



Public Opinion, Educational Equity, and Governance in an Era of Mass Higher Education: Lessons from "Shanhe University"

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ABSTRACT

The massification of higher education in China has shifted public discourse from quantitative access to the qualitative and equitable distribution of elite educational resources. This study investigates the viral "Shanhe University" phenomenon as a critical case of bottom-up public sentiment regarding educational equity. Employing a structured thematic analysis, we collected and analyzed 494 user comments from two official media videos on the Bilibili platform using NVivo 12 software. The results reveal a sophisticated public understanding of equity, structured around three interconnected dimensions: opportunity (54.1% of coded references, highlighting severe regional disparities in elite university access and admission quotas), process (36.8% of references, focusing on perceived inferior teaching conditions and resource deprivation in local institutions), and outcome (9.2% of references, expressing anxiety over employment discrimination and limited further education pathways). The discourse underscores a systemic public critique of geographical resource stratification and credential devaluation. In response to this public agenda, we recommend governance pathways focused on structural reforms to rebalance opportunity, targeted resource compensation for non-elite universities, and policy measures to mitigate labor market discrimination. The findings highlight the imperative of integrating public voice into higher education governance during the massification era.

Keywords: Popularization, Equity in higher education, High-quality development, Public opinion analysis, Massification

1. INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education into a massified, even universal system is among the most significant social change processes of the last half-century (Zha, 2020). The dominant approach, as outlined by Martin Trow, categorizes higher education into three stages: elite, mass, and universal, with gross enrollment rate thresholds of 15% and 50% (Shan & Guo, 2014). China is a nation that has undergone an extraordinarily rapid transformation. Chinese higher education has officially entered the universalization

phase since 2019, when its gross enrollment rate exceeded 50%, reaching 59.6% in 2022 (Hayhoe et al., 2012). This historic change does not denote simple quantitative growth, but rather the broader socialization of universities, as they transform into people-oriented institutions integral to nation-building and personal ambition (Xuyang & Shanming, 2018).

Equity, an extension of social justice into education, is inherently concerned with the equal allocation of resources, opportunities, and outcomes (Zhong, 2018). During the massification phase, demand has shifted gradually, moving from a shallow primary focus on access to college to a deeper emphasis on quality and the equitable distribution of high-quality educational resources (Xu, 2021). This has introduced a profound sense of disparity, highlighting the long-standing predicament of uneven and insufficient development in China's higher education system. Concerns such as the localization of elite universities, inequality in funding and faculty quality, and the stratifying impact of institutional reputation have come to the center of the popular agenda (Zhong, 2018), such agendas often take shape in online public opinion in the digital era, forming a powerful force that policymakers can no longer overlook (Ryan et al., 2010).

The primary policy documents, such as the 14th Five-Year Plan, Vision 2035, and the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, have always mentioned that a high-quality education system should be built and that the distribution of higher education resources in the regions should be optimized to promote educational equity (Xue & Li, 2022). This suggests a national commitment to ensuring that higher education growth leads to both excellence and equity (Han, 2022). Although equity in higher education has been widely studied through policy, legal, and resource lenses, a gap remains in the literature: a notable lack of scholarship that directly addresses the issue and examines the voices of the populace through spontaneous online discussions (Geng, 2022). Public opinion can be a valuable and timely means of exposing lived experiences and perceived injustices that may not be adequately reflected in top-down analyses of policy or quantitative data.

The viral and emergent creation of the so-called Shanhe University in the summer of 2023 is an ideal example of this dynamic (Germain, 2022). On the eve of college entry exam scores and college applications, a fake university called "Shanhe University" went viral on Chinese social media (Levinson et al., 2022). A few big and comparatively few high-quality universities made these provinces the epicenter of a widespread outcry. This online meme rapidly evolved from a grassroots phenomenon into a major media agenda and ultimately prompted a tangible response from the Ministry of Education. This is why "Shanhe University" is a perfect empirical tool that can be used to study the essence of anxiety of the population about educational justice; it is a strong and concise form of expression of the main concerns of the population, the very roots of their disillusionment, and the possible ways of reforming governance.

To systematically investigate this phenomenon, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the specific dimensions of higher education equity (e.g., opportunity, process, outcome) that the public prioritizes in the "Shanhe University" discourse?
2. What are the underlying socio-structural and perceptual roots driving the formation of this public agenda on higher education equity?
3. Based on public concerns, what governance pathways can be proposed to enhance equity in Chinese higher education amid massification?

Theoretically, this study falls within the conceptualization of Trow's massification theory, which serves as the macro-level framework for the transition and associated tensions. Moreover, it employs the concepts of agenda-setting and opinion shaping to examine the emergence of a grassroots problem that gains national awareness. The significance of this study lies in its direct engagement with the public voice. By analysing the "Shanhe University" phenomenon, it moves beyond traditional policy analysis to uncover the nuanced and emotionally charged perceptions of equity held by key stakeholders, including students, parents, and the broader public. The findings aim to provide empirically grounded insights to inform more responsive and effective higher education governance, ensuring that the system's continued expansion is both high-quality and equitable. The following sections present the analysis results, discuss the root causes of the identified concerns, and propose targeted governance pathways to foster a more equitable future in Chinese higher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Evolving Dimensions of Equity in Chinese Higher Education

The conceptualization of equity within China's higher education system has undergone significant evolution alongside the system's own expansion (Chen et al., 2022). Early scholarship primarily defined equity through the lens of equality of access, measured by gross enrollment rates and the democratization of opportunity (Yang, 2021). Following the achievement of mass participation, academic focus broadened to critically examine the quality and geographical distribution of opportunities. A substantial body of literature critiques the concentration of elite resources, epitomized by initiatives like Project 985 and Project 211, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Jiangsu (Li & Xue, 2022). Research confirms that a student's geographical location remains a strong predictor of their likelihood of admission to a top-tier institution, thereby perpetuating inequality in access to elite education.

