too many restrictions on the non-performance conditions of candidate teachers, leading the incentive scope limited**

The results of the study shows that all provinces put forward requirements for non-performance conditions such as age, educational background and professional title of candidate teachers. In terms of age, 37% of policies have clear limit requirements. Except that the selection of special-grade teachers in Shandong Province is limited to the legal retirement age, in other provinces, male teachers over the age of 55 and female teachers over the age of 50 have no right to gain these honorary titles. 15% of the policies have the lowest limit in terms of academic qualifications. For example, primary school teachers should have a college degree or above when selecting special-grade teachers in Inner Mongolia, and junior middle school teachers should have a bachelor's degree or above. In addition, 44%, 59% and 63% of the policies set the minimum standards in terms of professional title, teaching age and basic honor, respectively. For example, Hubei Province requires special-grade teacher candidates to have more than 5 years of senior professional title (Gaoji jiaoshi) in principle, and Gansu Province requires discipline leaders or backbone teachers to have been engaged in education and teaching for more than 10 years, Heilongjiang Province requires those who have won provincial and ministerial honors and above to make new outstanding contributions in recent 5 years before they can participate in the evaluation.

In addition, the results show demographic variables such as professional title, basic honor, teaching age, age and position account for about 20% to 60% of the full policy text, if they are combined into one variable, the share of these variables in the same text will reach 100%. In other words, age and professional title have become requirements for honor selection. There is also a certain internal correlation between these variables. For example, if it is required to select a special-grade teacher to be a senior teacher first, while being a senior teacher will take at least 10

years or more, and the age and teaching age will naturally rise accordingly. Although there is no minimum age limit in the text, there is generally a requirement that the minimum teaching age is 5 years.

Furthermore, teachers aged 40 and 50 are more likely to obtain provincial honors, limiting the qualification of a large number of really excellent young teachers and older teachers to obtain provincial honors. Although teachers of other ages may meet the standards in terms of teaching performance, scientific research, radiation and social responsibility, they may be stuck in these requirements that are not directly related to job performance. Moreover, this policy is contrary to the explicit requirement of the Overall Plan for Deepen Education Evaluation Reform in the New Era (hereinafter called the Overall Plan) (the State Council, 2020) that "the title of talents shall not be used as a restrictive condition for undertaking scientific research projects, professional title evaluation and employment, excellent evaluation and award". Objectively, it limits the enthusiasm of young teachers and promotes the sense of dusk of old teachers. This is consistent with the conclusion obtained by Zhang (2014) that there are significant differences in teacher honor acquisition at the levels of education, professional title and age.

Selection criteria about ethics: the one vote veto system is implemented in the evaluation of teachers' ethics, but it lacks of operability, and the overall requirements are low.

The Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Construction of Teachers' Ethics in the New Era (hereinafter called the Opinions of Ethics) (MOE et al., 2021) put forward, "Put the assessment of teachers' ethics in the primary position ". All provinces strictly implement the policy and take political literacy and teachers' ethics performance as the first standard for the selection of honorary teachers, with a coverage rate of 100%, which is also highly consistent with the primary purpose of guiding ideological guidance. However, further analysis of the specific contents of the evaluation of teachers' ethics shows the following two issues. The investigation of teachers' ethics is usually lacking in operability. Most honor policies do not form operable indicators for evaluating political

literacy and teachers' ethics. Although 27% of the policies require the submission of teachers' annual assessment, Fujian Province requires that the annual assessment results in recent five years be qualified or above and at least one excellent grade. The annual assessment still cannot fully truly and effectively reflect teachers' ethics.

The evaluation standard of teachers' ethics is relatively low. Although 56% of the teachers' honor policies put forward, those who have one of the following problems, such as teacher ethics, major teaching accidents, extra curriculum-making up, practice fraud, are not allowed to be customized. The negative list system of teachers' ethics only sets out a bottom line for every teacher, and it cannot truly reflect the progressive nature of the honor teachers' ethics. Honorary teachers are the leaders and models among ordinary teachers. The assessment of honorary teachers' ethics cannot only stay in teachers' basic professional ethics requirements.

