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Original Paper

Analysis of Major Changes in Chinese Higher Education in past 30 Years

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Abstract

Since the end of the 20th century, China has experienced a boom in higher education. By 2021, China's gross enrolment rate in higher education will reach 57.8%, entering a phase of universal access. In this paper, the author examined the main features of change over the past 30 years, namely massification, decentralisation and marketisation, and internationalisation, and analysed the driving factors from political, economic and cultural perspectives. In addition, along with development, higher education in China has faced several problems. While the most frequently cited problem is the lack of financial support, inequality, social stratification, and low employment rates are prominent issues analysed in detail in this paper.

Keywords

Higher Education, China, Massification, Change, Problem

1. Introduction

Chinese Higher Education has experienced remarkable expansion and development since the 1990s, as the globalization trend spread worldwide, and the central government published some related policies in economics and education fields. By 2021, there were 3012 higher education institutions, including those vocational colleges and adult institutions, with 44.3 million students enrolled, and the Gross Enrolment Rate reached 57.8% compared with only 3.4% in 1990 (MoE, 2022a). The economic reform in the late 1970s, which transformed the planned economy into a market-oriented economy, has invigorated higher education literally. Despite the dramatic expansion of HE, several other significant changes have occurred, like decentralization, internationalization and marketization, which are the salient features of the current CHE stage (Wu & Zheng, 2008). However, problems along with the reforms also deserve attention, including education inequality, regional development disparity and

increasing education expenditure. This article aims to clarify the significant changes and emerging problems in Chinese higher education over the past 30 years and explain them in terms of wider changes in China and the world.

The article will be organised into four sections, and the following parts will be the major changes occur in the past 30 years, the reason why those changes happened and conclusion.

2. Major Changes Occur in the Past 30 Years

2.1 What is Higher Education?

The meaning of "higher education" differs from nation to nation. In some countries, it refers to degree-granting institutions and degree or post-Bachelor's diploma programmes. While others include those shorter certificates (Marginson, 2018). According to UNESCO's large category, ISCED Level 6-8 programmes, ascending from Bachelor's degrees to Doctoral education, and Level 5 is 'short-cycle tertiary education' are identified (UNESCO, 2006). As for China, 'higher education' includes HEIs offering Degree programmes, higher vocational colleges and adult HEIs (MoE, 2018). The following part of the article will constrain these institutions.

As mentioned above, there have been four major changes in the past 30 years: massification, decentralization, marketization and internationalization.

2.2 Massification

Massification has been the most significant change in higher education over the past 30 years (Scott, 1995). Only a few people have access to higher education at the elite level. According to the vital indicator: Gross Enrolment Rate, Chinese researchers generally accept Trow's (1984) theory of the three-stage division of higher education development. The dividing point between elite and mass education is 15%, and between mass and universal is 50% (Wan, 2006). By 2002, China's GER had reached 15%, transitioning from an elite to a mass system (Wang & Liu, 2010).

The number of registered postgraduate and undergraduate students in 2021 is 4.7 times higher than in 2000 (see Figure 1), with 44.3 million in 2021. Furthermore, the Gross Enrolment Rate reached 57.8% in 2021, compared with 12.5% in 2000, which nearly quadrupled.

