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# Developing High-Quality Legal Human Resources in China: Contemporary Practices, and Strategic Directions

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the conceptual foundations, institutional practices, and policy orientations underlying the development of high-quality legal human resources (LHR) in China within the context of contemporary governance reform and global integration. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives in human resource development and international standards articulated by intergovernmental organizations, the study argues that LHR constitute a strategic resource essential for strengthening the rule of law, enhancing administrative capacity, and supporting China's engagement with increasingly complex domestic and transnational legal challenges. Through qualitative document analysis of Chinese government policies, legal education reform plans, and professional development frameworks, which are supplemented by comparative insights from the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, and other international bodies, in which the study identifies both substantial progress and persistent limitations in China's approach to legal talent cultivation.*

*Findings indicate that China has implemented wide-ranging initiatives, including curricular restructuring, expansion of experiential and practice-oriented training, enhancement of ethical and competency standards, and targeted programs for developing foreign-related legal talent. These efforts demonstrate clear alignment with global trends emphasizing continuous professional development, interdisciplinary integration, and the professionalization of legal services. However, challenges remain, such as variations in training quality across institutions, insufficient integration of practical components in legal education, uneven access to internationalized learning opportunities, and the need for stronger mechanisms to ensure professional ethics and integrity.*

*The study concludes that advancing high-quality LHR is not only a disciplinary or sector-specific task but a core requirement for China's long-term governance modernization and international competitiveness. Strengthening cooperation among universities, legal institutions, regulatory bodies, and international partners will be essential for addressing current gaps and sustaining reform momentum. Ultimately, China's capacity to cultivate a*

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*competent, ethical, and globally engaged legal workforce will significantly influence its ability to navigate institutional transformation and assert its role in shaping the evolving global legal order.*

**Keywords:** *Legal human resources; China; legal education reform; governance modernization.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences, *human resources* have long been acknowledged as a core determinant of socio-economic development. The United Nations defines human resources as “the skills, knowledge, and abilities possessed by individuals, or their potential, for contributing to the socio-economic development of a community.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the International Labour Organization (ILO) views human resources as “all persons of working age who are capable of participating in social production and who possess various forms of knowledge, skills, and competencies.”<sup>5</sup> These definitions indicate that human resources comprise a multidimensional construct that encompasses both human potential and the extent to which such potential is effectively deployed in development processes.

When applied to the legal sphere, the term *legal human resources* (LHR) is commonly used to refer to individuals professionally engaged in producing, interpreting, implementing, and studying the law. This group includes judges, procurators, administrative enforcement officers, lawyers, notaries, corporate legal counsels, arbitration specialists, legal academics, and researchers. Accordingly, the scope of LHR in China extends across courts, procuratorates, government ministries, legislative organs, state-owned enterprises, private firms, and academic institutions.

This understanding is consistent with the United Nations’ *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers* (1990), which recognize legal professionals as key actors in protecting human rights, safeguarding the rule of law, and contributing to sustainable development. In China, the role of LHR has become particularly significant in the context of legal modernization, rule-of-law construction (*fazhi jianshe*), and the country’s ongoing integration into the global economy. China’s central leadership has repeatedly emphasized the need for a high-caliber legal workforce capable of supporting national governance, judicial reform, and foreign-related legal

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1990* (1990), <https://hdr.undp.org> (last visited Sept. 3, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> **International Labour Organization**, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* (2013), <https://ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/kilm> (last visited Sept. 3, 2025).

affairs.

Against this backdrop, LHR may be defined as individuals who are systematically trained, certified, and engaged in legal practice, legal research, legal education, or legal policymaking. They not only ensure the effective functioning of the legal system but also play an important role in building the institutional foundations necessary for sustainable development, domestic governance, and China's expanding international engagement.

## **II. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach to examine China's efforts to cultivate high-quality legal professionals in the contemporary era. The sources include official Chinese government documents, central policy directives, judicial reform guidelines, and legal education regulations, as well as publications issued by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The analysis focuses on China's legal training structures, policy priorities, and institutional challenges in aligning domestic legal education and professional development with global standards.

