

Credentialism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice—The Elitist Ethos of Chinese Universities and Its Contradiction with Massification

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Abstract. Since the end of 20th century, Chinese higher education has achieved a rocketing development from elitism to massification. However, behind the scale expansion, the alienation of elitism and credentialism and their conflicts with the concept of mass higher education have become increasingly severe. Based on the perspective of pedagogy, this study explored the formation logic, alienation mechanism of elitism and credentialism, as well as their impacts on higher education. Elitism has been alienated into a tool for class solidification through intergenerational transmission of cultural capitalism, while credentialism changes academic qualifications into the core criterion for measuring personal value. The mutual relationship between the two has deeply impacted on the university evaluation system and resource allocation system, shaping the elitist ethos of higher education. This ethos is incompatible with the inclusive and diverse demands of mass higher education, which is reflected in structural dilemmas such as dislocation of educational value, imbalance of resource allocation and simplification of evaluation system. To resolve this paradox, it is necessary to reconstruct the value orientation of higher education, establish a classified evaluation system, optimize the resource allocation mechanism, and promote the transformation of higher education from scale expansion to connotative development.

1 Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, China's higher education has undergone a historic transformation. Taking the college enrollment expansion launched in 1999 as a key turning point, it took merely over two decades to complete the leap from elite education to mass education. In 2019, it further entered the stage of universalization, establishing the world's largest higher education system. This development has not only reshaped China's human resource structure, but also provided a strong driving force for social mobility and industrial transformation and upgrading, which is in profound alignment with the development logic of late-developing countries that realize modernization through educational catch-up.

However, behind the scale expansion, the deep-seated contradictions hidden in the field of higher education have gradually come to the fore. With the modernization and

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massification of higher education, the value orientation of higher education itself has attracted growing attention. Many scholars have pointed out that elitism and credentialism have become increasingly prominent in higher education and tend to evolve into mainstream values [1].

Among these issues, the penetration of elitism and credentialism and their conflicts with the concept of mass education have become the core topics restricting the high-quality development of higher education. As an ideological product of the transformation of modern social structure, elitism initially broke the closed pattern of the aristocratic hereditary system based on the principle of “ability-centeredness”, providing an important driving force for social progress. Yet in the contemporary higher education context, it has exhibited distinct characteristics of alienation. Variables such as ability, wealth, race and ethnicity, social class, high school background, parental and family involvement, as well as financial aid, constitute and restrict access to higher education [2]. The advantaged classes have paved the way for “elite reproduction” through the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, gradually reducing the ability-based selection mechanism to a tool for class solidification. As a concrete extension of elitism in the field of education, credentialism simplifies academic degrees into the core criterion for measuring personal value, constructing a narrow cognition that “academic qualification equals ability”. Furthermore, the talent-centered merit narrative of credentialism is used to justify that different educational and career paths are almost booked, while the merit interpretation focusing on effort may legitimize the concept of inequality that links lack of success with laziness [3]. This notion not only restricts the diversified development of individuals, but also adds to the academic credential anxiety in society. The mutual relationship between the two has deeply penetrated into all aspects of higher education through the university evaluation system and resource allocation mechanism, shaping a distinct elitist ethos.

The core essence of higher education massification lies in inclusiveness and diversity, aiming to meet the educational needs of different groups and realize the value pursuit of “education for all”. Nevertheless, in reality, the prevalent elitist orientation retained by Chinese universities, the resource allocation model favoring advantaged groups, and the single quantitative evaluation system have led to sharp contradictions between the elitist ethos and the direction of development in massification. Such contradictions are reflected not only in the promotion of elitism by internal university evaluations and the reinforcement of credentialism by university rankings, but also in the structural dilemmas, such as the lack of educational equity and the mismatch between talent supply and demand during the process of massification. Based on the formation and hidden dangers of elitism and credentialism, this paper will examine the dilemmas in China’s higher education massification process and propose future prospects.

2 The alienation of elitism and credentialism and their social risks

Elitism, in essence, emerged as an ideological product of the transformation of modern social structures. Initially, it took shape as a resistance against hereditary bloodline systems and aristocracy. Pareto’s Theory of the Circulation of Elites provided its core theoretical foundation, advocating that social resources and status should be distributed based on individual capabilities and achievements. This notion broke the closed framework of aristocratic hereditary succession and established a core channel for class mobility in modern society. During the rise of modern capitalist nations, the talent selection logic of elitism was highly compatible with the demand for skilled personnel generated by industrialized production, evolving into a vital ideological driving force that propelled the social division of labor and the development of productive forces.