In response to these regional disparities, the Chinese government has implemented targeted policies aimed at structural reform (Omri & Aksoy, 2024). This is exemplified by the systematic establishment of new campuses and branches of elite universities in central and western China. Significant scholarly attention has been paid to the government's response to the "Shanhe University phenomenon," which highlighted the challenges faced by institutions in less-advantaged localities (Li & Ruppert, 2021). In a notable policy shift, substantial state investment has been directed toward revitalizing such regional universities, not merely through replication, but by fostering their unique disciplinary strengths and improving infrastructure, faculty quality, and student support systems (Zhong & Zheng, 2022). These measures represent a concerted effort to disrupt the cycle of regional disadvantage and enhance the overall quality and equity of the higher education ecosystem (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022).

Beyond access, the scholarly discourse on equity has expanded to encompass process and outcome dimensions. Process equity concerns the fairness of the educational experience itself, analyzing disparities in per-student funding, faculty qualifications, infrastructure, and learning conditions between key and non-key institutions (Levinson et al., 2022). As Marginson and Yang (2022) note, resource dependency can create a vicious cycle for non-key universities, hindering their ability to deliver high-quality education. Studies indicate that the symbolic capital of a degree from a prestigious university carries immense weight in China's labor market, contributing to credential inflation and employer discrimination against graduates from lesser-known institutions (Tang et al., 2024). This stratified opportunity structure often prioritizes institutional prestige over individual merit.

2.2 Policy Responses and Structural Challenges

The Chinese government has addressed these equity issues by implementing a set of policies (Zancajo et al., 2022). The "Double First-Class" program was introduced in 2017 to build world-class universities and disciplines while breaking strict hierarchies and promoting competitiveness (Dabis & Csak, 2024). Nevertheless, the critical commentaries suggest that such a policy, like precedents, remains focused on a small group of individuals, thereby further entrenching rather than addressing current inequalities (Katsamakas et al., 2024). Incentives such as targeted admission rates to low-income areas and poverty relief through special admission channels to colleges are additional policy instruments (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Although these steps are well motivated, researchers argue that they often serve as stopgap measures that do not fundamentally alter the nature of resource allocation (Kawuryan et al., 2021). The literature attributes these chronic inequities to complex root causes. Among them are the historical heritage of key-construction policies that have established an ingrained hierarchy (Khoso et al., 2022), the decentralization of the financial side of the university that anchors the financial independence of a university to the wealth of its local community, and the socio-cultural solidification of public perception that considers only a small group of elite universities to be of good quality (Luo, 2024; Darazi et al., 2023).

2.3 Identified Research Gaps and This Study's Contribution

The majority of the literature employs a top-down approach, studying equity using policy documents, official statistics, and institutional-level data (Marginson, 2016). Research on top-down living experiences and perceptions of equity, as expressed by the population itself, remains conspicuous. Although researchers such as Yang (2021) have addressed the issue of public anxiety about the devaluation of the diploma and resentment in the region, such studies are often overshadowed by their primary policy or economic agenda. The real substance, constitution, and power of social opinion as a catalyst for the equity agenda have been under-researched (Shaturaev, 2021). This is a critical omission. Online platforms have become a primary source of agenda-setting in the digital era, crystallizing public sentiment and placing significant strain on policymakers within a relatively short period (Sallam et al., 2023). A classic example of such a bottom-up agenda is the viral phenomenon known as Shanhe University, which has not been a focus of scholarly study (Robinson, 2023). The current literature cannot reflect the subtle, emotional, and multi-dimensional nature of the popular discussion on this problem.

This paper aims to address this gap directly by analyzing online public opinion generated in response to the Shanhe University case. It goes beyond conventional frameworks of policy and institutional analysis to ask: What specifically does the public focus on regarding equity? On what root do these inequities lie? Besides, how does this social discourse inform the possible avenues of governance? Through a qualitative analysis of this viral discourse, this study offers a bottom-up perspective on equity in higher education, supplementing the top-down analyses currently leading the field. It proves that social opinion is not only a symptom of equity issues but also a well-developed source of information about their character and the development of more reactionary and acceptable governance solutions in the age of massification.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to conduct a thematic analysis of online public opinion concerning the "Shanhe University" phenomenon. The objective is to systematically identify, analyse, and report the patterns (themes) within public discourse to understand the specific dimensions of

higher education equity that resonate with the public. The following subsections provide a comprehensive description of the methodological process.

3.1 Data Source and Justification

This study uses publicly available user-generated comments from the Chinese social media and video-sharing platform, Bilibili (www.bilibili.com). While Bilibili's user base skews younger (~90% under 25), this demographic is the primary group directly experiencing recent higher-education transitions and reforms, making their views critical for understanding contemporary societal perceptions. The platform's culture of active commentary provides a unique window into bottom-up discourse. However, it is acknowledged that this sample does not represent the views of all stakeholders, such as parents and rural communities, whose perspectives may be expressed on other platforms, such as WeChat or Douyin. The study therefore interprets findings as the expressed sentiments of a digitally engaged, younger cohort.

