

Her Journey: The Growth Trajectory of an Educator-Principal

-- A Case Study of Zhang Guimei Based on Life Course Theory

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Abstract: This study employs life course theory to deeply analyze Principal Zhang Guimei's transformation from an ordinary teacher to an educator-principal. Focusing on three core trajectories—her educational experiences, emotional choices, and career development—this research clarifies her growth trajectory and examines how four dimensions (significant others, historical changes, individual agency, and life timing) interact to construct Zhang Guimei's unique and profound developmental path. The findings reveal that these four elements play distinctive roles of assistance, shaping, dominance, and promotion respectively, interacting and influencing each other. Among them, her husband assumed multiple functional roles, facilitating the occurrence of several critical events, such as supporting her university admission and her subsequent move to Huaping after his passing.

Keywords: Educator-principal; Zhang Guimei; Growth trajectory.

1. Introduction

In the strategic vision of the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020), China explicitly proposed cultivating a cohort of educators. The 2018 Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Team Construction in the New Era called for "creating an institutional environment where educators can emerge," while the 2019 Opinions on Deepening Educational Teaching Reform and Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Compulsory Education advocated "educator-led schooling"[1]. Faced with the profound call for educational leadership in the new era, the role and function of educator-principals have become particularly critical, as they bear significant missions in advancing educational progress and development.

Although academia has extensively explored the connotative characteristics, growth patterns, diverse influencing factors, and effective cultivation strategies of educator-principals from various dimensions—aiming to outline a universal path toward becoming an educator-principal—each educator's growth journey contains irreplaceable uniqueness and situational specificity. This study focuses on the process of how Ms. Zhang Guimei grew into an educator-principal, emphasizing the revelation of this unique process so that readers can appreciate the emotional fluctuations and inner struggles the protagonist carried at every decisive moment. The purpose is to demonstrate and illustrate [2].

Based on the perspective of life course theory, this study uses three core threads—Zhang Guimei's personal educational experiences, emotional choices, and career development—to deeply analyze the profound impacts of socio-historical changes, individual subjective will and self-shaping, key interpersonal relationships, and life timing on the formation of her educator identity. Particularly important

is that Ms. Zhang Guimei's educational practice and noble spiritual realm constitute a vivid and influential example. Her story may inspire numerous educators in China, especially teachers and principals, to develop passion for the educational cause.

2. Research Design

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

This study is conducted under the guidance of life course theory. Life course theory studies the impact of significant events on individual life trajectories, referring to the connection between individual development and socio-historical environments [3]. From existing research, "trajectory" and "turning point" are fundamental concepts and analytical themes in the current life course theory research paradigm. The four principles proposed by Elder constitute the essence of life course theory.

First, the "lives in time and space" principle essentially connects people with certain historical forces. Second, the "linked lives" principle: people always live within social relationships composed of relatives and friends. It is through specific social relationships that individuals are integrated into particular groups, and each generation is destined to be greatly affected by life events occurring in others' life courses. Third, the "timing of lives" principle: the timing of a life event may be more significant than the event itself, emphasizing the match between people and their environments. Fourth, the "human agency" principle: choices made by people in society are influenced not only by social contexts but also by personal experiences and personality characteristics.

Meanwhile, Principal Zhang Guimei's growth process also includes a series of role transitions and symbolic events, such as transformations from student to teacher to principal, and major events like founding the girls' high school. These experiences and events constitute key nodes in the formation of her educator-principal identity in chronological sequence, revealing role adaptation and professional development in individual life courses. Moreover, Principal Zhang Guimei's

growth trajectory involves the deep integration of social, psychological, and educational dimensions, demonstrating the interdisciplinary research characteristics of life course theory. Overall, life course theory is highly appropriate for studying Principal Zhang Guimei.

2.2. Research Subject

This study adopts Ma Xiaoli's definition of educator-principals: as an educator-principal, he/she possesses the common characteristics of educators—understanding educational laws, loving the educational cause, having educational passion, achieving fruitful educational results, and exerting extensive educational influence. He/she is a defender of educational faith, an explorer of educational authenticity, a pursuer of educational ideals, and a leader of educational development [4].