Yet, it must be acknowledged that elitism has undergone distinct alienation in the contemporary era. In terms of its fundamental talent selection mechanism, advantaged classes have paved paths of “elite reproduction” for their offspring by accumulating cultural and social capital, thereby reducing the merit-based selection system to class solidification. The phenomenon that “it is hard for children from underprivileged families to become elites” is essentially a performance of opportunity inequality caused by the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. On the ethical and moral front, guided by instrumental rationality, the elite groups attribute their success entirely to personal endeavor, dismissing the role of structural factors such as luck, opportunities and family backgrounds. They firmly believe that they are entitled to rewards—be it power, authority, status, or wealth—because these are the fruits of their own talent and hard work [2]. The moral condemnation of the underprivileged inherent in this “success ethic” is increasingly fostering social divisions, the growth of distrust, prejudice, jealousy, resentment, and contempt between different social groups, and thus undermining the very legitimacy of elitism itself [4].

In contrast to the macro social orientation of elitism, credentialism presents itself as an integration of social mentality, screening systems, and value evaluation frameworks, exerting extensive and profound influences across various social domains. With academic credentials as its core symbol, it crudely equates educational qualifications with personal ability and worth. This not only dictates the logic of educational resource allocation but also penetrates fields such as employment and social interaction, emerging as an invisible shackle that shapes individual development paths. As a concrete extension of elitism in the educational sphere, credentialism exhibits distinct microcosmic characteristics. From an individualistic perspective, neoliberals regard education as a solution for all social inequalities, arguing that all economic problems are essentially educational issues rooted in the failure of the underprivileged to acquire essential skills or obtain the credentials required for social integration and employment [5]. Far from being a genuine solution, this approach constitutes a moral judgment—a one-sided view held by the successful that equates professional competence solely with educational attainment. By reducing human capital theory to the narrow-minded notion that “qualifications equal ability”, credentialism traps universities and enterprises in a path-dependent cycle of “credential screening”. While credentials themselves are devoid of class connotations, they have become a crucial criterion for comparison in the context of job hunting [6]. Meanwhile, against the background of the massification of higher education, universities are under mounting pressure to fulfill their commitments to governments, employers, and graduates to enhance human capital and the economic value of higher education institutions [7]. From a philosophical standpoint, the slogans and principles advocated by elitism and credentialism—such as the principles of responsibility, success, the active life, and self-actualization—have gradually evolved into a form of hidden self-violence [8]. The logic of tying life value to academic labels runs counter to Aristotle’s theory of happiness, which emphasizes the holistic development of human beings. This reduces individuals to instrumentalized entities, leading to the over-commercialization and homogenization of individual existence, and resulting in the psychological alienation of individuals, manifested as a tangled mix of pride, anxiety, humiliation, and resentment.

The mutually constitutive relationship between elitism and credentialism exerts a profound impact on social structures. Academic credentials serve not only as the core evaluation criterion of elitism but also as the entry ticket to the elite class. The credential fetishism prevalent in universities and enterprises is constructing a new “academic qualification barrier”. Moreover, through its invasion into the educational system, credentialism transforms the elitist “myth of meritocracy” into a universal social consensus, ultimately giving rise to a social mentality of “credential supremacy” and plunging the entire society into the value trap of “success-obsessed” thinking.

3 Chinese universities and their elitist ethos

3.1 The promotion of elitism by internal evaluation methods in Chinese universities

Elitism, which broke the shackles of the aristocratic hereditary system based on the principle of ability-centeredness, has been alienated into a tool for class solidification in the contemporary era. Within China's higher education system, internal university evaluation systems, as the core carriers of talent screening and value orientation, are driving the in-depth evolution of elitist ideology through three dimensions: evaluation criteria, resource allocation, and development path guidance. Their influence involves both the positive dimension of breaking identity barriers and the practical challenges to educational equity. Although the academic elitism system in universities has certain rationality and positive effects, it still exerts a negative impact on the formation of academic communities and academic innovation [9]. From the perspective of pedagogy, the screening function of university evaluation systems is inherently compatible with the meritocratic logic of elitism, and this compatibility becomes more prominent against the background of higher education massification.