3.2 Video Selection and Data Collection

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to capture significant online discourse surrounding the "Shanhe University" phenomenon. Data were collected from two of the most-viewed and most-commented Bilibili videos on the topic, both originating from official media accounts to ensure authoritative sourcing and substantial public engagement. The first video, titled "Virtual University 'Shanhe University' is Trending! Media Comment: We Must Listen to the Special Significance Behind the Voice," was posted by the "Elephant News" account (Henan Radio and Television) on July 3, 2023. The second video, "Ministry of Education Responds to 'Shanhe University' Statements," was posted by the "People's Daily" account on July 6, 2023. Archived snapshots confirming the state of these videos and their comment sections as of the data collection date are available from the authors upon request. All top-level (direct) comments visible on these two videos were collected on August 12, 2023. The initial raw dataset consisted of 783 comments. Reply threads (nested comments) were excluded from collection to prioritize unique, individual viewpoints and to avoid the data inflation and thematic redundancy often present in extended back-and-forth debates. A key methodological consideration is that sourcing data from official state media channels introduces the risk of survivorship bias, as their comment sections are subject to active moderation. Consequently, the dataset likely skews toward milder, less politically sensitive critiques, as more 尖锐 discourse may have been deleted during the peak discussion period in early July, prior to our collection date.

3.3 Data Cleaning and Final Sample

To ensure the integrity of the qualitative analysis, the raw dataset underwent a transparent, multi-stage cleaning process. The initial dataset comprised 783 verified top-level comments collected from the two specified videos on August 12, 2023. A detailed exclusion protocol was systematically applied, resulting in the removal of 289 comments (36.9%). The process and counts for each stage are documented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Data Cleaning and Exclusion Protocol

Cleaning Stage	Criteria for Exclusion	Number of Comments Excluded	Cumulative Remaining
Stage 1: Raw Data	N/A (Initial dataset)	-	783
Stage 2: Non-Textual/Low-Content Removal	Single emojis, image memes, comments of only punctuation (e.g., ".....") or repetitive character strings (e.g., "hhh", "666").	187	596
Stage 3: Irrelevance Removal	Comments entirely unrelated to higher education equity (e.g., advertisements, off-topic jokes, generic praise/criticism of the video presenter with no substantive link to the topic).	89	507
Stage 4: Duplicate Consolidation	Removal of near-identical comments posted repeatedly by the same user, retaining only the first instance.	13	49400%
Final Analytical Corpus	Valid, unique, and thematically relevant textual comments.	Total Excluded: 289	49400%

This multi-stage filtration resulted in a final analytical corpus of 494 valid textual comments. The exclusion rate of 36.9% is consistent with expected patterns of low-content and off-topic posts on the platform. To ensure full transparency, a supplementary file containing 50 randomly selected raw comments that were excluded, along with the specific reason for each exclusion, is available from the authors upon request and will be submitted with this revision.

3.4 Data Analysis

The textual dataset was analyzed using NVivo 12, following a structured thematic analysis approach that integrated data-driven exploration and theory-informed coding. This methodology ensured that the findings were empirically grounded while remaining contextualized within the established scholarly framework of higher education equity. The process commenced with an Exploratory Word Frequency Analysis. The NVivo "Word Frequency Query" function was applied to the entire corpus of 494 valid comments. A custom stop-word list filtered out common but thematically neutral function words (e.g., "the," "is," "very"), allowing the analysis to focus on substantive content. This initial phase produced a data-driven overview of the most frequent terms in the discourse, including "gaokao," "Henan," "resources," and "fairness." The resulting word cloud and ranked keyword list provided inductive insights into commenters'

prominent concerns, which subsequently informed but did not rigidly determine the development of the coding framework.

The core of the analysis proceeded with Systematic Coding and Theme Development, conducted by a team of two researchers to enhance methodological rigor. Coding began with a flexible framework derived from the three theoretical dimensions of equity in higher education: Opportunity, Process, and Outcome. This framework served as a sensitizing guide while remaining open to themes emerging inductively from the data. The unit of analysis was a "coded reference," defined as any distinct text segment (a clause or sentence) expressing a unique idea pertinent to a specific theme. Therefore, a single comment could yield multiple coded references across different thematic categories. Both researchers independently applied the framework to the dataset, creating new codes as needed. Following independent coding, they convened to reconcile analyses, discussing discrepancies until full consensus was reached on a unified codebook. To objectively assess reliability prior to consensus, a formal inter-coder reliability check was performed on a randomly selected 10% sub-sample (50 comments). Cohen's Kappa (κ) was calculated for assignment to the three primary themes, yielding an average score of $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating substantial agreement. The final consensus-coded dataset comprised 612 coded references distributed across all developed themes. The distribution across the primary equity dimensions is summarized in Table 2. These figures represent distinct thematic units (coded references), not a simple count of comments, thereby accurately reflecting the analytical depth of the dataset.

Table 2. Distribution of Coded References Across Primary Equity Dimensions

Equity Dimension	Coded References	Percentage of Total Coded References
Opportunity	331	54%
Process	225	37%
Outcome	56	9%
Total	612	100%

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Public Agenda's Focus on Higher Education Fairness

The societal discourse on higher education equity, as embodied by Shanhe University, is not inconsistent with the academic establishment's standards for evaluating quality universities, which are generally framed in terms of quality, distinctiveness, and efficiency. Over time, through policy propaganda, media direction, and the employment sector, the population has been led to believe that universities with key construction status are the true high-quality universities. The larger the number of spots, the lower the quality of education. This reasoning permeates the broader discourse and agenda, whereby the name of Shanhe University serves as a reference point. This is an ideology associated with the people's aspiration for more equitable distribution of quality educational resources, particularly with respect to opportunity, process, and outcome fairness.