Zhang Guimei is undoubtedly an exemplary representative of educator-principals. First, mastery and application of educational laws: through professional study at Lijiang Education College and practice at Huaping Girls' High School, she implemented teaching according to students' aptitude by thoroughly understanding each student's background through home visits. Second, love for and dedication to the educational cause: she persisted in her post even during illness. Third, educational passion and social influence: facing the reality of gender inequality and uneven educational resources, she resolutely founded and successfully operated Huaping Girls' High School, providing educational opportunities for many impoverished girls. Her story has attracted widespread social attention and support. Fourth, upholding the educational philosophy proposed at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party: through practical activities such as home visits, donations, and founding the free girls' high school, she serves as a firm defender of educational faith and active explorer of educational essence. Fifth, pursuit and leadership of educational ideals: Zhang Guimei overcame difficulties with practical actions and persisted in her educational ideals.

2.3. Research Methods

This study focuses on the growth trajectory of Zhang Guimei, an educator with strong "representativeness," conducting in-depth process analysis through the diachronic of key nodes and important events in Principal Zhang Guimei's life. This study selects Principal Zhang Guimei's life history as the research framework and, based on detailed data collection including books, video records, articles, reports, and related news materials, presents her psychological journey and practical experiences at different stages in a three-dimensional manner.

Due to practical circumstances, direct in-depth interviews with Principal Zhang Guimei were impossible, which undoubtedly became a limitation of this study. Therefore, although the growth trajectory landscape of Principal Zhang Guimei constructed in this study largely reflects important stages and critical turning points in her development, the possibility of information gaps due to the inability to obtain direct oral history cannot be excluded. This is also a direction for future related research to further improve and expand—attempting to reveal the growth process and success factors of Zhang Guimei as an educator-principal more comprehensively and accurately through more diversified data sources and field investigations to compensate for this methodological limitation.

3. Zhang Guimei's Growth Trajectory

3.1. Educational Journey

3.1.1. Enlightenment of Love—Primary School

In an era marked by entrenched son preference, the newborn "Little Fifth" was met with neighbors' dismissive remarks: "Another worthless girl child." Undeterred, Zhang Guimei herself took the household registration booklet to the school to enroll. The family tacitly approved of this initiative; both her father and mother were delighted, for they cherished "Little Fifth" above all else. Thus, Zhang Guimei successfully commenced her primary education. The first song she learned at school was *The East Is Red*. She approached her teacher to inquire: "Who is Mao Zedong?" The female teacher, her countenance stern, responded with a single epithet: "Idiot!" Zhang Guimei had yearned to hear affirmation—"You are a clever and sensible child"—yet the teacher remained oblivious to this need. The word "idiot" precipitated profound feelings of inadequacy within her. Traumatized by this pedagogical failure, Zhang Guimei adopted rebellious behaviors; despite her position as class monitor, she captured caterpillars to frighten male classmates. During one lesson, as a caterpillar crawled across the lectern, she attempted to alert the instructor, who misinterpreted her warning as an insult. Zhang Guimei subsequently summoned the teaching director, but the ensuing reprimand only intensified her fear. Rather than returning home, she fled and nearly fell prey to wolves. Upon her return, her father stated: "You are not an idiot. How could my daughter be an idiot? The teacher misspoke. However, should you persist in such willfulness—first with caterpillars, then with further transgressions—then indeed you would become an idiot." This marked the first instance in which Zhang Guimei heard that an authority figure could be fallible. She wept aloud.

3.1.2. To Be Someone Like Sister Jiang—Middle School

As the national education system reformed, implementing the "seven-year consistent system" without requiring entrance examinations, she smoothly entered middle school. During middle school, Zhang Guimei recited Chairman Mao's quotations every day—she could recite the 200-page *Quotations from Chairman Mao* from beginning to end. The school organized a Mao Zedong Thought propaganda team to rehearse the large-scale opera *Sister Jiang*. To Zhang Guimei's delight, she starred as Sister Jiang and resolved to model her life after Sister Jiang.

