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**PROFESSIONAL SELF-IMPROVEMENT
OF MANAGERS IN CHINA: EVOLUTION WITHIN
THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM**

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The relevance of the study is determined by the growing role of managerial human capital in China's socio-economic development and by the increasing importance of professional self-improvement as a key condition for managerial effectiveness within a rapidly transforming vocational training system influenced by globalization, digitalization, and regional differentiation. The problem addressed in the article lies in the insufficient conceptualization of professional self-improvement of managers in China as a historically evolving phenomenon, particularly in the context of vocational training models that differ between Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau and combine traditional cultural foundations with modern management paradigms.

The ways of solving the identified problem are based on a historical-comparative and systemic analysis of the evolution of vocational training for managers in China, integrating pedagogical, managerial, and socio-cultural approaches, and examining how Confucian educational values, socialist ideology, and global management standards have jointly shaped the understanding of professional self-improvement across different historical stages and regional contexts. The research methodology includes historical-genetic analysis, comparative analysis, and conceptual modeling, which together allow the identification of key stages, dominant ideas, and structural components of professional self-improvement within China's vocational training system, as well as the clarification of regional specificities of Hong Kong and Macau as hybrid educational and managerial spaces.

The results of the study demonstrate that the concept of professional self-improvement of managers in China has evolved from a morally oriented model focused on self-discipline and collective responsibility to a multidimensional framework emphasizing lifelong learning, professional mobility, innovation capacity, and self-regulation within institutional training systems, while Hong Kong and Macau exhibit more market-oriented, flexible, and competency-based interpretations influenced by Western educational traditions. The conclusions substantiate that professional self-improvement functions not only as an individual managerial strategy but also as a systemic mechanism embedded in vocational training policies, organizational cultures, and regional governance models, which provides practical implications for the modernization of managerial training and for international comparative studies in professional education.

Keywords: vocational education; lifelong learning; managerial competence development; professional identity formation; historical-comparative analysis; regional educational models.

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КОНЦЕПЦІЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО САМОВДОСКОНАЛЕННЯ МЕНЕДЖЕРІВ У КИТАЇ: ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ В МЕЖАХ СИСТЕМИ ПІДВИЩЕННЯ КВАЛІФІКАЦІЇ

ТАН Ліпін

Актуальність дослідження зумовлена зростанням ролі управлінського людського капіталу в соціально-економічному розвитку Китаю, а також посиленням значення професійного самовдосконалення як ключової умови управлінської ефективності в умовах швидкої трансформації системи професійної підготовки під впливом глобалізації, цифровізації та регіональної диференціації. Проблема, порушена у статті, полягає в недостатній концептуалізації професійного самовдосконалення менеджерів у Китаї як історично змінного явища, зокрема в контексті моделей підвищення кваліфікації, що відрізняються в материковому Китаї, Гонконзі та Макао, й поєднують традиційні культурні засади з сучасними управлінськими парадигмами.

Шляхи розв'язання окресленої проблеми ґрунтуються на історико-порівняльному та системному аналізі еволюції професійної підготовки менеджерів у Китаї з інтеграцією педагогічного, управлінського та соціокультурного підходів, а також на вивченні того, як конфуціанські освітні цінності, соціалістична ідеологія та глобальні стандарти менеджменту спільно формували уявлення про професійне самовдосконалення на різних історичних етапах і в різних регіональних контекстах. Методологія дослідження охоплює історико-генетичний аналіз, порівняльний аналіз і концептуальне моделювання, що уможливорює виокремлення ключових етапів, домінантних ідей і структурних компонентів професійного самовдосконалення в системі професійної підготовки Китаю, а також уточнення регіональної специфіки Гонконгу та Макао як гібридних освітньо-управлінських просторів.