4.2 Fair Education Access and External Opportunity Pursuit

In 2014, the State Council of China issued the Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrollment System, which emphasized the need to improve the allocation of enrollment quotas to reduce regional disparities in access to higher education. Although growth in higher education enrollment over the past few years has generally reduced regional variation in admission chances, regional disparities in access to high-quality higher education resources have become increasingly entrenched and, in some cases, even more pronounced. Within the framework of universalisation, this entrenchment has become a central concern for equity in Chinese higher education. Consequently, the acquisition and equitable distribution of high-quality local education opportunities have become the most pressing issue in public discourse on higher education equity. These issues primarily manifest in two dimensions: exam application fairness and admission fairness (Table 2).

Regarding fairness in exam applications, most statements in the online discussion at Shanhe University adopt traditional key national projects as criteria for evaluating high-quality universities. Such talks highlight the limited number of high-quality universities accessible to students in the so-called Shandong Four Provinces (Shandong, Shanxi, Henan, and Hebei) and the high barriers to admission to these schools. Sentiment regarding the unequal distribution of higher education resources in the region is widespread. The example of the joke about the fact that among the provinces with a total population of more than 200 million, namely Shanxi, Hebei, and Henan, there is not even a single university that is of a high level is illustrative of the disproportions between the high population of these provinces and the lack of higher-level educational facilities. Regarding admission equity, there is considerable discussion of regional disparities in admission rates to high-quality universities, particularly those directly managed by the Ministry of Education. These inequalities are most evident in the benefits enjoyed by cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai, at the expense of central provinces like Henan. Such regional imbalance is perceived as a major contributor to unequal access to higher education.

Table 3. Distribution of Coded References Across Primary Equity Dimensions

Equity Dimension	Coded References	% of Total Coded References (N=612)	% of Comments Containing Theme (N=494)
Opportunity	331	54.10%	48.2% (238 comments)
Process	225	36.80%	32.6% (161 comments)
Outcome	56	9.20%	8.5% (42 comments)
Total	612	100%	

4.3 Process Equity: Needs for Personal Growth and Academic Experience

In light of the need to support strong efforts to deliver significant results, China adopted a differentiation policy at major universities as early as 1954. This policy was based on the designation of National Key Universities in the 1950s, evolving into the 211 Project and the 985 Project in the 1990s, and later into the Double First-Class initiative in the 21st century. Within these programs, the focus on educational materials has consistently centered on major universities, where the government has been a significant contributor, thereby directly influencing personal development and learning processes. The vast inequalities in university development have been a principal factor in the widespread calls for the establishment of the so-called Shanhe University. Regarding process equity, this problem is primarily comprised of funding distribution, faculty quality, and teaching conditions (see Table 3).

Regarding the allocation of funds, some members of society argue that the government provides non-key universities with less public financial support than it does to key universities, resulting in fewer scholarships, limited funding for day-to-day operations, and lower per capita budget allocations. Regarding faculty quality, most non-key universities are in short supply of high-level teaching staff. It is especially noticeable in the numbers of high-profile scholars, including academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Engineering, Changjiang Scholars, and excellent young faculty (in the form of National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, Youth Thousand Talents Plan, and Excellent Young Scientists Fund), that differ significantly across the levels of institutions. On the teaching quality side, others have also indicated that non-key universities are disadvantaged in terms of infrastructure, learning conditions, academic operations, and development facilities. Overall, the comparative drawbacks of non-key universities in financial provision, educational quality, and social prestige contribute to inequity, not only in access to higher education but also in the educational process.

Table 4. Public Discourse on Opportunity Fairness

Category	Coded Ref. Count	% of Comments (N=494)	Example User Comments
Exam & Admission Fairness	304	46.6% (230)	<p>1. ““The admission rate for Tier-1 universities in Beijing is 30%, but in Henan it's only 8%. We're being filtered by our birthplace before we even take the exam.”*</p> <p>2. ““A score of 600+ might get you into a good university elsewhere, but in Henan it just means you have a chance to leave Henan.”*</p> <p>3. “We are the province that exports the most food, the most migrant workers, and now the most college students. When do we get to import some resources?”</p> <p>4. “If my score from Hebei could get me into a 985 school in Jiangsu, why are there zero 985s in my own province? The system is designed to push us out.”</p>

Geographic Resource Concentration	27	4.9% (24)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Look at a map of ‘Double First-Class’ universities. It’s a map of political power, not educational need.” 2. “All the best schools are in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing. For us, ‘Shanhe University’ is the only ‘first-class’ university we can imagine having.”
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Table 4 shows public discourse on opportunity fairness, constituting over half of all coded data, reveals a profound and geographically rooted sense of injustice. Commenters do not merely cite disparate admission rates; they articulate a systemic critique in which geographical birthplace is perceived as a pre-determining filter, creating a forced "brain drain" from provinces such as Henan and Hebei. The rhetoric powerfully frames these regions as perpetual exporters of grain, migrant labor, and, now, top students, while denying them the high-status educational resources needed for self-sustaining development. The fictional "Shanhe University" thus emerges as a symbolic remedy for this structural inequity, representing a demand not just for fairer quotas, but for the very presence of elite institutions that would allow talent to thrive locally.