She memorized the maxims from Lei Feng's *Diary* and always remembered Paul Korchagin's famous words from *How the Steel Was Tempered*. For the heroic martyrs in *Red Crag*, Zhang Guimei was filled with admiration and emotion. She once pondered how to achieve equally generous and tragic dedication in peaceful times. She also frequently won awards with her beloved song *Praise of the Red Plum*.

3.1.3. The Stepping Stone for Devoting Her Later Life to Education—University

The two years of formal study at Lijiang Education College were the stepping stone for Zhang Guimei to devote her later life to education. There, she received comprehensive training in the professional competence, professional ethics, professional integrity, and professional norms required as an educator. She was no longer the reckless young teacher whose blackboard writing tilted and who burst into anger and tears during her first lecture.

3.2. Love

3.2.1. "You Continue Taking Exams, I'll Support Your Studies"—The Beginning of Absurdity

Her third sister helped Zhang Guimei settle at Zhongdian Forestry Bureau, where she was assigned to the youth team to participate in the construction of a new forest farm. A colleague at the forest farm introduced her to a Bai ethnic young man who graduated from Sun Yat-sen University. He told Zhang Guimei he wanted to continue his studies, and Zhang Guimei said: "You continue taking exams, I'll support your studies." She also wondered whether she was dating or doing charity. The two subsequently married. This wedding had no candy, and the bride was even "lost." On her wedding night, Zhang Guimei looked at the person on the other side of the bed. He had undergone eye surgery without anesthesia for her sake, yet when the bride was "lost" during the wedding ceremony, he could "calmly" complete the ceremony. Zhang Guimei thought: What kind of person is this?

3.2.2. Mentor and Soul Mate—Proof of Happiness

He took the exams for three years without success, but his age no longer allowed him to continue. Subsequently, Dong Yuhan was transferred from Dali to serve as principal of the forestry bureau's children's school. Before this, no student from the children's school had entered university. In his first year as principal, the school's enrollment indicators achieved breakthroughs. He told her she should study, or she would be eliminated in ten years. He naturally became her home tutor. Every evening, he lectured and assigned homework. She felt he was not only like an elder brother but more like a teacher. She once looked up to others' happiness, while her happiness was also looked up to by others.

Before Zhang Guimei's third college entrance examination, her husband fully supported her. Her home became a classroom with only one "student" and one teacher. Whenever and wherever, he always carried candy in his pocket. When she was tired, sleepy, sad, or distressed, he would take out a piece of candy. This piece of candy seemed magical; unwrapping the candy paper, Zhang Guimei's happiness and sweetness returned.

Zhang Guimei and her husband often rode bicycles to Erhai Lake. She couldn't forget their conversation: "Cao Zhi was unsuccessful throughout his life and saw through the cruel struggles and social indifference of the world. People are born longing for happiness. As a poet, Cao Zhi, like everyone else, yearned for a better life—a nature without pollution, orderly national governance, harmonious interpersonal relationships, fair and just rule of law, narrowed wealth gaps, shared social civilization development, and even immortality. Perhaps Cao Zhi used The Goddess of the Luo River to personify his yearning for a better society, leaving behind this eternal masterpiece." "My respected principal, I didn't expect you to be an idealist." The principal replied: "The sun of ideals rises from the sea of desires; therefore, she is full of twists and sufferings."

3.2.3. Leaving This Heartbreaking Place—The Tragedy of Love

Soon after, her husband developed gastric cancer. Zhang Guimei took him everywhere for treatment but finally bowed to reality. She said: "Don't be afraid, husband, I'll accompany you. They say removing the oxygen will make people pass quickly, so quickly you won't feel pain. I can't bear to watch you suffer like this. I can't borrow money. I'm not worthy to be your wife, but I can always accompany you, from earth to

heaven."

Just as Zhang Guimei's hand touched the oxygen tube, her husband apologized to her. Zhang Guimei hugged her husband and wept bitterly. Life and death parting happens between one inhale and one exhale. At 1:20 AM on February 24, 1995, her husband stopped breathing and closed his eyes forever.

