



Research Article

Meritocracy, Financial Investment, and Education Equity in Higher Education in China

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Abstract

Objective: This study explores how the ideas of meritocracy are reflected in the government officials' financial investment in higher education in China, and how this relates to education equity.

Methods: Given the important position of higher education in the occupational ladder and social structure, and the fact that higher education and diplomas have become one of the main criteria for promoting educational officials, this study uses meritocracy as the theoretical framework to conduct an analysis regarding the educational backgrounds of members of the leadership teams of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and various provincial government departments of education and finance in the People's Republic of China. It adopts content analysis as a method, which can quantitatively analyze the proportion of official education composition and qualitatively reveal the potential meaning of the proportion.

Results: Findings show that merits have been internalized into value pursuits in various fields of society, especially in the promotion of officials and the education ecosystem that this study focuses on, which impedes education equity in Chinese higher education.

Conclusion: Nowadays, universities are no longer lofty ivory towers. Their pursuit of rankings, reputation, and performance has its urgency and rationality. However, excessive attention to achievements and efficiency will vacillate the traditional academic, cultural, and educational nature of universities, making their essence increasingly numerous and jumbled. The pursuit of merit should be directed towards a more noble destination to cultivate new generations with ontology and self-consciousness for the realization of educational utopia. The role of governments at all levels should not be as stakeholders, performance reviewers, or spectators from afar, but as supporters, contributors, and leaders in rebuilding a fair, pure, and united education ecosystem.

Keywords: meritocracy, higher education, education equity, education finance, educational achievements

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China's higher education has gone through a decade of striving and leapfrogging to build the world's largest higher education system. The gross enrollment rate of higher education has increased from 30% in 2012 to 59.6% in 2022, an increase of 29.6 percentage points. The total number of students in universities has reached 46.55 million, achieving a historic leap, which means that China's higher education has entered a stage of universalization development. The "Chinese path to modernization" proposed in the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China indicates the development direction of higher education in the new era, and the mission and responsibility of higher education will increase accordingly. Nowadays is an important turning point in the development of higher education in China, during the transition from popularization to universalization. If we are only satisfied with the growth of quantity, it may hinder the high-quality development of universalization of higher education and will not help to establish a Chinese path to the modernization of higher education system.

Educational equity is an integral part and an inevitable course for the high-quality development of higher education. In the process of universalizing higher education, the relationship between the fairness of educational financial investment and its actual efficiency has attracted academic attention. The long-term and phased transformation of the financial system has a significant impact on the financial investment in higher education, and is also the most important endogenous driving force for changes in investment ratios. The growth rate of financial investment in higher education was uneven, and the overall proportion of investment fluctuated in a U-shape^[1]. Given that a reasonable allocation structure of educational resources is the fundamental prerequisite to ensure the maximization of public education investment efficiency, currently there is an imbalance in the proportion of education at all levels in education fiscal expenditure, which has hindered the efficient utilization of financial effectiveness^[2]. In view of the instability and structural imbalance of financial investment in higher education, a funding mechanism that combined the macro management of the government, the implementation of social intermediaries, and the independent running of universities should be constructed^[3]. Other studies also found that under the unique decentralization model of education finance in China, a set of formed incentive structures were provided for government public education expenditure activities by shaping intergovernmental relationships and adjusting intergovernmental interest structures^[4]. At the same time, the

government's tendency and preference for the direction of education funding investment reflected the its policy goals and certain specific expected effects. The focus of education financial investment has changed with the government's public education responsibility^[5]. Fiscal education funds, as an important foundation and material guarantee for the development of higher education in China and a key aspect of government policy intervention in education development, would directly or indirectly affect micro education decision-making, thereby changing unequal group differences^[6]. In 2012, China's fiscal education funds accounted for 4.28% of its gross domestic product, marking the beginning of the "post 4%" era in education finance. Public finance should focus on ensuring sufficient and reasonable financial investment in education, improving financial support capabilities to solve the sticking points of balanced education development, and establishing a public finance management system that prioritizes education development, in order to improve resource allocation and utilization efficiency, to achieve more favorable guarantees for educational reform and development^[7].

In the soil of China's current political system, officials play a vital role in leading the development of a region. Government officials at all levels, as the main decision-makers of various policies in their jurisdiction, influence the allocation of financial resources and the supply of public services. After the 20th National Congress of PRC, education, originally as a branch of people's livelihood, has become a national strategy and holds a decisive position in the "involved" society. How to obtain fair and just educational resources has become an increasingly concerned issue for the people, and as the main provider of public goods, including education, the differentiation of government fiscal expenditure preferences will directly affect the entire public education ecosystem. Based on the promotion tournament model and upper echelons, existing literature has systematically demonstrated that differences in individual characteristics of officials, such as age, tenure, and native place, can affect their governance ability and policy preferences. Yet, few studies have focused on the impact path of official academic degrees on education expenditure. Meanwhile, current research has rarely interpreted government education fiscal behavior from the perspective of meritocracy, and the internal logic and practical basis for education officials to make financial decisions have not yet received widespread attention. Based on the significant position of higher education in the allocation of career ladder levels and social structure status, and the fact that a high diploma has become one of the main criteria for promoting educational officials, this article uses meritocracy as a framework. Specifically,

we conducted a statistical analysis of the educational backgrounds of members of the leadership teams of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and various provincial government departments of education and finance in the People's Republic of China, revealing the diploma standards for selecting officials and whether their educational qualifications will affect their educational fiscal policy preferences, and examining how officials directly or indirectly affect higher education equity through educational fiscal investment.

1.1 Education Equity in China

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the promotion of educational equity has gone through three stages: equal rights-equal opportunities-equity of quality and result, constantly shifting from formal equity to substantive equity. General Secretary Xi Jinping has summarized the new direction of education development in the new era as "striving to ensure that every child can enjoy fair and high-quality education". From then on, better education is not only "more equitable education" but also "higher quality education", so educational equity becomes "high quality education equity"^[8]. The people's demand for education has also undergone significant changes, gradually shifting from equal access to education to a fair enjoyment of high-quality education, promotion and encouragement of comprehensive human development, and upgradation of people's sense of gain, happiness, security, and dignity in life. Therefore, the standard for the supply of educational resources has also transformed from ensuring fair and lawful enjoyment of the right to education to education that satisfies the people.