The quantitative orientation of evaluation criteria constitutes the primary manifestation of elitism. Currently, most universities adopt quantifiable indicators such as grade point average (GPA) rankings, the number of research outputs, and competition award levels as their core evaluation criteria. This screening logic of digital elitism is essentially an extension of the elitist notion that "ability can be measured quantitatively". Admittedly, in the early stage of the rapid expansion of higher education scale, establishing a relatively unified and practical quantitative evaluation system had certain rationality in terms of improving management efficiency and setting basic quality standards. Some scholars have pointed out that individuals socialized in educational systems characterized by early selection based on perceived potential are more likely to emphasize innate talent, whereas those navigating systems featuring late selection based on standardized examinations tend to highlight the role of effort [10]. However, when such instrumental rationality transcends its proper boundaries and becomes the sole criterion governing educational values and defining "excellence", its alienation begins to take shape. This over-reliance on quantitative indicators is in line with the neoliberal governmentality revealed by critical scholars, that is, by constructing a seemingly neutral and comparable measuring system, social inequality issues are transformed into competitions between individuals, thereby diverting attention from fundamental problems such as resource distribution and opportunity structures [11]. According to Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, knowledge gaining and ability development are multi-level and complex processes. Yet the current quantitative evaluation system in universities simplify these educational outcomes into numerical data, trapping students in a race of indicator chasing. Programs such as the Top Talent Program in top universities, despite their original intention of selecting talented students, attach too much weight to indicators like academic competition experience and research experience in their evaluation criteria. As a result, this opens up elite pathways exclusively for students with access to extracurricular resources, forming a chain of "resource advantage → indicator achievement → elite identity". This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's theory of intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, thereby raising the invisible barrier for accessing elitism.

The elite-oriented tilt in resource distribution further strengthens this trend. Elitism demands that certain valuable educational goods—such as university admission opportunities and high-quality educational resources—be prioritized for students with better academic performance [12]. Universities concentrate key resources, including scholarships, postgraduate recommendation quotas, and research funding on "elite students" who rank high in evaluation indicators, resulting in the Matthew Effect. On the surface, this distribution

model follows the elitist principle of “distribution according to achievement”, yet it neglects the key principle in educational equity. Rawls’ Theory of Justice in pedagogy emphasizes that educational resource distribution should tilt toward disadvantaged groups to achieve actual equity. Nevertheless, the outcome-oriented nature of university evaluation systems often neglects certain differences: students from remote areas may struggle to stand out in quantitative assessments due to defaults in their basic education, consequently losing access to resource support. This would gradually reduce the mobility of the elite group, echoing the alienated target of elitism.

More notably, evaluation systems put a formative influence on students’ development paths through elite-oriented guidance. Universities construct success templates based on academic performances such as postgraduate recommendation rates and employment rates, defining advancement to top graduate programs and employment in leading enterprises as elite achievements, and use evaluation incentives to guide students toward these goals. Such guidance ignores the essence of education as individualized development and runs against the diversity of self-actualization proposed in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Meanwhile, the emphasis on research outputs in faculty evaluation systems fosters teachers to invest more energy in cultivating elite students to improve their “output efficiency”, leading to hierarchical differentiation within the academic community and forming a two-way reinforcement of elitism in both teaching and learning [13]. However, when evaluation systems over-focus on elite groups, they give rise to an educational ecosystem where the majority are reduced to also-rans. The belief in a just world that such systems cater to social realities but covers up structural injustices [14]. This not only gives out the inclusive value of education but also transforms elitism from a “capacity incentive” into an identity privilege. As the primary venues for talent cultivation, universities need to construct evaluation systems that balance efficiency and equity, ensuring that evaluation truly serves the all-round development of all students and avoiding becoming conspirators in the solidification of elitism.

3.2 The reinforcing effect of Chinese university rankings on credentialism

The elitist ethos of universities is not formed in isolation; rather, it is the result of the internal evaluation systems and external ranking systems interacting and reinforcing each other. Internal evaluations produce students and faculty who meet elite standards, while external rankings bring about the outcomes of these practices—namely, academic credentials—with market value and social prestige, serving as a form of certification for credentialism. Together, they form a complete closed cycle.

Credentialism, with academic credentials as its core indicator, constructs a linear theory that “educational qualifications equal ability”. As the core value compass in the field of higher education, the ranking and evaluation system of Chinese universities continuously strengthens the penetration of credentialism through multiple pathways: indicator orientation, resource packing, and social cognition shaping. The logic of “quantitative competition” built in university rankings and evaluations aligns with the essence of credentialism—the “worship of academic qualifications”. This resonance transforms academic credentials from an external performance of educational achievements into a criterion for measuring social value, exerting a deep impact on the educational ecosystem and talent development.