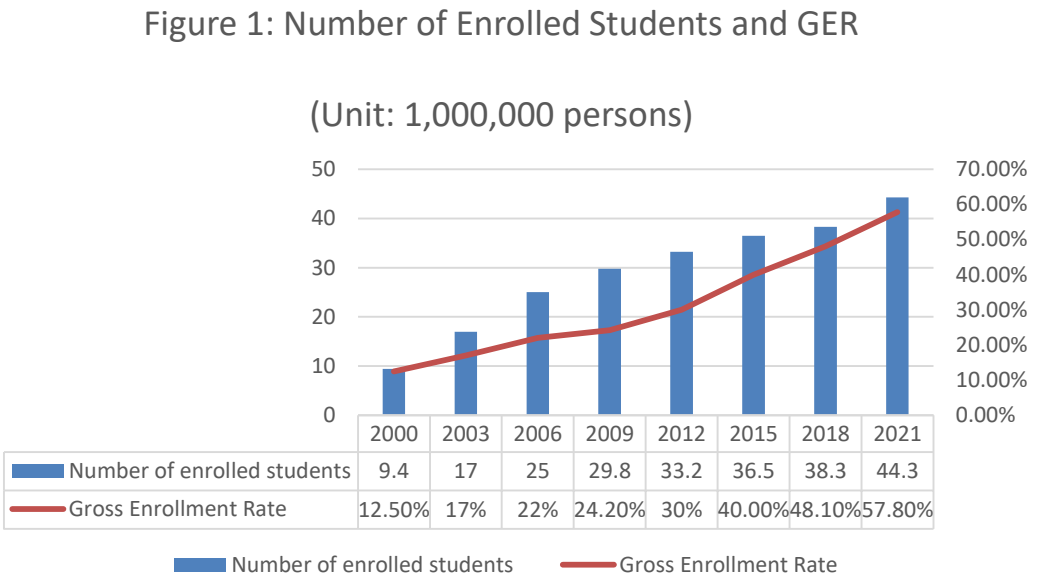

Figure 1. Number of Enrolled Students and GER (Unit: 1.00.00 Persons)

Source: Ministry of Education (2022).

Figure 2 provides a closer look of the number of undergraduate entrants in regular HEIs in China, as well as the number of regular and adult higher education institutions. From 2006 to 2018, the enrolment grew slowly. However, in 2021, 9.97 million people are enrolled in regular HEIs, an increase of 26% compared to 7.91 million in 2018. Actually, this massive expansion did not occur in 2021. According to MoE (2020a, 2021), the number of new students enrolled in 2019 is 15.67% higher than in 2018 and 5.74% higher in 2020. This trend is accompanied by an increasing number of regular HEIs in China from 2000 to 2021 to accommodate new students, while the number of adult higher education institutions decreases yearly.

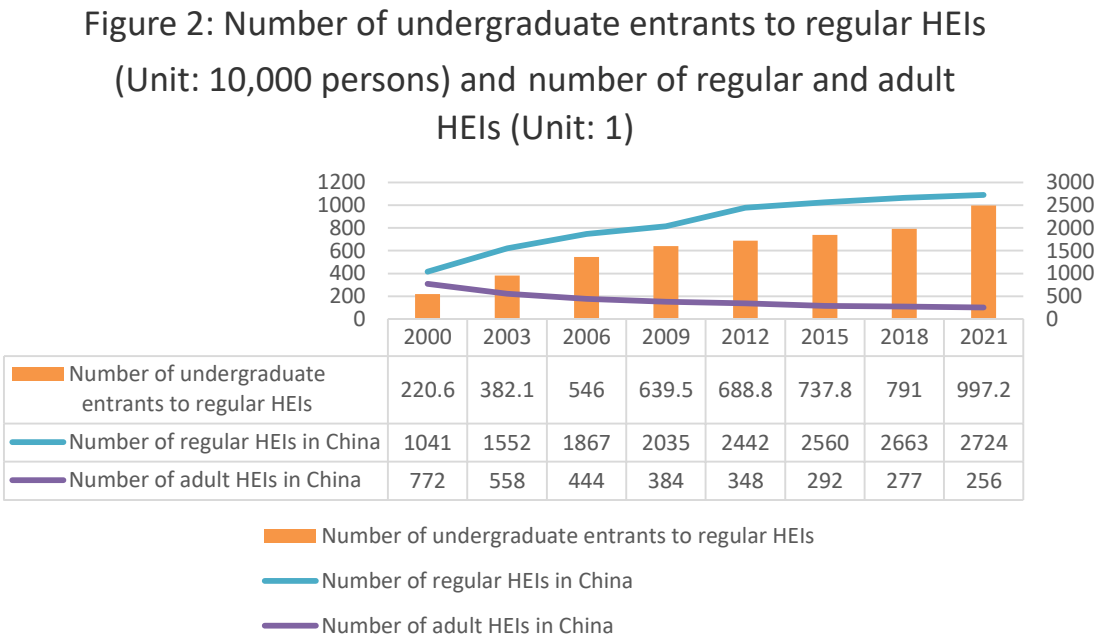

Figure 2. Number of Undergraduate Entrants to Regular HEIs (Unit: 10,000 Persons) and Number of Regular and Adult HEIs (Unit: 1)

Source: Ministry of Education (2022).

Massification in the undergraduate phase has stimulated an increase in postgraduate candidates (Wu & Zheng, 2008). Figure 3 shows the size and growth rate of postgraduate education in China. After 2003, the growth rate of postgraduate students tapered off and has stabilised since 2012, with an annual increase of around 5%.