Data were systematically extracted from national laws, State Council directives, Ministry of Justice (MOJ) regulations, Ministry of Education (MOE) guidelines, and statistical reports. Key themes included human resource strategies, legal education reforms, foreign-related legal talent development, and professional capacity-building initiatives. Comparative assessment with IGO recommendations was undertaken to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for further alignment with international best practices.

## **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Analysis of Chinese policy documents and IGO reports indicates that China has undertaken extensive efforts to improve the training and quality of its legal workforce. Major initiatives include reforming legal education curricula, enhancing the National Unified Legal Profession Qualification Examination, expanding professional training for judges, procurators, lawyers, and notaries, and establishing new mechanisms for cultivating foreign-related legal talents, which is an area identified as a national priority.

China has also emphasized ideological integrity, professional ethics, and political literacy as essential dimensions of LHR development. However, considerable challenges remain: disparities in legal education quality across institutions, limited practical training opportunities, uneven faculty capacity, and partial misalignment with international legal education standards.

IGO frameworks highlight the importance of experiential learning, clinical legal education, continuous professional development, and integration of comparative and international law into training programs.

Based on these findings, the study proposes:

- (1) strengthening cooperation between universities and legal institutions to enhance experiential learning;
- (2) expanding specialized programs on foreign-related legal affairs to meet China's global governance needs;
- (3) improving professional ethics training and accreditation mechanisms; and
- (4) fostering interdisciplinary approaches that integrate law with economics, technology, and international relations.

These measures would enhance the competence, adaptability, and international readiness of China's legal workforce, supporting both domestic rule-of-law reforms and China's broader global engagement.

#### **IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR TRAINING HIGH-QUALITY LEGAL HUMAN RESOURCES**

##### **1. Concept of Training**

When legal human resources constitute the primary target of capacity-building, *training* becomes the central process through which their competencies are shaped.<sup>6</sup> Training is a structured and purposive learning process through which knowledge, skills, and values are systematically transmitted and acquired, enabling individuals to develop professional competence, ethical judgment, and adaptability.

The Chinese context reflects these principles through multiple institutional channels. *Initial legal education*, which is primarily offered by universities, provides foundational knowledge through bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in law. *Professional training* is conducted through judicial academies, lawyer training centers, and notary training institutions to prepare individuals for specialized roles in courts, procuratorates, law firms, and administrative agencies. *Continuing professional development* (CPD), increasingly emphasized in China, ensures that legal practitioners maintain up-to-date knowledge and skills throughout their careers, especially in sectors such as foreign-related legal services, intellectual property, and

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<sup>6</sup> Lê Tiến Dũng, *Nguồn nhân lực chất lượng cao ở Việt Nam hiện nay và những vấn đề đặt ra* (2024), <https://tapchicongthuong.vn/nguon-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-o-viet-nam-hien-nay-va-nhung-van-de-dat-ra-122398.htm> (last visited Sept. 3, 2025).

digital governance.

Training for LHR in China is therefore a lifelong, multifaceted process that involves formal education, practical training, professional qualifications, and continuous learning. This comprehensive system aims to produce a legal workforce capable of responding to China's evolving socio-economic needs and the demands of a rapidly changing global legal environment.

## 2. Concept of High-Quality

High-quality human resources are typically described as individuals possessing strong intellectual ability, professional expertise, physical health, and essential social qualities.<sup>7</sup> Such individuals combine solid professional knowledge with well-developed skills, personal integrity, and the ability to operate effectively in complex and multicultural contexts.

In China, the cultivation of high-quality human resources, particularly legal professionals, is regarded as essential to the country's long-term development strategy. High-quality LHR support China's efforts to deepen rule-of-law governance, enhance judicial professionalism, promote technological innovation, and strengthen international legal cooperation<sup>8</sup>. They also contribute to China's capacity to participate in global economic governance, resolve cross-border disputes, and engage in international rulemaking.