The allocation of resources in political, economic, and organizational processes is crucial, and the unequal access to resources determines an individual's ability to thrive as a human being. Now more than ever before, one can predict a person's social mobility^[9]. The investment of educational resources at all levels, especially the investment of educational funds, directly affects educational opportunities and quality. More investment in educational funds can provide more educational opportunities, while also providing higher quality educational resources, ultimately improving educational quality. The education industry in China shows a relatively obvious characteristic of one-way government supply. Although other social organizations or individuals outside the state are allowed to invest in education and are encouraged to donate to education in various laws and regulations, due to the instability of education policies, the participation of other entities outside the government in the education market is not high. When the government serves as a one-way provider of educational resources, the main contradiction in the development of education is concentrated in the amount of people and property invested in the education industry, and whether the government education investment obtained by different regions or

groups is balanced^[10].

In fact, financial decision-making in higher education is made through a specific political mechanism that often allows certain groups to enjoy privileges rather than others. In addition, it also involves issues of individual / group inequality in terms of income, education, political rights, and academic ability levels^[11]. Firstly, when higher education is in the elite stage, higher education resources exhibit the characteristics of small scale and high quality. At this time, the resource allocation process can accurately and unbiasedly select the elite. Secondly, as higher education enters the stage of popularization, the expansion of enrollment has led to significant changes in the scale, and the characteristics of higher education resources have also shifted to larger scale and differentiated quality. Finally, when higher education reaches the stage of universalization, the further expansion of the scale transforms the resource characteristics into a large-scale and quality polarization. At this stage, the differentiation of educational resources has been significantly perceived, and individuals with diverse social backgrounds and classes can receive more resource allocation (entering prestigious universities), resulting in a higher level of perceived fairness in the outcome. Educational equity is a value judgment about the allocation of educational resources, and equity means "deserved", that is, the benefits obtained are morally reasonable and legitimate^[12]. The result of competitive distribution is inevitably unequal, and it is precisely this inequality that motivates individual competition. High quality higher education resources need to be obtained by some groups through rivalry, relying on "talent+effort", mainly reflecting the spirit of freedom.

Inequality in talent is generally considered an acceptable form of inequality relative to race, gender, and class. Based on the worship of personal abilities, people believe that as long as individuals are given equal opportunities for education, even if there are differences in innate factors such as intelligence, the educational achievements or results ultimately achieved through individual efforts are fair or acceptable. Driven by this meritocracy philosophy, higher education has indeed promoted social mobility to a certain extent. With the expansion of higher education scale and the increasing opportunities for people to receive higher education in the context of universalization, the competition has not weakened due to the increase in opportunities, but has become more intense. The race for educational resources, especially financial investment, is becoming increasingly fierce between prestigious and non prestigious schools, between public and private schools, and between key and basic disciplines. So that, the universalization of higher education has not only failed to solve the unfair situation, but has instead been captured by meritocracy and become a part of it, ultimately replicating or even exacerbating the inequity in education and society. The

injustices caused by meritocracy are not only unequal opportunities, but also flaws in the concept itself. This built-in defect cannot be prevented or avoided by social mobility or equal opportunities.

1.2 The Origin and Evolution of Meritocracy

1.2.1 The Source of the West - “Elitist Rule”

The origin of “Meritocracy” can be traced back to “Elitism” in ancient Greece, among which Plato’s “philosopher king” was particularly famous. Plato used ‘Noble Lie’ in *The Republic*, which created a myth that made people loyal to each other and their country. It describes how God fills people’s souls with iron, silver, or gold, making them suitable for labors, guardians, and rulers. The reason why this “lie” is noble is because it is a useful narrative that can defend social stability, social class, and inequality^[13]. The aristocratic characteristics of Spartan Aristocracy and the politics of the Roman Republic, as well as the feudal politics since the Middle Ages, all have strong features of elite governance. There are subtle distinctions between “meritocracy” and “elitism” mentioned above. From the analysis of word roots, the connotation of “merit” encompasses both virtue and talent; the minority rule highlighted by “elite” lays particular emphasis on the small number of elites, which is not limited to selecting standards based on virtue and talent, but also includes minorities formed due to consanguinity, wealth, or religious beliefs. At the beginning of the rise of western professionalism, the emerging middle class relied on their talents and achievements to strive for the power, interests, and status traditionally manipulated by the nobility. Gradually, spontaneous factors (intelligence, effort, capability) have replaced preconceived factors, that is, “what can you do” instead of “who are you”, in order to motivate all sectors of society and promise opportunities for upward mobility to the middle and lower classes^[14].

“Meritocracy”, as a specific term, first appeared in Michael Yang’s dystopia novel *The Rise of Meritocracy* published in 1958. He envisioned a future meritorious society, where merit was defined as “intelligence plus effort”, and social stratification was determined by intelligence tests. The core argument was the extremity of meritocracy, where social status was completely determined by merit, narrowing its definition and thus legitimizing social inequality under the concept of meritocracy. In the contemporary era, Michael Sandel concluded in *The Tyranny of Merit* that the core idea of meritocracy lied in the recognition and support of morality, talent and effort. The greater the achievements based on talent and effort, the more social wealth should be obtained, and the corresponding social status should be raised simultaneously. Sandel criticized the tyranny of meritocracy in contemporary society, which made academic qualifications and achievements become the leverage of social mobility, and made the education system evolve into the perfect

embodiment of meritocracy. Specifically, education is increasingly inclined to sift students who demonstrate their talents through their innate family and social resources as early as possible, allowing them to enter elite schools with abundant resources and ultimately enter the elite bureaucratic team. This meritocracy views individual failures as the result of insufficient abilities and efforts, while ignoring factors such as family background, social relationships, class differences, and social systems.

1.2.2 The Source of China - “Virtuous Politics”

The politics of traditional Chinese times belonged to the rule of the “able and virtuous” personage, and its ideology originated from the ancient philosophy of Confucianism and Taoism in the 5th and 6th centuries BC. Since written records began, the political form of China has always been centered around the “able and virtuous” personage, and the status and role of general public in the political life and practice of governing the country have not reached the level of institutionalization. The “able and virtuous” personage have almost unlimited access to national governance, forming a pattern of “authoritarian power dominating society”^[15].

In the context of ancient China, the term “able and virtuous” emphasized the selection and appointment of virtuous and capable individuals, believing that individuals with noble moral character and outstanding abilities should be selected to enter the ruling class and assume the responsibility of leading and governing the country. Its connotation includes two aspects. On the one hand, “virtue” and “ability” are important criteria for selecting talents. On the other hand, Confucius and Mencius emphasized the discrepancy between the wise and the fool, opposing formal equality. They deemed that governing the country was the obligation of social categories such as sages, gentlemen and scholars, while ordinary people did not take responsibility for national affairs and did not even have the right to participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs^[16]. Although the criteria for judgment varied among different schools, without exception, the classes of merchants, craftsmen, and farmers were excluded because their knowledge and skills were considered inherently inadequate. By institutionalizing the choice of the imperial examination system (Keju), the virtuous politics ideology resulted in consolidating the interests of the ruling class.