Selection criteria about performance: the evaluation of teaching performance is vague, and the tendency of paper first is obvious.

The honor selection standards of all provinces have made requirements for teaching performance and scientific research performance, with a coverage rate of 100%, but the specific requirements for educational performance are vague. For example, Jiangxi Province requires the participating teachers to achieve remarkable teaching results in selecting discipline leaders, but there are no specific requirements on the extent to which the teaching results are remarkable. In selecting teachers' honors, weakening students' scores is, to a certain extent, following the requirements of the Overall Plan to reverse the unscientific orientation of educational evaluation and overcome the stubborn malaria of only scores. However, scores are important components of teaching performance in the primary and secondary school stage and an important embodiment of education quality. To overcome the "only score" and "only enrollment rate" is not to completely deny the score and enrollment rate. Teaching performance should still be one of the most important evaluation aspects in the teacher honor system.

The one-side weakening will inevitably lead to the strengthening of the other side. The weakening of teaching performance objectively leads to strengthening scientific research performance, which is often narrowed to paper selection, forming a "paper only" teacher honor selection tendency. From the selection dimension, it can be found that the number of papers can eventually open the gap between candidates. As a result, the honor selection of backbone teachers and other kinds of honor teachers finally depends on the paper selection, which does not meet the spiritual requirements of the Overall Plan.

Although the quantitative paper evaluation on the surface ensures fairness, it essentially turns the honor system's incentive into competitiveness. Participating teachers fall into the preparation of more utilitarian honor competitions. Such an honor system does not arouse teachers' inner sense of responsibility, self-esteem, obligation, honor and other beneficial moral feelings (Lu, & Xie, 2017).

Selection procedure: the participation of students, parents and society is small, lacking openness.

A person's role is defined by the rules constructed by the social organization structure, and identity is the source of the actor's meaning. Likewise, teachers' sense of honor is the construction of teachers' sense of honor. The recognition from students, parents and society is of great significance to the construction of teachers' sense of honor. However, in terms of the whole selection process of honorary teachers, all the provinces usually adopt a relatively closed route of "school nomination - expert selection - manager determination". Although all provinces have established corresponding publicity and supervision systems, only a few people who pay attention to the honor selection on the official websites can see and pay attention to the relevant publicity information, and the top-down selection procedure is dominant. The text analysis found that only 11% of the selection policies included student satisfaction. For example, in the selection of discipline teachers in Fujian Province, the student evaluation satisfaction rate is required to be more than 85%, but the selection mechanism of social participation has not been introduced. This is consistent with the empirical research

conclusion of Wang and Zeng (2017) on the honor acquisition experience of primary and secondary school teachers in Z city of China. If the honor selection lacks broad popularity, it will reduce the social value of teachers' honor, resulting in a certain fair risk in the selection process, which virtually reduces the authority of teachers' honor.

### Discussions

According to the findings of this study, we put forward the following suggestions based on discussion.

Give full play to the instrumentality of policies and promote the systematisms and adaptability of teacher honor policies. As a tool to implement the relevant national political requirements, teacher honor policy should closely follow the policy objectives and fully play an instrumental nature. From the internal perspective of education, the teacher honor system can guide teachers to have the correct direction of education and teaching, ensure that teachers abide by the bottom line of teachers' ethics, and promote the improvement of teachers' education and teaching ability. From the external perspective of education, the teacher honor system can play the radiation role of excellent teachers and drive the overall development of teachers. All provinces comprehensively consider the functional purpose of the honor system, promote the systematisms and adaptability of the practical orientation, and give full play to its due functions. The specific suggestions are as follows.

Continue to consolidate the leading ideological role of the honor policy, guide teachers to become good teachers with ideals and beliefs, moral sentiment, solid knowledge and benevolence, and lead students' development with the improvement of the ideological quality of teachers.

Further, strengthen the incentive of honor policy. Each policy carries a variety of functions. Different functions are emphasized in different policies. The most closely related to the honor policy should be the incentive function. However, the current research has found that the incentive response rate is the lowest among the four functional purposes, which should be improved,

and the incentive conditions should be optimized to improve the added value of teachers' honor.