Within the legal field, high-quality LHR must not only meet general standards of competence but also satisfy the specific demands of legal practice, including:

- analytical reasoning and problem-solving,
- ethical and professional integrity,
- familiarity with both domestic and international legal systems,
- interdisciplinary literacy, especially in economics, technology, and public policy, and
- the ability to address emerging legal challenges such as digital governance, artificial intelligence, and global regulatory cooperation.

Thus, developing high-quality LHR in China is not simply a matter of improving legal education; it is a strategic requirement for strengthening the rule of law, enhancing national

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<sup>7</sup> Đường Vinh Sương, *Giáo dục đào tạo với phát triển nguồn nhân lực chất lượng cao ở nước ta hiện nay* (2014), <https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/nghien-cu/-/2018/30648/giao-duc-dao-tao-voi-phat-trien-nguon-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-o-nuoc-ta-hien-nay.aspx> (last visited Sept. 3, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Trần Văn Phòng & Lê Thị Hạnh, *Phát triển nguồn nhân lực chất lượng cao theo tinh thần Đại hội XIII của Đảng* (2023), [https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/web/guest/van\\_hoa\\_xa\\_hoi/-/2018/827302/phat-trien-nguon-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-theo-tinh-than-dai-hoi-xiii-cua-dang.aspx](https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/web/guest/van_hoa_xa_hoi/-/2018/827302/phat-trien-nguon-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-theo-tinh-than-dai-hoi-xiii-cua-dang.aspx) (last visited Sept. 3, 2025).

competitiveness, and supporting China's integration into global governance and international legal systems.

## **V. HISTORICAL FORMATION OF POLICY FRAMEWORKS IN CHINA**

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated a comprehensive restructuring of the existing legal education system based on the Soviet socialist model. Judicial personnel who had served under the former Nationalist (Kuomintang) regime were viewed by the CCP with deep suspicion regarding their political loyalty, and were deemed untrustworthy once the prior judicial system had been dismantled. These individuals were to be replaced. In the Party's view, the judiciary constituted a crucial instrument of the people's democratic dictatorship; thus, beginning in the early 1950s, the CCP launched a nationwide judicial reform movement aimed at ensuring the political reliability of court personnel and laying the foundation for what it termed "socialist legality." Consequently, many judges from the old regime were dismissed, and some were even detained. This period of judicial reform was celebrated as a success in consolidating socialist judicial organs at all administrative levels, embedding communist ideology as the guiding principle of judicial activities, and establishing a foundation for the people's democratic dictatorship. However, after the removal of large numbers of judges from the old regime, the judicial system fell into a severe personnel deficit, which adversely affected the functioning of judicial institutions. To address this pressing shortage, communist cadres were reassigned to perform judicial duties. Nevertheless, the CCP soon recognized that such temporary measures were insufficient for long-term needs, and that establishing an independent legal education system was imperative.

China's modern legal education framework was gradually institutionalized through its integration into the higher education system. In August 1949, the CCP Central Committee approved the establishment of the University of Politics and Law (*zhengfa daxue*) and appointed Xie Juezai as its president. Student admissions were drawn from three primary groups: revolutionary cadres, former judicial personnel from the Nationalist regime who required re-education and "ideological remolding," and newly graduated secondary-school students.

During the 1952 reorganization of higher education, several pre-existing law schools were dissolved (such as Soochow University) or merged to create new educational institutions. Four political-legal colleges (*zhengfa xueyuan*) were formally established in Beijing, Southwest China, East China, and Central-South China. Concurrently, law departments were founded within six universities: Peking University, Renmin University of China, Fudan University,

Wuhan University, Northwest University, and North China University (now Jilin University). Under CCP planning, political-legal colleges were designated to train judicial personnel, whereas university law departments were tasked with cultivating legal scholars. The standard duration of study was five years for university law students and four years for students in political-legal colleges.