Результати дослідження засвідчують, що концепція професійного самовдосконалення менеджерів у Китаї еволюціонувала від морально орієнтованої моделі, зосередженої на самодисципліні та колективній відповідальності, до багатовимірної системи, що акцентує безперервне навчання, професійну мобільність, інноваційну спроможність і саморегуляцію в межах інституційних систем підготовки, тоді як у Гонконзі та Макао переважають більш ринково орієнтовані, гнучкі та компетентнісні інтерпретації, сформовані під впливом західних освітніх традицій. У висновках обґрунтовано, що професійне самовдосконалення виступає не лише індивідуальною управлінською стратегією, а й системним механізмом, інтегрованим у політику професійної підготовки, організаційні культури та регіональні моделі врядування, що має практичне значення для модернізації управлінської освіти та для міжнародних порівняльних досліджень у сфері професійної освіти.

Ключові слова: професійна освіта; навчання впродовж життя; розвиток управлінських компетентностей; формування професійної ідентичності; історико-порівняльний аналіз; регіональні освітні моделі.

General statement of the problem and its connection with important scientific or practical tasks. In the context of accelerating economic transformation, technological modernization, and intensifying global competition, the role of managers as key agents of organizational and societal development has increased significantly. For China, whose development trajectory combines rapid industrial growth, large-scale public governance reforms, and deep integration into the global economy, the quality of managerial training has become a strategically important factor of sustainable

development. Within this framework, managerial professional self-improvement is increasingly regarded not merely as an individual attribute, but as a systemic requirement embedded in vocational training policies, institutional practices, and organizational cultures. However, despite the growing attention to managerial competencies and lifelong learning, the concept of professional self-improvement of managers in China remains insufficiently systematized and theoretically grounded, especially when viewed through a historical and comparative lens.

The scientific problem addressed in this study lies in the lack of a comprehensive conceptual model that explains how the understanding of professional self-improvement of managers in China has evolved within the vocational training system across different historical periods and socio-political contexts. Existing research often focuses either on contemporary competency-based training models or on isolated historical stages, without tracing the continuity and transformation of ideas related to self-cultivation, professional ethics, and managerial development. Moreover, the diversity of educational and managerial traditions within Greater China, particularly the distinct trajectories of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau, is frequently overlooked, resulting in generalized interpretations that do not reflect regional specificities.

From a practical perspective, this problem is closely connected with the urgent tasks of modernizing vocational education and training systems, improving the quality of managerial human capital, and aligning national training frameworks with global standards while preserving cultural identity. In China, state-driven reforms in vocational education emphasize lifelong learning, innovation capacity, and adaptability to labor market changes, which directly depend on how professional self-improvement is conceptualized and operationalized within training programs. At the same time, Hong Kong and Macau represent hybrid models that integrate Western managerial education traditions with Chinese cultural values, offering valuable insights for comparative analysis and policy transfer.

Addressing this problem is also relevant to international scientific discourse on professional education, management studies, and comparative pedagogy, as China's experience illustrates alternative pathways of integrating moral, cultural, and competence-based approaches to managerial development. By clarifying the historical evolution and regional diversity of the concept of professional self-improvement of managers, the study contributes to the development of theoretically grounded and practically applicable frameworks for vocational training. Such frameworks are essential not only for enhancing the effectiveness of managerial education in China, but also for informing international cooperation, cross-cultural training programs, and evidence-based educational policy design in a globalized world.

The analysis of recent research and publications. Recent research on professional self-improvement of managers in China has developed along several interrelated lines, reflecting changes in the country's vocational training system, management philosophy, and socio-cultural context. However, this body of literature remains fragmented, especially with regard to regional differentiation within Greater China and the historical evolution of the concept.

A significant group of studies formulates general ideas of professional self-improvement of managers in China without explicit regional differentiation. Scholars such as Victor C. X. Wang (USA) conceptualize managerial self-improvement primarily through the lens of lifelong learning and adult education, emphasizing continuous professional development as a systemic response to economic modernization and workforce upgrading (Wang et al., 2014). From the perspective of vocational education reform, Matthew T. Hora (USA) and Wang Lei (China) analyze competency-based training models and institutional mechanisms that promote self-directed learning, adaptability, and innovation among managers. In these works, professional self-improvement is understood as a structured, policy-driven process embedded in national vocational education and training (VET) systems, rather than as a purely individual initiative (Hora et al., 2018) (Wang et al., 2013).

