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**EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN THE STRUCTURE
SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF MODERN
CHINA**

Scientific speciality 5.4.4. Social structure, social institutions and processes

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Introduction

Relevance of the research topic. Social inequality is one of the most acute problems of modern society, both at the global and local levels. Among the various forms and types of inequality, the problem of educational inequality stands out, which has become one of the important research topics of modern sociology. Education is one of the important dimensions of social stratification, and the study of educational inequality is necessary not only for a deep understanding of the dynamics of social change and changes in the development of education, but also for the formulation of predictive scenarios for the development of the education system, on the basis of which important managerial decisions can be made in the field of politics, economics, cultural capital and human resource development. This is extremely important for contemporary China, where rapid economic and political development is accompanied by a certain progress in education, but it is also necessary to solve the problem of educational inequality that has arisen in the process of social development.

Since the founding of New China, its national education system has undergone a series of reforms: the establishment of the higher education entrance examination system (1955), the reintroduction of the university entrance examination (1977) during the period of overcoming the negative effects of the Cultural Revolution, the introduction of nine-year compulsory education in the post-reform and opening-up years, the achievement of universal secondary education in the early 21st century, and the process of achieving universal higher education, which continues from 2019 to the present day. All these strongly suggest that China's education system has made a qualitative leap at the same time as the country's rapid economic development. However, it should not be forgotten that in this process - due to the imbalance that exists between urban and rural development, as well as regional differences in investment policies - serious inequalities have emerged in education in terms of access to educational resources, the quality of educational services, and the provision of social mobility after graduation. These problems are not only detrimental to the development of education in China, but also affect the rationalisation of the social stratification structure.

This topic is extremely relevant for contemporary China. The topic of educational inequality occupies an important place in Chinese sociology, as the study of educational

inequality in the stratification system of Chinese society contributes to understanding the specifics of the changes taking place in China's social structure and education system. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasised that socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and the main social contradiction at this stage is the contradiction between people's growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development. Since almost all social contradictions and conflicts are related to the problem of inequality, studying the problem of inequality in the process of social development is undoubtedly one of the most important ways to effectively solve social problems. In addition, studying the Chinese education system provides an opportunity to analyse its impact on social transformation and social stratification. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that studying educational inequality in the structure of social stratification in contemporary China will contribute to the rationalisation of social structure and the elimination of social injustice.

It can also be assumed that the topic of educational inequality in China is also of interest to Russian researchers and specialists. In the context of intensive development of economic, political and cultural cooperation between the two countries, the study of this problem creates opportunities to use the experience of its solution in China for the practice of reforming the Russian education system.

Degree of scientific development of the problem. The study of social inequality has a long tradition in the history of world social thought. Since ancient times, philosophers have been interested in the questions of the structure of society, the origin and forms of property, class relations, equitable system, etc. (Plato [see: 89], Aristotle [see: 2], etc.). (Plato [see: 89], Aristotle [see: 2], etc.). In the Renaissance (N. Machiavelli [see: 80]), in the New Age (T. Hobbes [see: 20], J. Locke [see: 65], J. -J. Rousseau [see: 95], G. Hegel [see: 17], A. Smith [see: 98], A. Saint-Simon [see: 97], later - K. Marx and F. Engels [see: 83], O. Comte [see: 44]) deeply studied the problems of social inequality. A special role in the development of this topic belongs to the outstanding Russian sociologist P.A. Sorokin, who introduced the concept of social stratification into the scientific lexicon, defining its basis and essence as "the unequal distribution of rights and privileges, responsibilities and duties, the presence or absence of social values, power and influence among the members of this or that community" [99; p.302]. [99; p.302].

The works of famous sociologists - R. Darendorf [see: 25], E. Wright [see: 92], F. Parkin [see: 87], K. Davis and W. Moore [see: 28]. Darendorf [see: 25], E. Wright [see: 92], F. Parkin [see: 87], C. Davis and W. Moore [see: 28], T. Parsons [see: 88], D. Hruska [see: 148], G. Lenski [see: 149] and others. These topics are developed in the works of modern Russian authors - M.K. Gorshkov [see: 22]. Gorshkov [see: 22, 94], Z.T. Golenkova [see: 21; 43], P.M. Kozyreva [see: 43], M.F. Chernysh [see: 120], V.V. Radaev [see: 90], O.I. Shkaratan [see: 90], N.E. Tikhonova [see: 107] and others. The problems of social stratification and inequality in the CHN are investigated by Chinese scholars, among whom are Bian Yanjie [see: 64], Song Liping [see: 64], Song Liping [see: 64], Sun Liping [see: 64].64], Song Liping [see: 106], Lu Xueyi [see: 66, 67, 68], Li Lulu [see: 49, 50, 51], Li Qiang [see: 56, 57, 58, 151], Li Peilin [see: 52, 94, 150], Li Chunlin [see: 43, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63] and others.

Among the problems related to social stratification, the topic of educational inequality stands out. Education is one of the dimensions of stratification along with income, power, prestige. In the context of increasing social stratification, this form of inequality requires special attention. The question is whether the limited educational resources can be allocated wisely and whether citizens' rights to education can be guaranteed and made more equal. States should promote equal access to education because it supports social stability and ensures progressive progression.

In modern sociology there are different points of view on the problem of educational inequality. Thus, S. Bowles and G. Gintis, representatives of neo-Marxism in the sociology of education, in their work "School Education in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life" put forward the theory of class reproduction [see: 146]. They believe that schools are the product of class conflict and that the role of schooling in capitalist society is to maintain social inequality and reproduce unequal relations of production and class structures. In their view, the dominant culture in schools is that of the dominant upper class group, where members of the ruling class control educational objectives, assessment standards and transmit to lower class groups the behavioural styles, cultural consciousness and values of the upper class, reproducing unequal social relations. They argue that schooling that reproduces social inequalities and differences in the division of labour cannot be a transformative force for social justice, and that only by extending the democratic system to all spheres of social life "can schools

achieve their three goals: to promote social equality, to fully develop the creative potential of young people, and to integrate the new generation into the social order.

P. Bourdieu analysed the problem of equality in education from the point of view of cultural reproduction. His ideas are presented in the work "Reproduction: Elements of the Theory of the Education System" written together with J.-K. Passron [see: 5]. He argued that the chances of success in school are determined by a pupil's family and class culture, and the class culture transmitted by the school in the process of cultural reproduction is known as 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital is an important factor, along with economic capital, in determining an individual's social class. This kind of cultural capital has three forms: physicalised cultural capital, which includes speech, manners, instrument style, hobbies and cultivation; objectified cultural capital, which includes music, paintings, instruments and so on; and institutionalised cultural capital, which includes education and qualifications. He argues that the richness of a family's cultural capital plays a crucial role in children's chances of succeeding in school: capitalist schooling is a process of 'symbolic violence' to which the ruling class subjects the lower classes through an education system and goals prescribed by cultural hegemony. In other words, inequality is rooted in the different cultural backgrounds of families in class society and the unequal treatment of class culture in schooling, which has a significant impact on the education of children from different classes. This is a cultural approach to educational equity that focuses on class structure, cultural capital, etc.

In Russian sociology, the problem of educational inequality is developed in the works of D.L. Konstantinovskiy [see: 42, 43], G.A. Klyucharev [see: 38], Y.B. Epikhina [see: 31,32], G.E. Zborovskiy, P.A. Ambarova [see: 34, 35] and others. Fairness in education is considered at two levels: at the macro level, where education acts as part of the institutional system (in this case, education acts as part of the institutional system and its assessment as an institution becomes part of the assessment of fairness of society as a whole); at the micro level, the assessment of fairness in education is analysed as part of the social experience of the individual

In Chinese sociology, social structure, social stratification, and educational inequality are among the most actively developed scientific topics. From the time of the first socialist government until the economic reform of 1978, scholars have mainly justified the idea of a social structure of Chinese society in the form of "two classes plus one stratum" (working

class, peasantry, and intellectuals). It was only during the reform period that Chinese sociologists turned to discussing the diversity of forms of economic activity. This made a significant contribution to analysing the new social structure of Chinese society and a return to economic classification. Lu Xueyi [see: 66, 67, 68], Li Qiang [see: 56, 57, 58, 151], Li Chunlin [see: 59, 60, 61, 62, 63], Li Palin [see: 52, 94, 150] and others played a leading role in this process. At a time when social structure and social classes are dynamic and changing, the study of educational equality/inequality has become increasingly important. Having analysed P. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction as an influential and shared theoretical and methodological approach by Western sociologists, Chinese researchers Yang Chunhua [see: 145], Hu Xulong [see: 112], Zhang Wanli [see: 122], Wang Zhaoxin [see: 11]) and others have concluded that it cannot be fully applied to the situation in China.

Li Chunlin, in her study of educational equality between different social classes, concluded that "China has now established the largest education system in the world, and the education system continues to develop and grow, maintaining the ability for sustainable development, but the development of the education system has not eliminated the educational inequality between urban and rural areas, between different social groups and between different social classes. Educational inequality has become one of the factors affecting people's sense of social justice and has been the focus of Chinese media attention. This shows that people are no longer satisfied with the existing situation. They have started to pay attention to the fairness of the educational system. The fairness in education that people demand is not only the fair distribution of educational opportunities, but also the fairness of access to quality education. Therefore, ensuring balanced and equitable access to education for urban and rural people and different social classes is an important issue for China's social development [see: 60, 62].

In general, the modern scientific community in China has developed a broad theoretical and empirical basis for studying the problem of educational inequality in the process of social stratification. On this basis, it became possible to carry out a sociological analysis of the problem of educational inequality and determine the main guidelines of the dissertation research.

The object of the thesis research is educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society.

The subject of the study is the historical background, causes, factors and stages of formation of educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society.

The aim of the research is to study and identify historical preconditions, causes, factors and stages of the emergence and formation of educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society in the conditions of progressive economic, social and cultural development.

To achieve this goal, the ***following objectives*** are formulated:

1) to reveal the content of the main theoretical approaches to the study of social stratification in China;

2) to consider the stages of systemic transformation and changes in the structure of social stratification in China from the formation of the CHN to the "reform and opening-up era" and after 1978 in the context of historical prerequisites, causes, factors and stages of the emergence and formation of educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society;

3) Analyse the impact of education on the social class structure of Chinese society and identify the factors that shape educational inequality in the current system of stratification;

4) To analyse the current state of the educational system in China in the context of geographical differences, income differences and regional specificity in order to identify the main factors and the level of influence of each on educational inequality;

5) to study the mechanisms and impact of uneven distribution of educational resources on the dynamics of social inequality in different regions of the country;

6) on the basis of the identified causes and factors, taking into account both social and cultural-historical aspects of the problem, to develop proposals to reduce the level of educational inequality in various social groups in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society.

Compliance of the subject of the dissertation research with the requirements of the Passport of specialities of the Higher Attestation Commission: the dissertation is carried out within the framework of the scientific speciality 5.4.4 - "Social structure, social institutions and processes" and corresponds to the following points of the passport of this speciality:

1. Social structure and social stratification. Criteria of social stratification.

5. Social inequality, main types, indicators, factors and trends.

New forms of inequality in modern societies and approaches to its study.

Research hypothesis: *The* author assumes that in modern China, the dynamics of social stratification is inextricably linked to the development of the education system, which contains elements of inequality and imbalance. Educational inequality manifests itself at different levels, in different forms and in the following main aspects: differences in family (cultural) capital, inequality between geographical regions, inequality in the population's income and inequality in the distribution of educational resources at both macro and micro levels.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the research is primarily Marxist materialist methodology based on the class approach to the analysis of social reality. The thesis also used methodological provisions of P. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, including modern conceptual developments of Chinese specialists. Thus, the analysis of the problem of educational inequality in China was carried out on the basis of generalising the results of research projects of Chinese sociologists (Lu Xueyi, Liu Qianming, Li Chunlin, Li Peilin, etc.). The analysis of the mentioned subject in the works of modern Russian authors (M.K. Gorshkov, M.F. Chernysh, D.L. Konstantinovsky, G.E. Zborovsky, P.A. Ambarova, Y.B. Epikhina, E.M. Sorokina, etc.) was also taken into account and used.

