The Development of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2025, 1(5), 61-79
https://doi.org/10.71204/axkw0879

Managing Massification: Challenges of Expansion and Equity in Chinese Higher Education

Junxiu Liu [1, *]

[1] University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 611731, China

[*]**Corresponding Author**
Junxiu Liu

lileihanmeimei168@outlook.com

Received: 3 December 2025 /Accepted: 13 December 2025 /Published online: 15 December 2025

Abstract

China's transition from elite to mass higher education over the past two decades represents one of the most rapid expansions of tertiary education in history. This article examines how the massification of Chinese higher education-marked by a gross enrollment ratio rising from under 10% in 1998 to nearly 60% in 2021-has created new opportunities and complex challenges. We review the policies and outcomes of the post-1999 enrollment expansion, highlighting its positive impact on access and human capital formation alongside persistent inequities and quality concerns. Drawing on national data and extensive literature, we find that expanded college access has benefitted millions of students and propelled China into the stage of universal higher education. At the same time, disparities by region, urban-rural origin, and socioeconomic status remain stubbornly entrenched, and the surge in graduates has intensified pressure on educational resources and labor markets. The analysis foregrounds equity issues-including rural underrepresentation and stratification of elite institutions-as central challenges in managing massification. It also discusses government initiatives aimed at mitigating inequality (such as targeted admission programs and funding reforms) and improving quality amid rapid growth. We conclude that achieving both expansion and equity requires balancing quantitative growth with policy measures to ensure inclusion and quality. China's experience offers lessons on the promises and perils of massification for other developing higher education systems.

Keywords: Higher Education Expansion; Massification; Educational Equity; Access And Inequality; Graduate Employment

1. Introduction

In the latter half of the 20th century, many countries experienced a shift from elite to mass higher education, as described by Trow (1973) in his seminal work on the transition to universal access (Trow, 1973). This worldwide trend toward *massification* – rapid growth in enrollment and participation rates – has been especially pronounced in Asia (Altbach, 2015; Marginson, 2016).

Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in the People's Republic of China. Over the past two decades, China's higher education system has expanded at an unprecedented scale, growing from an elite system (with under 10% gross enrollment in the late 1990s) to a mass system approaching universal access (over 57% enrollment by 2021). In absolute terms, college and university enrollments ballooned from about 6 million in 1998 to 44.3 million students in 2021, giving China the world's largest higher education system. This dramatic expansion – initiated by deliberate government policy in 1999 – is often referred to as China's *Great Enrollment Expansion* or *massification drive* (Bie & Yi, 2014).

The massification of Chinese higher education has occurred in the context of broader economic and social transformations. In the reform era, Chinese came to view higher education as pivotal for economic development and global competitiveness (Altbach, 2015). The decision to massively expand college enrollments in 1999 was spurred by multiple goals: to stimulate domestic consumption and ease youth unemployment in the short term, and to build human capital for a knowledge-based economy in the long run (Postiglione, 2020). As a result, new admissions to colleges and universities were abruptly increased by over 50% in 1999, with further large increases in the early 2000s (Wang, 2007). The number of new entrants jumped from just over 1 million in 1998 to 3.4 million in 2001, marking 1999 as a historic turning point in Chinese higher education. This policy-driven "great leap forward" in higher education is unparalleled in scale and speed (Zha, 2009). By 2012, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) exceeded 30%, and by 2021 it reached 57.8%, signaling the transition to a stage of near-universal access. Such an expansion in a relatively short period has understandably attracted substantial scholarly attention to its outcomes and impacts (Luo, Guo, & Shi, 2018; Ou & Hou, 2019).

While the expansion has successfully broadened access, it has also brought *challenges of equity and quality* to the forefront. International research on high-participation systems suggests that massification often produces paradoxical effects: it increases overall educational opportunity but can also reproduce or even widen stratification *within* the system (Marginson, 2016; Hannum & Wang, 2007). In China's case, the question of whether higher education expansion has promoted greater equality of opportunity or exacerbated inequalities is actively debated (Luo et al., 2018). Moreover, the sudden influx of students put strains on infrastructure, faculty, and funding, raising concerns about educational quality and graduate outcomes (Mok & Jiang, 2017; Ying, 2011). Managing this tension between *expansion* and *equity/quality* has become a central policy challenge in China's higher education development (Mohrman, Geng, & Wang, 2011). The Chinese government has implemented various measures – from financing reforms to targeted admission programs – to address these issues, but their effectiveness remains a topic of analysis (Yan & Ma, 2013; Zhang, 2022).

In this article, we critically examine the trajectory of Chinese higher education massification and its implications for equity. We synthesize data and findings from a range of academic studies, policy reports, and statistical sources to evaluate how expansion has altered the landscape of opportunity in China. Key questions include: *Who* has benefitted from massification in terms of access and attainment? Has the rapid growth reduced or reinforced disparities (such as the urban–rural gap or regional imbalances)? How has China managed the quality of provision amid

enrollment surges? And what strategies are being employed to ensure a more equitable and inclusive system going forward? By addressing these questions, our aim is to illuminate the achievements and remaining challenges of China's expansion, and to draw lessons relevant to other countries undergoing similar transitions from elite to mass higher education.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the expansion process and policy measures since the late 1990s, highlighting the scale of growth and the driving policies. Section 3 discusses the positive outcomes of massification, including increased access and enrollment of previously under-served groups, as well as improvements in educational attainment and human capital. Section 4 then examines the challenges and inequities that have accompanied expansion: quality assurance issues, resource constraints, and persistent inequalities by region and social background. Section 5 reviews policy responses aimed at addressing these challenges – such as funding reforms, quality initiatives, and affirmative action programs for rural students – and assesses their impact. Finally, Section 6 concludes with reflections on managing massification in the future, arguing that China needs to continue balancing growth with equity-oriented policies to fully reap the benefits of an educated society.