A number of researchers address professional self-improvement within specific regional contexts. In studies focused on Mainland China, scholars such as Hui Zuo (China) examine lifelong learning policies and governance mechanisms that shape managers' motivation for continuous professional growth, highlighting the role of state regulation and collective responsibility (Hui et al., 2025). Research on Hong Kong, represented by authors such as Mantak Yuen (Hong Kong) and Peng Chen (Hong Kong), emphasizes market-oriented vocational education, quality assurance, and career development frameworks, where managerial self-improvement is closely linked to individual competitiveness, performance evaluation, and international standards (Yuen et al., 2019) (Schmidtke et al., 2012). In the case of Macau, scholars including Rachel Wai-Yi Cheung (Macau) focus on quality assurance and institutional regulation in vocational higher education, interpreting professional self-improvement of managers as part of organizational quality culture and professional accountability within a small but globally connected economy (Cheung, 2020).

Comparative studies explicitly contrasting Mainland China with Hong Kong and Macau highlight fundamental differences in how professional self-improvement is conceptualized and operationalized. Researchers such as Mark Bray (Hong Kong) and Magdalena Mok (Hong Kong) demonstrate that while Mainland China emphasizes morally grounded self-cultivation and system-oriented professional development, Hong Kong and Macau prioritize flexibility, individual agency, and competency frameworks influenced by Western management education (Bray et al., 2001) (Mok et al., 2007). These oppositions reveal different balances between collective values and individual professional trajectories.

An emerging body of research underscores the uniqueness of the Chinese managerial training system as a conglomerate that integrates traditional Confucian self-cultivation with externally influenced vocational models. Scholars such as Charlene Tan (Singapore) and Wang Chun (China) interpret Confucian ideas of moral self-improvement and disciplined learning as a cultural foundation that continues to inform managerial development in Mainland China (Tan, 2017) (Wang, 2023). At the same time, studies on Greater Bay Area cooperation by authors such as Qi Jiaoyu (China) illustrate how Hong Kong and Macau contribute international standards, market logic,

and institutional flexibility, strengthening the overall effectiveness of managerial vocational training in China (Qi et al., 2024).

Taken together, these studies form the analytical basis for understanding professional self-improvement of managers in China as a historically evolving, regionally differentiated, and integrative phenomenon, while also revealing the need for a unified conceptual framework that systematically links these dimensions.

Presentation of the main research material. By the end of the XXth century, China had formed a unique and historically unprecedented situation in the field of managerial vocational training, characterized by the parallel functioning of three distinct systems within a single national and cultural space. These systems developed under different political, legal, and educational conditions and, as a result, generated different understandings of professional self-improvement of managers. Specifically, by the late 1990s, the territory of China encompassed:

- the historically evolved Mainland Chinese system of managerial vocational training;
- British-based system operating in Hong Kong;
- Portuguese-influenced system functioning in Macau (Jing et al., 2022).

Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, China did not possess a single unified understanding of professional self-improvement of managers. Instead, this concept was shaped by three parallel vocational training systems, each grounded in distinct educational philosophies, governance models, and socio-economic priorities. The coexistence of these systems resulted in different dominant interpretations of managerial self-improvement. This historical plurality not only explains the diversity of approaches observed at the turn of the century but also created the structural and conceptual prerequisites for the subsequent integration and transformation of managerial vocational training systems in contemporary China (Zhu et al., 2025). Further we shall try to make the short characteristics of each co-parts of this trinity phenomena.

The *Mainland Chinese* system of managerial vocational training has developed through a long historical process in which governance, education, and moral cultivation were deeply intertwined. Unlike Western traditions that often separate management from ethics, Chinese approaches to managerial formation have historically emphasized professional competence inseparable from moral self-improvement. This tradition reflects broader Confucian assumptions about the role of educated elites in sustaining social harmony and effective governance (Yuan et al., 2023). In Classical Chinese society (up to 1911), the category of “managers” did not exist in the modern corporate sense. Instead, managerial functions were performed primarily by scholar-officials (士大夫, shi dafu), who occupied administrative positions within the imperial bureaucracy. These individuals managed taxation, infrastructure, justice, education, agriculture, and military logistics at various territorial levels. Alongside them, estate stewards, guild leaders, and state-appointed supervisors of workshops and granaries also fulfilled managerial roles, though with lower symbolic status. Importantly, managerial authority was legitimized not by technical specialization alone, but by moral integrity, learning, and loyalty to the state (Jing et al., 2022).