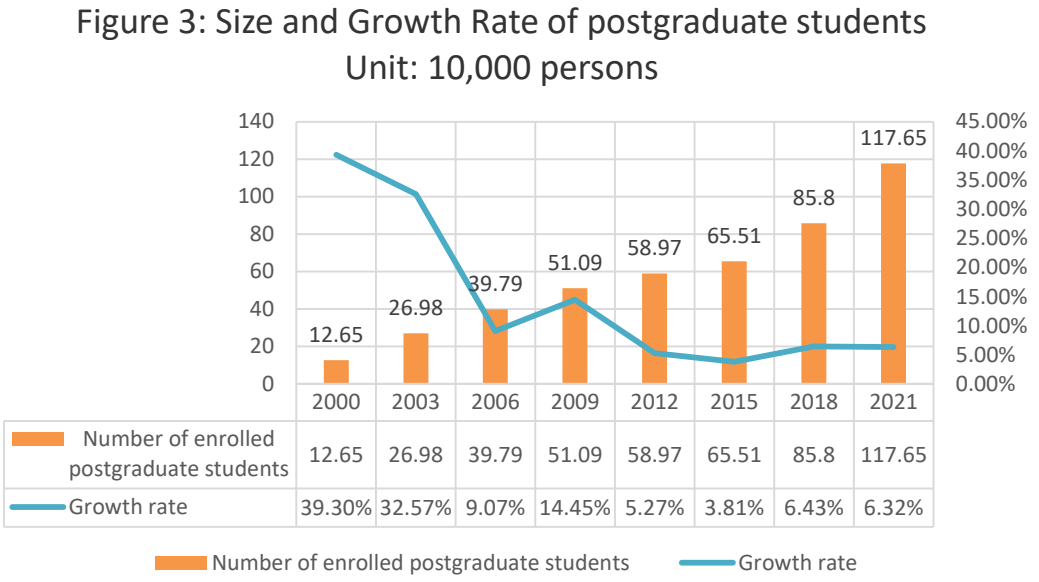

Figure 3. Size and Growth Rate of Postgraduate Students Unit: 10,000 Persons

Source: Ministry of Education (2022).

To sum up, higher education in China, both undergraduate and postgraduate, has grown to a great extent over the past 30 years. The GER reached 57.8% in 2021, up from 3.4% in 1990 - a considerable achievement. Moreover, this thirty-year expansion, primarily since the 21st century, has provided opportunities for structural adjustment. Adult HEIs have declined significantly over the last 20 years, in contrast to the growing number of regular HEIs across the country.

2.3 Decentralisation and Marketisation

Before 1990, China had used the "centralised model" for decades. Ministries could be described as "vertical stripes" or "*tiao*", while "horizontal fragments" or *kuai* referred to local governments. In such a system, universities have different functions and responsibilities under "*tiao*" or "*kuai*" (Ji, 1997). However, it is incompatible with market-driven economy.

Two key documents stimulated the decentralisation and marketisation of education. The first document was the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Education System*, issued by the Party Central Committee at the National Conference on Education in May 1985. In addition, *The Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China*, released at the Fourth National Conference on Higher Education in 1993, also proposed several approaches to educational reform, including diversification of funding sources for HEIs; decentralisation of administration and increase of university autonomy; and rebuilding the efficiency, effectiveness and rational expansion of universities (Mauch, 1997).

With the enactment of the policies, the relationship between the central government, local government and HEIs has changed. There are four main manifestations of this process.

Firstly, different regulation system emerged. Decentralisation refers to the reduction of central government control and the assign the responsibility and authority for the educational provision and management to local governments (Ngok, 2007). More specifically, the central government remains the macro control of legislation, funding and planning. However, the provincial and individual institutions empowered more autonomy to have a great say in educational matters, like student recruitment, curriculum setting and faculty employment (Cai, 2013). At the same time, the principle of "joint construction, adjustment, cooperation and merger" has gradually emerged in the reform of higher education management (Qian & Verhoeven, 2004). "Joint construction is a major reform form, which refers to the universities or colleges with no fundamental change in the funding resource. They have dual leadership with the central and provincial governments. A more organic and open system with multiple partnerships replaces a system with a single, one-to-one affiliation (Wang, 2001). "Adjustment" implies that the college or university's administration moves from the central to the local government and will be financially supported by the local government. "Merger" implies consolidating small colleges into comprehensive universities, which should include most disciplines, especially medicine. By 2000, a total of 612 higher education institutions had been merged into 250 (Lee, 2000), which should facilitate interdisciplinary exchange and optimal resource allocation, as well as cooperation between the new universities and local governments. All these changes have given rise to internal competition between educational institutions (Mok, 2002).