Combine with the specific local conditions at that time, appropriately adjust the importance ranking of the functional objectives of the policy, and coordinate the actual weight of the policy objectives in the honor selection. Many provinces have set priority standards to respond to timely environmental requirements in the honor policy. For example, the selection of special-grade teachers in Shanghai in 2020 takes making special contributions during the epidemic as the priority recommendation item, which temporarily improves the importance of the purpose of system reform.

Moderately liberalize restrictions such as age and education, and strengthen the operability of teachers' ethics and teaching performance assessment.

Teacher honor is a kind of professional honor. It fully reflects teachers' social existence and social value orientation. It is the expression of the unity of personal self-worth and social value. Teachers' honor undertakes the important mission of guiding teachers' values, behavior incentive, diagnosis and evaluation, and plays a positive honor effect on society. Therefore, we should further expand the incentive scope of honor policy and improve the rationality and operability of the selection criteria of honor policy, to give full play to the advantages and value of China's honor policy. The specific suggestions are as follows.

The teacher honor policies should expand the openness of the basic items for selection so that truly excellent teachers will not miss the honorary title for the sake of their age, teaching age, professional title or diploma. In particular, we should resolutely solve the problems of "hat only" and "diploma only" based on basic honors to stimulate and release the vitality of teachers.

The teacher honor policies should strictly implement the Opinions of Ethics, adhere to multi-party evaluation, take facts as the basis, take ideas, beliefs and moral sentiments as the core evaluation points, adopt high standards and strict requirements for the evaluation of honorary teachers' ethics, pay attention to both the negative list of teachers' ethics and the collection of positive signals of teachers' ethics. Also, the

policies should combine with a wide range of qualitative and quantitative materials, comprehensively and objectively evaluate the performance of teachers' ethics, improve the scientific and effectiveness of the evaluation, and ensure the reliability and validity of the evaluation of teachers' ethics and style.

While vigilant against the tendency of the one-sided pursuit of higher scores, the policies should admit scores in green evaluation indicators, face the role of scores in the evaluation of primary and secondary school teachers, and recognize the performance of teachers' main teaching work. In selecting honorary teachers, all regions and schools should ensure that students meet the academic quality standards.

Improve the openness of the selection process and establish a diversified selection mechanism combining top-down and bottom-up.

Designing a fair and open selection procedure is the key to process fairness and result fairness. The specific strategies that can be adopted include as follows.

- Form a top-down and bottom-up selection procedure. Introduce a diversified participation mechanism, and learn from the Year Teacher of the United States, Britain and Singapore. The honor awarded by government departments comes from the high recognition of students and parents. We should pay special attention to students' and parents' opinions and give peer teachers, students, and parents the right to speak before, during, and after the selection, rather than just the right to disagree with the publicity.
- Pay attention to the construction of the tripartite review team. Relevant departments shall coordinate the construction of a tripartite review team, adopt the selection system of selection

personnel, and do a good job in training review personnel. Standardize the tripartite selection process, improve the transparency of the selection mechanism, reduce administrative intervention in the selection process and reduce the influence of other improper forces.

- Improve the publicity and publicity mechanism of honor selection results, guide the society to respect honorary teachers, give full play to the exemplary and leading role of honorary teachers to teachers and society, and create a good social atmosphere of respecting teachers and valuing education.

### Limitations

Based on the content analysis method, this study analyzes the provincial-level teacher honor policy in China, comprehensively discovers the outstanding characteristics and problems existing at present, and gives specific policy suggestions. However, this study can also be improved from the following two aspects. First, in the sampling scope of the study, although the honor of provincial policy is the foundation for county-level and school-level policy, different counties and schools have their specific teacher honor policies. Therefore, the future study can focus on a smaller area, mining the status quo of teacher honor policy. Second, only the content analysis method is used in this study in terms of research methods. Since the content analysis method is mainly based on existing texts. Exactly speaking, it has found problems existing in the policy texts. Therefore, we can use interviews, questionnaires, and other methods to carry out this study more comprehensively and in-depth.

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