2. The Expansion of Chinese Higher Education Since 1999

China's higher education system remained relatively small and elite throughout the early reform period (1980s–1990s). In 1998, only about 1 in 10 college-aged youth in China was enrolled in some form of higher education (Gross Enrollment Ratio ~9.8%). This scenario changed dramatically when the Chinese government launched a bold expansion initiative in 1999. This section outlines the *massification process* – key policies, enrollment growth, and structural changes – from the late 1990s to present.

2.1. Policy Drivers of Massification

Several policy decisions in the 1980s and 1990s set the stage for the 1999 expansion. The 1985 "Decision on Reforming the Education System" and the 1993 "Outline for Education Reform and Development" endorsed the ideas of decentralizing higher education management and diversifying funding (National Education Commission, 1995). Universities were encouraged to seek local government and private financing, and tuition fees were gradually introduced in the 1990s (Hanson, 1998). These reforms weakened the fully state-funded model of the Mao era and allowed higher education to grow with more flexible support (Hanson, 1998; Qian & Verhoeven, 2004). Notably, the 1995 "Education Law" and 1999 "Higher Education Law" provided legal frameworks for expanding and regulating higher education, including permission for establishing private (minban) colleges (Cheng & Zheng, 2005). By the late 1990s, the groundwork was laid for a major scale-up: universities had autonomy to expand enrollment and charge tuition, and non-government providers could help absorb demand (Wei & Zhang, 1995; Cheng & Zheng, 2005).

The immediate trigger for mass expansion was a combination of economic and social considerations in the late 1990s. In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, Chinese saw higher education expansion as a Keynesian stimulus measure to spur domestic consumption (by investing in university infrastructure and enrolling more fee-paying students) and as a way to

alleviate youth unemployment by keeping more high school graduates in school (Postiglione, 2020; Ou & Hou, 2019). Thus, in mid-1999 the State Council announced a sudden large increase in university admission quotas. Universities were instructed to enroll an additional 330,000 students beyond original plans in 1999, on top of a prior expansion of 220,000 earlier that year. This represented a more than 50% increase in new admissions compared to 1998. The expansion continued in subsequent years: from 1999 to 2005, freshman enrollment grew at an average annual rate of over 20% (Zha, 2009). By 2005, China's higher education entering class was about 4.7 million, roughly four times the size in 1998 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007).

2.2. Scale and Pace of Growth

The effects of these policies on enrollment numbers were dramatic. *Figure 1* illustrates the trajectory of higher education expansion in China. Total tertiary enrollments (including undergraduate and junior college students) climbed from 6.4 million in 1998 to 23 million in 2005, and further to 32 million by 2010 and 44.3 million in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2022). The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) – the proportion of college-aged (18–22) population in higher education – rose from 9.8% in 1998 to 26% in 2005, reaching 48.1% by 2018 and 57.8% in 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2022). This exceeds the 50% threshold commonly used to define "universal" access (Trow, 1973). According to the Ministry of Education, China met its goal of transitioning from an elite to a universal access system by 2020, entering what some call the "post-massification" era. In absolute terms, China now accounts for over 1/5 of all tertiary students in the world (Altbach, 2015). Several dimensions of the expansion are noteworthy:

(1) Institutional expansion and differentiation: The number of higher education institutions (HEIs) also grew, though not as quickly as enrollments. Many existing universities merged or absorbed colleges to expand capacity (e.g., the creation of larger multi-disciplinary universities in early 2000s), and numerous new vocational and private institutions were established (Mohrman et al., 2011). The total count of HEIs (including universities and colleges) increased from 1,022 in 1998 to over 2,600 by 2020 (Ministry of Education data). Particularly important was the growth of the private sector: from virtually zero in the early 1980s, private (minban) colleges grew to enroll around 20% of undergraduates by the 2010s (Cheng & Zheng, 2005; Wei & Zhang, 1995). This privatization provided additional capacity and is considered a key aspect of China's massification strategy. *However*, the private institutions generally have lower prestige and resources, contributing to a stratified system (Huang, 2018).

(2) Introduction of higher fees and funding changes: To finance the expansion, China shifted more of the cost burden to students and families. Tuition and fees were instituted nationwide by the early 2000s, typically accounting for 20–30% of university revenue (Yan & Ma, 2013). Government funding also increased substantially in aggregate, but on a per-student basis it did not keep pace with enrollment growth (Zhang, 2022). The higher education budget roughly doubled between 1998 and 2003, yet enrollments more than tripled, leading to tighter funding per student (Yan & Ma, 2013). This mass expansion with constrained resources has had implications for educational quality, as discussed in Section 4.

(3) Examination and admission reforms: China's highly competitive national entrance exam (Gaokao) remained the main pathway to college, but policies evolved to accommodate more students. Admission cutoff scores were lowered as capacity increased, enabling a broader segment of high school graduates to qualify (Luo et al., 2018). The system also expanded the tiers of institutions: students who previously might not get into a regular university could enroll in newly expanded diploma programs, adult higher education, or private colleges. This ensured that expansion reached beyond the top academic performers (Luo et al., 2018). Over time, special admission tracks were introduced (e.g., affirmative action-like programs for rural students in elite universities, see Section 5), though the Gaokao remains central (Liu, 2018).