3.3. Career

3.3.1. Holding Up Young Faces with Her Life

In April 1997, Zhang Guimei was diagnosed with a uterine fibroid the size of a five-month fetus. "Little Fifth," who had never been afraid, was frightened at this moment—perhaps having made some preparation. Zhang Guimei wanted the children to achieve good results in the examinations during the final burning of her life. She graded papers and homework until midnight or even the early morning, rising around 5:30 AM to supervise student learning. Later, Zhang Guimei underwent surgery. On the 24th day after surgery, she went to the ethnic middle school to serve as homeroom teacher for the third-year graduating class.

In December 1997, she suffered unbearable abdominal pain. A hospital re-examination revealed tumor recurrence. After the high school entrance examination, on July 22, 1998, she underwent a second surgery. The operation lasted over four hours. Due to various reasons, she was not very sensitive to anesthetics. She requested the doctor to suture the wound and not perform this surgery.

At the 2020 Touching China Awards Ceremony, Bai Yansong noticed Zhang Guimei's hands covered with medicated patches, leading to the following dialogue: "Joint pain. If I don't apply this, my hands can't stretch out and move. With it, I can move a little." "How long have you been applying them? How many years?" "Several years now." "Can you still remember how many kinds of medicine you take daily?" "I take more than ten in the morning. At noon, because I need to take some traditional Chinese medicine, I take five kinds—both Chinese and Western medicine." "You are desperately fighting!" "I also think, fight desperately if need be!"

3.3.2. Indifference to Fame and Fortune

Lijiang Education College organized a symposium. "Don't you like modern living facilities?" a teacher asked. She immediately replied: "I like them." "Then why donate all your money?" "That's because some people need help. Not to help them live a modern life, but to help them obtain basic survival and educational conditions." "Don't you feel it's a loss?" "I don't feel it's a loss. Instead, I gain comfort: I've done a little for children in need."

Zhang Guimei never attached importance to money. She lived frugally, using her salary to help impoverished children attend school and pay their tuition. Money allocated by superiors for her medical treatment and new clothes was all spent on students. Because she bought desktop computers for students, she became a delegate to the 17th National Congress without formal attire.

Zhang Xiaofeng: "Honestly, at the beginning, I didn't understand. Previously, when we walked in the mountains, especially in winter, Teacher Zhang would immediately take off her coat and give it to mountain residents when she saw them wearing single layers. When she entered students' homes and found poor housing conditions, she would spend her own money to repair their houses. When she saw mountain residents having difficulty accessing water, she

would personally fund water cellars for them. Over so many years, she has donated more than one million yuan of her salary and bonuses to mountainous areas. Although seeing her frail body, there is a majestic figure behind her. She possesses a powerful force that drives our entire teaching team to continue advancing bravely and persist."

3.3.3. Being a Mother Once

An overseas Chinese charity decided to establish a publicly-assisted, privately-operated children's home in Huaping County, hiring Zhang Guimei as part-time director (without salary). County leaders also considered her the most suitable candidate but feared her health couldn't sustain the workload. Zhang Guimei actually committed with the words "Let me be a mother once." However, these children's original families were all very difficult, and their mental health was also a major challenge.

Every morning, Zhang Guimei began teaching at the ethnic middle school; every evening, she dragged her tired body back to the children's welfare home, carefully guiding the children's studies and actively promoting their healthy growth. She believed aesthetic education was an important means of quality education. She led the children to plant various flowers in the welfare home's courtyard and participate in gardening work together. Finally, under Zhang Guimei's care and education, all 54 children in the welfare home completed nine-year compulsory education, with some successfully entering high school and even university.

3.3.4. Not a Dream—The 17th National Congress of the CPC

At the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Zhang Guimei told reporters: "Mountain people are poor, poor in backward consciousness and culture. Mountain people place much hope on the 17th National Congress, hoping the Party will introduce more good policies suitable for mountain children to study." The proposal at the 17th National Congress that "education is the cornerstone of national rejuvenation, and educational equity is an important foundation of social equity" excited Zhang Guimei so much she couldn't sleep all night.

After returning to Huaping, the provincial party committee and provincial government gave the green light to this dream. Various procedures were quickly approved. The Lijiang Municipal Party Committee, Municipal Government, and Huaping County Party Committee and County Government each allocated 1 million yuan for school construction. The county government immediately coordinated land, conducted planning, and established a leading group for the girls' high school preparatory work.

