



Interrupted Ladders? Higher Education Expansion, Youth Aspirations, and Social Mobility in the 21st Century China

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Abstract: This paper explores the paradox of social mobility in China's higher education expansion. Despite a sixfold increase in enrollment rates since 1999, intergenerational mobility remains limited, especially for rural and working-class youth. While access has broadened, inequality persists through credential inflation, labor market exclusion, and unequal family resources. The paper concludes by advocating reforms in funding, employment policy, skills-based education, and intergenerational equity to restore education as a credible ladder of upward mobility.

Keywords: educational expansion, social mobility, credential inflation, small-town youth, structural inequality, hukou system

1. Introduction

China's higher education expansion has often been viewed as a path to greater social mobility. Yet for many youth — especially those from rural or working-class backgrounds — access has not guaranteed advancement. Instead, they face devalued degrees, rising competition, and persistent structural barriers. This paper reconsiders the promise of mass education by focusing on the lived realities of “small-town youth,” analyzing how policy ambition collides with social stratification. It asks: when education expands, who truly moves upward — and who remains stuck?

2. The Paradox of Mobility in China's Education Miracle

In 1999, China launched an unprecedented expansion of higher education. Within two decades, gross enrollment rates surged from 10% to over 60% by 2023, transforming China into the world's largest higher education system. This expansion was widely celebrated as a democratizing force, promising upward mobility for millions through the meritocratic gateway of the Gaokao (national college entrance exam). Yet, a striking paradox persists: despite massification, intergenerational income elasticity remains stubbornly high — above 0.6 according to recent studies by Peking University — suggesting that social mobility has not improved commensurately.

This paper interrogates a central contradiction: why has the world's largest experiment in educational expansion failed to deliver substantial social mobility, especially for youth from working-class and rural backgrounds? While the quantity of access has expanded, qualitative disparities have intensified. Elite families retain disproportionate access to top-tier institutions, while graduates from non-elite universities face devalued credentials, intensified labor market competition, and structural exclusions reinforced by the household registration (hukou) system.

Focusing on the experiences of so-called small-town swots (*xiao zhen zuo ti jia*), this paper argues that China's education system has transformed from a “ladder of mobility” into a “generator of anxiety.” The following sections examine the policy logic of expansion, the new youth predicament, the fractured ladder of opportunity, the coping strategies of marginalized youth, and potential policy correctives. Through this lens, the paper aims to illuminate how stratified access, institutional rigidity, and credential inflation jointly constrain the mobility dreams of a generation.

3. The Logic of Gaokao Expansion: Equity Promises and Hidden Stratification

China's higher education expansion in the late 1990s was driven by a threefold agenda: mitigating employment shocks from state-owned enterprise reform, boosting human capital for WTO integration, and reinforcing the narrative that “knowledge changes fate.” Between 1999 and 2023, university admissions increased from 1.6 million to over 10 million, with gross enrollment rates rising from 10% to over 60%. This “education miracle” significantly broadened access to tertiary education.

However, expanded access did not dismantle entrenched inequalities. Rural students made up over 30% of top university enrollments in the 1950s but fell below 15% by 2020 (Peking University). According to a 2023 report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, less than 25% of elite university students come from working-class or peasant families,

revealing a regressive trend beneath the surface of massification.

Three institutional mechanisms sustain this stratification. First, resource concentration: top-tier universities receive more than ten times the per-student funding compared to ordinary institutions, reinforcing elite institutional dominance. Second, regional quota disparities: populous provinces like Henan face steep disadvantages—sometimes as high as 4:1—in admissions compared to cities like Beijing. Third, meritocratic gatekeeping: mechanisms such as Olympiad awards or independent recruitment disproportionately favor students from affluent urban backgrounds, effectively legitimizing the reproduction of privilege.

In sum, Gaokao expansion ensured “education for all,” but failed to deliver “quality education for all.” The massification of access has been accompanied by an intensification of qualitative hierarchy, making the path to elite credentials increasingly exclusive.