It can be seen that whether the Confucian ideology of selecting talents surpasses feudalism deserves further examination. Firstly, the goal of Confucianism in selecting “able and virtuous” individuals was not to achieve social justice or fairness. On the contrary, its criteria had a strong class bias, favoring the moral and intellectual advantages of the literati and officialdom class, and belittling the capability and virtues of the working class. Through Keju, the literati and officialdom class has been regarded as the wisest and

most moral social group.

Through a comparison between China and the West, it is found that no matter in which era or political community, only politics that can simultaneously meet the dual standards of virtue and ability can be considered good politics^[17]. Both China and the West have reflected a certain degree of meritorious thinking in various stages of historical development. However, the meritocracy in the Chinese context differs slightly from the structure of practice and theory in the West. The uniqueness of the Western elite community finds expression in its identity, wealth, religion, intelligence, abilities, or a combination of excellence, building a high fence between it and the ordinary, forming a structural block in the political system. Even though there are still distinctions in status, scope of power, etc. within the organization, there is no higher category, and even kings are under the law^[18]. However, in traditional China, there existed a holy king who selected and controlled the “able and virtuous” among all the scholars and officials. As officials, the “able and virtuous” were no more than “incarnate kings”^[19]. So from this perspective, the virtuous politics in the traditional political discourse system of China are actually the politics of sage sovereign. In this top-down mode, the selection of kings took precedence over opportunities.

1.3 Meritocracy and China’s Higher Education

Ancient Chinese philosophical schools, such as Confucius, Mencius, and Legalism, although holding different political views on feudal order, had similar understandings of social stratification as a key element of social cohesion in imperial China. Education, as an important tool to demonstrate the rationality of social stratification, enhances social cohesion while building social balance^[20]. Mencius proposed “make no social distinctions in teaching”, and Confucius and his followers criticized the inherent corruption of the feudal ruling class in order to ensure a sustainable hierarchical society, and suggested that social justice be achieved through education. Therefore, the Keju examination system was given legitimacy. Education is seen as the main way and means to define merits, thus making Keju a political tool to prove the legitimacy of the literati and officialdom class throughout history.

The historical tradition of social selection in China based on the examination system has a long history. As early as the Sui Dynasty, Keju was a recruitment mechanism for elite positions in ancient Chinese bureaucracy, providing efficient, reliable and political correctness officials for the ancient empire, which could be said to be the pioneer of elite selection. This tradition was revived when the college entrance examination was reinstated in 1977. There are many similarities between the current college entrance examination and Keju. Firstly, both are preliminary measures adopted after market reforms^[21]. Secondly,

although there are cases where certain provinces and cities have qualifications for preparing exam questions separately, both adopt large-scale standardized selection tests. The formal standardization of the college entrance examination, which serves as a quantifiable measure to allocate admission tickets to higher education opportunities, is symbolically linked to fairness and meritocracy, and is a crucial step in the selection process of the entire education system.

The college entrance examination is like a filter that inputs accurate standards to classify students of different elite qualities, providing higher education opportunities to students of different social backgrounds through “selecting the best”. Whether or not to receive higher education and the level of higher education they receive determine the opportunities and rewards for achieving “merits”. Because the acquisition of diplomas and related skills promises status and rewards, higher education has become a driving force for meritocracy. Meanwhile, the three pillars that make up meritocracy are generally considered to include equal opportunities, fair selection, and merit based rewards, while higher education provides a platform for evaluation, selection, and rewards.

The platform itself is also permeated by meritocracy. The construction of World-class Universities and First-class Discipline projects can be seen as a product of the emergence of higher education strategies under the penetration of merit orientation. Professor Simon Marginson of Oxford University found that the common focus of world-class universities is their own world reputation, global ranking and social impact by studying the orientation and strategic direction of research universities in the Asia Pacific region^[22]. The proposal of improving the status and reputation of Chinese universities in the world was first put forward in the “Project 211” in 1995.

The project aimed to focus on building around 100 higher education institutions and a group of key disciplines for the 21st century. The following “Project 985” was a major decision to build a first-class university with the world’s advanced levels, including 39 approved universities. The labels of “211” and “985” universities strengthen the elite status of such universities at the top of the higher education system, and there has been little trend of expansion for many years, thus successfully maintaining their elite status. In recent years, in the construction of “Double First-Class”, 42 “World-class Universities” and 98 “First-class Disciplines” have been distinguished from the 2017 selection, totaling 140. By 2022, the two will no longer be distinguished, and it has been recognized that any university with “First-class Disciplines” can be called a “World-class University”, which is equivalent to the expansion of China’s “World-class” universities from the original 42 to 147. The dynamic selection every five years

will adjust the list of “World-class Universities” based on the actual situation, mainly depending on whether the discipline construction is done well.

According to the vision of the Ministry of Education, the expansion of “World-class Universities” can dilute the identity of universities, thus enabling schools to get down to strengthen disciplinary construction. This also means that the era of “211” and “985” will come to an end and become history, and the “permanent identity” of universities labeled as both will be banned. The replaced discipline construction will become the key to the upgrading of universities, which will inevitably make other ordinary universities focus on forging a “first-class discipline”. Leaving aside the term “first-class”, in 2022, compared to 2017, the total number of universities increased by only 7. Universities that do not have “first-class disciplines” are still the vast majority in the entire system, and they still have not emerged from the swamp of identity crisis and unclear positioning^[23]. The vague positioning put them at a disadvantage in competing for financial funds. They will not only be squeezed by elite universities supported by key construction projects, but also by new forms of research institutions, resulting in a shortage of funds and talent. From the perspective of disciplinary fields, universities generally believe that only disciplines listed in the catalog can obtain national recognition and development resources, with strong monopoly and exclusivity. And it will also be stimulated by ranking evaluations closely related to government resource allocation. Many universities set their goals as visible indicator systems on the ranking charts, ignoring internal laws, promoting academic exaggeration and utilitarianism, and still trapped in the imitation trap of “being like first-class” and struggling to extricate themselves^[24].

Higher education is increasingly showing a trend of winner take all, whether at the intercollegiate, disciplinary, or individual level, with the gap between high educated individuals and low educated individuals in various dimensions of individual value, such as income, status, and reputation. As functionalist theorists have pointed out, the special advantage of educational achievement based selection mechanisms and achievement based reward systems is that they provide a reliable ideological basis for status and income disparities. Standard examination is not only a competition between cultural capital and social resources, but also a connection with attractive social rewards that further facilitates different cultural strategies. In order to maintain or accumulate more cultural capital, the initiative of families, enterprises and governments has been motivated, thus shaping the lineage network, organizational structure and assessment criteria, which in turn has enhanced the cultural capital and its reproduction in the social network.