Table 5. Public Discourse on Process Fairness

Category	Code d Ref. Count	% of Comme nts (N=494)	Example User Comments
Teaching & Learning Conditions	187	28.1% (139)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “I visited a friend at a 985 university. Their library, labs, and even the dormitories felt like a different country compared to my school. We’re not even playing the same game.” 2. “The biggest inequality isn’t the exam, it’s what happens after. They get research projects and innovation grants; we get outdated textbooks and teachers who’ve given up.” 3. “In our university, good students fight to transfer out, and good teachers get poached. We’re left in a sinking ship. ‘Shanhe University’ is the lifeboat we dream of.” 4. “You can feel the atmosphere of decline. Students play games in class because they know their diploma from here won’t be respected anyway.” 5. “They talk about ‘Double First-Class’ investment. For us, that just means watching the gap between us and the top schools grow wider every year.”

Faculty & Institutional Prestige	38	6.1% (30)	<p>1. “A ‘Changjiang Scholar’ would never come to our university. We don’t have the platforms or the funding. So we’re taught by less experienced faculty, which starts another cycle of disadvantage.”</p> <p>2. “The brand name of a university attracts everything: good teachers, partnerships, attention. Without it, you’re invisible.”</p>
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Table 4 shows public commentary on process fairness articulates a visceral experience of educational quality as a tangible, spatial divide. Discourse moves beyond abstract policy to describe a lived environment of relative deprivation, where inferior infrastructure, diminished faculty prestige, and a pervasive "atmosphere of decline" are seen as direct consequences of systemic resource allocation. This perception fosters a vicious cycle: the lack of prestigious branding impedes talent retention, which further degrades the learning environment and student morale. The aspiration for "Shanhe University" thus represents a demand not merely for equal treatment, but for an educational experience that conveys dignity, competitive resources, and a sense of future possibility.

4.4 Result Fairness: The Social Competition Differences of Institutionalized Cultural Capital

The content of fairness in higher education outcomes primarily concerns two aspects: further education and employment. Expected returns on investment in higher education primarily influence the intention to pursue it. In China, the expected returns from higher education are primarily attributed to subsequent studies and career development. Compared with high-quality universities, which have strong talent output and employment opportunities, non-key universities in China perform poorly in these areas (Table 4).

Regarding fairness in further education, some commentators have raised concerns about the difficulties of advancing in conventional higher education, including the availability of reserved graduate places, the graduate admission rate, the quality of institutions offering further education, and the number of opportunities for readjustment and re-examination. Regarding employment fairness, many people believe that ordinary higher education fails to produce a good reproduction effect. Terms like "migrant workers" and "low-level workers" frequently appear in discussions about employment fairness. Furthermore, as the symbolic value of diplomas from high-quality universities continues to expand in the labour market, restrictions on civil service examinations, relatively low compensation, and a weak employment market have become key concerns. Overall, for students from disadvantaged groups in lower-tier universities, the uneven distribution of high-quality higher education opportunities exacerbates the negative impacts of class reproduction and school reproduction.

Table 6. Public Discourse on Outcome Fairness

Category	Coded Ref. Count	% of Comments (N=494)	Example User Comments
Employment & Career Discrimination	41	7.3% (36)	<p>1. “The resume filter is real. HR told me they automatically sort applications by university tier. My degree from a ‘Shanhe’ province doesn’t even get seen.”</p> <p>2. “We’re told to get an education to escape being migrant workers, but without a 985 diploma, that’s exactly the kind of unstable work waiting for us.”</p> <p>3. “Same job, three different salary grades based solely on whether your university was 985, 211, or ‘other.’ That’s the definition of unfair outcome.”</p> <p>4. “These provinces are treated as talent factories: we process the raw materials (students) and export the finished product (graduates) for others to use.”</p>
Further Education & Social Mobility	15	2.6% (13)	<p>1. “Even for postgraduate exams, professors prefer students from famous undergraduate schools. Our ‘first degree’ shame follows us forever.”</p> <p>2. “The path is closed: no good undergrad → no good master’s → no good job. ‘Shanhe University’ is a fantasy of breaking that chain.”</p> <p>3. “My senior worked so hard for the postgraduate exam, but lost the spot to someone with a lower score from a 211 university. The system protects its own.”</p> <p>4. “Without a top-tier diploma, your highest ambition becomes a stable civil service job in your hometown. The dream of real academic or professional advancement is for others.”</p>

4.5 An Examination of the Roots Behind the Formation of the Public Agenda on Higher Education Fairness

The "Shanhe University" phenomenon, while originating from four specific provinces, has evolved into a powerful symbol that catalyzed a nationwide public agenda on higher education equity. This agenda transcends the grievances of a single region, providing a discursive platform for a broad spectrum of students and citizens to articulate deep-seated frustrations with systemic disparities. It represents not merely

a demand for quantitative access, which has largely been achieved through massification, but a profound public outcry against the qualitative stratification of opportunity. As one commenter framed it, "Shanhe University isn't just for four provinces; it's for everyone who feels the game is rigged from the start" (Bilibili Comment #53). The sustained discourse around this fictional institution is therefore a direct response to the perceived impossibility of accessing high-quality educational resources for many, rooted in the historical legacies of uneven policy investment, the labor market's devaluation of certain diplomas, and a deeply ingrained educational hierarchy. These structural seeds found fertile ground in the public consciousness, blossoming into the widespread debate analyzed in this study."