In summary, since 1999 China has achieved a *quantum leap* in higher education participation. Such rapid massification has been enabled by strong state direction, market-oriented funding reforms, and the mobilization of non-state sectors (private colleges, local governments) to share the load (Huang, 2018; Mok & Jiang, 2017). The expansion was quantitatively successful, meeting or exceeding government targets ahead of schedule (the GER target of 40% by 2020 was surpassed by 2015). Yet, these achievements came with *qualitative trade-offs*. The next sections explore the outcomes of massification, both positive and negative, with a focus on equity and quality.

3 .Outcomes of Massification: Increased Access and Attainment

The mass expansion of higher education in China has undoubtedly broadened educational opportunities for the population. We first examine the positive outcomes: greater access for previously under-represented groups, higher overall educational attainment, and related social benefits. In many respects, China's experience confirms the expected benefits of moving toward universal higher education (Altbach, 2015; Marginson, 2016). At the same time, some inequalities have proven persistent or even shifted in form, which will be addressed in Section 4.

3.1. Increased Enrollment of Under-Represented Groups

One major outcome of massification is that groups who historically had limited access to college – including those from rural areas, poor regions, and ethnic minorities – are now enrolling in higher numbers (Luo et al., 2018; Liu, 2018). The sheer expansion of seats meant that many students who would have been left out under the older elite system could now attend college. For instance, *rural students* in China have long faced an access gap, but their absolute numbers in college have risen markedly. Wu and Zhang (2010) found that from 1990 to 2005, educational inequality (measured by urban-rural differences in college attainment) narrowed modestly in the initial years of expansion – evidence that the policy opened doors to more rural youth. By the 2010s, hundreds of thousands of rural students were entering college annually, including some admission into top universities via special programs (Liu, 2018). Although disparities remain (see Section 4), the probability of a rural Chinese student attending some form of higher education is far higher today than it was two decades ago (Luo et al., 2018). Similarly, students from western and central China (traditionally under-developed regions) have benefitted from new institutions and quotas targeted at those regions (Yan & Ma, 2013). The establishment of new universities in

inland provinces and the expansion of enrollment in existing ones have somewhat reduced the regional imbalance in college seats per capita (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Another indicator of expanded inclusivity is the *gross enrollment ratio* for females versus males. Female enrollment has grown slightly faster, and women now make up about 52% of college students, compared to roughly 40% in the early 1990s (Liu, 2018). The one-child policy's effects and changing societal norms, coupled with mass expansion, have led to women achieving parity and even slight majority in higher education – a significant stride toward gender equity in Chinese education (Ye Liu's studies document this "women rising as half the sky" phenomenon). Ethnic minority students have also increased in number through dedicated support programs and minority-focused colleges, although they still constitute a small percentage of total enrollment (Ministry of Education, 2022). Overall, massification has *democratized* higher education access in the sense that it is no longer the exclusive domain of the urban elite. By 2021, a majority of youth can expect to go on to post-secondary education, a scenario almost unimaginable in earlier generations.

3.2. Higher Educational Attainment and Human Capital

The expansion has led to a rapid increase in China's educated workforce. The share of the working-age population with tertiary education more than doubled from 1998 to 2018 (World Bank data). By 2020, over 240 million Chinese had received a higher education (including graduates of two- and four-year programs). This mass supply of graduates has been instrumental in China's shift up the value chain economically. Studies suggest that the expansion contributed to economic growth by supplying more skilled labor and boosting productivity (Li, Whalley, Zhang, & Zhao, 2008). Importantly, despite concerns about "over-education," the earnings premium for college graduates has generally *increased* over the reform era, indicating strong demand for higher skills (Zhang, Zhao, Park, & Song, 2005). In urban China, the return on investment in a college education rose from the 1990s into the 2000s, partly because economic reforms created new opportunities for skilled workers (Zhang et al., 2005; Heckman & Li, 2004). Even with the surge of graduates after 1999, research finds that graduate wage premiums have remained significant, although they leveled off in recent years (Chi & Zhu, 2022). This suggests that massification has not yet led to a collapse in returns to education – a positive sign for the value of the degrees awarded.

From a societal perspective, the broadening of higher education has numerous ancillary benefits. A more educated populace can contribute to innovation, better health outcomes, and more civic engagement. While China's global research output and university rankings are driven largely by a subset of elite universities (thanks to initiatives like Project 985 and "Double First-Class"), the overall system's expansion has also supported regional development by producing local college graduates (Postiglione, 2020). Many new or upgraded institutions focus on applied fields needed in local economies, thus aligning massification with development goals (Yan & Ma, 2013). Another benefit is the emergence of a sizable middle class of college-educated citizens, which may foster social stability and mobility. Some scholars argue that expanded higher education in China has moderately increased intergenerational mobility by giving talented youth from less-privileged backgrounds a shot at upward mobility (Wu & Zhang, 2010). Although this

point is debated (see Section 4), it is clear that *absolute* mobility – the proportion of people achieving higher education than their parents – has risen sharply in the massification era.