Given the deep relation between meritocracy and China’s political tradition and higher education, this article defines “meritocracy” as the advanced degree, high political performance, and great achievement that government officials rely on to enter official career and gain promotion opportunities, as well as how their behavioral decisions in higher education financial investment under the control of this data-driven, weight-based, and performance-based orientation have led to a trend of advocating “meritocracy” in the education ecosystem.

2 METHODOLOGY

Whether it is the Western society that deems entering prestigious universities as the starting point for entering politics, or the new generation of leaders born under the principles of “intellectual, professional, youthful, and revolutionary” in China, high academic qualification has become the main gripper for political elites to gain power and position promotion. In China, political elites can be equated with high-level officials at the provincial and ministerial levels, who can exert significant influence on the allocation of social resources. Given the crucial role played by political elites in dominating educational financial resources, this study focuses on how Chinese political elites promote higher education equity through fiscal behavior.

The affiliation of higher education institutions determines their main source of financial funds. Universities within the jurisdiction of political elites can be mainly divided into centrally deployed universities and local provincial universities according to their affiliation. The financial funds of the two mainly come from central and local financial appropriations, and the amount and method of appropriations are mainly influenced by the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education, and the finance and education departments of various provincial governments. Therefore, this paper takes the educational background of the main members of the leadership of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, as well as the education departments and the finance departments of 23 provinces, 4 municipalities, 2 special administrative regions, and 5 autonomous regions as the research sample. The resumes published on the official website, supplemented by relevant information from Baidu Baike, Wikipedia and other websites, obtained a total of 623 samples, including 7 from the Ministry of Education, 9 from the Ministry of Finance, 346 from the Department of Education, and 261 from the Department of Finance. In terms of data processing, considering the completeness of the sample’s educational background and the fact that the sample is in a probationary period, officials who cannot obtain complete resumes from all channels or are in a probationary period will not be included in this article.

Finally, 521 official samples were selected, including 7 from the Ministry of Education, 9 from the Ministry of Finance, 283 from the Ministry of Education, and 222 from the Ministry of Finance. In the data panels of each province and city, classify and summarize according to the standards of “doctoral student”, “on-the-job doctoral student”, “postgraduate”, “on-the-job postgraduate”, “central party school graduate student”, “provincial party school graduate student”, “undergraduate student”, “on-the-job undergraduate student” and below. From this, the proportion of education obtained in the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the education and finance departments of each province and city, as well as the distribution in the total sample. Analyzing the number and proportion of officials with different types of educational qualifications in the two kinds of departments can to some extent reflect certain characteristics of China’s current official selection system and prepare for explaining how these officials affect educational equity.

In addition, the implementation of education funds in each province can capture the level of education efforts and fiscal expenditure priorities of local governments. According to the 2021 China Education Report Data, Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang are among the top three provinces with developed education. At the same time, municipalities directly under the central government such as Beijing and Shanghai also have strong educational strength, ranking among the top in the country. As the governments of these five provinces and cities with strong comprehensive strength and educational competitiveness, their decisions and actions in education finance have certain representativeness. Hence, this article also selected Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong Province, Jiangsu Province from the National Education Expenditure Execution Statistics Tables for the five years from 2017 to 2021, the performances of the five provinces and cities in Zhejiang Province in the “Three Growth” - “The proportion of local people’s governments’ financial allocation for implementing compulsory education should be higher than the proportion of regular fiscal revenue growth”, “Ensure that the cost of compulsory education gradually increases according to the average number of students in school”, “Ensure that the salaries of faculty and staff and the per capita public funds for students gradually increase” - is to construct provincial-level panel data for these five provinces and cities. The dependent variable is the comparison between the growth rate of general public budget education funds and fiscal recurrent income (percentage points), which represents the growth rate of government fiscal recurrent income this year compared to the previous year (%).

This article adopts content analysis as a method, which can quantitatively analyze the proportion of official education composition and qualitatively reveal the potential

meaning of the proportion. By conducting statistical analysis on the relevant data in the statistical table of education expenditure execution, the aim is to explore whether there is a positive proportional relationship between government revenue and education expenditure, and whether the “three growth” can truly be achieved. Representative data will be presented in the form of text in the following text.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Merits as the Main Basis for Selecting and Promoting Officials

The promotion path of political elites in China is logically formed under the comprehensive influence of factors such as traditional culture, social background, and political leaders^[25]. Research has found that in the selection and promotion of officials, merits always dominates and runs through the entire process, and the spiritual core of merit permeates from the threshold of education to political achievements and performance.

3.2 The Generation of Elite Power Field

The emergence and replacement of political elites in China have gone through three stages: the first was the cadre system reform promoted by the leadership collective with Deng Xiaoping as the core, which implemented the “Four Modernizations” policy of leading cadres, namely knowledge, specialization, youthfulness, and revolution. This has led to a large number of young and middle-aged knowledge-technical bureaucrats with an advanced background in science and engineering replacing elderly cadres who lack good education and professional knowledge. The new generation of political elites in China gained power because they had a higher educational background^[26]. The second replacement, starting from the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, maintained the principle of “Four Modernizations”, allowing young and middle-aged technical bureaucrats to further occupy a dominant position. Concurrently, in the selection of technical bureaucrats, more emphasis is placed on the appointment of economic officials, especially knowledge economy cadres with economic and technological advantages and economic management capabilities in economic fields such as the market, foreign trade, and finance. At the beginning of the 21st century, the third transformation occurred. While continuing to adhere to the “Four Modernizations” principle, political elites need to possess comprehensive governance capabilities and public service awareness.

In the process of replacement, technocrats gradually replaced revolutionary elites, but with the deepening of reform and opening up, the emphasis shifted from simply emphasizing economic talent to emphasizing public governance capabilities. Before the reform and opening up, revolutionary nature was a characteristic of political elites, with high loyalty to the party and the

country, but low levels of education. After the reform and opening up, such elites apparently failed to adapt to the new needs of national construction and were gradually replaced by a group of technical bureaucrats with high education and professional knowledge. By the end of the 20th century, the operation of national power had shifted from management to a new pattern of orderly and coordinated governance with multiple subjects, and the proportion of officials with humanities and social sciences backgrounds had gradually increased.