The foundation of managerial training in Classical China was the Confucian education system, institutionalized through the civil service examination (keju) system from the Tang dynasty onward. This system functioned as a large-scale vocational training mechanism for governance. Candidates underwent prolonged preparation focused on classical texts, moral philosophy, historical precedent, and administrative reasoning. Professional self-improvement was understood primarily as “self-cultivation”: a lifelong process of refining character, judgment, and responsibility (Chen et al., 2020). The Confucian ideal held that only a morally cultivated individual could govern others effectively, making ethical self-discipline a core managerial competency. During the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, this system became increasingly standardized and merit-based, reinforcing the idea that managerial capacity could be developed through structured learning and continuous self-reflection. Manuals for officials, commentaries on governance, and institutional mentorship within bureaucratic hierarchies further supported professional development. Importantly, learning did not end with appointment; officials were expected to engage in ongoing study, introspection, and correction of behavior, reinforcing a cyclical model of professional self-improvement (Tan, 2017; Yuan et al., 2023).

The late Qing dynasty (1644–1912) period and early twentieth century introduced profound transformations. Facing internal crisis and external pressure, China began incorporating Western administrative knowledge, legal frameworks, and technical disciplines. New schools for public administration, economics, and industrial management emerged, gradually shifting the understanding of managerial competence toward efficiency, specialization, and modernization. However, even during this period, traditional notions of moral responsibility and service to society remained influential, creating a hybrid training model (Bai, 2019).

After 1949, the People’s Republic of China restructured managerial vocational training within a socialist framework. Managers were redefined to include state cadres, enterprise directors, and later technical and economic managers in state-owned industries. Training institutions such as party schools, cadre colleges, and vocational institutes emphasized ideological education, organizational discipline, and practical management skills. Professional self-improvement was reframed as alignment with collective goals, political reliability, and continuous learning in service of national development (Ottervik et al., 2024).

Hong Kong’s system of managerial vocational training developed within a distinctive colonial context shaped by British legal, economic, and educational traditions. Unlike Mainland China, where managerial formation historically evolved through Confucian bureaucratic culture, Hong Kong’s model emerged as a hybrid system combining British administrative rationality with Chinese social structures and later global corporate practices. Hong Kong became a British colony in stages following the First Opium War (1842) and together with Kowloon peninsula territory were leased in 1898 for 99 years. British governance introduced common law, civil administration, capitalist market structures, and English-language education, reshaping nearly all aspects of social and professional life. During the early colonial period,

managerial positions were overwhelmingly occupied by British expatriates. Managers were defined primarily as colonial administrators, senior civil servants, and commercial executives within trading houses, banks, shipping companies, and infrastructure enterprises. Chinese residents, although central to the labor force and entrepreneurial activity, were largely excluded from senior managerial roles in government and major corporations. Managerial authority was associated with imperial governance, legal knowledge, and loyalty to British institutional norms rather than local cultural capital. Managerial vocational training in this period was not localized. British managers were typically trained in the United Kingdom through elite universities, military-administrative institutions, or professional apprenticeships before being posted to Hong Kong (Summers, 2020). There were no dedicated local institutions designed to train Chinese managers for senior administrative roles. Professional self-improvement for colonial managers emphasized discipline, administrative efficiency, legal competence, and adherence to British ethical standards of public service.