Second, decentralization allows private organizations and even individuals to establish schools. The involvement of private forces in the provision of education further leads to the marketization of education: a private person and organization can compete with public schools or even run schools for profit in the education market (Ngok, 2007; Cai, 2013). Non-state/private higher education institutions, known as the *minban* in Chinese, have flourished since the 1980s and have been authorized to award degrees and certificates, particularly in the new century. In addition, China introduced a new type of private university in the late 1990s: second-tier colleges, which are affiliated with public universities and established in cooperation with enterprises or other social forces. In 2021, 764 non-state HEIs accounted for 25.37% of the total, with 8.45 million students enrolled (MoE, 2022a). Private HEIs are considered an effective operation to provide higher education opportunities in China (Kang, 2004).

Furthermore, the diversification of funding of universities is a signal of marketisation as well. Government funding, income from university-owned companies and entities, endowments, and tuition fees are currently the primary sources of university funding (Li et al., 2011). Government funding can be divided into state funding and funding from local governments. In the past ten years, China has spent 4.13% of its on education (MoE, 2022b). While the average in the whole world is 4.3%, and the OECD countries are 4.9%. Those prestigious universities like Peking University and Tsinghua University will have more financial support than others. In other words, states have never satisfied the educational expenditure demand. Hence, HEIs in China have set up school-running enterprises, not only university press but also some commercial companies. From 2001, tuition fee has covered more

than 50% of total education expenditure (Li et al., 2011). Public university's tuition fee is around several thousand RMB per year since they can receive relatively more government funding, while private HEIs charge more than 10 thousand RMB (Zha, 2008). In addition, several organisations and individuals make donations to universities in their hometowns or rural areas.

Finally, due to marketisation, the function of higher education has been refined. The roles of students and academic staff have changed. Students become customers to 'buy' knowledge, which will affect teachers' teaching style in turn. Students will be more inclined to choose interesting lectures rather than descriptive ones. Teaching faculties would cater for students' needs and be assessed by students at the end of each semester. In addition, marketisation promotes competition between different HEIs in China and outside China (Dodds, 2008). Higher education is not only a centre of teaching but also an essential scientific community and a centre of technological innovation (Kang, 2004). Professors would have to meet specific research output requirements and publish in English journals in order to gain more international reputation. Economic benefits can quantify academic work, which would largely limit academic freedom (Mohrman et al., 2008). Society and universities prefer those practical disciplines, and humanistic subjects are at the periphery (Barnett, 2011).

2.4 Internationalisation

Over the past 40 years, the internationalization of higher education in China has accelerated rapidly (Guo et al., 2021). In the late 1970s, Chinese President Deng Xiaoping made the internationalization of CHE a national strategy for China's modernization. By the 1990s, after phased development, China had established a relatively comprehensive plan.

Since internationalisation is increasingly regarded as an essential indicator of world-class universities and a way to improve Chinese national competitiveness, Chinese universities have taken many movements (Guo et al., 2021). There are five major forms of internationalisation of Chinese higher education: Chinese students studying abroad, transnational higher education, recruiting foreign academic staff and students, integrating international curriculum and importing international textbooks into China, cross-country academic cooperation and engaging in international activities (Chen & Huang, 2013; Zha et al., 2019). These five forms can be categorised into import and export, in Chinese that is "zou chu qu" "yin jin lai".

On the import side, the Chinese government and universities show great interest in recruiting international students. According to MoE (2019), in 2018, more than 490,000 international students from 196 countries came to China for higher education. Nearly 60% are from Asia countries, and students from Africa account for 16.57%. South Korea has the most considerable foreign student number, with 50,600 students. Universities do not charge them more tuition fees. On the contrary, 12.81% of them are on scholarships from the central government and do not have to pay tuition fees.