Recently, the selection and promotion of leading cadres in China have become more knowledge-based, and academic qualifications have become one of the institutionalized standards for official turnover and promotion. Zheng^[26] also claimed that after entering the 21st century, the level of requirements for the academic qualifications and degrees of cadres has increased. For example, when selecting department directors, having a doctoral degree has already been a limited condition. In 2011, when China recruited national civil servants, the age for welcoming graduate and doctoral students was widened for the first time to under 40 years old, which was 5 years longer than before. The Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Party and Government Leading Cadres, which came into effect on March 3, 2019, stipulates that “generally, leading cadres at or above the level of department or bureau should have a college degree or above”^[27]. Education has become a high-frequency term in the selection and promotion of officials.

According to the statistics of educational background data of main officials from two central ministries and provincial education and finance departments in this study, it is shown that in the Ministry of Education, the proportion of doctoral students is 85.71%, and there is one master’s degree. In the Ministry of Finance, master’s degrees account for 66.67%, of which two-thirds obtain the academic degree through on-the-job programs. In addition, there is one doctoral (on-the-job), one undergraduate degree, and one graduate degree from the Provincial Party School.

In the education departments of various provinces, doctoral degrees account for 30.73%, of which 22.25% obtain doctoral degrees through on-the-job doctoral programs. Master’s degree accounts for 38.85%, of which 18.71% obtained a master’s degree through on-the-job master’s degrees. In addition, there are 2.82% graduate students from the Central Party School and 1.06% graduate students from the Provincial Party School. A bachelor’s degree (a regular college degree is equivalent to a bachelor’s degree in terms of job benefits, and is classified as a bachelor’s degree in statistics) accounts for 25.43%, of which 1.41% obtained a bachelor’s degree from an in-

service university. In addition, there are two undergraduate degrees from the Central Party School and one in-service college degree. Statistics show that the proportion of officials with bachelor’s degree or above from the education departments of various provinces, municipalities, special administrative regions, and autonomous regions in China is as high as 99.59%, and the proportion of those with master’s degree or above is 73.46%.

In various provincial finance departments, doctoral degrees account for 8.56%, of which 2.25% obtain doctoral degrees through on-the-job doctoral programs. Master’s degree accounted for 38.74%, of which 13.06% obtained a master’s degree through on-the-job master’s degrees. In addition, there were 6.31% of graduate students from the Central Party School and 6.76% of graduate students from the Provincial Party School (including one graduate student from the Beijing Municipal Party School and one graduate student from the Ningxia Party School). Undergraduate education accounts for 36.03%, of which 3.60% obtained undergraduate degrees through in-service universities, and another 3.60% obtained undergraduate degrees from the Central Party School.

The above data shows that it is currently a common phenomenon for leaders and cadres in two central departments, as well as in the education and finance departments of various provinces, to have high academic qualifications. For example, the proportion of doctoral students in the Ministry of Education exceeds 85%, and the proportion of master’s degree students in the Ministry of Finance exceeds 60%. The highest degree obtained by the Education Department of Liaoning Province is a doctoral degree, accounting for 54.54%, 55.56% in Heilongjiang and Jiangsu provinces, 57.14% in Beijing, and even up to 75% in Shandong province. All major leading members of the Jilin Provincial Department of Finance have a master’s degree or above, including 77.78% in Sichuan Province, 80% in Hainan Province, and 85.71% in Guangdong Province.

It seems that at any historical stage, similar educational backgrounds, career achievements, and promotion processes have formed a sense of community among political elites. The elite class has sufficient impetus to maintain the relative isolation of the community, in order to avoid being eroded by the floating masses from the bottom. Parkin proposed the theory of “social closure”: various social communities will limit the possibility of obtaining certain resources and opportunities to small groups with certain qualifications through certain procedures. Consequently, certain social or natural attributes, including ethnicity, educational, social background, region, religion, and so on, will be chosen as legitimate reasons for excluding others. Bourdieu further directly exposed the power field of higher education as an

elite generation by examining the educational system as a mechanism for generating power^[28]. Higher education draws a well-defined line among the crowd through graduation diplomas, in order to identify and screen out individuals who may occupy a certain social status in the future, while excluding some groups in a gentle and implicit way. Accordingly, higher education has become the birthplace and greenhouse for “quasi elites”. After receiving a high-level education, these people first possess the status of “academic elites”, which makes it easier for them to enter official careers than ordinary people, and ultimately become “power elites”.

3.3 Climbing the Ladder of Official Promotion

Education is one of the important criteria for selecting talents both in ancient and modern times, and in contemporary China, the necessity of an education diploma is increasingly emphasized in the process of official promotion. Sun^[29] believed that after the reform and opening up, education has replaced family background as an important criterion for selecting cadres, and cultural capital has become one of the key types of capital for obtaining cadres' status. This feature is also confirmed in the data collected in this article, which shows that it is a common phenomenon for officials to obtain higher education through in-service education. Zheng^[30] pointed out in his book *Reflections on the Pathology of Education in Our Country* that officials were currently competing to obtain “on-the-job education degree”, and the “arms race” for education could not be cooled down. Diploma bias has become the order of the day among some high social status, high paying professions, and high reputation groups, including the political officials focused on in this article. The resulting diploma bias is just a consequence of the supremacy of merit-diplomas increasingly become a benchmark for the differentiation of groups, determining the status and power range of individuals, and playing a role in different societies.

Will a high or low diploma have a differentiated impact on government education fiscal behavior? The conclusion drawn by Lin^[31] was: on the one hand, the uplift of official education level helped to enhance their understanding of coordinated social and economic development, thus placing greater emphasis on education; on the other hand, the marginal positive impact of excessively high academic qualifications (master's degree or above) on government officials' preference for the proportion of education expenditure was decreasing. Education, as one of the key factors in the personal background of officials, affects their policy preferences. The occurrence of the latter situation can be attributed to the fact that political elites with higher education have brighter prospect for promotion, and are therefore more susceptible to promotion incentives, thus focusing on productive careers with short profit cycles and quick results rather than educational careers that cannot

be effective within a short tenure period; local officials with lower education levels tend to increase financial expenditure items that benefit their social class, while officials with lower education levels are more inclined to increase livelihood related financial expenditures such as social security, education, and public safety^[32].

Moreover, the logic of competition in the officialdom will profoundly change the way and content of performance rivalry dominated by officials. Rational officials possess both the dual identities of “economic man” and “political man”, which makes them have different considerations when deciding on governance strategies, especially in allocating financial resources. For local officials, financial investment in education is indeed a dilemma. First, the merit orientation of local governments for the distribution of limited resources will amplify the scarcity of financial resources, and regard merit as the rule or principle of effective distribution. Education investment, especially basic education investment, has a low contribution rate to the local economy and a long cycle. Many outstanding students in the western region choose to come to a more developed eastern region for employment after graduation, resulting in a certain degree of negative spillover effect on local education. There is sufficient logic to indicate that local officials may reduce their own government's education fiscal expenditure or misappropriate higher-level government transfer payments for some highly visible and efficient economic achievements.

