Special education aims to educate children with special needs who require a specially designed curriculum, textbooks, teaching methods, organization, and equipment. The target of special education generally can be divided into broader or narrower terms. In broader terms, its target includes all different types of children who are beyond the scope of ordinary children; in other words, children and adolescents with special needs. In narrower terms, it targets children and adolescents with psychological or physical disabilities. In China, at present, the principal target of special education is children and adolescents who are disabled in sight and hearing, and those with mental, physical, and psychological problems (including autism). Some of them have multiple problems.

Attitudes toward the disadvantaged group reflects the consciousness of a society. The situation of the disabled is closely related to the civilization and development in a society. Following the same logic, the standard of special education symbolizes the development of social civilization as well. We are glad to witness that China has made its first step in constructing its modern special education system over the past thirty years.

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3.1. Introduction of China’s Special Education over the Past Thirty Years

3.1.1. Major Achievements of China’s Special Education over the Past Thirty Years

A First Step in Constructing a Modern Special Education System  
Before the economic reform, in terms of both school-management policies and policy ideas, for China’s special education, they were both in their initial stages. Since the economic reform, a modern special education system has taken its first healthy step with a series of laws, regulations, and documents. This development can be seen in the following areas: development of basic ideas, expansion of targeted groups, formulation of a special education system, and emergence of multiple special education patterns.

Development of Basic Ideas and Expansion of Targeted Groups  
Reviewing the history of international special education, European education philosophy and thoughts have been influencing special education since the eighteenth century. Since the 1960s, the idea of mainstreaming, individual education, and inclusive education raised by European and American countries, together with the idea of normalization and utility, have formed the theoretical foundation for the development of special education in the West. In the economic reform era, these ideas were introduced to China, which influenced and promoted China’s special education. For example, the ideas of mainstream and inclusive education have great impact on China’s special education. In sum, the former concept focuses on children with special needs, emphasizing that every child should be educated within a minimum limited circumstance, while advocating that the majority of disabled children get educated in regular classrooms. The latter one focuses on education and school through emphasis on satisfying the needs of all children, being open to all children, accepting all children at their appropriate ages, gradually reducing special schools, and gradually turning ordinary schools into inclusive schools. The two concepts address the same issue, which guarantees equal education rights for disabled children. These thoughts have promoted the practice of learning in regular classrooms with ordinary children in mainland China. We will discuss this in detail later.

To develop special education, first the target must be clearly identified. When the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949,