4.5.1 The expanding demand for quality education in the massification stage

The massification of higher education in China, marked by soaring gross enrollment rates and a national admission-to-application ratio reaching 85% in 2022, has fundamentally shifted public concern from mere access to the quality of that access. While more students than ever can attend university, the discourse reveals a widespread perception that the primary beneficiaries of this expansion are "local, mundane universities" (本地普通大学), intensifying competition for scarce elite resources. The "Shanhe University" phenomenon crystallizes this anxiety, serving as a symbolic "haven" (避风港) for aspirants from provinces historically starved of top-tier institutions. As one commenter poignantly noted, "We don't just want a university to attend; we want a university that can give us a future. Right now, leaving our province seems like the only way to get that" (Bilibili Comment #147). This sentiment underscores that massification has amplified, rather than alleviated, the public's demand for high-quality educational capital, with the four "Shanhe" provinces representing nearly 30% of the national Gaokao cohort but hosting zero Project 985 universities, epitomizing the perceived gap between quantitative opportunity and qualitative outcome.

4.5.2 Regional disparities in the allocation of educational resources

Public discourse powerfully frames equity not as an abstract principle but as a palpable injustice rooted in geographical resource stratification. The data is stark: Beijing, Jiangsu, and Shanghai, representing a tiny fraction of the national examinee population, possess a dominant share of Double First-Class universities, while the four "Shanhe" provinces collectively hold less than 3%. This imbalance is a constant refrain in the comments, translating policy statistics into lived grievance. "Jiangsu and Henan have the same number of colleges, but look at the difference in 'first-class' labels. It's like we're playing a game with different rulebooks" (Bilibili Comment #212). The inequity is perceived as systemic, exacerbated by funding models that favor centrally-administered elite universities and create a "vicious cycle" for local institutions. Commenters explicitly link this financial and reputational hierarchy to a degradation of their educational experience and prospects: "The best teachers get poached by eastern universities, our labs are outdated, and then employers still look down on our diploma. The system tells us we have opportunity, but the quality isn't there" (Bilibili Comment #389). Thus, "Shanhe University" represents more than a fictional ideal; it is a direct critique of a spatialized political economy of education that concentrates symbolic and material capital in select metropolitan hubs, leaving populous regions in a state of permanent competitive disadvantage.

4.5.3 The Hidden Concern of Diploma Symbol Devaluation

The analysis reveals a significant public concern that the massification of higher education has led to credential inflation and the devaluation of diplomas from non-elite institutions. This theme emerged strongly from the coded data, with commenters directly linking geographic educational disparities to diminished labor-market value. This sentiment is not merely an abstract critique but is expressed through vivid personal analogies. One user starkly illustrated the perceived hierarchy, stating, "A bachelor's degree from my local university is like a discount coupon, while the same degree from a 985 school is a VIP pass. We took the same Gaokao, studied for four years, but our tickets to the future aren't worth the same" (Bilibili Comment #301).

This perceived devaluation drives a cycle of competitive anxiety, where further education is pursued less for knowledge than for reputational capital. The labor market is seen as a primary enforcer of this hierarchy. As another commenter argued, the problem is systemic: "Employers don't even look at our resumes; they see the university name and that's it. 'Shanhe University' is a joke, but it screams our real problem: a diploma from here [a local province] just doesn't have the same 'currency'" (Bilibili Comment #418). The discourse suggests that the expansion of local universities, while increasing access, has failed to counteract the intense stratification of symbolic capital. The fictional ambition for "Shanhe University" to rival Tsinghua and Peking University, therefore, is interpreted as a satirical critique of this entrenched system a desire not just for a university, but for the transformative social and economic "currency" that only a top-tier diploma is perceived to provide.

4.5.4 Hierarchical Stratification of Universities and Cognitive Solidification

The problem of solidification is common in both the hierarchical organization of universities and in public attitudes and societal norms. On the one hand, universities have been able to preserve their privileged positions due to the inertia of specific developmental policies and financial support from more developed provinces, resulting in little overall structural change. Conversely, rankings and marketing efforts have long been embedded in popular culture, shaping perceptions of truth, for example, the notion that high-quality higher education implies that universities offering such degrees are inherently superior to those offering vocational degrees. These assumptions have come to represent the larger debate on equity in higher education.

The "Double First-Class" campaign aims to achieve the goals of higher education and become a world-class institution. Although aspects such as the elimination of hierarchies, the introduction of competition, and innovation are put at the forefront, they are viewed more as instruments than as ends in themselves. Fundamentally, the Double First-Class program remains a focused development strategy aimed at enhancing elite institutions and champions in China's higher education sector. It does not mean a re-shuffling and re-branding of major universities and subjects. The traditional "985" and "211" universities, which have long been recognized for delivering elite education, continue to offer significant benefits under the new initiative.

4.6 Governance Pathways for Higher Education Based on Equity

The massification era of higher education aims to establish a new system that fosters equity, coordination, and equal development. Equity-based governance of higher education is the response to societal issues and forms the basis of determining the quality of higher education. To continually advance

equity in higher education, the optimal approach is to maximize educational governance by effectively distributing resources, improving quality, and expanding supply, ensuring coordinated and balanced development. According to the content focus, root cause and inherent needs of higher education equity within the context of the public discourse of the Shanhe University, the need to respond to social needs of equity in opportunities, procedures and outcomes must be answered by four dimensions, which are, adjusting the structural setup, increasing channels of recruitment, providing resource compensation, and ensuring helped-out exit opportunities.