The indicator system of university rankings and evaluations directly drives the classification of credential value, providing support for credentialism. Current mainstream evaluations and rankings—such as those for the Project 985, Project 211, and the Double First-Class Initiative—are primarily based on numerical indicators including research outputs and further education rates. When such evaluation criteria are translated into university talent cultivation practices, they turn into an extreme pursuit of producing “high-value credentials”.

In line with Bloom's perspective, education should aim to achieve the all-round development of knowledge, skills, and affective dispositions. Yet under the pressure of rankings, universities tend to distribute resources to programs with greater "further education advantages" and "employment advantages", enhancing students' credential added value by increasing course difficulty, offering additional academic programs, and encouraging participation in competitions. This reduces academic credentials from a natural outcome of the educational process to a core product of university competition, further strengthening the social perception that "greater university credentials equal higher talents", which is highly consistent with the instrumental tendency of credentialism.

The deep integration of rankings and resource distribution encourages the classification of credential value and strengthens the practical nature of credentials and higher education. Within policy frameworks such as the Double First-Class Initiative, universities with higher rankings gain access to more fiscal funding, research grants, and talent recruitment resources. These advantages, in turn, translate into higher-quality student enrollment and greater recognition of their academic credentials. This creates a distinct difference in the value of credentials issued by universities at different tiers. More alarmingly, the implicit preference for credentials from Double First-Class universities in corporate recruitment and civil service examinations further widens this gap. This leads to individuals' development being shackled by credential labels, transforming credentialism from a "social cognitive tendency" into an "individual survival strategy".

Beyond the explicit impacts of credential worship and resource allocation, university rankings and evaluations are also achieving the comprehensive penetration of credentialism through the hidden pathway of shaping social consensus. Intensive media coverage of rankings and blind pursuit of prestigious universities by parents have turned university evaluations into a de facto "credential value ranking" in the public mind. Bourdieu's theory of "symbolic capital" claims that academic credentials from top-ranked universities have become a form of symbolic capital that combines economic value with social privilege; possessing such credentials grants individuals higher social recognition. Meanwhile, the homogeneous competition among universities triggered by rankings has driven them to neglect all-round development and personalized talent cultivation. Instead, they concentrate resources on enhancing the market competitiveness of their credentials, further squeezing the space for non-utilitarian education. When academic credentials become the sole criterion for measuring educational success and personal worth, education falls into the trap of instrumental rationality. This not only goes against the fundamental educational mission of fostering virtue through education but also firms up the social foundation on which credentialism thrives. University rankings and evaluations should naturally serve as tools to promote educational quality. Only by reconstructing an evaluation system centered on talent cultivation quality can we break the shackles of credential worship and enable education to return to its essential purpose of cultivating people.

4 The paradox of elitism in the process of massification of Chinese higher education

4.1 The massification of Chinese higher education

According to the theory of higher education development stages proposed by Martin Trow in the 1970s, the scale expansion of higher education can be divided into three phases: when the gross enrollment rate of higher education is below 15%, it belongs to the elite phase; reaching 15% marks the entry into the mass phase; and exceeding 50% signifies advancement into the universal phase [15]. The massification process of Chinese higher education took the

college enrollment expansion policy launched in 1999 as a critical turning point. It has gone through three stages—rapid expansion, quality improvement, and connotative development—realizing a rocketing development from "access for a minority" to "universal access for the majority", and establishing the world's largest higher education system. In 2019, China's gross enrollment rate in higher education exceeded 50%, officially entering the universalization stage, which symbolized a historic leap in the massification process of Chinese higher education. At present, the massification of Chinese higher education presents a landscape characterized by grand scale and structural diversity, yet it still faces multiple structural contradictions. In terms of scale, the gross enrollment rate of higher education reached 60.8% in 2024, with the number of people receiving higher education hitting 250 million, and the average years of schooling of the newly added labor force exceeding 14 years, laying a solid foundation for building a country with strong human resources.