The empirical basis of the study was statistical data of the State Statistical Office and the National Bureau of Statistics of China, as well as secondary analysis of social research data conducted by a number of sociological research centres and institutes of the CHN.

The reliability of the obtained results of the study is determined by the use of classical works on sociology, reference to an extensive database of modern scientific publications on the topic of the study, the use of verified methods of sociological analysis, as well as the accuracy and consistency of the results obtained.

The theoretical significance of the work lies in the fact that the generalising provisions formulated by the author, based on Marxist materialist research methodology, can be used for further study of the problems of educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of Chinese society. The findings of the thesis contribute to the study of the development of the modern institute of higher education in the conditions of socio-economic transformations taking place in China, and allow us to assess the directions of solving the problem of educational inequality in Chinese society. The work not only poses

the problems of educational inequality in the stratification structure of modern Chinese society, but also identifies their causes and formulates proposals for their solution and overcoming.

The practical significance of the work lies in the fact that the results of the author's study of inequality in the educational sphere can serve as a basis for further research in this area. The materials of the dissertation can be used in the development of basic and special training courses on the sociology of education, social stratification issues, problems of social inequality, etc.

The scientific novelty of the dissertation research consists in the following:

- social barriers to equal opportunities for access to quality education in the stratification structure of modern Chinese society have been identified;

- In the context of the problem of educational inequality, the problems of education and upbringing of *"noble children from modest families"*, which are topical for Chinese sociology, are analysed in conjunction with the issues of education in rural areas;

- It is substantiated that differences in Chinese family cultural capital affect access, opportunities and attitudes towards higher education;

- regional and resource disparities among educational institutions are identified as an important cause and dimension of the existing educational inequality in China and their characteristics are shown;

- on the basis of statistical data, the efficiency of the existing practice of educational resources distribution was analysed, and measures to reduce the level of educational inequality were proposed.

Approbation of the obtained results. The main provisions, results and conclusions contained in the VKR are reflected in the published scientific works of the author, including 7 articles in the journals included in the VAK list recommended by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation.

The main provisions of the dissertation research were also reported by the author at the All-Russian Scientific Conference "Kovalev Readings - 2022" at St. Petersburg State University (St. Petersburg, 17-19 November 2022); at the All-Russian Conference on Natural Sciences and Humanities with International Participation "SPbSU Science - 2022" (St. Petersburg, 21 November 2022); at the Russian-Chinese Sociological Conference "Modern Cities and Social Governance in Russia and China", organised by the Russian-

Chinese Centre for Comparative Sociology (St. Petersburg, 21 November 2022); at the Russian-Chinese Sociological Conference "Modern Cities and Social Governance in Russia and China", organised by the Russian-Chinese Centre for Comparative Sociology (St. Petersburg, 21 November 2022); at the All-Russian Conference on Natural Sciences and Humanities (St. Petersburg, 21 November 2022); at the Russian-Chinese Sociological Conference "Modern Cities and Social Governance in Russia and China

The thesis consists of an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion and a reference list of 167 titles.

The main results of the conducted research, reflecting the author's contribution to the increase of sociological knowledge on the problems of educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society, consist in the following provisions:

- historical preconditions, causes, factors and the main stages of the emergence and formation of educational inequality in the structure of social stratification of modern Chinese society, which in the conditions of progressive economic, social and cultural development of the People's Republic of China is a natural order of interposition of all social classes and other strata in their continuous interaction with each other and real interrelation (See: 125. Zhang Haopeng. The structure of the model of social stratification of Chinese society // *Sociology*. 2022. №6. - P. 109-113; see: 131. Zhang Haopeng. Tendencies of change in the social stratification of the Chinese population in the period before the opening-up reform (1949-1978) // *Socio-humanitarian knowledge*. 2023. №1. - C. 64-66);

- The author's methodological approach to the study of the process of development of social structure and social stratification in China in the context of Chinese national peculiarities has been developed, which helps to identify the key directions and trends of their development in modern Chinese society (see: 130. Zhang Haopeng. The Evolution of the Social Role of China's Household Registration (Hukou) // *Sociology*. 2023. №1. - C. 174-178);

- The influence of the traditional Chinese household registration system on social stratification and educational inequality was revealed, which is important for understanding the processes of social change taking place in China (See: 126. Zhang

Haopeng. Gender aspects of social stratification of the Chinese population // *Medicine. Sociology. Philosophy. Applied research. №1. 2023. - C. 68-70*);

- Based on P. A. Sorokin's theory and methodology of social stratification and P. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, the thesis reveals the most important factors influencing social stratification in education from the point of view of their interrelation and interaction with each other (See: 127. Zhang Haopeng. The impact of the level of education on the state of social stratification of the Chinese population // *Medicine. Sociology. Philosophy. Applied research. № 1. 2023. - C. 62-64*);

- Based on the analysis of different theoretical approaches, it focused on education as a factor influencing social stratification and revealed the impact of inequality on the development of education in the social structure of modern China, including the impact of three major factors such as: geographical inequality between regions, differences between rich and poor families, differences between universities, and the role of social problems such as the deficit of family cultural capital, the imbalance between urban and rural development (See: 129. Zhang Haopeng. Differentiation of living standards of urban and rural population of China: aspects of social stratification // *Socio-humanitarian knowledge. № 1. 2023. - C. 46-49*);

- It is shown that in the conditions of the influence of educational inequality on the structure of social stratification of modern China, the priority reason for this is not so much the shortcomings of the education system itself, but the fact that the modern social structure of China does not sufficiently combine the balance of political, economic and other means. The study of educational inequality opens up opportunities not only to study but also to solve the problems of social inequality (See: 128. Zhang Haopeng. Realisation of instruments for reducing social inequality in the economic, political and cultural spheres of society // *Sociology, No. 1. 2023. - C. 154-158*).

The main points put forward for defence:

1. Sociologists have used the ideas, models and concepts they have developed to describe the subtleties of social stratification in society throughout history. The following methodological approaches to the study of social stratification can be distinguished: (materialist) Marxism, Weberianism (understanding sociology), neo- and post-Marxism, neo-Weberianism, as well as theoretical approaches presented in the works of P.A. Sorokin, O. Duncan, J. Kelly, J. Goldthorpe, G. Bravermann, and others. The essence of the author's

(or multidisciplinary) integrated approach and new models consists in adding the explanatory potentials of the above approaches in studying and revealing the sociodynamics of complex processes in the structure of social stratification of Chinese society. Along with the Marxist approach, Chinese sociologists (Bian Yanjie, Song Liping, Lu Xueyi, Li Lulu, Li Qiang, Li Peilin, Li Chunlin, etc.) use methodological provisions of modern conflictology, structural-functional methodology and other paradigms. At the same time, political shifts and social transformations in China influence the development of social stratification ideas. These methods better reflect the dynamic nature of complex social processes closely related to socio-economic reality and changes in China.

2. In the years between the establishment of New China (1949) and the era of reform and opening up, the evolution of the structure of social stratification went through two stages of development: 1949-1956, 1956-1978. After these phases, with the launching of Deng Xiaoping's systemic reforms in 1978, a feature of the mainstream models of Chinese social stratification research was expressed in a comprehensive approach to the study of this issue. In particular, the "ten major social strata" and the "inverted T-shape" model were identified, which showed that, firstly, the distribution of public resources on the basis of the market economy has become uneven, and, secondly, that this unevenness is constantly intensifying and increasing the scale of social inequality (especially in comparison with the situation at the beginning of economic reforms). The analysis of the historical dynamics and features of China's social structure also showed that since the founding of the CHN, Chinese social stratification and social structure have gone through several stages of dynamic growth. Social differences at each level have been linked to ongoing political and historical developments. For example, studies have shown that China's special household registration scheme (*hukou*) now divides the country into two subsystems, creating urban-rural differences in various aspects. After 1978, as a result of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, China's social structure underwent significant changes in terms of demographic and family transformation, regional structural development, as well as citizens' ownership of material goods, and the development of all forms and levels of education.

3. In the half century since Deng Xiaoping's reform era, China's social sphere has undergone significant changes and achieved remarkable success in secondary and higher education. We are talking about the introduction of compulsory nine-year education, the establishment of key national universities, resulting in the enrolment rate of college and

university applicants and students rising from 12.5% in 2000 to 51.6% in 2019, etc. But at the same time, only less than 20 per cent of students studying in Chinese universities come from rural and less developed areas of the country. This indicates the existence of social inequality within the current Chinese higher education institution. The complexity of the educational process and uncertainty, as well as unequal access to education for different groups of people, have objectively contributed to trends of increasing social stratification. Thus, *education has largely become a factor in reproducing social stratification and social inequality.*

4. The problem of educational inequality in China is manifested in three main areas: *inequality between regions, inequality in education due to income inequality, and inequality in the distribution of educational resources.* As for *regional inequality*, it is mainly based on the inequality in education between urban and rural areas and the inequality in access to education between developed and less developed regions. *Income inequality*, on the other hand, leads to inequality in access to education between children from poor and rich families. And, even after receiving an education of almost equal quality, it is not always possible for the poor to achieve upward social class mobility, or at least to avoid downward mobility of the original class. The *imbalance* in the distribution of resources among different universities in China is mainly reflected in the public expenditure on education for different universities in different regions of the country, as well as in the quality of teaching, the construction of basic educational institutions and the level of teacher training of these different universities.

5. *The main factors of educational inequality in China are differences in family cultural capital and imbalance in the distribution of social capital and educational resources.* Firstly, in families that are lower strata in origin, on the one hand, parents do not pay much attention to their children's education. On the other hand, in conditions of very fierce competition for quality educational resources, students from poor families do not have an initial advantage in obtaining an education equal to that which children from affluent families can expect. Secondly, the imbalance in the distribution of educational resources between different regions and universities, the unfair practice of admitting and selecting talents in college entrance examinations, and the inequality of educational and scientific potential of universities reduce the chances of students from the lower and even middle strata of society to receive quality education.

6. In seeking solutions to the existing problem of educational inequality in China, the following circumstances should be taken into account: first, the need to strengthen the propaganda of the importance of education, including qualitatively improving the education of poor children, filling the lack of cultural capital in the family and *interrupting the intergenerational transmission of educational poverty*. Secondly, the need to strengthen policy control and government participation in order to broaden the scope of mobility of high-quality educational resources, change the existing distribution structure of educational resources, and eliminate existing regional and urban-rural inequalities. Third, there is a need to strengthen the mechanism of "integrating production and vocational training" and strengthen the position of vocational education in China's education system, including the teaching of new academic disciplines that meet the needs of the country's current development.

Chapter 1. Historical background, factors and stages of formation of social stratification of modern Chinese society

1.1. Social stratification and methodological foundations of its study in Chinese sociology

The founder of the theory of social stratification P.A. Sorokin gave the following definition of this concept: "Social stratification is the differentiation of some aggregate of people into classes in a hierarchical-subordinate rank. It finds expression in the existence of higher and lower strata. Its basis and essence - in the unequal distribution of rights and privileges, responsibilities and duties, the presence or absence of social values, power and influence among the members of a community" [99; p. 302].

According to another classic of modern sociology, E. Giddens, "social stratification can be defined as "structured differences between groups of people. Societies consist of layers arranged in a hierarchical order, with the privileged closer to the top and the unprivileged at the bottom" [18; p. 151]. P. Sztompka gives a similar definition, defining social stratification (stratification) as "a hierarchy of social groups with greater or lesser access to some socially valuable good: wealth, power, prestige, education" [139; p. 39].