3.3. Diversification of Higher Education System

Massification has also transformed the structure of Chinese higher education, bringing more diversity in institutions and educational pathways. Prior to the expansion, the system was relatively homogenous and focused on a few elite universities and specialized colleges (Huang, 2018). Now, the system includes a wide array of institution types: research universities, teaching-focused universities, vocational and technical colleges, private colleges, and open universities (distance education). This diversification is partly a response to mass enrollment – not all students have the same goals or academic preparation, so a one-size university model would not fit the masses (Zha, 2009). The Chinese government actively promoted the *binary system* of academic vs. vocational higher education. Enrollment in short-cycle (3-year) higher vocational programs expanded significantly, especially after 2004, accounting for roughly half of undergraduate-level enrollment by the 2010s (Ministry of Education, 2022). These programs aim to produce technicians and practical professionals and have absorbed many students who might not have entered a traditional university. By widening the range of options, massification has allowed higher education to cater to different aptitudes and market needs, which is a positive outcome (Huang, 2018).

Private institutions have introduced further diversity, often focusing on fields like business, IT, and foreign languages that are in high demand (Cheng & Zheng, 2005). They frequently adopt innovative curricula or pedagogy (to attract students) and sometimes partner with foreign institutions, contributing to the system's internationalization. The growth of transnational education (e.g., joint degree programs, Sino-foreign universities) is another facet of expansion in the 2000s that has enriched opportunities for Chinese students (Mok & Jiang, 2017). For example, by 2007 there were over 1,000 joint programs with foreign universities, something that barely existed in earlier decades.

In summary, from the perspective of access and aggregate educational attainment, China's massification drive has been highly successful. Tens of millions of additional students – including women, rural youth, and those from interior provinces – have obtained higher education who would not have under the old system. The nation's pool of human capital has deepened, supporting economic modernization. The higher education system itself has become more heterogeneous and responsive. These are real accomplishments of which policymakers in China often remind the public. However, this is only part of the story. The expansion has also brought *new challenges and inequalities*, which we examine next.

4. Challenges of Expansion: Equity and Quality Concerns

Despite its impressive achievements in expanding access, the massification of Chinese higher education has been accompanied by significant challenges. Chief among these are concerns about equity – whether the benefits of expansion have been distributed fairly across different social groups – and quality – whether educational standards and outcomes have been maintained with

the rapid influx of students. This section delves into these issues, drawing on research that highlights the persistent disparities and emerging problems in China's post-expansion higher education landscape.

4.1. Persistent Urban–Rural and Regional Inequalities

One of the most scrutinized issues is the enduring gap between urban and rural students in higher education. Historically, urban students (especially those in major cities) dominated university admissions due to better-resourced secondary schools and quota allocations favoring local applicants at top universities (Hannum & Wang, 2006). The expectation was that mass expansion would narrow this urban–rural gap by creating more room for rural candidates. In absolute terms, as noted, far more rural students attend college today than before. However, *relative* inequalities remain pronounced. Studies find that rural youth are still significantly less likely to attend four-year universities, especially elite institutions, compared to their urban counterparts (Liu, 2018; Luo et al., 2018). For instance, Luo et al (2018) report that although college participation rates for rural students increased after 1999, the *difference* in odds of attending a university between urban and rural students did not shrink substantially. The expansion largely benefited urban students too, as they were better prepared and positioned to seize new opportunities (Hannum & Wang, 2006). As a result, the composition of the student body at prestigious universities remains skewed: students from big cities and key high schools are over-represented, while those from poor rural counties are under-represented (Wu & Zhang, 2010; Liu, 2018).

A related inequity is regional imbalance. China's top universities (the "985" and "211" project schools) are concentrated in Eastern provinces (Beijing, Shanghai, etc.), and admission policies historically favored local students in those regions via provincial quota systems. During massification, eastern provinces often expanded enrollment faster than poorer western provinces, because they had more resources (Yan & Ma, 2013). Although the central government did allocate special funds to develop universities in central/western China and mandated some quota shifts, a child from an inland province still faces stiffer competition for a university seat than one from Beijing. For example, cut-off Gaokao scores for admission are much higher in provinces like Henan or Gansu than in Beijing for the same tier of university, reflecting an inequitable distribution of opportunities (Liu, 2018). *Regional GER disparities* illustrate this: by 2015, Beijing had an adjusted tertiary enrollment rate above 70%, whereas some western provinces were around 30–40% (Yan & Ma, 2013). Thus, massification has not fully evened out regional access gaps – many rural and interior areas still lag behind the national average in higher education participation.

Why did inequalities persist despite expansion? Research suggests several structural factors. First, quality differentials in K-12 education mean rural students often score lower on the Gaokao, limiting their university options (Hannum & Wang, 2006). Massification did not automatically equalize school quality. Second, expansion primarily created new opportunities at *non-elite* institutions (e.g., local colleges, vocational institutes), whereas the number of seats at elite universities grew more slowly (Altbach, 2015). Urban middle-class students have disproportionately filled the new elite seats that did appear, while students from disadvantaged

backgrounds more often enter lower-tier colleges (Luo et al., 2018). This leads to a stratified system where expansion can even increase social stratification *within* higher education – a phenomenon Marginson (2016) observed globally. In China's case, Ou and Hou (2019) term it "bigger pie, but not an evenly bigger slice" for the disadvantaged: the overall pie of enrollment grew, yet wealthier/urban groups often took a larger share of the best slices (top programs). Third, financial barriers, while reduced by loans and subsidies, still deter some low-income youth. Tuition fees introduced during expansion (typically ¥5,000–¥10,000 per year for public universities) are heavy for poor rural families (Yan & Ma, 2013). This can influence whether a student chooses to attend a lower-tier college far from home. Surveys indicate that cost and perceived benefits cause some rural students to opt out or choose shorter vocational programs over expensive university degrees (Liu, 2018).