In 1954, a national conference on political-legal education was convened. In September of that year, the Ministry of Education issued a unified legal curriculum requiring a four-year program comprising twenty-nine subjects that included theoretical, foundational, and specialized content. By 1956, China's legal education system had developed significantly, with approximately 800 law lecturers, 7,000 law students, and an annual admission capacity of roughly 2,000 students.

However, the progression of legal education was disrupted by the Anti-Rightist Campaign launched in 1957. Legal nihilism and widespread disregard for the rule of law contributed to the deterioration of legal scholarship. Many law lecturers were labeled "rightists" and stripped of their teaching positions. The crisis deepened during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). All university law departments were closed except those at Peking University and Jilin University, which nominally remained but did not function normally. It was not until 1973 that Peking University resumed admitting law students, followed by Jilin University the next year. Nevertheless, by 1975 the total number of law students nationwide had dwindled to only 269.

## **VI. GENERAL CONDITIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEGAL PRACTICE**

The prerequisites for becoming lawyers, judges, procurators, and other judicial personnel (including legal assistants) are set out in various statutory instruments.

Under the Judges Law, first enacted in 1995 and amended in 2000, the general criteria for appointment as a judge include:

- (1) Chinese nationality;
- (2) at least 23 years of age;
- (3) endorsement of the Constitution of the PRC;
- (4) good political, professional, and moral character; and
- (5) adequate physical health.

Parallel requirements apply to procurators under the Procurators Law.

The revised statutes tighten professional qualifications, particularly with respect to educational attainment and work experience. To become a judge, an applicant must possess a bachelor's degree in law (LLB) or hold a bachelor's degree in another discipline supplemented with

specialized legal knowledge, along with at least two years of legal work experience. For positions in the Higher People's Courts or the Supreme People's Court, three years of experience are required. Applicants holding an LL.M. or Ph.D. in law are required to have only one year of legal experience.

A further major reform introduced in the 2000 amendments mandates that, as of 1 January 2002, all judges and procurators must possess a university-level degree or higher. Moreover, judges and procurators at the basic level must be selected from individuals who not only meet the above standards but have also passed the National Judicial Examination.

Exceptions apply only in certain ethnic minority regions where judicial human resources are comparatively underdeveloped. Under the special provisions of the 2000 amendments, such regions, where compliance with the general standards proves impracticable, may, with approval of the Supreme People's Court, appoint judges and procurators who hold a three-year post-secondary diploma (*da zhuan*) in law, within a specified transitional period.

Incumbent judges and procurators who do not yet meet the required educational standards are obligated to undergo training, with specific measures to be issued by the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate. The amended laws, however, do not clarify whether those unable to meet the standards after training will be dismissed, nor do they provide deadlines for completion of mandatory legal training.

For lawyers, the requirements are stipulated in the 1996 Lawyers Law. A "lawyer" is defined as a legal professional holding a practice certificate who provides legal services to the public. Prior to obtaining such a certificate, individuals must pass the national bar examination. Crucially, candidates must complete a four-year undergraduate legal education program or possess equivalent professional qualifications, or hold a degree in another discipline but pass the national bar examination.

Graduates of law schools enjoy significant advantages in passing the examination compared with graduates of other fields such as economics or political science, who must self-study basic legal textbooks. Such candidates may acquire legal knowledge through university training programs, distance learning, or self-instruction, even without completing formal legal education. Nevertheless, legal education remains essential for entering the legal profession.

The amendment adopted on 29 December 2001 raised the minimum educational qualification for lawyers from a three-year diploma to a four-year bachelor's degree, harmonizing the Lawyers Law with the revised Judges Law and Procurators Law. The Ministry of Justice recently required practicing lawyers and notaries who lack a bachelor's degree to obtain one

within five years starting from 2002. The Supreme People's Procuratorate likewise instructed procuratorates nationwide to provide retraining for incumbents who must meet new statutory requirements. An estimated 60% of current procurators require such training.