Social stratification is one of the most important sociological concepts, which reflects not just the stratification of society (from Latin stratum - layer) and differences in the social status of people, but the *real differentiation of* a certain population of people into classes and other strata in a hierarchical-subordinate rank, expressed in the unequal distribution of property, income, power of influence, education and other tangible and intangible benefits among them. A stratum is formed by members of a society united by one or more stratification criteria, as well as by common status characteristics. As a result of this differentiation, elementary, cumulative and conglomerative strata appear. Stratification, meaning the layer-by-layer structure of any society and is the basis of existing social inequality. In this sense, stratification can be regarded as a structured system of social inequality.

Sociologists explain the existence and causes of social stratification in different ways, considering it as a multifaceted, hierarchically organised social environment. For example, J. Homans in his theory of social exchange explained social inequality by the non-equivalent nature of the exchange of the results of human activity [see: 147]. It is proposed

to use various factors and standards to determine whether a person belongs to a certain socio-economic stratum. P.A. Sorokin identified three categories of criteria of social stratification: 1) political (influence and power), 2) economic (money and wealth) and 3) professional (skills, professional talents, occupation of social positions) [see: 100; p. 102]. T. Parsons pointed out three groups of signs of social stratification: "qualitative characteristics of members of society, which they possess from birth (origin, family ties, sex and age, personal qualities, innate features, etc.), role characteristics, determined by the set of roles that an individual performs in society (education, profession, position, position, qualification, different types of labour activity, etc.), characteristics associated with the possession of material and spiritual values (wealth, property, production, etc.), characteristics related to the possession of material and spiritual values (wealth, property, property, etc.), characteristics related to the possession of material and spiritual values (wealth, property, production, etc.), characteristics related to the possession of material and spiritual values, etc.). [see: 88; pp. 599-632].

Based on the above-mentioned criteria, modern sociology identifies the following main aspects (dimensions) of social stratification: possession of material goods (income, wealth), power, education, prestige [see, e.g., 139, pp. 348-354]. The most significant indicator of social stratification is the general socio-economic position of the group, which is influenced by a number of factors. Sociologists have developed many criteria for distinguishing social strata. Thus, B. Barber identified six indicators: "1. prestige, profession, power and authority, 2. income or wealth, 3. education or knowledge, 4. religious or ritual purity, 5. position of relatives, 6. ethnicity (ethnicity)" [see: 84; p. 256]. Another point of view was held by A. Touraine, who believed that "at present, the ranking of social positions is conducted not so much in relation to property, prestige, power, ethnic community, as in relation to access to information, in connection with which the dominant position is now occupied by those who possess the largest amount of knowledge and information" [see: 47; p. 256]. [see: 47; p. 112].

In modern sociology, there are several classification schemes used to identify the fundamental or structural elements of social stratification. The middle class makes up 60-80% of the population of industrialised civilisations, the lower class - 13-35%, and the elite - about 5-7%. Representatives of the upper class are people who are at the top of the social scale in terms of wealth, influence, prestige, education, etc. They include prominent

representatives of the intellectual and creative community, influential social leaders and politicians, representatives of the highest levels of the armed forces, well-known businessmen, bankers, heads of well-known corporations.

The middle class includes owners of medium and small enterprises, managers, civil servants, military personnel, financial specialists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, technicians, highly skilled workers, farmers and a number of other groups. Most sociologists believe that the middle class acts as a kind of social pillar of society, supporting its viability and stability. Thus, A. Toynbee noted that "modern Western civilisation is first of all the civilisation of the middle class: Western society became modern after it managed to create a numerous and competent middle class" [cited in: 13; p. 112].

The underclass consists of various groups of people, including the homeless, beggars and the unemployed, as well as low-paid workers doing predominantly unskilled, physically demanding manual labour.

Often sociologists make more subtle divisions within each class of social strata. The American sociologist and anthropologist W. L. Warner, in his five-volume study *Yankee City*, identified six classes:

- the upper upper class (the elite of society, people with very high income, inherited wealth, quality education);
- lower upper class (nouveau riche, professionals who receive a very high income from their activities);
- upper middle class (professionals, managers, businessmen, employees with a sufficiently high level of income);
- lower middle class ("white collar" clerks, middle and lower level government officials, skilled workers);
- upper lower class (workers engaged in predominantly physical labour);
- the lower underclass (the chronically unemployed, those without secondary education and permanent income, declassified elements)" [See: 3; p. 86-97].

There are different schemes of social stratification. For example, sociologists may consider the working class to be a distinct social class located between the middle and lower classes. Some classify highly skilled workers as lower middle class. Some argue that the working class is divided into two strata: upper and lower, and the middle class into three strata: middle, upper and lower. Despite the many variations, they all ultimately boil

down to the same thing: the non-mainstream classes consist of strata or layers within one of the three main socio-economic classes of the modern era: rich, poor or affluent.

Thus, social stratification creates boundaries between people, which are manifested in their social life as a ranking of their status positions in a hierarchical-subordinate order within various types of activities. Such ranking is objectively necessary to motivate individuals to fulfil their social duties more successfully.

In studies of China's social stratification conducted by Chinese sociologists, the most common method, as well as the methodological basis, is the *class theory of Marxism*. Although K. Marx himself never used the term "stratification", his ideas about the class structure of society and social classes played a huge role in shaping modern ideas about the system of social stratification.

Marxist sociology assumes that the basic function of social organisation is to satisfy the basic human needs for food, clothing and shelter. Consequently, the production system is the nucleus around which other elements of society are organised. The Marxist definition of social class derives from the primacy of material production, within which large groups of representatives of physical and other types of labour have an identical relation to the means of production (owning or not owning them), occupy a qualitatively definite place in the system of social production and play a specific role in organising labour and ensuring the processes of exchanging its results. Therefore, a social class is formed within any set of persons who play the same role in production processes. In addition, Marx considered class both objectively and subjectively. The fulfilment of objective conditions alone does not entitle any social group to be regarded as a social class. Only when a group develops *für-sich* attitude or class consciousness does it become a truly social class. Thus, as researchers note: "Marx based his definition of class on two criteria: (a) economic status and (b) class consciousness among those who belong to the same or close economic status" [4; p. 57].

According to classical Marxism, the successive social and economic formations of slave-holding, ancient, Asian feudal and capitalist (entrepreneurial) socio-economic formations, which have succeeded each other throughout the historical evolution of mankind, not only gave rise to many different social classes and other strata, but also necessarily created two main antagonistic classes - the ruling class of exploiters (slave-owners, feudal lords, bourgeoisie, etc.) and the oppressed classes of exploited (slaves, serfs,

proletarians, etc.), which were constantly in class struggle with each other.) and the oppressed classes of the exploited (slaves, serfs, proletarians, etc.), which were constantly in class struggle with each other. Besides them there were also non-mainstream classes - these were, as a rule, artisans, small traders, peasants, etc., i.e. those who produced only for themselves, using no other labour force than their own.

The initial and fundamental criterion of society differentiation for K. Marx was the ownership of property. Therefore, the priority social class structure of society was reduced to two antagonist classes: those who owned the means of production (slave owners, feudal lords, bourgeoisie) and those who did not own such property (slaves, serfs, proletarians). Other social groups (e.g. intellectuals, bureaucrats, and so on) were regarded as intermediate levels (strata) between classes or as intra-class social groups.

Thus, the concept of social class began to be actively used in the theories of society in the 18th - 19th centuries, i.e. during the formation of modern industrial civilisation in the countries of Western Europe. Marx first encountered this word in the writings of Restoration-era philosophers such as F. Guizot and O. Minier, who used it to characterise the struggle of different social classes during the Great French Revolution. Marx distinguished between the growing classes of the new social order and clarified the economic basis of class contradictions, which is what makes it so valuable.

The Marxist notion of social classes as a supporting structure of the social structure of society is challenged in non-Marxist Western social science by various hypotheses of social stratification. Their creators argue that the idea of classes is quite relevant for considering the social design of past social orders, including modern capitalist society. However, it does not work in the modern postmodern social system on the grounds that in this society, due to widespread corporatisation, property relations have become unclear and lost their certainty. Therefore, from the point of view of the representatives of neo-Marxism, "the idea of "class" should be displaced by the idea of "strata", and the hypothesis of social class construction of society should be displaced by the theory of social stratification" [83; p. 82].

The strong influence of Marxist class theory on the study of social stratification in China is explained by the conditioning of the economic situation by class affiliation. In most cases, the economic situation is determined by the level of income and the amount of property, not only by the ownership of the means of production. It is this conditionality

that Chinese scholars investigate particularly closely and extensively. In addition, the study of social stratification in China, along with Marxist class theory, has been significantly influenced by other sociological concepts and methods, among them M.K. Gorshkov and Li Peilin. Gorshkov and Li Peilin highlighted the following:

- "1. M. Weber's traditional method of identifying status groups;
2. measurement of socio-economic status (O. Duncan, J. Kelly);
3. The theory of social stratification of professional qualifications (J. Goldthorpe);
4. The concept of social stratification of "New Marxism" (E.O. Wright);
5. New theory of market transition (I. Selenyi, M. Burawoy);
6. The theory of social reproduction (P. Bourdieu)" [see: 96; p. 28-33].

1. M. Weber's traditional method of identifying status groups. In Weber's analysis, all people with similar economic interests and economic power belong to the same class. His position is close to Marx's ideas, but not in all respects. Under the economic factor Weber understood not only the relations of production but also the relations formed in the market. Thus, he expanded Marx's concept: "his model of stratification consisted of more than two antagonistic economic classes. At the same time, he showed that economic antagonisms between classes need not have fatal consequences for one particular class (in contrast to Marx's point of view)" [47; p. 97]. M. Weber did not accept the Marxist concept of two classes divided into those who own the means of production and those who do not. Instead, he analysed from an economic point of view the means by which economic power could be obtained. For example, ownership of the means of production could lead to monopoly or control over the sale of economic goods as well as their production. Thus, this type of ownership becomes a kind of economic power. Ownership can also lead to the accumulation of property. In addition, property can also mean the ability to take advantage of education to improve one's economic and social status. Weber believed that each of these aspects could ideally be ranked in terms of the power that each gives and that the class structure of society could be determined.

Weber's approach to stratification was based on two ideas. Firstly, he started from the situation that Marx identified, namely that social stratification is an organised manifestation of unequal power in society. Secondly, although this generalisation is universal, he, like Marx, focused on industrial societies and capitalism in particular to analyse social stratification. Weber limited his analysis to institutionalised power, that is,

power that can be exercised in a legitimate and regular manner. This excludes from the discussion any illegitimate power, such as criminal prosecution and piracy, or any abuse of power by illegal means. For analytical purposes, Weber divides institutionalised power into three spheres of activity - economic, social and political. Within these three spheres, power is expressed in terms of class, status and party respectively. He then analysed the characteristics of power within each of these spheres, describing a system of stratification. It should be noted that the above categorisation given by Weber is not static: there is interaction and tension between the spheres highlighted.

Weber was more pessimistic than Marx about the likelihood of one economic class (the proletariat) winning over another (the bourgeoisie). Marx assumed that the market nature of capitalism could provide the necessary preconditions, consciousness and organisation for a social movement. Weber argued that this was impossible because the market creates only temporary alliances that dissolve as soon as immediate economic gain is achieved. Classes could find a basis for common action; but this basis could not be merely economic. Weber believed "that Marx's error lay in his assumption that economic forces are more or less automatically transformed into social forces" [82; p. 43].