Transnational higher education has also increased significantly in the new century. There are currently 2,332 TNE institutions and programmes with over 300,000 students, including 11 transnational universities and 121 second-tier colleges (MoE, 2020). This type of education has a more international

curriculum and teaching style with international faculty in partnership with foreign higher education institutions. Some international universities have even established branches in China, such as UNNC and XJTLU. In addition to the TNHE institutions, the Ministry of Education recruit international teachers yearly and has a specific policy of subsidising their transport, daily living costs and salaries. Last but not least, the government has a special fund to help domestic universities import foreign textbooks. In 2006, the Ministry of Education spent 580,000 RMB on 13 projects (MoE, 2007).

In terms of export, from 2016 to 2019, 2.52 million Chinese students choose to study abroad. As the largest host country for international students, student mobility between China and the rest of the world remains central to internationalization (Liu & Liu, 2016). What is more, a growing number of Confucius Institutes have been established around the world. By 2017, there were 516 Confucius Institutes in 142 countries worldwide, and more than 60 countries had integrated Chinese into their national education systems (MoE, 2018). Traditional Chinese medicine is also prevalent abroad. In contrast to the introduction of western practices, "zou chu qu" aims to raise the national discourse and voice of China through different forms of cultural exchange.

3. Driving Forces of Major Changes

3.1 Economic Factors

All these changes followed the transition to a market-driven economy after 1978. Deng Xiaoping, the late supreme leader and chief architect of Chinese economic reforms, laid out the basic outline for modernisation (Ngok, 2007). From 1978 to 1992, China worked to achieve "four modernisations", namely the modernisation of industry, agriculture, defence, science and technology (Huang, 2003). China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has reached 114.38 trillion, and GDP per capita has reached 12,000 (MoF, 2022a). Over the past forty years, the proportions of the three main industries have changed dramatically. The primary sector has declined, while the secondary and tertiary sectors have increased simultaneously. The share of the primary sector in 2021 was 7.26%, while the shares of the secondary and tertiary sectors were 39.42% and 53.32%, respectively (NBoS, 2022a). In line with the increase in GDP, expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP has remained above 4% over the last decade (MoF, 2022b). In comparison, in 1995 only 2.41% of GDP was allocated to education, and 3.22% in 2002 (Mok & Lo, 2007). The success of the economic transformation has not only laid a solid foundation for educational reform and development but has also stimulated strong demand for higher education development (Bie & Yi, 2014). Jobs in secondary and tertiary industries often need special skills or credential-required. Workers who do not have a bachelor's degree could not get a satisfactory job in the 21st century, which increased the desire of domestic students to pursue higher education.

Moreover, China joined the WTO in 2001 after a 15-year struggle to join the organisation. WTO norms, guidelines and regulations affect not only trade and commerce in China but also how higher education operates. In particular, the General Agreement on Trade (GATS) defines higher education as a service (Huang, 2006; Zhang, 2003). Under the GATS, there are four modes of education services supply:

cross-border supply, overseas consumption, commercial presence and the presence of natural persons (Knight, 2006). In 2004, 114,700 students studied abroad. However, in 2019, the number of students who study abroad is 703,500, six times the number in 2004 (MoE, 2005; MoE, 2020c). As cooperation with other countries becomes much closer, more transnational education programmes and institutions have emerged over the last twenty years. Both the disciplines and delivery modes have become more diversified. 2004 saw the establishment of UNNC as the first China-foreign cooperative institution. By the end of 2020, there were 2332 TNHE programmes and institutions compared with 712 in 2002, which is flourishing. The framework of GATS has regulated higher education as an industry, set up the standard of transnational education, and promoted TNHE development in China.

Last but not least, since 2013, China launched the One Belt One Road scheme, and China's economy has been linked with European and African countries. The purposes of the OBOR scheme are multiple, including promoting the Renminbi as a global currency, opening up China's undeveloped provinces and seeking regional and global suppliers and markets (Siddiqui, 2019). Cultural exchange along with win-win cooperation. Chinese higher education has become more internationalised by recruiting international academics and students with government scholarships from those countries (Lo and Pan, 2020). The OROB-country students often study science, technology, business and medicine, which suit their needs or interests. At first, the state reserved 10,000 scholarships annually for OBOR-country students. However, the number of students grew eightfold by 2016 (Rhodes, 2019). In 2018, more than 490,000 international students from 196 countries came to China for higher education. Nearly 60% are from Asia countries, and students from Africa account for 16.57%. 12.81% are on scholarships from the Chinese government and do not have to pay tuition fees (MoE, 2019). The economy's prosperity in the last several decades has influenced Chinese higher education to become more internationalised and market-oriented to a large extent.