Overall, the amendments significantly elevate professional standards, especially for judges and procurators. Notably, the requirements for judges and procurators now exceed those for lawyers. Historically, one could become a judge or procurator without passing the national bar examination, and even demobilized military personnel were eligible. In contrast, candidates for judgeships and procuratorships must now pass the National Judicial Examination and meet prescribed experience thresholds, whereas prospective lawyers are not required to have prior practical work experience.

Authorities have clarified that individuals already holding a lawyer's certificate may continue practicing law; however, those seeking to transition into judicial roles must still pass the National Judicial Examination. Since 2002, therefore, the pathway to becoming a judge or procurator has become significantly more demanding, creating new challenges and responsibilities for institutions of legal education.

## **VII. POLICIES ON LEGAL EDUCATION AND LAWYER TRAINING**

China's legal education system is more complex and fragmented than those in Western jurisdictions such as the United States. While most law schools are housed within universities administered by the Ministry of Education (MOE), a number of specialized universities and colleges of law and political science are directly managed by other ministries, including the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and the Ministry of Public Security. In recent years, the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate have also established specialized training institutions. Additionally, a nationwide self-study system is administered by the China Law Society. These collectively constitute four distinct channels within China's legal education system.

Legal education is primarily supervised by the MOE, particularly its Department of Higher Education, under which the Division of Education in Finance, Economics, Political Science, and Law is responsible for managing the development of legal education. This division is tasked with providing guidance on legal education, formulating development strategies, preparing teaching materials, strengthening the linkage between legal education and society, and evaluating pedagogical methods and teaching facilities.

Given the specialized nature of legal education, the MOE cannot manage the system alone. The MOJ, through its Department of Legal Affairs and Education, provides additional oversight,

particularly for the law schools and training centers under its jurisdiction. However, the coordination between the MOE and the MOJ remains opaque. The MOJ appears more involved in the development of legal education at colleges and other institutes than at MOE-affiliated law schools. Nevertheless, legal textbooks compiled by the MOJ, based on guidance from the MOE, remain highly authoritative throughout China.

The mission of a law school plays a crucial role in shaping legal education and the legal profession in China. Unlike the United States, where each law school publishes a mission statement, China's system historically reflected ideological imperatives. For example, the traditional mission of legal education emphasized training students in “the basic principles of Marxist-Leninist jurisprudence; the political-legal work of the Party; socialist political consciousness; mastery of legal expertise; and competence in research, teaching, and legal practice.”

However, after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992 and China's subsequent orientation toward a market economy, the ideological character of legal education became more pragmatic. Recent mission statements, such as that of Peking University School of Law, no longer contain explicitly communist terminology such as “Marxism,” “socialism,” or “the Party,” instead emphasizing mastery of legal knowledge and the ability to apply law in solving practical legal problems.

Legal curricula nationwide share a common structure, comprising general courses (e.g., foreign languages, physical education, philosophy), foundational law courses (e.g., Constitutional Law, Criminal Law), and specialized subjects (e.g., International Economic Law). Core courses such as Criminal Law, Civil Law, and Constitutional Law are mandatory, whereas specialized courses are usually electives.

Nevertheless, law schools differ in academic focus. At Peking University, students must complete 150 credits over four years, including required courses (106 credits), electives (20 credits), a thesis, and an internship. Graduates must demonstrate: solid knowledge of legal theory and substantive law, familiarity with legislative developments, proficiency in foreign languages for reading academic literature, competence in applying legal rules to practical problems, and the necessary qualifications for teaching and research. In 2000, the university had 1,821 law students: 866 undergraduates, 720 LL.M. candidates, and 235 Ph.D. candidates; around 1,300 continuing-education students; and 388 graduates employed in judicial organs, enterprises, law firms, and academia.