The second, along with economic, sphere of power is social. Weber used the term "status" to refer to the different strata in this sphere. All persons who enjoy the same honour or prestige in the eyes of society and lead the same way of life usually belong to the same status group. Thus, status is judged by the standards accepted in the community. While class is a form of impersonal economic status, status is related to personal evaluations. In addition to lifestyle and patterns of taste and consumption, levels of education, kinship, and occupation are also used as a basis for judging the status of people in a society. There is usually a correlation of these different types of ranking to establish the resulting status of a person. Thus, Weber, unlike Marx, took a multi-dimensional approach to stratification. It can reasonably be argued "that part of the assessment of status depends on economic criteria. The maintenance of a way of life obviously depends on money" [82; p. 60]. However, there are advantages in separating class and status as the distinction between the two can clarify the situation. For example, the *nouveau riche* are those who have become rich recently but whose aspirations for high status are not immediately realised. On the other hand, there are high-status elites who may lack money or economic power, as in the case of bankrupt aristocrats or high-caste Brahmins with very low incomes. In other words,

the two dimensions of class (measured only in economic terms) and status do measure different aspects of stratification.

Political power is the last of the three dimensions proposed by M. Weber. He developed this aspect of stratified power the least and treated it mainly as a residual category. Political power can reflect social and economic power, there is a clear tendency of individuals to convert their power in one sphere into commensurate power in other spheres. Thus, wealthy individuals seek status and political power. Those who hold high office seek political influence. Politicians too are interested in status and economic power. However, there are advantages in separating these three spheres analytically. As an illustration, consider the case where the three spheres exist in tension. During the period of early capitalism, each of the three spheres of power was located in a different stratum of the population. The descendants of the former feudal aristocracy were able to maintain their status power. In the transitional society, when all other traditions were discarded, the status tradition seemed to remain more or less intact. Economic power was concentrated in the hands of the new bourgeoisie, which gained, in Marxist terms, 'ownership of the new means of production.' Political power, however, was less localised and more dispersed, as it was divided between the old aristocracy and the new claimants to power. As capitalism developed, the separation of these three spheres of power created tensions" [83; p. 303]. For example, business could not be conducted independently of the government, which became the main factor in the economic sphere. Therefore, economic elites had to cooperate more closely with political elites. Moreover, there was a tendency among people to translate their position in one power hierarchy to a comparable position in another power hierarchy. Thus, the economic and political elites tended to realise a comparable position in the status hierarchy. Thus, there was a tendency for the three elite groups to merge.

A comparison of "economic classes" (Marx) and "status groups" (Weber) shows the following. The basis of social class is indisputably economic. These are the characteristic groups of industrial societies that have developed since the seventeenth century. Difficulties arise, however, when attempting to specify the number of social classes or to define their exact membership. Nevertheless, most sociologists recognise the existence of an upper class (owning or controlling most of society's resources), a working class (representing industrial wage earners employed in the working professions) and a 'middle class'. In modern industrial societies, social classes cannot be distinguished on economic

grounds alone. The picture of social stratification is complicated by the presence of status groups along with social classes. Status groups are distinguished, among other things, by the "lifestyle" of the people who make up these groups, while social classes are distinguished by their attitude to the production and acquisition of goods. The difficulty in drawing a coherent picture of social stratification in Western industrialised societies arises from the fact that these societies have experienced a real weakening, though not the disappearance, of class distinctions and class conflicts. As industrialisation has greatly improved the economic position of the working class, the sharp distinction between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' has lost its significance in Western societies in the sense that the 'have-nots' have access to many of the goods of life that were not available in the pre-industrial period, namely good food, decent clothing, opportunities for schooling, higher education, health care, etc. In this context, the differences between social classes are based primarily on people's "lifestyles" defined by several criteria that society considers symbols of honour and prestige. These social classes are more appropriately called status groups. A characteristic feature of these status groups is that the relations between them are relations of competition and rivalry rather than conflict, as K. Marx assumed.

Chinese sociologists applying Weber's theory of status groups to the study of social stratification in China believe that while property, wealth and ownership of the means of production are undoubtedly important criteria in determining a person's social rank, they are not the only ones when considering different institutional and organisational structures. The importance of the economic component in determining an individual's social rank varies. In China before and even after 1978, there were many other elements that determined people's social rank because there was little or no private capital income and little differentiation in labour income. For example, administrative level, ownership status, place of residence (rural or urban) all had significant implications for China's organisational structure. Authority, status, power, income, education level and other factors emerged as the most influential factors in analysing the interrelationship of factors affecting the characteristics of the nine status groups in China in the late 1980s. With these factors, one can determine one's social status with an accuracy of 70%. In addition, the correlation coefficients of authority, status and power exceed 0.62.

2. *Measuring socio-economic status:* When comparing the experience of several states with a relatively stable social structure, a certain correlation is observed between the factors

affecting a person's position in society, so for convenience the assessment system can be validated with a number of indicators of significance. Social status is assessed by professional prestige, income and level of education. O. Duncan's Socio-Economic Indicator System (SEI) and J. Kelly's International Socio-Economic Measurement Scale (ISESS) are two examples of systems using this technique of combining objective and subjective indicators. D. Treiman emphasises the indicator of professional status. He presented the results of a study comparing 60 states in the world. The study produced results that, with a coefficient of similarity ranging from 0.8 to 0.9, were comparable to the results of Duncan and Kelly's sophisticated analysis of socio-economic variables. In 1993, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences conducted a study known as the China Urban and Rural Household Survey, which surveyed 3,000 registered residents from ten different cities and counties in China. Administrative level and ownership status have a significant impact on the prestige ranking of occupations, but there is a significant discrepancy between the prestige ranking and income ranking, according to the results of the fourth study of Chinese occupational standards classification and cross-national comparison of occupational classifications in the ranking table.

3. *The theory of social stratification by professional qualifications* is also popular among a number of researchers studying the stratification system of the Chinese society. Its creator J. Goldthorpe adhered to the point of view "that following social development, the role of professional qualifications in social stratification becomes more and more important" [27; p. 394]. In the second half of the XX century in the professional structure of the most developed Western countries there appeared a tendency to strengthen stratification, because the share of persons engaged in physical labour is decreasing, and the share of persons engaged in mental labour is increasing. The scientist believes that "the analysis of the structure of social stratification consists in finding out the place occupied by people in the labour market and in production units, that is, finding out their labour relations, and the place of labour relations in the study of social stratification is extremely important" [27; p. 394]. He classified all workers into seven classes using data from studies conducted between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s: a class of agricultural workers; a class of petty bourgeoisie; a class of service workers; a class of skilled workers; a class of lower-level technical workers; a class of semi-skilled and unskilled physical labourers; and a class of workers performing routine non-physical labour. The term "service class" as used

by him is different from the term "service workers". It includes professionals such as managers, supervisors, superintendents, administrative staff and skilled labourers. These fit into Goldthorpe's idea of the upper middle class. He then expanded the classification to eleven classes based on a seven-member structure. "The first class are high-level professionals, administrators, managers, and large proprietors; the second class are lower-skilled professionals, middle-level managers, under whose authority are wage workers engaged in non-physical labour; the third (a) class are high-level workers in routine non-physical labour; the third (b) class are low-level workers in routine non-physical labour; the fourth (a) class are small private proprietors who use wage labour; the fourth (b) class are small private proprietors who do not use [27; p. 398].

4. *the "New Marxism" theory of social stratification.* Its author E.O. Wright is an American sociologist, the main representative of the school of new (analytical) Marxism in the field of Western social stratification. He considers "the main criterion for the separation of classes to be the control of capital. This type of control over specific assets in trading relationships leads people to pursue one strategy or another. These strategies, in turn, determine the outcomes of market transactions. Owners of means of production use their capital assets, non-owners of means of production use organisational assets of different degrees or technical/specialised assets" [92; p. 338]. Wright divides workers into twelve classes: "capitalists; small entrepreneurs; petty bourgeoisie; expert managers; expert managers; expert non-managers (the expert community); managers who are not fully accredited, i.e., officially recognised and approved (in the form of admission or referral) of their qualifications; managers who are not fully accredited; workers who are not fully accredited; non-accredited managers; managers who are not accredited, and proletarians" [92; p. 338]. These classes represent a kind of matrix model. The vertical of owners shows differences in ownership of means of production; the vertical of non-owners shows differences in attitudes towards organisational means, and the horizontal of non-owners shows differences in attitudes towards technical specialised assets. Wright's main idea regarding the stratification of Chinese society is "that the birth of the working class is the result of the proletarianisation of China, because of which some middle class people were continuously absorbed by the working class, and in the employment structure any tendency to advancement met an obstacle" [92; p. 409]. A number of Chinese sociologists use Wright's theory to analyse their country's experience.

5. *"New theory of transition to the market"*. Among the scientists of this school is the American sociologist I. Selenyi, who developed the theory of transition to the market, analysing the transition to the market system in the era of cardinal changes in the former USSR and Eastern Europe. He tried to prove that the influence of equal market power of monopolies could be eliminated at the stage of social redistribution in the transition to a market society. However, this point of view encountered practical difficulties. Among the many proponents of this idea is the neo-Marxist M. Burawoy. In his opinion, significant shifts in the economies of Eastern Europe and the former USSR represent "the *second* great transformation" in terms of K. Polanyi's thesis of "the great transformation". Polanyi's thesis of the "great transformation". Some scholars argue that the overlap of two major Chinese revolutions that gave birth to the working class influenced the overall socio-economic structure of the country.

6. *P. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction*. A prominent representative of French poststructuralism, P. Bourdieu distinguished between the concepts of "strata" and "class". In fact, in his opinion, not everything depends on a person's financial or professional status. Consumer preferences are an important factor of social stratification. Social relations and cultural products created by people are an objective force that conditions human behaviour and leads to "the fact that socio-cultural production becomes a process that exceeds individual expectations, choices and opinions" [5; p. 6]. The phrase "The classifier classifies by the method of classification", which is attributed to P. Bourdieu, is well-known. The sociologist, having analysed people's preferences in food, clothes, housing, shops, clinics, furniture, vehicles and even in plays, music, literature, pets, flowers and children's toys. came to the conclusion that taste preferences are at the heart of the system of social stratification, People believe that the idea that education promotes equality in the social structure is wrong. This is evidenced by studies conducted on the education system. The notion that "if the father is rich, the son is rich" continues to be a cornerstone of social reproduction in France. Chinese scholars also study social stratification through the prism of the idea of social reproduction, in particular, they investigate educational inequality [see Ch. 2 of the thesis for more details]. Since the beginning of the 21st century, studies of social stratification in Chinese society have relied mainly on a nationwide sample, which is due to the increase in funding for scientific research on Chinese society and the

development of statistical methods. Nevertheless, qualitative research still remains the basis for deciphering and analysing the results.

1.2. Periodisation of the systemic transformation of CHN social stratification (1949-1956 and 1956-1978).

On the first of October 1949, China's history was marked by the founding of the People's Republic of China. After the monarchical form of government that had prevailed for many centuries, democratic reforms began in the country. A new leader came to power in China - Mao Zedong, who established a new state and economic system. "Thus the country began to operate a planned economy, which was organised on the Soviet model, where power was concentrated in the public sector and the economy followed a five-year development plan. By nature, Chinese society was an agrarian society in the process of industrialisation. This character determined the ideology of China and also influenced social stratification, social organisation, politics, economy, urbanisation, social security, education, family, social mobility, population and environment, social control, social change, international status and foreign policy" [25; p. 29].

Following the economic sphere, the social sphere also underwent certain transformations during this period, such as the transition to a socialist structure. The leading position in the social-political hierarchy was taken by Mao Zedong, Chairman of the People's Council, head of the CPC and the Government of the People's Republic of China. The Communist Party of China began to play a particularly important role in the life of the country.

Few doubt that the emergence of a new power and the birth of a new social order would have a significant impact on the organisation of Chinese society. Thus, three stages of transition to social stratification and related changes took place after the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

The years 1949 and 1956 constituted the *first stage*. For a short period, Chinese society consisted of four classes: the national bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, peasantry and workers. After the end of the period of "communist re-education" in 1956, two main classes, the workers and peasants, appeared in the structure of Chinese society as a *single* stratification layer. This system continued to exist until 1978, the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's reform phase. China officially entered the third stage of openness and structural transformation in society. The transition to a market economy, industrialisation and

urbanisation led to the formation of a new social class structure and stratification system consisting of 10 main strata.