However, the massification process of Chinese higher education is still confronted with multiple structural challenges. From the perspective of educational equity, the problem of unbalanced regional development is prominent. The gross enrollment rate in eastern regions such as Beijing and Shanghai exceeds 70%, while that in some western provinces is less than 45%, with high-quality resources excessively concentrated in the east. Meanwhile, within the higher education system, Double First-Class universities account for approximately 60% of the nation's total research funding. Such a disparate resource allocation is not merely a consideration of efficiency, but a direct reflection of elitist values in fiscal decision-making. Inevitably, this gives rise to the Matthew Effect, where the strong get stronger, and the gap between elite and non-elite universities becomes increasingly institutionalized.

From the dimension of supply-demand matching, there exists a mismatch between talent supply and industrial demand. Graduates majoring in STEM disciplines account for 40% of the total, yet the talent gap in fields such as integrated circuits and artificial intelligence still exceeds one million; the proportion of graduates in service-related majors is less than 35%, resulting in the coexistence of credential inflation and skill shortage. From the perspective of quality assurance, the proportion of "double-qualified" teachers in regular undergraduate universities is only 35%, far lower than the 70% in German universities of applied sciences. The research-oriented evaluation system has led to the tendency of valuing research papers over teaching, resulting in weak practical teaching and restricting the improvement of talent cultivation quality.

4.2 The contradiction between massification and the elitist ethos

Alongside the massification process of Chinese higher education, the deeply rooted elitist ethos within this field has not been eliminated. It can be argued that the structural challenges emerging in the massification of China's higher education stem fundamentally from this elitist ethos. As existing studies have pointed out, the massification process has reshaped the opportunity structure between ordinary universities and elite universities [16]. The mechanism lies in the fact that elite universities, through skewed resource allocation and symbolic capital, continuously attract and select top-tier students; meanwhile, ordinary universities are trapped in "credential depreciation" amid homogenized competition. Far from weakening, this has systematically reinforced the function of higher education as a tool for social class stratification. As noted earlier, elitism, centered on the principle of ability, has easily been alienated into an instrument of class solidification in the contemporary era. In the context of higher education massification, this characteristic has further evolved into conflicts between educational equity and quality pursuit, as well as between diverse demands and a single value orientation—a conflict that is becoming a key constraint on the high-quality development of higher education.

Some scholars have mentioned that many students in elite schools describe academic success as "playing a game", a game in which one must understand the rules and effective ways to gain an advantage [17]. With the advancement of higher education massification, a growing number of individuals from working-class and middle-class backgrounds have fallen into the opportunity trap of higher education, and competition for educational status advantages has become increasingly fierce [18]. This poses a tremendous challenge to the higher education system itself.

In the process of Chinese higher education massification, the mismatch of educational orientation makes up the core performance of this paradox. The essence of higher education massification lies in inclusiveness and diversity, aiming to meet the educational needs of different groups and cultivate a diverse range of talents for social construction. This aligns with the philosophy of "education for all" advocated in UNESCO's Learning to Be. However, in practice, most Chinese universities still stick to the orientation logic of the elite education phase, taking "cultivating top talents" and "competing for top rankings" as their core goals, while neglecting the demand for cultivating skilled talents in the phase of massification. This has led to a disconnect between educational supply and social demand. On the one hand, local undergraduate universities have blindly pursued transformation into research-oriented universities, mindlessly launching academic programs and weakening the development of application-oriented courses. On the other hand, societal perceptions of "elite talents" are still restricted to holders of degrees from prestigious universities, plunging graduates in the era of mass higher education into credential anxiety and further contributing to the misdistribution of educational resources.

In the contradiction between the massification of Chinese higher education and its elitist ethos, the imbalance in resource allocation serves as an important carrier of this conflict. Some scholars have pointed out that various resource allocation practices in the massification of China's higher education are still largely constrained by a planned economy mindset and deeply influenced by elitism [15]. Resource distribution guided by elitism exhibits the "Matthew Effect", a feature that has become more pronounced amid the massification process. Currently, core educational resources such as state fiscal investment, research project approvals, and high-quality faculty are still highly concentrated in a small number of Double First-Class universities, which account for more than 70% of the nation's key research projects and high-level talent programs. In contrast, local undergraduate universities and vocational colleges, which shoulder the main responsibility of mass education, are generally confronted with resource shortages, characterized by weak faculty strength, insufficient practical training facilities, and a lack of research funding. From the perspective of educational equity, this elite-oriented resource allocation model violates the fundamental principle of "equal educational opportunity", resulting in significant disparities in the starting points, processes, and outcomes of education for students in universities at different tiers. The essence of the resource allocation issue lies in the coordination of the demands of multiple stakeholders. While massification was supposed to broaden channels for social mobility, the elitism-driven logic of resource allocation has instead reinforced the perception that "prestigious university status equals elite status", making it increasingly difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve social mobility through education—a development that runs counter to the equity aspirations of mass higher education.