That afternoon, all cadres and workers from the county education bureau came to the girls' high school to participate in labor. The education bureau director held her hand and said: "Teacher Zhang, don't worry. School matters are our education bureau's matters." Your choice and efforts were correct. Without this school, they would have no opportunity to continue studying after junior high school graduation. Their entire lives couldn't escape the "curse."

3.3.5. The Party is Present at the Position

Yang Wenhua, former director of Huaping County Education Bureau, said: "One student scored six points in mathematics—six points to enter, six points in mathematics to study high school. The college entrance examination mathematics is 150 points. What university could she test into?" To catch up on the gap, both teachers and students had

to make multiple efforts. Coupled with poor campus conditions in the first year and insufficient operating funds, 17 teachers resigned, 9 of them leaving, and teaching work was nearly paralyzed.

Just when Zhang Guimei was disheartened, organizing materials, and deciding to give up running the school, a new discovery brightened her eyes. Zhang Guimei said: "Eight people, six are party members. If party members are present, the position should be present. I said, meeting!" Teacher Zhang Hongqiong: "At that time, we had no money and were poor. Then she took us to draw a party flag on the second floor and wrote the oath." Zhang Guimei: "Then we began to swear, me one sentence, them one sentence. When I said we struggle for communism for life, I cried. The voices behind were all crying. That solemn, sacred feeling—never had it before."

This re-swearing of the party admission oath ignited the teachers' teaching enthusiasm and made Zhang Guimei more firmly believe in the importance of red education for running the school. Since then, Zhang Guimei required strict control of students' schedules. Regardless of whether there were classes, teachers had to be present at school all day.

Zhang Hongqiong: "We sang red songs like Praise of the Red Plum and Song of Heroes. Teacher

3.3.6. The Difficult Shu Road

Lijiang Huaping Girls' High School began enrolling 100 students. Six students transferred out midway because their families didn't believe the school could cultivate talent. The remaining 94 students all had poor foundations and had to use the method of "lion leading sheep" to make them strong. She decided to use her unique secret weapon—home visits.

Thus, she personally traversed mountains and rivers, entering the remote mountainous areas where each student lived to explore their living environments and backgrounds. Considering students' economic conditions and time costs, the girls' high school adopted a system of three days of concentrated vacation per month. This allowed students to return home for living expenses, help with household chores and farm work, and provided Zhang Guimei with valuable opportunities for home visits. During this brief monthly vacation, she visited every family one by one, carefully observing and analyzing students' growth environments. Through this teaching method according to students' aptitude, Zhang Guimei strived to help students break through learning bottlenecks and assist their thriving growth in difficult environments.

At the 2020 Touching China Awards Ceremony, Zhang Guimei said: "Their mothers would borrow money to let their sons study, but daughters would be married off directly, collecting bride price and that's it. One girl was in her second year of high school and stopped studying here. I said look how she stopped studying. Her mother burst into tears, crying terribly. I said don't cry, tell me why. She said because I gave birth to two daughters. One family blocked all our paths."

3.3.7. Hard Work Pays Off

Today, this powerful school motto has been heard throughout society: "I am a girl from the high school. I was born a mountain, not a stream. I wish to stand at the peak of mountains, looking down upon mediocre ravines. I am a girl from the high school. I was born a hero, not grass. I stand on the shoulders of giants, looking down upon humble cowards."

4. The Internal Mechanism of Zhang Guimei Becoming an Educator-Principal

4.1. Significant Others

Significant others play a leading role. Zhang Guimei's growth trajectory bears the marks of various social relationships including family, marriage, and workplace. Different roles in these relationships jointly wove the warp and weft of her life, jointly constructing her unique outlook on life, educational philosophy, and educational practice.

At the family level, her father planted the seeds of educational philosophy in Zhang Guimei's heart through the specific "caterpillar incident." Her third sister helped her settle at Zhongdian Forestry Bureau, where she was assigned to the youth team to participate in new forest farm construction. It was precisely because of forest farm colleagues' introduction that Zhang Guimei met her future husband.