Thus, under the leadership of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China, considerable progress was made in the establishment of socialism between 1949 and 1956. The transformation that took place during this period affected all spheres of activity, thus contributing to the rapid economic recovery. At the same time, China's rapprochement with the USSR took place, resulting in a complete change in the country's political vector, which became oriented primarily towards the Soviet model of development. The changes in the political course were expressed, firstly, in strengthening the directive role of the CPC in the country's political power system, secondly, in the rejection of private property and the market system, and thirdly, in the denationalisation of property in urban and rural areas.

The reform in the agrarian sector had a significant impact on the change of socio-economic strata in China. It eliminated landowners and the rural bourgeoisie. The peasants, having received the estates of rich landowners, although they did not dominate the society of the time, still constituted the majority. Along with the national and petty bourgeoisie, there were other classes of labourers. Chinese society was structured by the national capitalist class, workers, peasants and petty bourgeoisie [see: 27; p. 56]. In the era of socio-economic upheaval, the national working class (including civil servants) made up 3.3 per cent of the population, the peasantry 88.1 per cent, and the capitalist class 0.4 per cent. The peasantry, which constituted less than 12 per cent of the total population, formed the basis of the pyramidal socio-economic system in which the bulk of the people lived. This socio-economic structure indicated that China's national industry was in its infancy and was dominated by small peasant households.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party proclaimed the political course of "Combining Public and Personal Interests". The working class of the People's Republic of China, which at this stage of the country's socio-economic growth, formed the backbone of the ruling party and figured prominently in politics. Significant changes in the social order were brought about by the working class of the CHN, which, at this stage of the country's socio-economic growth, formed the backbone of the ruling party and held a great deal of political authority. It is noteworthy that the old bourgeoisie sharply lowered its social status despite the fact that it possessed huge financial

resources. Agrarian reform raised the social position of the peasants and gave them access to a certain amount of land, which allowed them to give political support to the working class. In addition, at this time there was a significant revitalisation of the state economy and unemployment was virtually eliminated.

With the establishment of New China, a new historical era in the country's economic development began with initiatives such as mass production, co-operatives and major land reform. At the same time, people did not hold out much hope for solving the problems that existed in the economy and social life, as the country's economic development was at a low level due to the widespread destruction caused by the war. At this time, the Chinese Communist Party had already established certain distinctions between classes, but did not yet have a unified standard to distinguish between different social levels. Economically, the Party and the government defined social classes mainly by income levels. Culturally, the Party established the degree of cultural diversity as a criterion for determining social status in the early stages of nation formation. Zhang Wanli writes that "With the reform of the national economic system and the introduction of the rural land contracting system, the state began to make certain adjustments in the lives of the various social classes. One of the most important reforms was the abolition of the people's commune system and the transformation of all farmers in the country into separate accounting units" [see: 122; p. 27]. Because of the large number of artisanal and non-agricultural workers in the agricultural production sector, the state changed the status of artisans or non-agricultural workers by excluding them from the agricultural production sector and dividing the social strata into three classes. Wu Peng Sen notes that "the first is the urban industrial and commercial class, consisting of people engaged in various industrial, commercial and other service activities. This group did not constitute a large proportion of the total population of the society. The second group was the industrial labourers: this group consisted of industrial workers, urban artisans and people of other non-economic occupations who were engaged in various manufacturing activities, industrial and commercial operations. The third group was the peasantry: this class constituted the largest proportion of the total population of society in the early years of the founding of New China" [108; p. 17].

An analysis of the three social strata mentioned above demonstrates that, despite the establishment of New China, there was still considerable social division. The level of organisation of social classes was evolving. The degree and characteristics of social

division at this time were manifested in many areas and dimensions, including the growing economic gap between the affluent and the poor, the sharp inequality of social classes, the extreme inequality in cultural level, literacy, etc. After China began the large-scale construction of socialism after 1950, the inequality between different social groups became even more pronounced. At this time, social stratification gradually shifted to categorisation based on social relationships, personal income and wealth, and employment in different places. After significant progress in nation-building, China has entered a new era marked by a change in the pattern of social stratification.

In the early years after the establishment of New China, individuals and organisations were at a relative disadvantage due to a number of circumstances that affected the traditional social structure. In response, the Communist Party of China decided to support social development in line with the course of events. After the establishment of New China, the CPC launched a major socialist reform campaign and achieved remarkable success in this area. The country's economy began to develop on a large scale. Under these historical conditions, people began to pay more attention to their own rights and interests and made more demands on material life and spiritual culture. People, especially at the time of the "Cultural Revolution¹", began to question whether their situation was in line with the interests of society as a whole. Along with changes in the social structure, social stratification increased at the same time: "the period between the founding of New China and the reform was a time when Chinese society was moving from traditional to modern social relations, from closed to open, from traditional culture to modern, from agricultural to industrial era" [131; p. 64].

During the Maoism era, two distinctive features of social stratification of Chinese society became apparent: "first: economic and social differences within different spheres became more obvious; second: social differentiation in its development passed certain stages" [37; p. 35]. The division of strata during Mao's rule was clearly pronounced. Age, level of education, gender and ethnicity were the characteristics that determined class stratification. By age, people were divided into the young, middle-aged and old; by education level, into those with primary, secondary and higher education (including

¹ "The Cultural Revolution: known as the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', took place from May 1966 to October 1976. It was a civil unrest that was wrongly started by the leaders and exploited by counter-revolutionary groups, causing serious disasters to the Party, the country and people of all nationalities, and leaving behind extremely painful lessons." [see: 26]

university degrees), as well as master's degrees and above; by ethnicity, into Han Chinese and ethnic minorities; and by gender, into men and women. It should be noted, however, that socio-demographic gaps have become pronounced during this period, one of which is the low rate of women's participation in productive activities because "due to traditional cultural influences, there are fewer job opportunities for women than men in the labour market" [126; p. 69].

In terms of phases of transformation over time, a number of phases are distinguished: from 1950 to 1956, the initial phase of socialist construction; from 1958, the period of the "Great Leap²" and the "communisation of the people³" (1958-1966); between 1952 and 1966, the country underwent a period of transition to socialism; and between 1966 and 1977, a major change known as the "Cultural Revolution" took place and its completion.

In the *second of the* previously mentioned stages (1956 - 1978), China's social structure began to conform to a socialist society. After the liquidation of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, rural artisans and peasants formed people's communes, which later became part of the peasantry. Urban artisans joined the working class and were employed by state and communal enterprises. The result was a social structure in which two classes - workers and peasants - were the most important. Collective farms were given the right to own land during the socialist reform of 1956, but the new system of agrarian production did not raise the standard of living of the rural population. A system of lifetime residence registration, urban rationing based on employment or residence, and laws prohibiting rural people from moving to the city were introduced. "Within the Chinese peasantry until 1978," Wang Wehai notes, "no major social shifts took place, although peasants made up 67.4 per cent of the country's population" [6; p. 41]. All this suggests that despite the sharp growth in the number of the working class in the 1950s during the period of industrialisation, China remained an agricultural country until the era of reform and opening up. The share of workers in the population structure rose from 3.3 per cent in 1949 to 19.8 per cent in 1978, while the share of intellectuals grew with the development of science and education, peaking at 3.5 per cent in 1978.

² "Great Leap Forward": "refers to the mass movement carried out from 1958 to 1960 to achieve high industrial and agricultural production while building the country's economy. This movement was a serious setback for the party in exploring the path to socialism" [see: 156].

³ "Communisation of the People's Commune": "The Communisation of the People's Commune was an important decision taken by the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1950s to determine the path of socialist construction in China as part of the overall socialist construction." [see: 159].

When analysing the social class structure and social stratification, one cannot but mention a special system of regulating social relations in Chinese society. It is about "hukou" - household registration, which refers to the "household-based population management policy" pursued by the People's Republic of China with regard to its citizens. Li Quansheng writes of it as "a social system that emerged with the emergence of the state and involves the study, registration and declaration of the population of households within its jurisdiction through all levels of government, and the establishment, classification, zoning and compilation of households according to certain principles. It was the main basis for the ruler to levy and collect taxes, to administer and enforce laws, as well as an important way to moralise the peasants and restore their personal freedom" [55; p. 62].

The meaning of hukou is much broader than just household registration systems. It is a system of social governance in China, closely linked to the distribution of resources and benefits. It regulates many aspects of people's daily lives, including access to food, clothing, housing, transport, medical care, employment opportunities and social protection. A dual-identification system that separates residents into agricultural and non-agricultural hukou, and strict administrative regulation of the transfer of hukou between localities in accordance with the idea of hukou jurisdiction are its two main components. "China has had a strict household registration system for about 60 years, which makes the process of urbanisation in China quite different from most developed countries. Instead of a one-time flow of peasants to cities, as in developed countries, here there is a constant movement of people between urban and rural areas" [125; p. 111]. During its existence, the hukou system has undergone a number of reforms, including the reform of hukou in small towns in the mid-1980s, the trial introduction of the resident ID card system, the sale of hukou in the 1990s to "convert peasants to non-permanent residents" of regions, etc. An increasing number of people from rural areas and small towns have started to move to large and medium-sized cities, especially in the context of market transition. There they work as self-employed, wage earners, migrant labourers and temporary workers. They consider hukou to be obsolete as they can continue to live in cities without legally changing their hukou. On the other hand, since local hukou is necessary to access these institutional resources, there are instances where hukou is of particular importance, from career advancement to enrolling children in school. However, in contemporary Chinese culture, the possession of local hukou is seen as an obstacle rather than an advantage.

China has a long history of using household registration as a social institutional tool for social control. In the Xia and Shang dynasties, household record-keeping based on "lijia" (hukou) first began. "In "Liu shi chun qiu" ("Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu") it is stated that "all the people of the world were guarded by lijia, and if a lijia did not enter, many people left their homes" [77; p. 109]. A similar statement is contained in "Guoyu": "He who has a lijia among the people cannot be governed without a great official" [8; p. 39]. To improve the management of the peasantry, during the Warring States era and the Spring and Autumn period, the Qin state established a land registration system based on the "household register". The household register played a crucial role in society through data collection, statistics compilation and analysis of information based on "registers". After the unification of China, the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty issued a series of laws and regulations known as the "Six Laws", which laid out the "system of hypocrisy". Under the Han Dynasty, a strict household registration system was established with specific rules regarding the purposes, details, and methods of household registration that divided residents into military and civilian. The law on ninth-class officials was enacted during the Eastern Han Dynasty, and the household registration system was introduced during the Three Kingdoms period (3rd century CE). Registration and management of lands and dwellings, marriages and families were introduced under the two Jin dynasties. Under the Sui dynasty, the Household Law and household registration regulations were developed; under the Northern and Southern dynasties, the Miscellaneous Law, the Household Law, and decrees and regulations concerning household management were issued. Under the Tang Dynasty, laws establishing a nationwide household registration system were enacted. "The Ming Dynasty, under the influence of the "eight-legged examination", introduced a series of reforms, replacing the traditional imperial examination with a judicial examination (also known as the "examination") administered by the Ministry of Officials, clarifying the content and procedures of the examination. The examination was also a strict requirement for hiring civil servants" [77; p. 63].