Second, each local government needs to consider the education expenditure of other regions, especially neighboring (including economic and geographical) regions, when making educational financial decisions within their jurisdiction. While achieving “absolute merit”, it is still necessary to pay attention to “relative merit”, and sometimes even the latter can better demonstrate the gap in governance capabilities between local governments. Generally speaking, the relationship between education expenditure in this jurisdiction and that in neighboring areas is positively correlated, and education expenditure in this jurisdiction will increase with the increase of education expenditure in neighboring areas^[33]. Because if there is an apparent difference in the quality of education public services provided by neighboring areas, it will present a message to the higher-level government that the local government does not attach enough importance to education, thereby reducing their political reputation. Meritocracy makes local governments increasingly competitive in educational performance, dominating local governments and officials to constantly concentrate on tasks, indicators, and performance, which can easily lead to a phenomenon of excessive survival such as “high yield and multiple harvests”, “the more, the better”, and “benefit maximization”. Meritocracy have artificially increased rivalry and had a certain impact on individual

officials, making individual efforts worthless, leading to polarization of self responsibility and self criticism. In addition, in the competition, local governments imitated each other, making their policies in various aspects of education funding tend to be consistent, ultimately exacerbating the widespread homogenization and weakening the innovation capabilities of governance.

Last but not least, regardless of how the performance evaluation system for officials is reformed, data-driven, visualized, and quantifiable achievements remain a solid basis for official promotion. Whether it is the past political leadership, or the “GDP only” theory of heroes, or the scientific development stage with “morality, ability, diligence, performance, integrity” as the indicator, those quantifiable and demonstrable performance indicators in each period account for a large proportion in the entire assessment system, and the political performance network built by calculation, measurement, competition, comparison, etc. cannot be easily destroyed.

3.4 The Infiltration of Meritocracy in Higher Education in China

The proportion of education expenditure to GDP is a commonly used indicator in the world to measure a country’s education level. As early as 1993, the State Council’s “Program for the Reform and Development of Education in China” proposed: “To increase the proportion of national fiscal education expenditure to gross domestic product to 4% by the end of the 20th century, reaching the average level of developing countries in the 1980s”^[34]. Unfortunately, this proportion did not reach a breakthrough of 4% until 2012. However, it is worth affirming that since then, the proportion of national financial education expenditure in GDP has continued to exceed 4%. In 2022, the national Public budgeting education expenditure will be 3945.5 billion yuan, with a year-on-year growth of 5.5%, which is the tenth year of the “post 4%” era^[35]. Yet, there are still situations where the proportion of education fiscal expenditure to total fiscal expenditure is small, the growth rate is small and slow, even in developed regions with strong economic foundations and abundant resources. Moreover, since the reform and opening up, China’s financial expenditure on primary, secondary, and higher education has significantly increased in terms of quantity, but there are still inefficient and unreasonable phenomena in terms of quality and structure, especially reflected in the preference for higher education. In the meantime, the distinct “binary” characteristic of financial investment in education within the higher education system will weaken the competitiveness of private universities, non-key universities, non key discipline projects, humanities and social sciences majors in obtaining financial funding. In other words, the level of equity that fiscal decisions based on competition among various entities will bring, what equity means, and how to balance efficiency, effectiveness,

education quality, and collective well-being. As DesJardins reminded higher education researchers twenty years ago, equal investment does not necessarily mean fair funding. However, has China’s current financial assistance model improved fairness? In this part, the answer is that, immersed in meritocracy and influenced by political, economic, and other factors, the current mode of educational financial investment is to some extent biased and narrow, and still needs to be optimized.

3.5 Low Proportion of Total Investment in Education Finance

According to Article 55 of the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on Education* promulgated in 1995, “The growth rate of the State Council and local people’s governments at all levels for implementing the financial allocation for compulsory education shall be higher than the growth rate of the regular financial income, to ensure that the cost of compulsory education is gradually increased according to the average number of students in school, and to ensure that the salaries of teachers and staff and the public funds per student are gradually increased.” This regulation is colloquially referred to as the “three growths” in educational funding. This article analyzes the Statistical Table for the Implementation of National Education Funds from 2017 to 2022, and selects Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, which are at the leading level of comprehensive strength and competitiveness, to demonstrate their performance in these three growth areas. Statistics show that in 2017 and 2021, the growth rate of general public budgeting education funds and financial recurrent investment in Beijing showed a negative growth, and in 2021 it decreased by 6.77 percentage points, while the financial recurrent income in these two years increased by 9.16% and 7.41% respectively compared with the previous year; in 2018 and 2021, the regular growth rate of education funds and finance in the general public budgeting of Shanghai decreased, and in 2021, it decreased by 6.15 percentage points, while the regular financial revenue in these two years increased by 7.01% and 10.30% respectively compared with the previous year; in 2021, the growth rate of general public budgeting education funds and fiscal recurrent revenue in Guangdong will decrease by 0.16 percentage points, and the fiscal recurrent revenue in the same year will increase by 7.49% over the previous year; in 2017 and 2018, the growth rate of general public budgeting education funds and fiscal recurrent revenue in Zhejiang decreased by 4.28 and 1.45 percentage points respectively, while the fiscal recurrent revenue increased by 11.85% and 12.37% compared with the previous year; in 2018 and 2021, the growth rates of general public budgeting education funds and fiscal recurrent revenue in Jiangsu decreased by 4.21 and 5.63 percentage points respectively, while the fiscal recurrent revenue increased by 7.30% and 9.21% compared with the previous year. The above data shows that even in economically developed regions,

the “three growths” cannot be achieved with quality and quantity guaranteed, and even in some years, the decline is relatively large.

This article provides the following explanations for the above phenomena from the perspective of meritocracy. Firstly, the political and economic system that combines administrative centralization with fiscal decentralization in China has to some extent influenced the behavior and decision-making of local officials in allocating financial resources. The fiscal decentralization system endows local governments with discretionary power in the allocation of financial resources, while also being influenced by the “top-down” central government’s power to appoint and dismiss personnel, providing strong economic and political incentives for local officials.

The “Chinese style” decentralization structure has greatly mobilized the enthusiasm of local economic development, leading to local contest for the development of the economy in their jurisdiction under the scale of relative performance^[36]. Compared with other indicators, economic performance has incomparable advantages because it is visualized, measurable, and comparable. So no matter how the performance evaluation system is reformed, the indicator of economic performance always occupies a predominance. Under the guidance of maximizing economic benefits, local government officials will consider their own political prospects and be committed to promoting economic growth in their jurisdiction. At the financial level, the promotion competition of local political elites is manifested in the expansionism orientation of public expenditure scale and the economical bias of public expenditure structure, which makes local governments more inclined to produce public goods (i.e. physical infrastructure)^[37], while in the supply of non productive public goods (i.e. social infrastructure, such as education, etc.), there is a pattern of insufficient power^[38].