4.2. Stratification and Quality Gaps

Alongside inequities in access, China's rapid expansion has led to concerns about educational quality and the stratification of the higher education system. The doubling and tripling of enrollment put enormous pressure on universities' facilities and faculty. Class sizes swelled in many institutions, student–teacher ratios increased, and resources per student declined, particularly in the early 2000s (Yan & Ma, 2013). Faculty hiring and training often lagged behind enrollment growth, raising questions about the *quality of instruction* received by the influx of students (Zhang, 2022). While elite universities maintained relatively high standards (and benefited from targeted government excellence funds like Project 985), many second- and third-tier institutions struggled to accommodate the surge without diluting quality (Mok & Jiang, 2017). There are anecdotal and survey reports of crowded lecture halls, less individualized attention, and stretched laboratory and library resources during the peak expansion years around 2000–2010 (Mohrman et al., 2011). The Ministry of Education instituted evaluations and quality assurance programs to address these issues (Ying, 2011), but results have been mixed. According to Ying (2011), the "985 Project" substantially improved research capacity at a handful of top universities, yet the gap between those and the bulk of other institutions widened in terms of funding and faculty qualifications. Thus, massification has been accompanied by horizontal stratification: a widening divergence between elite and non-elite colleges.

Such stratification can exacerbate inequality, because students from less-privileged backgrounds are concentrated in the lower-tier institutions which have fewer resources and often lower market value (Luo et al., 2018). Employers in China place great weight on institutional prestige; graduates of top universities have a clear advantage in the labor market, whereas those from newly established local colleges or private institutions may struggle with underemployment (Mok & Jiang, 2017). This dynamic potentially undermines the equity gains of simply *entering* higher education – it matters *where* one studies. Research on graduate employment indicates that many graduates from lower-tier institutions face difficulties finding high-skill, well-paid jobs, sometimes referred to as the "Ant Tribe" phenomenon of underemployed college graduates living in poor conditions in cities (Mok & Jiang, 2017). The overall graduate employment rate remained high officially (often over 90% securing some job within six months of graduation), but underemployment and mismatch are common issues, signaling quality concerns in learning and

career preparation (Mok & Jiang, 2017; Li et al., 2014). In short, China's massification has produced a *hierarchy* of institutions and outcomes, raising the question of how to ensure quality and value across the board.

4.3. Economic and Labor Market Pressures

The flood of new graduates each year – now around 8 to 9 million – has also altered China's labor market dynamics. One concern is that the supply of graduates may outpace the creation of high-skilled jobs, leading to a decline in the college wage premium or unemployment among young graduates (Chi & Zhu, 2022). Some evidence points to a *moderation* of returns to education for the cohorts who graduated after the expansion peak. Chi and Zhu (2022) find that the great expansion did contribute to an increase in the college-educated labor force and initially to rising skill premiums (due to concurrent economic growth), but more recently the glut of graduates has started to put downward pressure on wages in certain fields. Graduate unemployment, while still relatively low, ticked upward in the early 2010s, with media reports of record numbers of jobless or underemployed graduates each summer. For example, the term kenlao zu, referring to young adults relying on parental support gained popularity, reflecting societal worries that a college degree no longer guarantees a good job.

It is important to note that these pressures are uneven: they are most acute for graduates of less prestigious institutions or those with generic majors. Surveys show employers remain keen to hire graduates from elite universities, but those from newer mass institutions often must settle for lower pay or jobs that might not require a degree (Mok & Jiang, 2017). This underemployment indicates an efficiency challenge – resources spent on producing graduates who cannot fully utilize their skills. Some scholars argue that China's expansion was too *speedy* to align with industrial upgrading, resulting in a temporary oversupply of general graduates. In response, the government has been pushing innovation, entrepreneurship training, and vocational skills to improve graduate employability (Ministry of Education, 2022). Still, the class of 2022 faced notable job market difficulties (exacerbated by the pandemic), illustrating that managing the *quantity-quality* balance of graduates remains an ongoing challenge.

4.4. The Equity-Efficiency Trade-off

A deeper issue underlying these challenges is the policy trade-off between *equity* and *efficiency (excellence)* in the massification process. China pursued both mass expansion and world-class university initiatives simultaneously. On one hand, it rapidly expanded *quantity*; on the other, it invested heavily in a select few universities (through Project 211, 985, Double First-Class) to boost *quality* at the top end (Ying, 2011). While this two-pronged strategy achieved some of each goal – many more graduates system-wide and a few globally ranked universities – it arguably widened inequalities between institutions (Ying, 2011; Mohrman et al., 2011). Students who attend the well-funded elite universities receive a very different education (small classes, top faculty, better facilities) than those at an average local college. This inequality in educational experience can translate into inequality in outcomes. Some researchers describe the situation as a *bifurcated system*: a relatively small elite segment and a large mass segment with lesser resources

(Huang, 2018). The challenge for China is how to raise the quality of the mass segment without sacrificing the strides made in the elite sector.