As a cornerstone of traditional Chinese society, China's household registration system is in a sense a manifestation of state control mechanisms. Until the 1950s, China had a planned economy and a hierarchical management system separating rural and urban areas. The institutional separation between urban and rural areas was established in 1956 with the enactment of the "Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Household

Registration." Urban residents had to go to the public security bureau of their district or county to complete the necessary paperwork, while rural residents had to go to rural areas to obtain identity cards, transfer household registration, and perform other hukou management duties. They had to obtain a temporary residence permit if they could not make the place their permanent home. Under this system, the movement of people was regulated and controlled: the hukou and identity card served as forms of identification; the "temporary residence permit" served as a legal identity document for temporary stays, the "identity card" served as evidence of household registration, and the "hukou book" contained a complete record of each person, including their date of birth, gender, occupation, and place of origin. "Hukou" created objective social stratification by restricting the freedom of movement of many urban dwellers and tying peasants to their land. Problems of urban-rural mobility and social security underlie many of the issues generated by the household registration system, which exacerbates social injustice and deepens the divide between urban and rural communities.

According to this system, people belong to either urban or rural hukou. It is very difficult for Chinese peasants to move up or down the hukou status ladder and become members of other status groups. China's urban and rural areas are separated from each other by a rigid hukou system, resulting in a dualistic social structure in which the urban-rural split has become the most basic social stratification. This eventually leads to status inequality among the members of society. "These are the "status system", "unit system" and "administrative system", which overlap with each other and coexist within a certain systematisation" [53; p. 61].

The institutionalised segregation of all members of society into different social categories is called the "status system". Status rules are clearly defined, are usually not changed by an individual depending on his/her desires or even inherited and remain unchanged throughout his/her life, except in exceptional situations. Its social embodiment is the three unique social identities held by members of society: 'cadre (manager)', 'labourer', 'peasant'. "Differences in the acquisition of certain characteristics by each member of society are primarily reflected in his status, which makes the structure of social stratification and the realisation of the status of society members very 'rigid'" [7; p. 152]. Each member of Chinese society has a status that depends mainly on how he or she relates

to different levels and types of units, including the unit to which he or she belongs, as well as how unified its members are.

"Unification of social membership" means organising the members of society into "units" of different degrees, unifying society as a whole and unifying the distribution of social resources. A certain set of social chances and resources can be shared and obtained only by becoming a part of a "unit".

"Administrative system" means that "administrative relations and administrative status become the structural basis of people's social status and their relations in a sufficiently general social context, so that power becomes one of the important external signs marking people's social status" [51; p. 43]. Administrative positions and relations have spread throughout society as universal social interactions. The predominant characteristic of modern social hierarchy and structure is "the division and stratification of power according to functions and positions, as well as a system of management and organisation in which rules are the subject of administration" [49; p. 160].

Political and occupational stratification are just two examples of the several aspects that make up the idea of social stratification. Interclass mobility is closely related to each of these elements. Unfortunately, for a long time, Chinese studies on these topics have virtually ignored a crucial component - the existence of the hukou family registration system in society - in favour of focusing only on the study of economic and social growth. Clearly, a person's social class has a significant impact on his or her status. The level of education an individual has received is important for status. But along with this, one should not forget about the influence of such a factor as "hukou": "the household registration system is, in fact, an "implicit" social division of labour with strong discriminatory overtones" [113; p. 459]. The hukou system not only limits the freedom of choice, but also determines the status and lifestyle of a citizen within his social class.

Wang Weihai notes that "after the 1970s, with the acceleration of China's reform and opening up and the pace of development of the socialist market economy, the urban-rural gap gradually narrowed, and this trend became particularly evident after the 1980s". [cited in: 6; p. 37]. Thus, low wages and unequal property ownership are the two main reasons for the economic inequality that exists in China between urban and rural areas, as well as between other social classes. As an instrument of social control, the household registration system helps to promote social equality and regulate inequality in people's welfare. China's

household registration system has affected income inequality in different sectors and locations, and as a result, property and income inequality between different classes.

The hukou system has significantly affected the lifestyles of urban dwellers for three reasons: first, there is a significant difference between urban and rural dwellers, with agricultural hukou discriminated against and largely restricted; second, there is a significant difference in access to social security, health care and education between urban and rural areas; third, the majority of China's traditional population are urban dwellers and peasants who have their own homes and financial c Nevertheless, it must be recognised that the Chinese hukou system is an established and distinctive method of social control.

When discussing the reforms and development of China's modern political and social systems, it cannot be denied that the household registration system has had a great impact on changes in the structure of social stratification as well as changes in China's social stratification. Social stratification was created by the dualistic urban-rural system and then consolidated by the hukou system.

The household registration system in China served as the basis for many aspects of government administration, including tribute collection, food regulation, promotion of military service and the organisation of the army. It also served as a common repository of demographic data. The name and content of the household register changed over time, but its basic qualities remained the same: it was established by the state (ruler), with the household (including a specific organisation, family or individual) as the basic unit and the population or part of it as the basic content. In some periods it also encompassed land and property, and often had a wide range of other connotations and purposes relating to the home and the individual. In terms of institutional economics, the Chinese household registration system is not only a way for the state to track births, marriages, deaths and other demographic data within an 'embedded' institutional structure; it is also often used in conjunction with the land system and the hierarchy system to assign certain rights and responsibilities to specific household registers, and to specific individuals or groups within household registers. It is a kind of institutional organisation and structure that regulates individuals, their rights and their ability to use resources, among other things. The hukou system thus serves as the main centre of interaction between social control and individual rights, and changes in the household registration system partly reflect the logic of the development of these two concepts over time. China's longstanding household registration

system continues to have a significant impact on people's daily lives and individual rights even after thousands of years of existence. Given its long history as one of the most significant institutions in China, it is likely to continue to influence the development of Chinese society in the future.

1.3. Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the formation of a new structure of social stratification in Chinese society

Assessing Deng Xiaoping's reforms that began in the CHN in 1978, Rong Ning notes that they "accelerated the process of urbanisation and contributed to the transformation of society in different directions: the economy from a planned to a market economy, the society from agrarian to industrial" [33; p. 2]. These processes provided both horizontal and vertical mobility, led to the emergence of new social strata, such as private entrepreneurs and individual producers. As a result, a new structure of social stratification emerged. The process of its emergence went through *three stages*.

1. The family contracting system was introduced in the village as early as 1978, with workers' pay depending on their productivity. Peasants' earnings increased sharply at the same time as agricultural output grew. According to data, the net income of villagers increased by 165.9 per cent between 1978 and 1984. As a result of the reform, peasants gained access to various agricultural activities and eventually became a major source of new capital for certain layers of traders and producers. The economy during this period was based on state and collective forms of ownership, as the city had not yet begun a major transformation.

2. In 1985 - 1991, the pyramidal model of society stratification (the top represents the highest or richest stratum of the population and the base represents the majority of the population belonging to the social bottoms) went away⁴, new social strata appeared and the income gap between them grew. In urban public organisations, a contract system was introduced in 1985. New laws on labour contracts changed the status of workers and managers: workers became employees, while managers of state-owned enterprises gained autonomy and managerial status. The development of various types of private property led to the formation of a layer of enterprise owners, managers, specialists and technical staff.

⁴ In addition to the pyramidal model of stratification, society can also be structured using a diamond-shaped model in which the middle stratum represents the majority of people and the higher and lower social strata represent the minority.

In rural areas, the growth of township enterprises resulted in the emergence of a significant number of peasant labourers and entrepreneurs. In contrast to the first stage of reforms, the degree of economic inequality increased at this stage: the incomes of non-state workers exceeded the incomes of state employees, incomes in the state sector began to lag behind those in the high-tech sector, and in 1991 the income gap between urban and rural residents reached 2.5 times. The perception of injustice in the social distribution of money began to spread in public opinion.

3. In the period from 1992 to 1999, income inequality increased and the process of formation of a non-equilibrium social economy accelerated. The old system of social stratification based on power, human capital and economic resources was replaced by a new one. In March 1992, two events took place: first, after visiting special economic zones in southern China, Deng Xiaoping declared that "it is pointless to get involved in theoretical and conceptual disputes about the nature of reforms, in particular about which path to choose - capitalism or socialism" [29; p. 204]; second, the XIV Congress of the CPC was held, where the idea of developing a socialist market economy was justified, the implementation of which led to the redistribution of resources and the normalisation of social interactions. Reforms in the public sector also changed the socio-economic status of workers. The system of lifetime employment and benefits was abolished in 1995 with the introduction of the labour contract. The emphasis on productivity improvements and job cuts has contributed to unemployment, adding to the ranks of the urban poor and increasing tensions between employers and workers. Available data show that labour claims increased by 47.5% per year between 1993 and 1999 [see: 140; p. 32]. The distribution of resources among the regions was significantly affected by the economic and financial measures that the government took in order to strengthen the central power. The leadership of the district and volost began to own much less resources than the leadership of the centre, province and large cities. All this led to a decline in the incomes and living standards of peasants, as well as a serious discrepancy between the economic indicators of the city and the countryside ("in 1992-1999, the income of the urban population was 2.5-2.8 times higher than that of the rural population" [see: 69; p. 69]. [see: 69; p. 27].

The analysis and comparison of the population's income allowed a number of Chinese researchers to propose a model of stratification of society based on the income level as a marker or indicator. On the basis of income as the most important characteristic, as well as

taking into account the occupation, social status and reputation of representatives of different strata of the population, Ya. Xusheng divided Chinese society into five strata:

"1. The highest stratum, including top government officials, responsible officials of state banks or other central-level public institutions, and owners of large industrial enterprises.

2. The upper middle stratum, which includes part of the intelligentsia, owners of medium and small enterprises, wage earners in foreign enterprises, and employees of enterprises in basic industries.

3. The middle stratum, which includes professional technical and scientific workers, lawyers, university teachers, art and journalism workers, employees of state-owned enterprises, the lower stratum of employees of non-state-owned enterprises, the stratum of owners of medium-sized small enterprises, as well as individual traders and entrepreneurs.

4. The lower middle stratum, which included peasants, wage labourers, urban and rural, and workers.

5. The lowest stratum, including peasants without land, the unemployed and people who have lost their jobs". [see: 167].

However, the most accepted and shared by most Chinese researchers is the more detailed classification of social structure, which identifies ten social strata in Chinese society:

"(1) State and community leaders;

2) managerial employees;

3) private entrepreneurs;

4) specialists and technical staff;

5) office clerks;

6) Individual industrialists and traders;

7) trade and service workers;

8) production workers;

9) agricultural labourers;

10) Unemployed, unemployed and semi-unemployed in the city and village". [see: 151].

The first stratum consists of government leaders and top government officials, political party leaders, heads of commissions and ministries, heads of public administration bodies (including provincial, local, regional, and supreme governments), and heads of centrally

administered cities. Li Qiang notes that "Chinese social policy defines this stratum as the highest in the stratification structure, as the vanguard and organiser of the development of social and market economy" [151; p. 252].

Middle and senior managers working in medium and large enterprises constitute the *second layer*, comprising three main categories of managerial personnel: (1) middle and senior managers of mixed and foreign capital firms; (2) former founders or owners of large private enterprises (hiring started in the late 1990s when ownership and management were increasingly unbundled). (3) employees of the administrative and management apparatus of state-owned and collective enterprises who in the late 1990s upgraded their professional level and became professional managers.

The third layer consists of private entrepreneurs who earn income from capital investment. This layer, which was one of the most advanced productive forces and the driving force of the socialist market economy, developed in parallel with the socialist market economy and emerged as a result of the opening-up reforms.

The fourth stratum is made up of professional and technical experts from various organisations, including government agencies, political parties, national corporations, non-governmental enterprises and organisations. Most professionals have higher technical or humanitarian education, and their knowledge and experience meet the requirements of the specialised division of labour in modern social production. Most of them live in cities. At first this was a minor component of the stratification structure, but with modernisation and the development of science, education and technology, this stratum has become increasingly strong. It now accounts for 5.1 per cent of the population, but this figure fluctuates widely between rural and urban areas and areas with different rates of economic growth. As a result, the proportion of technicians and experts is 1.5-3 per cent in counties and 10-20 per cent in large and medium-sized cities.