3.2 Political Factors

As the economic reform took place in the early 1980s, the country soon found that the existing education system cannot meet the social demand. In 1993, at the Fourth National Conference on Higher Education, *The Outline for Educational Reform and Development in China* was published, which provided more space for local governments and higher education institutions. The central government should be the 'backbone' of development. Provincial governments and HEIs were authorised with more responsibility for academic and administrative affairs, like admission size, expenditure of funds and staff recruitment (Ngok, 2007). 1993 *The Outline for Educational Reform and Development in China* highlighted that education and science are crucial to China's modernisation process, and the country is catching up with developed countries worldwide (Zha, 2008).

The following comprehensive reconstruction of the education system, which began in the late 1990s, was also centred on "decentralization", accompanied by reforms to rebuild the government and change its role in the context of a market economy (Zha, 2008). The document *Action Plan for the Revitalisation of Education for the Twenty-first Century*, issued in 1998, claimed that a two-tier

management system should be established within 3-5 years, which was the basis for the subsequent 20 years of development to date. On 1 January 1999, with the enactment of the *Higher Education Law*, higher education in China was legislated to be supposed to be a less centralised system. Furthermore, the 1999 *Decision on Deepening Educational Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education* identified decentralisation as the main objective of higher education reform and called for a close integration between higher education and the local economy (Zha, 2008).

In addition to changes in the education system and the promulgation of related policies, the Chinese government has also set up some special programmes to establish world-class universities (Li, 2010). They were "Project 211" in 1995 and "Project 985" in 1998. In 2019, these two specializations were integrated into the *First-class universities and disciplines of the world*.

3.3 Cultural Factors

Contemporary Chinese culture combines elements from its deep tradition, Marxism and other Western ideas (Liu, 2012). It is undisputed that China's fundamental and unique culture is inherited from Confucianism (Bell, 2010).

Education has been at the heart of Chinese life ever since ancient times and is considered the most crucial route to social mobility. Many Chinese proverbs about the usefulness of reading, such as "There is a house of gold in a book (书中自有黄金屋)" and "All things are inferior, but only reading is superior (万般皆下品，唯有读书高)".

For individuals, the only way for those from low-income families to improve their social status was through education. Many children from humble families would study hard for over ten years to achieve a better life through the imperial examination system. Those from prominent families must study harder to gain a voice or maintain their families' prosperity.

At the macro level, Confucians advocate strict hierarchies to maintain social order and believe meritocracy is the best way to promote prosperity and harmony (Chau, 1996). Education can not only help individuals improve themselves and their social status, but also be an effective screening mechanism for selecting elite governance. Through a more egalitarian examination system, a pool of talented individuals can be selected to build the nation. In other words, education can further extend to training elites for national development (Liu, 2012).

Since educational attainment is highly valued, upward social mobility and income growth associated with educational attainment are significant (Li et al., 2011). As the economy has grown over the last three decades, so has China's education demand. Chinese families are willing to invest in the education of their children. According to a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences survey, spending on children's education ranked first in the overall household consumption category. They would like to pay for a better future for their children by sending them to higher education.

4. **Emerging Problems among These Changes**

China has achieved much during the education reform over the past three decades, but several problems have also emerged.

4.1 Lack of Funding and Resource

Due to the massive expansion of higher education, a shortage of funding and resources has ensued. Both the central government and schools need more funding and resources to maintain the proper functioning of schools and the quality of teaching (Cai, 2013; Guo et al., 2019).

In terms of funding, the education reforms of the late 1990s made higher education no longer free. Students should pay a certain amount of tuition fees, which now rise to several thousand yuan for most public universities. China government has invested around 4% of its GDP in education for the last ten years (MoF, 2022b), but only a few prestigious universities can receive sufficient government funding. The shortfall in funding for ordinary schools remains significant. Some have chosen to expand enrolment and raise tuition fees to fill the funding gap, which has led to a decline in the quality of education in turn. More students mean larger class sizes and greater responsibility for each teacher. When one teacher has to teach hundreds of students, it drastically reduces teacher-student interaction.