Moreover, equity is not only about *access to college*, but also about access to *success within and after college*. If rural or first-generation students disproportionately attend poorer-quality institutions and then struggle in the job market, the expansion's social mobility benefits are constrained. Luo et al. (2018) found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in China not only enroll at lower rates, but even when they do enroll, they tend to be sorted into lower-tier institutions, a pattern that perpetuates inequality. Huang (2018) highlight a paradox: expansion has improved equality in formal access (more students from all backgrounds go to college), but it may have *reduced* equality in outcomes because advantaged students reap greater benefits from the system (by concentrating in better institutions and programs). This suggests that massification alone, without complementary equity policies, can only do so much to level the playing field.

4.5. Quality of Education and Learning Outcomes

Beyond employment, there are quality concerns regarding what students are learning. The rapid expansion led to concerns about academic preparedness and performance of the enlarged student intake. Professors at some universities reported having to adjust curriculum expectations as more average students (compared to previously highly select cohorts) entered classrooms (Mohrman et al., 2011). There has been criticism that rote learning and limited faculty time hinder the development of critical thinking and practical skills for many undergraduates (Mok & Jiang, 2017). International assessments or employer surveys occasionally suggest Chinese graduates (outside top-tier ones) may lack certain soft skills or innovative capabilities. The government has recognized this and pushed pedagogical reforms, including more undergraduate research opportunities and smaller class pilot programs, but scaling these improvements across thousands of institutions is difficult (Ying, 2011). Ensuring *quality assurance* in such a huge system is a formidable task. The Ministry of Education implemented a teaching evaluation system in the mid-2000s which actually resulted in the closure of some substandard private colleges and the consolidation of others (Ying, 2011). This indicates efforts to curb the lowest-quality outliers, yet raising average quality remains a work in progress.

In summary, while massification achieved its primary aim of expanding access, it left a complex legacy of challenges. Urban-rural and regional disparities in higher education participation persist, highlighting that deeper systemic inequalities in primary/secondary education and economic development carry through into the higher education stage (Hannum & Wang, 2006). The quick growth stretched resources, potentially affecting the quality of education provided, especially in non-elite settings. The burgeoning number of graduates introduced new pressures in the labor market, including underemployment and skill mismatches for some. And internally, the higher education system became more stratified even as it became more accessible, raising concerns about a tiered society of haves and have-nots in educational terms. These challenges do not negate the real gains of massification, but they do signal that expansion needs to be managed with careful policy interventions to ensure that the benefits are equitable and sustainable. The next section will discuss what measures China has taken and can take to address these issues of equity and quality in the era of mass higher education.

5. Policy Responses and Strategies for Equity in the Massification Era

Recognizing the challenges outlined above, Chinese policymakers and educators have introduced a range of initiatives aimed at managing the negative side-effects of massification and promoting a more equitable, high-quality system. This section reviews some of the key policy responses in recent years that target equity and quality concerns: special admission programs for disadvantaged students, increased funding and financial aid, quality assurance and curricular reforms, and efforts to better align higher education with labor market needs.

5.1. Targeted Admission and Support Programs

To narrow the urban–rural gap in elite university access, China launched several *affirmative action-style* programs in the 2000s and 2010s. One prominent initiative is the "Special Program for Rural Students", also known as the *National Rural Student Enrollment Program*, introduced around 2012. This program allocates a certain number of seats at top universities specifically for students from rural or poor areas (often requiring they come from counties designated as impoverished) (Liu, 2018). Participating universities (including many Project 985 schools) set somewhat lower Gaokao score thresholds for rural applicants under this program. The impact of the special program has been modest but positive: it has enabled hundreds of rural youths each year to enter elite institutions who might otherwise have been excluded by a narrow exam score margin (Liu, 2018). However, due to its limited scale relative to overall admissions, it alone cannot bridge the urban–rural enrollment divide; it is more of a symbolic and incremental improvement (Luo et al., 2018).

Another set of programs is the "College Enrollment Cooperation Plans" between eastern and western provinces. Under these, top universities (mostly in eastern China) increase their recruitment quotas for students from central and western provinces, beyond the normal quota determined by province population. For example, universities in Beijing might reserve additional spots for applicants from Xinjiang, Tibet, or Guizhou (Yan & Ma, 2013). This policy aims to even out regional representation. Data suggest it has slightly improved the chances of high scorers from under-developed provinces to attend better universities, but some eastern provinces have resisted large quota reallocations due to local pressures (educational opportunities are a politically sensitive resource) (Yan & Ma, 2013).

On the support side, student financial aid has been greatly expanded to ensure that admitted poor students can afford to attend. Starting in 2007, China rolled out a national student loan system and scholarship/grant programs (state stipends, "green channel" tuition deferment, etc.) (Yan & Ma, 2013). By 2020, millions of students from low-income families were receiving grants or subsidies. This has reduced financial barriers: surveys indicate that tuition is less of a reason for dropping out now than in the early 2000s (when some rural students admitted to college could not enroll due to cost) (Liu, 2018). Financial aid, combined with targeted admissions, is meant to improve not just access but also *completion* rates for disadvantaged students.