The fifth layer consists of middle and lower management level workers in state and party organisations, as well as lower level managers and office workers in companies with different ownership structure. This layer is an important component of social mobility, as it represents the personnel reserve of the management system (managers, expert professionals, public figures, etc.). Workers and peasants can move up the social ladder through this intermediate layer, and this is its extremely important function. Although it makes up 4.8 per cent of modern Chinese society as a whole, it reaches 10-15 per cent in

the metropolis and 2-6 per cent in the counties. There is reason to believe that, as a result of the industrial boom and the further development of the market economy, its proportion will increase considerably in the next ten years.

Individual industrialists and traders who earn income through production, stock market trading and trading constitute the *sixth stratum*. It includes property owners, small stock speculators, traders who have enough money to employ workers and run a business, small business owners, etc. Until 1949, most independent contractors and artisans worked primarily for themselves. This class was eliminated in the trade and industrial reforms of the 1950s, and in 1978 there were only 15,000 independent tradesmen and small business owners in China. But the expansion of the family contracting system, the policy of openness, and the large-scale migration of independent contractors and traders to the countryside after the reforms favoured the widespread expansion of this stratum in the cities. Thus, the economic shifts that took place were the main reason for its revival and further development.

People trained in trade and services constitute the *seventh stratum* in the same socio-economic category as workers. Those employed in trade and services are increasingly in the same position as office workers in large cities. Although this stratum now accounts for 12% of the stratum structure, it is crucial to take into account the differences between urban and rural regions, as strata and the degree of urbanisation are linked. The layer of trade and service workers is underrepresented in China's socio-economic structure compared to rich countries. This is due to a number of reasons, but the main one is the insufficient level of urbanisation, which hinders the development of the tertiary sector of the economy. Another contributing factor is the poor quality services currently offered by the traditional catering industry. With the development of scientific research, tourism, education, leisure and social services, this layer will expand rapidly.

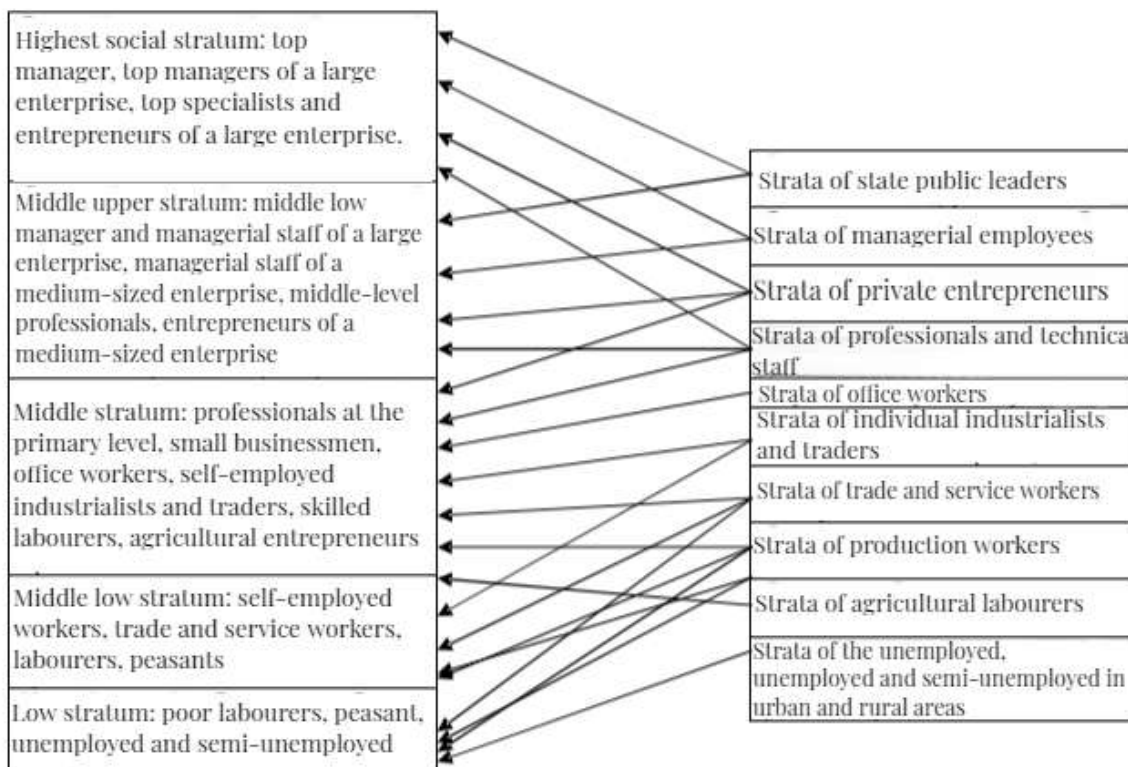
The majority of workers in the *eighth stratum* are employed in industry and construction. Due to the formation of resident registration and different business ownership systems, the incomes, social benefits and status positions of this stratum have differed significantly for a considerable period of time. Recently, these differences have diminished as a result of the growth of the market economy and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, but residency problems remain. Peasant workers are a relatively independent segment of the population [see: 102]. Although their occupation is similar to urban workers,

they are classified as peasants by virtue of their social origin and residence documents. Consequently, they face problems of wages, labour protection and social security. Peasant workers currently occupy a significant part of the stratification structure, accounting for 22.6 per cent of total employment. This varies considerably between urban and rural areas, as well as between cities with different economic systems and villages with different levels of development.

The largest *stratum* in the Chinese social structure - agricultural workers - is the *ninth stratum*. The number of people employed in agriculture in China is very large - 25 million people. This is one of the essential features of the agricultural complex. At the same time, the status of this stratum is extremely low due to the almost complete absence of organisational resources, as well as very limited cultural and economic resources compared to other strata. The consequence of this is the low incomes and difficult socio-economic situation of the peasantry.

Finally, the *tenth stratum* consists of unemployed, underemployed or semi-unemployed Chinese citizens living in both urban and rural areas (mostly working-age unemployed, except for students). Many labourers, artisans and service workers are unemployed or only partially employed as a result of changes in the production structure and government system caused by the shortage of jobs. Li Qiang states, "There is a situation in the labour market where a large number of young people are looking for jobs, but due to land requisitioning, peasants cannot farm and cannot find suitable jobs in the cities due to lack of jobs" [151; p. 152]. Despite the significant number of the unemployed, they have comparable socio-economic backgrounds - young and middle-aged peasants, former employees of state and public enterprises, etc., who are of the same age.

Figure 1: Social structure and social stratification of modern Chinese society [see: 151].



It is important to note that there are significant differences in the class structure of urban and rural areas in modern Chinese society. (See: Figure 2)

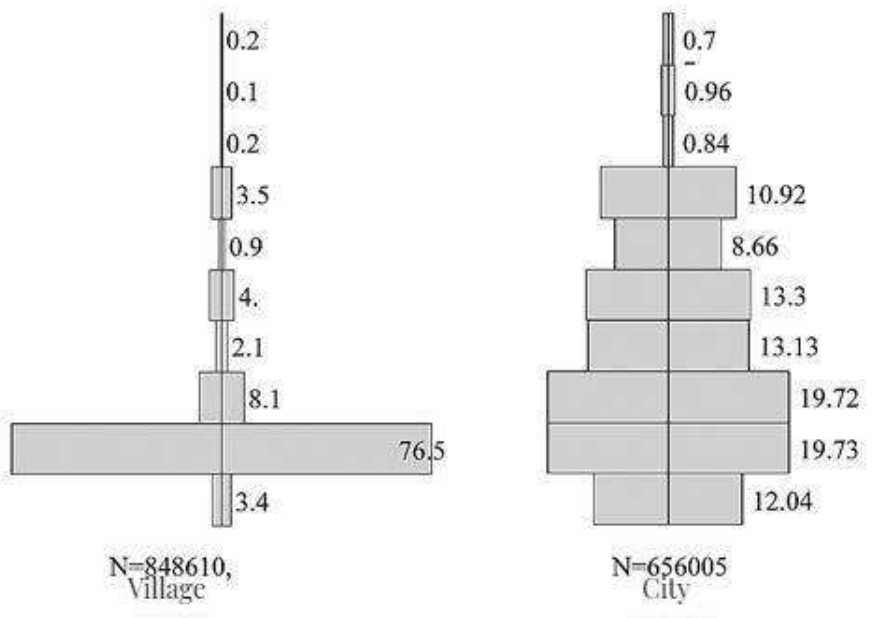


Figure 2. Class structure of Chinese society

(Figure 2

rows from top to bottom: state and federal government executives, directors, private business owners, technicians, clerks, small business owners, sales and service workers, industrial workers, peasants, and those who are unemployed or partially unemployed).

With a relatively large volume in the lower layer ("pyramid") and a smaller volume in the intermediate layer, the class structure of the *village* has the shape of a pyramid. The class division in the form of an "olive" defines the characteristic of the *city*.

The dualistic division of territories into urban and rural areas is related to China's social structure. The term "urban-rural dualism" in China refers to the multiple social and economic structures of urban and rural areas, which also represent the duality of urban-rural relations in which rural areas are subordinate to metropolitan areas. At the core of this system is the urban-rural household registration system, which allows the state to distinguish between residential areas classified as agricultural and non-agricultural. Many other institutional arrangements are built on this system, including the labour system, the social security system, and the food and oil supply systems. By granting non-agricultural hukou different rights and advantages and artificially separating urban and rural areas, these institutional arrangements create a dichotomous economic and social structure of urban-rural inequality. Therefore, Liu Baozhong and Qiu Ye note that the dichotomy between urban and rural structures in China is "not only a difference in natural spatial structure, but also a difference in industrial and economic structure, as well as a difference in institutional arrangement dominated by state policies" [70; p. 47]. In the era of planned economy, the system of urban-rural divide has not yet been eliminated. Due to the fact that both urban and rural working classes at that time had access to their own social resources, there was rivalry between them in the sphere of production interests and entrepreneurship. "Dualistic" system was formed as a result of the development and reform of the market economy. Urban workers began to join the ranks of labour migrants, while peasants began to give up land as a source of income and go to work and start businesses, which created differences and tensions between urban and rural communities.

Under the previous dualistic system, there was a social divide between rural and urban areas. With the development of reform and opening up and China's entry into the market economy, some peasants became "urban dwellers" and worked or engaged in business. A second group of newly arrived peasants at the same time began to work in some state-owned enterprises in the city. Social differences were the result of shifts in the rural economy: some peasants profited from land income, while others transferred surplus labour to the cities. Due to a series of contradictions and conflicts in the development of urban and rural social structures, this process led to increasing rural-urban disparities and a

dualistic economic structure. These include the widening income gap between rural and urban areas, the abandonment of agricultural labour in urban areas, and the displacement of rural populations by urban populations. These contradictions and tensions affected the social life and well-being of both urban and rural dwellers. On the one hand, migrant workers have found it difficult to assimilate into metropolitan life. However, distance and wealth inequalities between migrant workers and city dwellers prevent them from integrating into civic life.

After reform and opening up, China's urban and rural social structures have undergone significant changes that have influenced social stratification. Firstly, China has shifted from the old dualism system to the socialist market economy system in terms of urban-rural linkage structure. Second, various urban resources are moving to and concentrating in the countryside. Thirdly, it becomes clear that the interaction of social interests is pluralistic. Although the income of farmers in rural society is increasing, there is still a serious problem of growing income inequality and the gap between the well-to-do and the poor. Demographic situation is the most serious problem of rural social structure. Under the influence of a series of social elements caused by the structural changes in the economy, China's industrialisation process continues, resulting in a gradual decline in the proportion of people living in rural areas. At the same time, the income level of peasants has not increased enough to significantly reduce the urban-rural gap. In terms of population, urban dwellers have nevertheless completely taken over, but they have not changed the dual urban-rural structure.