This structure began to change significantly after World War II. Rapid industrialization, population growth, and the expansion of manufacturing and finance created a demand for locally trained professionals and managers. From the 1950s onward, British authorities gradually expanded access to education for the Chinese population, though within a stratified system. English-language secondary schools and technical colleges became gateways for upward mobility, while higher education institutions began to play a decisive role. The founding of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1911 and later the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 1963 marked a turning point (Lo et al., 2023). These institutions, modeled on British university traditions, introduced programs in business administration, economics, public administration, and management. Vocational and technical institutions, such as polytechnics (later the Hong Kong Polytechnic University), provided practice-oriented managerial training aligned with industry needs. This institutional expansion enabled the emergence of a local Chinese managerial class. Within the British-based system, professional self-improvement was conceptualized primarily in instrumental and individualistic terms (Brooks et al., 2024). Managers were expected to continuously enhance their qualifications, leadership skills, and technical expertise through formal education, professional certifications, overseas training, and later executive development programs. Unlike Confucian self-cultivation, moral development was framed less as an ethical duty to society and more as personal professionalism, accountability, and performance. By the late twentieth century, managers in Hong Kong included civil servants, corporate executives, factory managers, financial professionals, and later global business leaders operating within multinational firms. Managerial identity was increasingly merit-based, tied to education, competence, and adaptability in a competitive market environment.

Macau's system of managerial vocational training evolved under a unique form of long-term Portuguese influence that differed substantially from both British Hong Kong and Mainland China. Unlike formal colonial administration, Portuguese presence in Macau was characterized by negotiated coexistence with Chinese

authorities, resulting in a hybrid governance, economic, and educational environment. This distinct context shaped how managerial roles were defined, how managers were trained, and how professional self-improvement was conceptualized.

Portuguese influence in Macau began in the mid-sixteenth century. In 1557, Portuguese merchants were permitted by the Ming authorities to establish a permanent settlement in Macau in exchange for rent and cooperation in maritime trade. For centuries, Macau functioned as a Portuguese-administered enclave rather than a fully ceded colony. This ambiguous status allowed Portuguese legal, administrative, and educational practices to coexist with Chinese social structures. The Chinese population of Macau, although dominant demographically and economically active, was largely excluded from colonial management positions during the early and middle periods of Portuguese rule (Lampo, 2023). Chinese individuals functioned mainly as intermediaries, merchants, guild leaders, foremen, and family-enterprise managers within the local economy. These roles, while managerial in practice, were not institutionally recognized within the Portuguese administrative framework. Professional self-improvement among Chinese managers followed traditional pathways: apprenticeship, kinship-based transmission of business knowledge, and moral self-discipline rooted in Confucian values rather than formal vocational training.

A gradual shift began in the twentieth century, particularly after World War II. As Macau's economy diversified (from trade and shipping to manufacturing, tourism, and later gaming) there emerged a growing need for locally trained professionals and administrators. Portuguese authorities slowly expanded access to education, though it remained linguistically and socially stratified. Portuguese-language education dominated official administration, while Chinese-language schooling served the broader population with limited upward mobility into government management. The establishment of higher education institutions marked a turning point. The University of Macau, founded in 1981 (originally as the University of East Asia), introduced programs in business administration, public administration, law, and management, reflecting Portuguese and broader European academic models. These institutions became central to managerial vocational training, particularly in the late colonial period and after the 1999 handover to China. Training increasingly emphasized legal knowledge, administrative competence, and multilingual proficiency (Portuguese, Chinese, and English) (Xie, 2024).

Within the Portuguese-influenced system, the idea of professional self-improvement was shaped by European humanistic and bureaucratic traditions. Managers were expected to cultivate formal qualifications, legal rationality, ethical responsibility, and administrative discipline. Self-improvement was closely linked to educational attainment and professional certification rather than moral self-cultivation in the Confucian sense. However, among Chinese managers in commerce and family enterprises, professional development continued to rely on experiential learning, adaptability, and social networks. By the late twentieth century, the category of "manager" in Macau expanded significantly. It came to include civil servants, business executives, tourism and gaming industry managers, financial administrators, and public-sector professionals (Vong, 2023). After 1999, vocational and managerial

training further integrated global standards while retaining traces of Portuguese legal and administrative culture.