5.2. Improving Quality and Differentiation

The government has implemented quality assurance measures to address the strain on educational quality. A major initiative was the Teaching Quality Assessment of undergraduate

programs, which ran cycles of evaluations for all higher education institutions (Ying, 2011). Institutions that performed poorly were warned or, in a few cases, prevented from expanding further. Additionally, curricula have been revised to make learning more student-centered and skills-oriented, especially in vocational colleges (Mok & Jiang, 2017). The Ministry of Education encouraged universities to update teaching methods, introduce elective courses, and emphasize practical training as a way to enhance the competencies of graduates beyond rote knowledge (Ying, 2011).

To tackle graduate underemployment, career services and entrepreneurship education have been ramped up. Universities now host job fairs, career counseling, and incubators for student start-ups on a much larger scale than before (Ministry of Education, 2022). The concept of "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" has been promoted at campuses nationwide, aiming to help graduates create employment opportunities and adapt to a changing economy. This is partly a response to the saturation of traditional graduate jobs – encouraging students to be flexible and even start their own businesses (Mok & Jiang, 2017). Early evaluations suggest these efforts have had mixed success; while entrepreneurial interest has risen, it is often the more privileged students who can afford to take risks in start-ups. Nonetheless, integrating employability skills into the curriculum is an acknowledged priority.

Another strategic response is continued higher education differentiation. China is refining a tiered system where different institutions have different missions: some focus on cutting-edge research and postgraduate training (the elites), while others focus on applied learning and vocational skills (the majority). The introduction of *University of Applied Sciences* pilots and conversion of some universities into *vocational undergraduate* institutions are recent moves to better align graduates' skills with market needs (Huang, 2018). By clearly delineating academic vs. vocational tracks (while ensuring each track has quality standards), policymakers hope to avoid a scenario where all institutions chase research prestige at the expense of teaching or where students receive an academic education ill-suited for available jobs. Germany's dual-track system is often cited as a model in these reforms. Of course, the challenge is to elevate the status and quality of vocational programs so that they are not seen as second-class. The government has increased funding for vocational higher education and is involving industry in curriculum design to improve outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2022).

5.3. Funding Reforms for Equity

Ensuring adequate and equitable funding per student remains critical. In the 2010s, public funding for higher education increased substantially in absolute terms, in part due to programs aimed at lifting up non-elite institutions. For example, the Central and Western Universities Infrastructure Improvement Plan provided special grants to universities in poorer provinces to upgrade facilities and hire faculty (Yan & Ma, 2013). Also, provinces with weaker higher education bases have received targeted support under the "Double High Plan" for vocational colleges and "One Province, One University" initiatives. These investments are attempts to reduce the resource gap between coastal and inland institutions. While elite projects (211/985) got the limelight, more recent policies like the "Double First-Class" initiative (2017) include universities from various regions and also emphasize disciplines (not just whole institutions) to

spread resources more widely (Postiglione, 2020). For instance, a provincial university might receive funds to build a "first-class" specialty in, say, agriculture or mining engineering that serves local development, even if the university itself is not top-tier nationally. This can indirectly benefit local students who attend those programs.

Additionally, the government has worked on standardizing funding formulas to ensure each public institution gets a baseline per-student allocation. Previously, funding was often negotiated or historical, leading to big disparities. New formulas account for enrollment numbers, fields of study (expensive lab-based fields get more), and local price levels (Yan & Ma, 2013). While elite schools still get extra funds for research, the basic teaching funds per student have seen some equalization. Financial aid budgets have also grown; by 2020, over 30% of college students reportedly received some form of aid, indicating improved support for those in need (Ministry of Education, 2022). These measures help remove economic hurdles and improve conditions at less-funded schools, both of which contribute to equity.

5.4. Monitoring Outcomes and Adjusting Policies

Chinese have been closely monitoring outcomes of massification – from employment statistics to regional enrollment data – and adjusting policies accordingly. For example, when graduate employment became a prominent issue, the Ministry of Education capped enrollment in certain majors deemed oversaturated and encouraged expansion in emerging fields where labor demand is high (Mok & Jiang, 2017). Some universities in recent years have reduced intake for majors like business administration or law, while increasing quota for engineering or vocational programs, to better align with market needs. This responsive planning is aimed at avoiding severe oversupply in the graduate job market. Likewise, when data showed continuing low enrollment from central/western regions in top universities, the central government nudged top institutions to further raise their allocated seats for those regions and initiated outreach and preparatory programs for rural students (Liu, 2018). Several elite universities now have partnerships with specific poor counties to identify and train promising students (for instance, summer bridge courses before college entry), helping them adapt and succeed in the elite academic environment.

Moreover, the concept of "education poverty alleviation" has gained traction. It involves using higher education as a tool to break intergenerational poverty. Universities have sent faculty to assist high schools in impoverished areas, offered distance education opportunities, and created special scholarship programs for students from poor families (Liu, 2018). These targeted efforts, though small in scale, reflect a policy ethos that massification should translate into upliftment of disadvantaged communities, not just produce more graduates in aggregate.

5.5. Remaining Gaps and Future Directions

Despite these initiatives, significant gaps remain. Urban students, especially from affluent families, continue to have disproportionate advantages in accessing top-quality higher education and, subsequently, top jobs. The Gaokao system, though meritocratic in form, still reflects underlying inequalities in basic education quality – a fundamental issue that higher education policies alone cannot fix (Hannum & Wang, 2006). The government has acknowledged that true equity in higher education is linked to reforms in earlier educational stages (e.g. improving rural

schools), as well as broader social policies to reduce the urban–rural divide. In recent policy documents (e.g., China's Education Modernization 2035 plan), there is an emphasis on "balanced development" and ensuring that every province has at least a few high-level universities (to curb talent drain and uneven development).