Regarding resources, Chinese quality higher education resources are severely lacking in the central and western regions, even in the coastal areas. For example, in Zhejiang Province, an economically developed coastal region, there is only one university, Zhejiang University, which is arguably world-class. Guangdong Province already has a population of over 120 million in 2021, and Shenzhen, which has over 2 trillion GDP in 2020, surpassing Hong Kong, still needs more quality universities. The elite model is no longer suitable for the era of mass higher education. Contemporary universities need to produce skilled and applied talents that meet the needs of the labour market (Li, 2017a) as well as global citizens in an international context.

4.2 Inequality and Stratification

Inequality is the most significant problem arising from education reform. The unbalanced distribution is not only occurring between urban and rural areas but also among different social groups. The unbalanced income would intensify educational inequality in China (Li et al., 2011; Yang, 2010).

In 2021, the national disposable income per capita was 35,128 yuan, and the ratio of urban to rural incomes in China was 2.5 (NBoS, 2022b). Even though compared with 2012, it decreased by 0.38. However, in the mid-1980s, it was 1.8 (Li & Luo, 2007). Students' parents who have relatively higher socio-economic status would more likely to getting access to university.

Research has found that students from families with the more cultural, economic and social capital crowd out students from disadvantaged families at key national universities. Those students tend to be concentrated in local institutions with fewer resources and lower quality (Wan, 2006) since they have relatively less access to educational recourses. Take Peking University as an example. A total of 4,402 undergraduate students were admitted to Peking University in 2021. Of these, 442 students are from rural households, accounting for 15.1% of mainland students and were the highest in recent years.

Moreover, the distribution of prestigious universities in China is also uneven. Beijing and Jiangsu Province are the regions with the most “985 Project” and “211 Project” schools, with 26 and 11, respectively. While many provinces like Tibet, Gansu and Qinghai only have one in each. Despite many specific policies from the central government to promote equity in education, a gap still exists.

Educational inequalities further exuberate social stratification. According to Mok and Wu (2017), family background plays a crucial role in employment and further development, with 79.4% of respondents believing that family background has a strong influence. The avenues for students from low-income families to achieve upward social mobility are narrower than before (Mok & Wu, 2017). Students expect to improve their social status through higher education. However, in reality, as higher education expands, it is less likely to promote social mobility, and it is easier for students to find a satisfying job after graduation if they have social networks or capital (Lin, 2017)

4.3 Unemployment Rate

The employment rate revealed by the Ministry of Education and universities is relatively high. In 2016, the net employment rate of graduates was 90.58%, and the rate of those who signed a job contract was 68.64% (MoE, 2016). However, some HEIs have reportedly taken steps to force students to falsify their employment (Wu & Cheng, 2008).

According to a survey conducted by Peking University in 2021, the confirmation rate and monthly salary of graduates with different qualifications and majors vary. The survey shows that the proportion of graduates who have confirmed their future is 73.8%, which means that nearly a quarter of graduates have not signed up. More importantly, Table 1 shows that high education does not necessarily mean a high contracting rate. The future confirmation rate of college graduates is higher, at 80.6%, than for undergraduates. The starting salary for graduates from ‘Project 985’ and ‘Project 211’ schools is around 10,827 yuan, compared to 6,043 yuan for other schools. In addition, the average salary of graduates from science and engineering disciplines is higher than that of humanities and social sciences (Peking University, 2022).

Table 1. Confirmation Rate and Monthly Salary of Graduates

	Rate of confirmed future (%)	Average monthly salary (RMB: yuan)	Median monthly salary (RMB: yuan)
Total	73.8		
College	80.6	3910	3500
Bachelor	74.4	5825	5000
Master	82.2	10113	9000
Doctor	77.9	14823	15000

According to these statistics, higher education cannot guarantee students a bright future. Every choice they make may lead to a different way.

5. Conclusion

Driven by economic reforms, national policy enactments and cultural trends, higher education in China has undergone significant changes in the past three decades.

In 2021, the GER has reached 57.8%. With more graduates holding a bachelor's degree, the employment rate for undergraduates was even lower than for college graduates in 2021. The social stratification that is thought to be caused by education has become more pronounced. Students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to have access to relatively decent jobs. Furthermore, as education becomes more market-oriented and decentralised, investment in education becomes more separated. The lack of private funding and reduced government investment has led to regional imbalances in education. The central and western regions have far fewer resources for quality education than the eastern seaboard and large cities. With higher education circulating in the market as a valuable commodity, those students from poorer families have far less access. Along with its achievements, China will have to do much to address these issues in the years to come.

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