Beyond the inequities caused by resource allocation, the singular evaluation system has further intensified the contradiction. Higher education massification calls for the establishment of a diversified evaluation system that balances academic competence with practical ability, and personal development with social needs. Nevertheless, in practice, the quantitative evaluation logic guided by elitism still dominates. Whether it is university rankings, program assessments, or student evaluations, quantifiable indicators such as research outputs and GPA rankings are taken as the core criteria. This singular evaluation

system has exerted a dual squeeze on mass higher education. For universities, local institutions, in pursuit of higher rankings, have been forced to abandon their distinctive strengths in application-oriented education and become trapped in homogenized competition characterized by "valuing research over teaching" and "prioritizing theory over practice". For students, the pressure of quantitative indicators has plunged them into GPA anxiety, causing them to neglect the development of practical skills and comprehensive quality. More alarmingly, this evaluation logic may transmit to the basic education stage, giving rise to the phenomenon of "academic involution", and further eroding the inclusive value of higher education massification through the competitive logic of elitism.

5 Conclusion

Based on the perspective of pedagogy, this paper systematically explores the alienation logic of elitism and credentialism, as well as their paradoxical relationship with the massification process of Chinese higher education. Originating as a resistance to aristocratic systems, elitism has experienced alienation in the contemporary higher education through the mechanism of intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, as described by Bourdieu. Transforming from a driving force for social mobility into a tool for class solidification, its success ethic has further contributed to social divisions at the ethical level. Meanwhile, as a concrete extension of elitism in the educational sphere, credentialism has constructed a narrow value evaluation system centered on the equation of "academic qualification equals ability". This system not only restricts the diverse development of individuals but also fosters credential anxiety in society. The relationship between the two has deeply penetrated all aspects of higher education through the mechanism of internal university quantitative evaluation and external ranking systems, continuously consolidating the elitist ethos of Chinese higher education.

The elitist ethos of higher education is fundamentally incompatible with the inclusive and diverse developmental goals of the massification stage. This incompatibility is concentrated in structural dilemmas such as misaligned educational orientation, imbalanced resource allocation, and a singular evaluation system. The homogenization tendency of local universities blindly pursuing transformation into research-oriented institutions, the Matthew Effect in the concentration of core educational resources in Double First-Class universities, and the singular quantitative evaluation logic have not only led to practical problems such as the mismatch between talent supply and industrial demand and uneven regional educational development but also undermined the core value of massification in broadening social mobility channels, running counter to the principle of educational equity advocated in Rawls' theory of justice.

This paper argues that the high-quality development of Chinese higher education must stick to the following principles. First, it is vital to reconstruct the value orientation of higher education, and return to the fundamental mission of education—fostering virtue through education. Second, we need to break the evaluation framework of grades-only and credentials-only, and establish a evaluation system tailored to different types of universities, focusing on assessing academic innovation capacity for research-oriented universities, and strengthening the evaluation of practical talent cultivation effectiveness for application-oriented and vocational institutions. Finally, efforts should be made to optimize the educational resource distribution mechanism, establish policies favoring local undergraduate universities, vocational colleges and minimize the Matthew Effect in resource distribution.

Naturally, this study has certain limits. Focusing on macro-level theoretical analysis, it lacks the support of micro-level empirical data. Additionally, this research has not conducted an in-depth analysis of the different performance of universities in the eastern, central, and western regions. Future research can adopt a mixed-methods approach including quantitative

and qualitative research to conduct inter-university and regional comparative studies. It can also draw on new theory to explore the path dependence and obstacles in the reform of the higher education evaluation system, so as to provide more targeted solutions for resolving the elitism paradox.

The contradiction between the massification of Chinese higher education and its elitist ethos is essentially a conflict between the transformation of the educational development stage and the lag in educational philosophy and institutions. To resolve this contradiction, it is necessary to break the singular value orientation of elitism, reconstruct the educational orientation, resource distribution system, and evaluation framework adapted to the massification stage, and achieve diversified quality improvement on the basis of ensuring educational equity, so that higher education can truly serve the development needs of all people.

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