Secondly, from the perspective of the education industry itself, its long cycle and slow effectiveness make it contribute lower economic benefits compared to other industries. Due to the difficulty for local officials to achieve significant results from education investment during their tenure, and the problem in reflecting the demands of schools that bear governance in the objective function of local officials, which cannot directly affect their career paths, it is impossible to guarantee that local officials can effectively respond and supply diverse demands for education at all levels. Additionally, the spillover of public education causes the imbalance between the revenue and cost of financial expenditure, that is, outstanding students who benefit from the education investment in the region may choose metropolises with more development prospects than the region after graduation from college. This phenomenon is more obvious in some western underdevelopment, which attacks the initiative of local governments to invest in public

education and lacks momentum in the supply of public education products.

3.6 Preference for Financial Investment in Education

The hierarchical structure of public education expenditure reflects the adjustment of public education expenditure in the allocation of funding resources at various levels of education and the specific proportional relationship formed thereby. A reasonable structure of public education expenditure can enable effective coordination and balanced development of functions among different levels of education, thereby facilitating scarce public education resources to meet the educational needs of various levels of social development to the maximum extent possible, and ultimately achieving maximum social benefits^[4].

Since the reform and opening up, China’s primary, secondary, and higher education have shown significant growth in total education expenditure, but there is a clear preference for higher education expenditure. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when China resumed the college entrance examination, university students who were considered “God’s favored one” were exempt from tuition fees when they went to university. In 1989, the country implemented a university fee system, with a tuition fee of 200 yuan per academic year, and implemented a parallel system of public and self funded tuition. It was not until 1997 that public fees were officially abolished and universities uniformly charged fees. At the same time, the financial investment in education was mainly prioritized for national key education fields or projects that were expected to solve the main development contradictions at that time, such as the merger and adjustment of higher education. During the same period, both elementary and secondary education were required to pay certain fees. From the development trend of the per capita expenditure index, the per capita expenditure index for primary and secondary education in China has increased from 6.1% and 8.1% in 1998 to 16.3% and 22.8% in 2018, respectively. The per capita expenditure index for higher education has decreased from 142.8% in 1998 to 36.4% in 2018. The per capita expenditure for higher education in China has been significantly higher than that for primary and secondary education. The research conducted by Yang et al.^[4] showed that the hierarchical structure of public education expenditure in China has maintained a development pattern dominated by higher education expenditure for a long time from 1998 to 2018. Even with some optimization, the average expenditure index of higher education students in China has been markedly higher than that of primary and secondary education, resulting in imbalance among the three education levels and undermining the fairness of education development.

From the economic attributes of the educational hierarchy, it can be seen that higher education is more closely

related to employment competitiveness and occupational compensation compared to primary and secondary education, and plays an essential role in promoting technological innovation, optimizing industrial structure and regional economic development. In the bargain, compared to long-term and general basic education, higher education has a shorter investment cycle and stronger professionalism, which can cultivate high-level specialized talents with higher coupling with local economic demand structure. This recognition of the value of higher education in providing skills and knowledge is in line with the logic of meritocracy. Local government officials pursue their own career paths as internal pursuits and take higher education indicators as external orientations, thereby strengthening the demand for local governments to expand financial investment in higher education and introducing the promotion competition effect into the public education field. Therefore, in the context of limited government financial resources, higher education and its projects with higher benefits are more likely to become the preferred objects of government finance.

From the analysis of the government level and expenditure responsibility sharing of education at all levels, higher education is mainly managed jointly by provincial and central governments, high school education is mainly managed by municipal and county-level governments, and compulsory education is mainly managed by county-level governments. The average ratio of central and local expenditure responsibilities at different levels of education is 0.13: 99.87 for compulsory education; high school education 0.59: 99.41; higher education 30.87: 69.13. From this, it can be seen that the vast majority of responsibility for public education expenditure in all stages except for higher education is borne by local governments. And this advantage of higher education also ensures that it has more sufficient funding sources and policy advantages than other levels of education.

With the deepening perception of the merit of higher education and scientific and technological innovation, urban attraction, and regional competitiveness, local governments have a strong zeal for investing in higher education. In addition, the enrollment expansion policy that has lasted for 20 years has contrived the competition of local governments in the development of higher education. The most conspicuous external manifestation is that local governments engage in games around higher education policy goals and expenditures, thereby giving an impetus to the expeditious expansion of local higher education scale^[39].

One of the most plain evidence of the expansion of the scale of higher education is to expand the enrollment scale of universities. In 2022, the total number of students in higher education has reached 46.55 million, and the gross enrolment ratio has reached 59.6%. China has entered

the stage of universalization of higher education. The growth of the scale of higher education has brought huge dividends to social progress and personal development, and is also accompanied by many spillover effects, such as improving the conditions for running universities, enriching the types of universities, and enhancing the ability of educational informatization. Under the “Halo effect” of many achievements, the expansion has also spawned a series of social problems. Although higher education scholars and financial policy makers have generally expressed the necessity of “equal opportunities” and the desirability of certain policies to promote fairness, there is much less discussion on how to achieve equity and what kind of equity should be achieved, including welfare, resources, capabilities, and processes. The lack of consensus and accuracy on what constitutes a fair education fiscal policy undermines efforts to clarify and compare fiscal policies and practices, including reconciling individual and public needs, while taking into account political processes and feasibility issues.

Can the expansion of enrollment scale promote educational equity? Firstly, higher education, as an important medium for breaking class solidification, has been widely questioned for its function in promoting intergenerational mobility after the emergence of statements such as “it is difficult for a noble child to emerge from a humble family” and “the idea of the uselessness of study”. Wei^[40] found that the expansion of higher education has increased opportunities for higher education enrollment, but the policy dividend is more for children from families with high educational backgrounds. Luo and Liu^[41] further pointed out that the expansion of basic education has promoted intergenerational mobility among low-income families, while the expansion of higher education has a more significant promoting effect on intergenerational mobility among parents with higher education and urban families. The Maximally Maintained Inequality Theory highlights that the educational opportunities increased by the expansion of higher education are preferentially acquired by the advantageous families with socioeconomic status. The Effectively Maintained Inequality Theory lays stress on that the advantageous families will turn to pursue higher quality elite education after the educational opportunities are met^[42]. Thus, it can be seen that the expansion of university enrollment has a very limited effect on promoting intergenerational mobility, especially for disadvantaged families. Instead, it may strengthen class replication and even exacerbate social inequality. Besides, local governments are competing to provide a large amount of education funding for their affiliated universities to expand their scale, while also being constrained by the education supply capacity, namely, to what extent the school can uplift the quality of education. Zong^[43] inspected the first ten years of enrollment expansion, during which time series data of local higher education financial investment

clearly showed that with the expansion of local universities, the proportion of per student budget funds and budget funds in the total budget of local ordinary universities clearly decreased. Hence one can see that the effectiveness of increased financial investment in benefiting individual students is questionable.