Tsinghua University School of Law, re-established in 1995 after its 1949 merger into Peking

University, has been able to incorporate more modern curricular approaches due to its recent founding. It offers LLB, LL.M., and Ph.D. degrees, with 15 required and 17 elective courses at the undergraduate level. Students must also participate in “social practice,” including community service, legal internships, moot court activities, and related engagements. Moot court, still relatively new in China, is an area in which Tsinghua has been particularly active. The school has also adopted clinical legal education, familiar in the United States, enabling students to address real or simulated legal problems through practical training. Unique among law schools, Tsinghua requires students to take certain natural science courses such as advanced mathematics, introductory physics, and modern biology, reflecting the university’s strengths.

Information technology has expanded opportunities for new forms of legal education, such as online and distance learning. Peking University School of Law has pioneered these innovations by establishing a three-year Internet-based program.

Traditional pedagogical methods, chiefly lecture-based instruction, remain dominant in China, though increasingly criticized for being overly conservative, inhibiting constructive skepticism, intellectual curiosity, and creativity. To counter these limitations, innovative methods including the Socratic approach, clinical legal education, and moot court have been gradually introduced.

Clinical legal education emphasizes learning through active participation rather than outcome alone, using practical legal work to cultivate analytical, contextual, and professional skills. While clinics are widely embedded in ABA-accredited U.S. law schools, they were introduced in China only in 2000 with support from the Ford Foundation. Currently, seven Chinese law schools, including Tsinghua, operate clinical programs. Tsinghua collaborates with the Haidian District Consumer Protection Association in Beijing to run a legal clinic where students handle consumer-protection matters, thereby developing skills unattainable through traditional lectures.

Moot court training develops advocacy skills. Common law jurisdictions require moot court in the first year of study; China adopted the model only recently. Tsinghua has organized multiple competitions and sent teams to international moots. Mooting reflects case-based teaching, a hallmark of common-law legal education, which many Chinese legal educators advocate adopting more broadly.

Despite the value of these new methods in providing practical training, which is indispensable in the legal profession, traditional instruction still plays an important role in conveying foundational legal knowledge. The new methods should therefore complement, rather than supplant, conventional pedagogy.

Even with increased practical training in law schools, post-graduate practical experience remains essential. As one senior American lawyer and professor observed, young attorneys “cannot succeed in becoming well-trained and effective lawyers without at least three to five years of real-world legal practice,” regardless of the length of their academic preparation.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the cultivation of high-quality legal professionals constitutes a foundational component of China’s broader strategy to modernize governance, strengthen the rule of law, and enhance its capacity for international legal engagement. Within both domestic and comparative frameworks, legal human resources (LHR) emerge as an indispensable pillar of institutional effectiveness, socio-economic development, and national competitiveness. The conceptual review underscores that LHR development is inherently multidimensional, integrating professional knowledge, practical skills, ethical integrity, and interdisciplinary capacities, all of which are increasingly critical in an era characterized by digital transformation and complex transnational challenges.

China’s policies and institutional practices reveal significant progress in advancing legal education, expanding professional training systems, and aligning national standards with international expectations. Initiatives such as curriculum reform, competency-based training, foreign-related legal talent strategies, and the enhancement of judicial and administrative professional pathways illustrate a sustained commitment to improving both the quality and adaptability of the legal workforce. Comparative insights drawn from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) highlight areas where China’s efforts converge with global best practices, particularly in experiential learning, continuous professional development, and the professionalization of legal services.

Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain. These include disparities in training quality across institutions, the need for more robust practice-oriented programs, limitations in interdisciplinary integration, and the ongoing imperative to strengthen ethical and professional standards. Addressing these gaps will require coordinated reforms across education, professional governance, and institutional capacity-building. Deepened cooperation between universities, legal institutions, and international partners, alongside the continued refinement of national guidelines, would further enhance China’s ability to produce legal professionals capable of navigating both domestic and international legal environments.

In sum, the development of high-quality legal human resources is not merely a sector-specific objective but a strategic national priority. As China continues to advance toward comprehensive

rule-of-law governance and deeper integration into the global legal order, the effectiveness of its legal workforce will increasingly determine the country's institutional credibility, governance capacity, and international influence. Sustained, evidence-based investment in legal training and professional development will therefore remain essential for ensuring China's continued progress in the new era.

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