4. The Youth Predicament: Credential Inflation and the Small-Town Swot

For generations of rural and working-class youth, the Gaokao has symbolized the most viable — often the only — pathway to upward mobility. However, the expansion of higher education has led to credential inflation. The share of jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree rose from 20% to 65%, while competition intensified across graduate and civil service exams. Many youth pursue ever-higher qualifications for diminishing returns, spending immense time and resources. Online communities reflect disillusionment, as elite-educated students express a sense of betrayal and stagnation. Skill mismatches further frustrate expectations: fewer than half of STEM graduates find relevant jobs, and many postgraduates work in low-wage sectors. For many, mobility feels like a treadmill: the effort intensifies, but the landscape remains static.

5. The Fractured Ladder: Three Ceilings of Mobility

Despite the massification of higher education, China’s social mobility ladder remains fractured. For rural and working-class youth, the ideal of “knowledge changing fate” now confronts three persistent ceilings: weakened educational selection, labor market exclusion, and intergenerational resource disparity.

5.1 The Erosion of Educational Selection

As bachelor’s degrees become commonplace, their market signaling power declines. Graduate credentials increasingly act as new filters — a “second Gaokao” — that are harder to cross. For instance, law graduates from lower-tier universities face judicial exam pass rates below 10%, while elite counterparts exceed 40%. This reinforces symbolic distinctions: degrees from prestigious universities maintain status value even when job performance is comparable, reflecting Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital converted into symbolic dominance [1].

5.2 Institutionalized Labor Market Exclusion

The hukou system continues to restrict opportunity [2]. Many Beijing and Shanghai employers, particularly in government and SOEs, express preference for local residency. Settlement policies tied to educational pedigree further disadvantage non-elite graduates. As Tilly’s “opportunity hoarding” concept suggests, structural filters privilege elites under the guise of meritocracy.

5.3 Intergenerational Resource Disparities

Mobility is also shaped by unequal access to economic and social capital. Elite families leverage connections for internships and property assets to subsidize career delays. In contrast, disadvantaged students often leave school indebted, lacking networks and bargaining power, forced into low-paying, high-pressure jobs with little room for advancement. Together, these ceilings render social mobility a “glass channel”: visible, aspirational, but rarely traversable for the majority.

6. Youth Survival Strategies: From Exam-Takers to Defectors

Confronted with blocked mobility and mounting precarity, Chinese youth—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds — are devising diverse strategies to survive, adapt, and resist. While these responses rarely challenge the system directly, they reveal how individuals navigate structures that have ceased to deliver on the promise of meritocracy. These strategies fall broadly into two categories: tactical adaptation and cultural resistance.

6.1 Tactical Adaptation: Rationalizing the Unraveling Ladder

Many youth lower their expectations. Humanities graduates turn to retail, marketing, or sectors like new energy sales, prioritizing income over prestige. This shift is often framed symbolically, such as the viral phrase “taking off Kong Yiji’s robe,” denoting the abandonment of academic idealism.

Another route is exam fixation. The civil service exam, seen as a ticket to job security, has become a national obsession — over 2.5 million candidates registered in 2023. For many, “shang’an” (getting ashore) symbolizes not ambition, but escape.

Some opt for geographic retreat, leaving first-tier cities for lower-cost regions. Digital nomad enclaves in places like Dali or Hegang represent minimalist responses to unsustainable urban life.

6.2 Cultural Resistance: Symbolic Withdrawal from the Game

Other youth engage in soft resistance. “Lying flat” rejects the ethic of endless competition, instead embracing low-desire, low-output lifestyles. It is less apathy than a critique of productivity as virtue.

A related phenomenon is the “full-time child”, where young people live with their parents while studying or recovering from burnout. This model blends familial support with a quiet refusal to engage in the labor market on exploitative terms.

These strategies embody resilience, but also resignation. As de Certeau observed, tactical moves rarely dismantle dominant systems; they merely carve out space within them [3]. Without structural reform, such responses risk entrenching passivity rather than enabling transformation.

7. Conclusion: Rebuilding the Ladder — Toward a New Policy Imagination

To restore education as a channel of mobility, reform is needed in four areas: reallocating funding to disadvantaged regions and universities, banning hukou-based job discrimination, expanding high-quality vocational education, and introducing intergenerational equity measures such as inheritance-linked education support. Educational legitimacy depends not on access alone, but on whether it leads to meaningful opportunity. Without structural change, aspiration will continue to outpace achievement for many.

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