In the marital relationship, the interaction between Zhang Guimei and her husband showed strong constructive characteristics. Their shared experiences and life in Dali were not only rich in deep affection but also shared noble ideals. As an emotional pillar, her husband gave Zhang Guimei firm support at the spiritual level. As a substantive educational partner, he played the role of home tutor and life mentor, actively promoting Zhang Guimei to continue her studies, providing necessary knowledge supplies, and assisting her successful admission to Lijiang Normal College.

Her husband's passing, though bringing heavy blows, also became a powerful driving force triggering Zhang Guimei's move to Huaping and the founding of Huaping County Senior Girls' High School. Additionally, in Zhang Guimei's career development, support and cooperation from superior leaders, colleagues, and various sectors of society were also key to her realizing educational aspirations. From unit leaders' arrangements and transfers, to colleagues' understanding and assistance, to overseas Chinese charity institutions' aid and local education departments' strong support—these external forces created favorable conditions for Zhang Guimei at critical moments, promoting the establishment and development of the girls' high school.

Their indirect or direct influences, such as adjustments to Zhang Guimei's family life trajectory (like her husband's job transfer) and direct support for career promotion, all reveal the importance of organizational internal social relationships for individual career planning and implementation. Superior leaders' decisions and support not only facilitated changes in Zhang Guimei's living environment but also provided key opportunities and substantive help for her founding of the senior girls' high school in the Huaping area and the long-term development of educational causes.

4.2. Historical Changes

Historical changes play a shaping role. Zhang Guimei's life course is embedded in specific historical time and space. China in June 1957 was in the early stage of socialist construction, and the strong atmosphere of collectivism and revolutionary heroism deeply influenced her adolescence. Through participating in rehearsals of the revolutionary opera *Sister Jiang* and systematic study and recitation of Mao Zedong Thought at school, she formed profound era imprints and red memories. This period's socialization process

strengthened her political faith and loyalty to the Party and country, laying a solid value foundation for her subsequent adherence to educational positions and persistent pursuit of social justice and progress.

Meanwhile, the early stage of her life was also significantly influenced by traditional Chinese gender concepts. As a female "Little Fifth," she personally experienced son preference phenomena in family and society. This gender discrimination planted seeds for safeguarding women's rights in her heart. In subsequent teaching work, Zhang Guimei's contact with girls married off early in remote mountainous areas during home visits further stimulated her attention and determination to change women's fate. Thus, she established a senior high school specifically for girls in the Huaping area, providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups and powerfully countering gender inequality phenomena.

A series of key events, turning points, and continuous social interactions ultimately guided her onto a unique path dedicated to promoting educational equity and gender equality.

4.3. Individual Agency

Individual agency plays a dominant role. In the academic analysis of Principal Zhang Guimei's life course, individual agency theory provides a key explanatory framework. Through studying Zhang Guimei's behavioral choices, we can discover that when facing various complex social situations and educational problems, she always demonstrated strong subjective initiative—actively and consciously shaping and controlling her life's process.

In the "Difficult Shu Road" home visit scenario, Zhang Guimei did not retreat because of difficult mountain roads but chose positive action. This process was both a demonstration of individual persistence in responsibilities in unfavorable environments and an accumulation of valuable educational practical experience for her, empirically verifying the positive role of individual subjective initiative in educational practice.

When proposing and implementing the initiative to found Huaping Girls' High School, Zhang Guimei persisted and took action despite numerous difficulties and external doubts. This unremitting pursuit of educational ideals and practical operation highlighted the core position of individual subjective initiative in career decision-making and educational innovation.

When facing health challenges, Zhang Guimei persisted in leading classes and caring for welfare home children despite illness. This noble professional ethics and sense of responsibility precisely originated from her internal subjective initiative drive. Her persistence and dedication not only improved students' academic performance but also quickly won social recognition for Huaping Girls' High School, proving the decisive role of individual subjective initiative in educational output and institutional reputation enhancement.

In summary, Principal Zhang Guimei's life course case vividly reveals the leading role of individual subjective initiative at various stages and links in her career development. Whether overcoming practical difficulties, achieving educational innovation, or facing physical illness and persisting in teaching and educating people, it demonstrates the profound meaning and important role of individual subjective initiative in constructing and promoting individual life courses and their social impact.