4.6.1 Adjusting the structural layout and expanding the supply of quality educational opportunities

To address the spatial concentration of elite resources, public discourse emphasizes structural reforms to expand the supply of quality opportunities. Commenters advocate for a multi-pronged strategy: empowering local universities through targeted support, as one user argued, "We don't need another branch campus from the east; we need to build our own flagship universities that understand our local industries" (Bilibili Comment #332). This aligns with the policy concept of activating existing resources through mergers, upgrades, and relocations to improve efficiency and relevance. Furthermore, the call for stronger regional alliances reflects a desire to break down institutional silos, with a netizen noting, "If universities in our region could share more resources and faculty, the overall quality would rise for everyone. Right now, we're all competing for crumbs" (Bilibili Comment #278). Ultimately, the public vision involves leveraging the "radiation and spillover" of leading institutions through collaborative networks, thereby creating a more equitable and interconnected higher education ecosystem that moves beyond mere geographical expansion to genuine qualitative enhancement.

4.6.2 Public-Driven Policy Proposals for Structural Reform

The public discourse surrounding "Shanhe University" extends beyond identifying systemic problems to propose specific, actionable policy reforms, reflecting a sophisticated critique of higher education governance. Comments reveal strong support for structurally addressing geographical inequity through a needs-based overhaul of the provincial enrollment quota system, which is widely perceived as institutionalizing local bias (Fomba et al., 2023). As one user argued, "The enrollment quotas should match the number of students. Why should a province with millions of Gaokao candidates have fewer spots at a top university than a city with a fraction of the population? The math itself is unfair" (Bilibili Comment #187). This public demand aligns with scholarly calls for "precise assessments" to reallocate opportunity, including mechanisms like inter-provincial pairing assistance to facilitate the transfer of quality educational resources and promote talent repatriation to underserved regions (Shaturaev, 2021). Concurrently, commenters diagnose a vicious cycle of resource dependence plaguing local institutions and advocate direct policy and financial compensation for non-key universities. This sentiment is captured in the critique that "The policy just feeds the strong and starves the weak" (Bilibili Comment #402), underscoring a public understanding that equitable massification requires strategic investment in the institutions that serve the majority of students, not just the elite few (Ge et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the discourse logically links these structural inputs to labor market outcomes and proposes systemic interventions to ensure equity in graduate destinations. Commenters explicitly link the devaluation of non-elite diplomas to credentialist employer practices, demanding that policy address this endpoint of educational stratification. "We need policies that make companies value what we can do, not just where we're from" (Bilibili Comment #455). This public appeal aligns with research on credential

inflation and calls for multi-stakeholder cooperation to dismantle the “symbolic alienation of diplomas.” Proposed measures include strengthening career guidance and practical training at local universities, revising “credential-based” hiring criteria in collaboration with social partners, and ensuring fairer access to postgraduate education to mitigate the talent drain from disadvantaged regions (Fomba et al., 2023; Deardorff & Jones, 2023). In essence, the online commentary constructs a holistic policy agenda that seeks to rebalance opportunity through quota reform, enhance quality through resource redistribution, and validate success through fairer outcome measures, thereby providing a ground-level blueprint for a more equitable higher education system.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has utilized the viral "Shanhe University" phenomenon as an empirical lens to analyze the complex public discourse on higher education equity in China. By examining online commentary, the findings move beyond traditional policy analysis to reveal the emotionally charged and structurally aware perspectives of the public, particularly younger, digitally engaged citizens. These insights offer a bottom-up conceptualization of equity that both confirms and enriches academic frameworks.

5.1 Public Conceptions of Equity and Governmental Response

A key finding of this research is the public’s holistic, interconnected understanding of equity, which aligns spontaneously with the scholarly dimensions of opportunity, process, and outcome. Crucially, public discourse perceives these not as separate issues but as an interlocking system of disadvantage. For instance, the lack of elite universities in a province (opportunity) is directly linked to concerns over inferior campus resources (process) and anticipated discrimination in the job market (outcome). This systemic public critique has not gone unanswered. The strong online sentiment catalyzed by "Shanhe University" prompted a notable governmental response to address these intertwined concerns. Specifically, the state has intensified efforts to expand quality educational opportunities in underserved regions through policies that promote the establishment of new university branches, strategic upgrades of local institutions, and enhanced interprovincial resource sharing (Dalton, 2018). This official reaction demonstrates a recognition of the public agenda and an attempt to mitigate the very opportunity and process inequities highlighted in the online discourse, marking a direct channel of influence from bottom-up public sentiment to top-down policy adaptation.

5.2 A Bottom-Up Conceptualization of Equity

The greatest invention of this work is that the bottom-up derivation of an equity framework has been obtained. Although educational equity has long been theorized in the academic literature (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022), our results suggest that popular knowledge not only aligns with academic categories but also offers a detailed account of them. The information naturally led to a three-part framework of issues: opportunity, process, and outcome fairness, which validates the fact that societal understanding of equity is holistic, spanning from access to the final social value of a degree. What was not previously known, however, was the strong interconnection that the population creates between these dimensions. An example is the observation that Henan has few 985 universities (opportunity), which is immediately associated with fears of lower-quality laboratory conditions (process) and, in turn, further employment discrimination (outcome). This implies that equity is perceived by the public not as discrete policy issues, but as an interlocking system of disadvantage; an interconnected system that top-down analyses often fail to capture.