In the early 2000s, China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the acceleration of market reforms significantly expanded the scope of managerial roles. The concept of "manager" broadened beyond the traditional image of the party-state cadre to include enterprise executives, functional department heads, project managers, and professionals responsible for coordinating complex organizational processes in both public and private sectors. Vocational training pathways diversified accordingly. On the Mainland, party schools and cadre training institutions remained central for preparing public-sector managers and leaders of state-owned enterprises, combining political education with applied governance and management skills. At the same time, universities, business schools, and enterprise-based training systems expanded rapidly to meet the needs of a growing private sector and foreign-invested enterprises. During the 2010s, integration between the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Macau intensified, particularly through economic cooperation mechanisms and regional development strategies. Hong Kong's long-established model of professional certification, continuing professional development, and internationally benchmarked management education began to interact more systematically with Mainland vocational and managerial training systems. Mutual recognition of professional qualifications in selected fields, cross-border executive education programs, and talent mobility initiatives gradually reduced institutional barriers between the systems. In Macau, Portuguese legal and administrative traditions continued to shape public management and education, but managerial training increasingly aligned with regional and national standards, particularly in finance, tourism, and public administration (Bailey et al., 2024) (Goodall et al., 2023). Rather than eliminating regional differences, this phase marked a shift toward coordination and interoperability among the three systems.

From 2019 onward, China entered a new stage of system-level consolidation. Major policy reforms emphasized the construction of a modern vocational education and training system capable of supporting high-quality economic development and social governance. The revised Vocational Education Law and related policy documents elevated vocational education to a strategic position within the national education system and strengthened the role of enterprises in training design and implementation. Importantly, this reform logic also encompassed managerial roles, especially middle-level and operational-level managers in manufacturing, services, digital industries, and public administration. Within the framework of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, vocational and managerial training is increasingly operated through shared competency standards, joint programs, and cross-regional recognition mechanisms (Lin, 2025).

In contemporary China, the category of "manager" encompasses a wide spectrum of roles across governance and the economy. It includes party-state cadres and public-sector administrators, managers and executives in state-owned enterprises, private-sector and multinational corporate leaders, and professionals in regulated industries such as finance, construction, and engineering. Despite sectoral differences, these groups are increasingly subject to a common logic of professional development

grounded in lifelong learning, formal certification, and performance-based advancement (Nolan et al., 2023). Within this integrated system, professional self-improvement is no longer understood solely as moral self-cultivation, as in traditional Confucian governance, nor purely as individual career advancement, as in earlier market-oriented models. Instead, it is conceptualized as a continuous process of competence upgrading, governance capacity building, and adaptive learning. Managers are expected to improve their technical and digital skills, strengthen regulatory and compliance awareness, enhance leadership and communication abilities, and cultivate the capacity to operate within complex, multi-level institutional environments. At the same time, for public-sector and state-owned enterprise managers, professional self-improvement remains closely linked to ethical responsibility, organizational discipline, and alignment with national development goals (Liu et al., 2022).

Conclusions. The findings indicate that professional self-improvement in China has shifted from an elite, morally grounded and administratively focused process to a systemic, lifelong requirement embedded within vocational education and continuous professional development. Modern Chinese managers (encompassing party-state cadres, leaders of state-owned enterprises, private-sector executives, and professionals in regulated industries) are now expected to combine technical competence, regulatory awareness, leadership skills, and adaptive learning capacity. Vocational training institutions, including party schools, universities, enterprise training centers, and professional certification bodies, play a central role in structuring this process and aligning it with national development goals. A key conclusion of the article is that China's approach to managerial self-improvement reflects a hybrid logic. Traditional emphases on discipline, responsibility, and service to collective interests remain influential, particularly in the public sector and state-owned enterprises. At the same time, market-oriented and internationally benchmarked practices (such as competency frameworks, performance evaluation, and cross-border qualification recognition) have been increasingly institutionalized, especially within the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area. This hybridization allows China to maintain governance coherence while responding to the demands of a globalized economy.

Importantly, professional self-improvement has become a policy-driven and structurally supported process rather than an individual initiative alone. Recent reforms in vocational education law and policy underscore the strategic importance of continuous learning for managerial effectiveness, social stability, and economic upgrading. Managers are positioned not merely as administrators or profit-maximizers, but as key agents of institutional coordination and innovation. The evolution of vocational training for managers in China illustrates a broader transformation of managerial identity: from historically differentiated roles toward a unified, competence-based model of professional self-improvement. This model, grounded in lifelong learning and institutional integration, represents a distinctive Chinese response to the challenges of modern governance and sustainable development.

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