Secondly, the efficiency of financial investment in higher education can be a matter of competition or strengthening policy objectives, involving the normative issue of prioritizing higher education institutions of different categories and levels. The current financial investment in higher education in China presents a distinct “binary” characteristic, exacerbating inequality between schools and regions. The funding for public universities in China mainly comes from government financial allocations, relying more on central or local financial support, and is subordinate to the provincial, municipal, and autonomous region level governments where the universities are located. Nevertheless, private colleges and universities often rely on enterprises, institutions, and social organizations, as well as individual citizens, to utilize non-state financial education funds, which are managed by the education department or education commission of the province, city, or autonomous region where the college is located. Apparently, the organizers of public higher education are governments at all levels, while those of private higher education are investors. Whereupon, the vast majority of the funds required for the operation and development of the former come from central or local financial appropriations, and the Ministry of Education will also allocate a certain amount of education and training funds based on the number of newly recruited students in the university. For the latter, the government has almost no funding, and it is at a disadvantage in obtaining government financial investment. Compared to public institutions, local governments have less responsibility towards private institutions, and their teaching quality and achievements have less impact on the political performance of officials. The difference in the main body responsible for leading the two types of universities results in a distinct binary feature in obtaining financial funding.

The distribution of educational financial funds between key universities and ordinary universities presents an “inverted pyramid” shape, with a wide gap between the two. According to the statistics from 2020-2021 Academic Year Undergraduate Teaching Quality Report, in 2020, the average daily teaching operating expenses per student of 104 “Double First-Class” construction universities were 7890.56 yuan, which is far exceeding the audit and evaluation requirements of 1200 yuan. The “Double First-Class” project, as a major force for knowledge discovery and technological innovation, and an important base for cultivating high-quality talents, can generate higher levels of human capital, directly or indirectly affect the productivity of enterprises, thereby creating conditions for stimulating new growth points of regional economy and

supporting regional coordinated development strategies. The benefits and performance of national key universities in the project are much higher than those of ordinary universities, so they can receive more affluent and stable financial support, and even exhibit a phenomenon of enrichment.

In fact, the competing views on educational distribution justice or the requirement for governments to provide fairness or justice through the (re) distribution of education systems and resources have led to very different prescriptions for higher education fiscal policies. Unclear normative standards for fiscal policy recommendations may lead to ineffective, undesirable, unequal and / or unfair outcomes in other important aspect of distribution. The competitive funding mechanism adopted for research and project funding has widened the gap between universities, as well as between key and basic disciplines. According to the purpose of educational financial funds, the allocation of financial investment to higher education is divided into four types: daily operation funds, research funds, key construction project funds, and other funding allocations. The daily operating funds are mostly used for ordinary teaching activities and auxiliary activities carried out by universities, which are routine financial appropriations and are easier to obtain. While the acquisition of scientific research funds and project funds is highly emulative, and different types and levels of higher education institutions have significant superiority and inferiority in these two types of funds, making high-level universities with high output and good returns profitable. The multidimensional nature of higher education goals or interests, as well as the sophisticated measurement issues arising from them, pose great challenges to scholars and officials who hope to advance the fair agenda.

4 CONCLUSION

The core idea of meritocracy in this article lies in the recognition and acknowledgement of elements such as high education background, high political performance and high talent, that is, the greater the achievements based on official education background and talent, the higher the political status that can be reached, and correspondingly the political power that can be mastered should also be augmented. This meritocracy philosophy embodies and aligns with the public’s appreciation, yearning, and affirmation of academic qualifications and excellence. Moreover, it thrives and never wanes because it conforms to people’s intuition of appreciation for endowment and talent, captures their inner needs for achieving self transcendence and class leap.

In the context of globalization and the knowledge economy, the government has gradually increased its attention to higher education, which is deeply influenced by the meritocracy culture. It has been noted that the efficiency

and output emphasized in performance evaluation contradict the precipitation and meticulousness required by academic research, and the connotative development of universities is increasingly blocked by quantitative evaluation, shaping the behavioral orientation of various groups in university to pursue performance, resulting in a decline in teaching quality and a tendency towards disordered educational ecology.

The infiltration of meritocracy in the education system and official promotion system, and the increasingly complex entanglement between the university field and the quasi elite production, provide us with a new perspective to examine the interaction between various subjects in today's Chinese higher education ecology, such as the government and schools, schools and social institutions, schools and schools, and various groups in schools. While providing reasonable logic for officials' selection and promotion, financial investment decision-making, inter school competition, project races, and transformations in teacher-student relationships, meritocracy, as a form of value arrogance, gradually prioritizes utilitarian and instrumental values over the ontological values of education and human beings, and measures the value of higher education and individual based on the performance and benefits of the market level.

A comprehensive analytical framework is needed to determine what equity is in higher education, which must include all aspects of equity and the philosophical basis of the problem: what is equity and for whom, which distribution mechanisms should be adopted, and how much should be allocated. Without a consensus of the distribution goals of education finance, we will never be able to successfully formulate systematic and reasonable policies that promote equity or achieve equity in educational opportunities, social mobility, outcomes, or other potential ideal distribution goals determined through political processes. Feasibility is crucial in the debate on educational equity and social justice. Higher education scholars and government officials not only need to broaden their comprehension of political and philosophical debates, but also need to deepen their perception of the political, economic issues and background of redistributing opportunities and resources through higher education.

Nowadays, universities are no longer lofty ivory towers. Their pursuit of rankings, reputation, and performance has its urgency and rationality. However, excessive attention to achievements and efficiency will vacillate the traditional academic, cultural, and educational nature of universities, making their essence increasingly numerous and jumbled. The pursuit of merit should be directed towards a more noble destination - to cultivate new generations with ontology and self-consciousness for the realization of educational

utopia. The role of governments at all levels should not be as stakeholders, performance reviewers, or spectators from afar, but as supporters, contributors, and leaders in rebuilding a fair, pure, and united education ecosystem.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Author Contribution

Xu J designed the study, conducted the data analysis and drafted the manuscript. Lin J supervised the work. Both authors contributed to writing the article, read and approved its submission.

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