4.4. Life Timing

Life timing plays a promoting role. According to the elaboration of "life timing," a core concept in life course theory, individual life development trajectories are closely related to social structure changes and opportunities in specific historical periods.

Taking the major policy orientation proposed in the report of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party—"Education is the cornerstone of national rejuvenation, and educational equity is an important foundation of social equity"—as an example, it injected strong momentum into the educational equity process. Not only did it stimulate people's enthusiasm and expectations for achieving fair educational starting points at the macro level, but it also profoundly influenced individual behavioral choices at the micro level.

In this context, Comrade Zhang Guimei was deeply inspired. Starting from the educational reality of frontier minority areas, she resolved to establish a completely free girls' high school to eliminate educational inequality brought by region and gender. This is the concrete practice and response to the Party's educational spirit.

On the other hand, the uniqueness of "life timing" is also reflected in Zhang Guimei's personal life experiences. The national implementation of the "seven-year consistent system" education reform provided Zhang Guimei with the opportunity to enter middle school without entrance examinations, thus changing her educational path. Without this timely education system reform, Zhang Guimei's life trajectory might have been completely different—perhaps unable to enter middle school, and consequently unable to access later work environments and interpersonal networks, including work experience at the forest farm, acquaintance with colleagues, and meeting her future husband. All of this constituted the foundation for her subsequent life and career development.

In summary, whether at the national level of educational policy turning points or personally benefiting from the key timing of education system reform, both played important catalytic and promoting roles in Zhang Guimei's founding of Huaping Girls' High School. This vividly interprets the significant meaning of "life timing" in life course theory for individual career decision-making and social practice. Meanwhile, this also fully proves that policy guidance and institutional innovation have non-negligible roles in promoting social equity and improving educational resource allocation efficiency.

5. Summary

This study conducts in-depth research on Principal Zhang Guimei's growth trajectory, using life course theory to reveal the growth trajectories of educator-principals and their key influencing factors behind them. In Zhang Guimei's gradual transformation from an ordinary educator to an outstanding educator-principal, four dimensions—historical changes, significant others, individual agency, and life timing—played indispensable roles.

Historical changes, as macro-environmental variables, profoundly shaped Zhang Guimei's individual development patterns. The influence of significant others manifested as a guiding force, directing Zhang Guimei's life path. Individual agency occupied a core position in her growth process, dominating her behavioral choices in responding to challenges and seizing opportunities. The timely intervention

of life timing played an active promoting role at key nodes, facilitating Zhang Guimei's comprehensive development and transformational sublimation from inside out and from beginning to end.

However, this study also has some limitations, mainly manifested in the inability to directly obtain in-depth interview materials from Principal Zhang Guimei, resulting in a lack of first-hand oral history in the research. This may affect the complete interpretation of certain specific details and deep psychological motivations. To compensate for this deficiency, future research can obtain more comprehensive and accurate research data through diversified data collection methods and field investigations.

Based on the above research results, for educators aspiring to become educator-principals in the future, this study proposes the following recommendations:

First, follow the pulse of the times and policy orientation, and bravely undertake social responsibilities. Educator-principals need to closely monitor the evolution of national education policies, deeply understand and actively respond to the era's demands for educational equity and high-quality development, closely integrate personal educational philosophy with national strategies, strive to implement educational reform measures in educational practice, and lead the progress and development of their educational institutions.

Second, activate individual agency and synergistic effects of social networks. Following Principal Zhang Guimei's example, cultivate and demonstrate strong individual subjective initiative, actively seek and utilize key social relationship network resources, including support from superior leaders, cooperation from colleagues, and assistance from various sectors of society. Jointly solve problems in educational practice, promote the implementation and optimization of educational projects, and realize educational aspirations.

Third, seize critical opportunities and innovate educational practice to respond to social needs. Keenly capture and timely respond to key transition periods and special needs in the education field, utilize policy windows and opportunities in life, innovatively carry out educational practice, such as establishing educational institutions or projects serving specific groups, practically combat educational injustice with actions, and demonstrate the mission and execution power of educator-principals.

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