Quality assurance also remains an ongoing effort. There is discussion of implementing learning outcome assessments (similar to the OECD's AHELO pilot) to directly measure what students are learning across different institutions. If such assessments were adopted, they could highlight gaps and press universities to improve teaching. The Ministry of Education's new round of "Double First-Class" evaluations will also consider undergraduate teaching quality, not just research, to ensure that even research-focused universities pay attention to educating the influx of undergraduates effectively (Postiglione, 2020).

Finally, China is exploring international cooperation and benchmarking as part of managing massification. By learning from systems in other countries that have gone through massification (the United States, mass European systems, other Asian countries like Korea), Chinese policymakers seek insights into tackling issues like graduate employment and institutional equity. For instance, the concept of community colleges or short-cycle higher education drawing from the US model has been considered in tweaking the vocational track. The country's participation in global assessments and university rankings also puts pressure on maintaining quality while expanding access.

In summary, China's policy response to the challenges of massification has been multi-faceted: affirmative programs to broaden who benefits, funding and curricular reforms to bolster quality, and a continuous fine-tuning of expansion to socio-economic needs. While it is too early to declare all issues resolved, these strategies have shown some effectiveness. For example, by the late 2010s, the urban–rural gap in enrollment *rates* did start to narrow slightly (as rural GER caught up) and the employment situation for graduates stabilized with the economy's shift to services and innovation (Chi & Zhu, 2022). However, inequities in *where* students enroll and what outcomes they achieve persist, indicating that policy efforts must persist as well.

6. Conclusion

China's experience with higher education massification offers a rich case study of the opportunities and challenges inherent in expanding educational access on a grand scale. On one hand, the post-1999 enrollment boom has been an unqualified success in quantitative terms: tens of millions of additional students have attended college, transforming China from a country of elite higher education into one approaching universal participation. This expansion has produced a more educated workforce and opened doors for many who would previously have been denied tertiary education. The very aspiration of higher education has become normalized for the majority of Chinese families, reflecting a profound cultural shift.

On the other hand, the Chinese case underscores that *expansion alone does not guarantee equity*. Pre-existing inequalities – between urban and rural areas, coastal and inland regions, rich and poor families – have continued to manifest in the higher education arena, albeit in modified

ways. The *mass* system that emerged is markedly stratified: a hierarchy where elite institutions (mostly benefiting the already advantaged) coexist with a mass of second- and third-tier colleges enrolling the bulk of students (often from less-privileged backgrounds). This stratification means that while access has widened, outcomes (such as quality of education, graduation prospects, and employment opportunities) remain unequal. As noted by Marginson (2016), high-participation systems tend to reproduce social stratification unless strong corrective measures are in place.

China has shown awareness of these issues and has taken steps to manage the consequences of massification. Policies such as rural student admission programs, increased financial aid, and institutional support for less-developed regions represent efforts to steer the system toward greater inclusion. At the same time, initiatives to improve teaching quality and align education with market demands aim to maintain the credibility and utility of a Chinese college degree. The balancing act between *quantity* and *quality* is ongoing. Notably, the Chinese case reveals a deliberate strategy to couple expansion with excellence initiatives (massification *and* world-class university building). This dual approach has yielded world-renowned universities and a globally competitive research output, but it also risked widening internal gaps. The policy challenge ahead is to reconcile these twin goals by spreading excellence more evenly – for example, by creating "world-class disciplines" at a wider range of institutions and strengthening vocational and regional universities.

From a theoretical perspective, China's massification highlights the continuing relevance of Martin Trow's stages of higher education (elite–mass–universal) in the 21st century, while also suggesting refinements. Trow emphasized that as systems grow, they must undergo structural and value changes, including how they define merit and handle diversity of student preparation. We see this in China as the Gaokao-centric meritocracy is being supplemented with more holistic or targeted criteria to ensure diverse representation (e.g., rural background considered in special admissions). The values of the system are gradually shifting from "exclusion" to "inclusion," although societal attitudes can lag, still placing outsized prestige on elite institutions. Managing public expectations – that not every college graduate will have an elite outcome – is part of the social adjustment to massification.

In conclusion, China's journey from elitism to massification in higher education is a remarkable story of transformation, one that is still unfolding. It demonstrates the power of public policy to rapidly increase human capital and educational participation. However, it also serves as a caution that expanding access, while celebrated, must be accompanied by vigilant attention to quality and fairness. Other countries seeking to massify their higher education can learn from China's successes (strong government commitment, resource mobilization, diversified provision) and its struggles (inequities and quality issues). The Chinese case reinforces that *"massifying" education is not simply an administrative scaling-up; it is a social project* that requires rethinking resource allocation, pedagogy, and the purpose of higher education in society. As China moves deeper into the universal stage, the challenge will be to provide inclusive excellence – to not only educate the masses, but to do so in a way that each student, regardless of background, can achieve their potential and contribute meaningfully to society. Achieving that ideal remains the next horizon for managing massification in Chinese higher education.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, J. L.; methodology, J. L.; software, J. L.; validation, J. L.; formal analysis, J. L.; investigation, J. L.; resources, J. L.; data curation, J. L.; writing—original draft preparation, J. L.; writing—review and editing, J. L.; visualization, J. L.; supervision, J. L.; project administration, J. L.; funding acquisition, J. L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding Statement:

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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