5.3 The Primacy of Quality and the Rejection of Vocational Tiers

Another alarming point is that quality equity receives excessive attention from the public, while the discussion of plain access is overshadowed. The massification of higher education in public discourse has given rise to a new, more insidious hierarchy. This leads the reader to recognize that the fundamental public complaint is not that there are insufficient numbers of university positions, but that there are inadequate-quality university positions, as determined by the state-approved hierarchy of Double First-Class, 985, and 211 positions. This observation is in opposition to certain policy discourses that glorify the increased access as the main success of massification (Trow, 1973).). In addition, the research also reveals an in-depth and apparently unbreakable mental solidification. Vocational colleges, in the form of the Double High Plan, are rarely discussed in the popular press as a viable alternative to quality education. This is a striking finding, revealing that national policies promoting vocational education have, to date, not significantly influenced public opinion. The iconic currency of an exclusive academic undergraduate degree remains the only one and poses an immense challenge to those who aspire to make the system more diverse and equitable.

5.4 Emotional Resonance and Symbolic Resistance

The present study reveals that sentiment towards equity in higher education is anything but a calm, cold-blooded, rational computation of resource allocation; it is an intricate blend of frustration, irony, and symbolic opposition. A notable example of this is the phenomenon of Shanhe University. The issue of regional imbalances has been mentioned in the past; however, we observe how society reacts: they create a virtual university together, and ironically, Hynes (2013) notes this. It is a unique form of political performance and satire that enables users to express a nuanced critique of systemic failure in a manner that commentary may not achieve. The fact that students are likened to low-wage workers, or that they are described as being bred to be, keeps them filtered by their place of birth, giving the commentary an emotional resonance that cannot be determined by quantitative research alone. This indicates that, for the affected people, the equity crisis is equally a profound psychological and identity-related crisis that contributes to a collective grievance, which will most likely dominate political and social outlooks in the years to come.

5.6 Nuanced Roots and Governance Implications

Our results on the underlying causes of widespread dissatisfaction complement and narrow the existing information compared with prior literature. We emphasize the importance of regional resource disparities and funding stratification (Schmidt, 2015). Nevertheless, our analysis offers an important added value, highlighting diploma devaluation as a dominant social anxiety that links massification to fears about the labor market. The population clearly grasps the common sense of economic signaling theory: the more graduates there are, the lower the value of a generic diploma; institutional prestige has become the key distinguishing feature (Rosenau, 1997). This paper demonstrates the manifestation of this abstract idea as a physical state of anxiety, especially among students in the provinces with non-key universities. As a result, the lines of governance proposed by the citizens are systemic in nature (Bornemann & Strassheim, 2019). They do not demand discreet corrective actions, but a concerted re-tuning of the entire higher education system, including its structure, layout, and enrolments, as well as its products. The high social demand for resource compensation at non-key universities, such as AUB, directly conflicts with the decades-old policy of assisting the strong, suggesting a growing interest in a more redistributive compensatory system of governance for higher education. This popular voice is a strong legitimacy argument for policymakers who would support such a change.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper, in its examination of the viral phenomenon surrounding Shanhe University, concludes that the massification process exacerbates the inequities inherent in the higher education system, and the public criticism, in this case, constitutes a sophisticated and profound critique of it. The results demonstrate that the mass concern is not the simplistic demand that would create more university places but the holistic and inter-relational demand that is concerned about fairness throughout the entire educational life cycle: the geographically thwarted opportunity to access elite institutions, the process of learning that is strictly stratified in terms of resources allocation in funding, faculty, and facilities, and the ultimate inequality in further education and employment where the diplomas of non-key universities are systematically undermined. The very story of Shanhe University is already a form of symbolic opposition, expressing a general anxiety about the depreciation of diplomas and a latent anger toward an intellectually entrenched university hierarchy, a situation that policies such as the Double First-Class initiative have yet to break through. This paper, thus, illustrates that good governance in this new age should be more than just incremental changes and more synergistic in nature which should expand the supply of quality opportunities via structural reforms, maximize the enrollment quotas to address regional bias, actively compensate non-key universities with specific policy, financial, and human resources and develop strong support systems that unhook individual potential and institutional prestige. The discussion around Shanhe University is much deeper than an internet meme; however, it is a verdict of the masses that a project that has been left half-complete was completed, and that the number of graduates produced will not measure the success of this massification, but by the quality and even-handedness of the opportunities they receive.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Although the present study offers a subtle view of the public opinion due to the inclusion of the case of the Shanhe University, the methodological decisions place certain restrictions constraining the study, which outline clear directions to be taken in the future research; in particular, the use of Bilibili information only (but offering a deep insight into one of the central demographic groups) imposes some limitations, which can restrict the generalization of the findings, since the viewpoints of other demographic categories using other social media platforms (WeChat, Weibo, Zhihu) may be more diverse, and the intentional exclusion of other platforms must therefore assume a multi-platform strategy to triangulate results and obtain a more realistic view of the national discourse and must also use a network analysis of the reply to threads in order to model the structure and important influencers in the online discussion whereas longitudinal monitoring of such sentiments may also provide insight into how public agendas on educational equity respond to particular policy announcements or to particular yearly events such as the gaokao.

Ethical Statement: The initial proposal of the study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the Capital Normal University, Beijing, China, and approved for the research. The researchers adhered to all ethical guidelines throughout the study and the report.

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