China's economic development has entered a new phase. The problem of inequality between the affluent and the poor has attracted increasing attention due to the existence of income differences between Chinese farmers and urban dwellers, escalating conflicts of interest, and growing tensions between different groups of people in rural areas. New circumstances and challenges have emerged, especially with the acceleration of economic growth in both urban and rural areas, the constant change in social structures, and the growing process of dividing people into rich and poor. For example, the number of unemployed people in urban areas is increasing, and the number and extent of the urban poor has increased significantly. In rural areas, various mass incidents are taking place, negatively affecting the environment and sentiments of various social groups. In the cities,

the division between the rich and the poor and the resulting conflicts of interest, as well as the division and antagonism between urban and rural social classes, have further intensified.

According to the appropriate use of three different kinds of resources, the stratification of contemporary Chinese society can be characterised by four unique aspects, examined from the perspective of stratification approach:

1. Occupation and stratification are closely related. Social stratification in modern China is associated with the strengthening of occupational component, as in most industrialised and developing countries. Occupational factors affect social stratification in the following ways: first, the socio-economic gap between manual and non-manual workers is growing; second, the socio-economic gap between managers (executives) and non-managers is growing. The emergence of segmented organisations in industrial societies and the development of technology are inevitable causes of both these problems.

2. In contemporary Chinese society, several unique institutional configurations continue to have a significant impact on stratification. These include ownership of the means of production, industrial unification systems, household registration, and the significant influence of the state on resource allocation.

3. Differences between owners have also widened considerably. Ownership of the means of production is a typical characteristic of market economies and continues to be one of the key elements contributing to the stratification of modern society. Obviously, this component has less influence in modern Chinese social stratification than in modern capitalist society.

4. The stratification of society is also particularly affected by the transition phase of economic development. Lu Xueyi writes that during the adjustment in the transition period, the incomes and living standards of "most people will gradually increase, at the same time some people will fall into the lower strata of society because of the relative decline in their incomes and living standards, and there will be marginalised groups with an uncertain class position in the transition period" [67; p. 33].

Speaking of *institutional changes*, it should be noted that the unitary system, urban-rural relations and other issues, etc., are primarily concerned.

1. Modernisation and industrialisation occurred almost simultaneously, but the most significant consequence of industrialisation was the disintegration of the agricultural working class, with the centralised system of production in the people's communes turning

into a 'home-contracting responsibility system', and the migration of peasants, especially young and middle-aged peasants, from agriculture to other occupations after the 1980s.

2. The hukou status system and the relationship between urban and rural areas have changed. The traditional Chinese identity system has begun to show signs of fading as a result of the rapid development of China's industrialised and market economy in recent decades. The history of most industrialised countries shows that modernisation eventually entails the transformation of agricultural populations into industrial populations, and most countries eventually succeeded in migrating their populations from rural to urban or peri-urban areas. However, Wang Ying writes that "a country like China, with a population of 1.4 billion, is unique in the world. It is still an open question whether China will achieve urbanisation of its population, and which path it will follow" [7; p. 153]. Given that China has maintained a strict system of household registration for the last 60 years, the process of urbanisation in the country differs significantly from most developed countries. Unlike industrialised countries, where peasants move to cities in scattered streams, here there is a continuous migration between rural and urban areas. In fact, this group of people moving between urban and rural has created a triadic structure on top of the original urban-rural dichotomy. This triadic structure gives rise to a number of social issues concerning the values of the modern legal society as well as numerous institutional arrangements, including constitutional arrangements.

Chinese civilisation has entered a new phase that has brought with it increasing socio-economic stratification. Due to the unique historical moment the country is now experiencing, major changes are taking place in the national economy, traditional culture, traditional lifestyles and legal norms. The ongoing socio-economic transformations are giving rise to many new phenomena and paradoxes, which are also causing certain problems. All of these, however, will eventually take China's growth to a new level. As the market economy develops and the socialist democracy and legal system are upheld, the form and nature of social stratification will change. The creation of a rational, modern social stratification structure in the modern period is not a closed self-development process for any nation or region. Society should follow the global growth trend to a greater extent, while preserving some essential aspects of its current structure. As far as the social class system is concerned, the general global trend suggests that urbanisation, industrialisation and the continuous development of science, technology and education will eventually lead

to a more rational, stable, open and dynamic class system, each of which will prioritise its own interests and therefore contradictions are inevitable. However, there are also many common interests that can be realised through co-operation and compromise. In the course of economic and social progress under such a class system, mutually beneficial outcomes for all classes are possible.

Since the beginning of *reform and opening up*, China's socio-economic policy has undergone two major adjustments. First, it was necessary to adjust the policy of social class stratification; second, it became necessary to adjust the policy of income distribution. As a result, the social structure of Chinese society has undergone significant changes in a number of areas and patterns, including population size, urban-rural relations, work, family, income distribution, and lifestyle. All of these stratification shifts have had a direct impact on the onset of reforms, the transition of the Chinese economy, and the evolution and transparency of social and economic policies.

1.4. The impact of the reforms on the social class structure and social stratification of Chinese society

The policy of reform and openness is associated with the transition to a market economy. The beginning of this process can be traced back to the transition of the peasantry to the contract system. In the winter of 1978, in Xiaogang village, Anhui province, 18 peasants dared to sign the first land use contract in the history of new China. In fact, the real starting point of the reforms was the rejection of the then Party line of "class struggle" and the orientation towards "building order out of chaos". At the same time, analyses of the interests of classes and social strata have always been based on the policies, principles and party line of the CPC.

Beginning in 1978, as China began to enter a new era of reform and opening up, the "father of Chinese reform" Deng Xiaoping gave a series of speeches in which he expressed several crucial ideas that had a profound impact on China's class-stratification structure.

Firstly, from his point of view, the main task of the coming era of growth is to overcome the underdevelopment of the "productive forces" and that part of the contradictions that prevented the state and its citizens from satisfying their needs. In this regard, it is crucial to be oriented primarily towards socialist modernisation.

Secondly, in socialist society the class struggle takes on unique features; dictatorship should only be used in response to anti-socialist elements: "We oppose the extension of the class struggle and do not believe that there is a stratum of the bourgeoisie in the Party, nor do we believe that in socialist society the bourgeoisie as a class or other exploiting classes can exist after the liquidation of the bourgeoisie and the exploiting class" [quoted in: 94; p. 22].

Third, if people are to truly benefit from reform and development, it is necessary to continue to move forward in a direction consistent with Marxism's principles of material self-interest. To do this, positive factors must be mobilised and the support of the whole country must be mobilised. "So that it is not just a meaningless socialist slogan": 'Poverty is not socialism'."

Fourth, the system of universal regional demarcation should be destroyed from the very beginning of the reform. Encouraging people in each region to develop through persistent efforts is necessary to create a strong, exemplary force to move, push and help underdeveloped regions. This is "the great policy of influencing and setting in motion the entire national economy."

Fifth, allowing private and individual economic activity, as well as the activities of foreign firms with 100 per cent foreign capital and joint capital, is crucial, in addition to socialist public ownership as a basic requirement for growth. As a result, the basic inconsistencies between socialism and the market economy will be eliminated. Planned and market economies are merely techniques: "the criterion of effectiveness is whether these methods produce positive or negative results in terms of the development of the productive forces of socialist society, whether they contribute to increasing the aggregate power of the state, whether they produce an increase in the living standards of the citizens."

Sixth, it is crucial to strive for common wealth as it will help to contain social inequalities. Thus, a concept of social welfare was developed that took into account the characteristics of both developed and slow-developing regions. Ultimately, it was believed that the development of successful regions should spur the growth of underdeveloped regions, leading to shared prosperity. Lu Xueyi writes: "it will allow the socialist system to get rid of the contradiction of two-classism, when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" [68; c. 89].

In order to change class politics and class relations, several significant transformations were made based on Deng Xiaoping's theories. Many victims of past oppression and injustice were rehabilitated. The reputations of millions of people who had been labelled as "counter-revolutionaries", "revisionists" and "criminal elements", etc., were restored. The years of the "cultural revolution" led to a rethinking of the attitude towards the intelligentsia, which had been regarded as belonging to the working class. A significant number of party members who in 1957 had been unfairly labelled as "right-wing" were rehabilitated. People who had been classed as kulaks and landowners in the past were granted commune membership privileges in 1979. At the same time, policies concerning the Kuomintang rebellion and Taiwanese relatives living in mainland China were enacted. Workers of county groups that had been part of the Kuomintang during the conflict were released. In the early 1980s, it was proclaimed and established that traders and industrialists were workers in a socialist society, after 700,000 out of 860,000 of them were restored to the legal status of workers. Eventually it was declared that all sections of society should be mobilised to participate in the construction of socialism and the reform of openness in order to "unite for the future" and bring about a significant reform of relations in the class hierarchy, thus broadening the social base of the reforms. This meant that China's class growth was based on reform policies following the abandonment of the "Cultural Revolution".

Economic reforms have resulted in significant changes in the structure of interests and social stratification of Chinese society. The expansion of the private rather than communal economy has led to the formation of new layers of private entrepreneurs, including managerial and technical staff of foreign and private firms. This initially affected the ownership structure. Second, urbanisation and industrialisation transformed more than 200 million peasants into 'new workers'. Third, social mobility was facilitated by the explosive growth of the modern economy and the emergence of a middle class. Industrialisation and urbanisation accelerated the transition from the traditional rural and urban structure to modern social communities. In scale, speed and depth, such changes in the social organisation of populations were unprecedented in world history. Hundreds of millions of peasants moved from their land to work in industry and services in a short time. Numerous former rural populations concentrated in the cities. The transformation in China's social

structure has been a powerful driving force behind radical changes in people's lifestyles, employment patterns and the whole shape of Chinese society.

The most significant direction of China's post-reform socio-economic policy was the reform of the income distribution system. It began with the abolition of the equalisation system, which increased income differences, promoted competition and improved the efficiency of resource allocation. It was initially assumed that the new income distribution would remove the main obstacle to equalisation. History shows that egalitarian theory is a significant obstacle to the application of the principle of distribution according to labour, as stressed by the leaders of the CPC Central Committee in 1984. The widespread adoption of egalitarian values threatened to destroy the creative forces of society. The declared policy was to "encourage a section of the population to accumulate capital and property and move into the rich class". This was seen as the only real way to ensure the prosperity of the whole society and was in accordance with the laws of socialist growth. "Incentivising efficiency is a necessary condition for embodying social justice" in distribution policies, the 1987 CPC Special Reports said. This policy was presented as "the balance between efficiency and justice" at the 14th CPC Congress in 1992. "Balance between efficiency and fairness" is how it was characterised at the 15th CPC Congress in 1997. This principle was reaffirmed at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002, together with the recommendation that efficiency should be prioritised at the initial stage of distribution and then fairness. The distribution policy has brought profound changes to the structure of interests. Regional interests were prioritised, local governments were given more power, and the financial structure of "unequal financing" was gradually introduced. Changes in the public sector were facilitated by the emergence of private businesses, foreign-owned enterprises, rural enterprises and other players in various sectors of the economy. With the introduction of the "contract system", "income tax", "loan issuance" and "joint stock companies", state-owned enterprises underwent significant changes. These and other transformations have resulted in the creation of a largely autonomous market system. The key components of the significant changes in the composition and mode of distribution of income were capital, technology and management.

In addition, since the 1980s, income gaps between urban and rural areas, between regions, between economic sectors and between institutions have been growing. In some cases, income distribution has also become unequal. Income gaps have continued to widen

in the face of intense global competition in many sectors, and wealth has grown rapidly in parallel with the economy. Investment in some sectors became increasingly concentrated after collectivisation. Low wages kept the amount of excess supply and the competitiveness of workers at the same level. The growth of economic inequality was also influenced by the presence of corruption and illegal income. The state became involved because of acute discontent in society caused by the development of socialism, market economy and growing income inequality. In 2003, the 3rd Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee proposed "to streamline and standardise the distribution procedure, intensify efforts to regulate income distribution, and pay special attention to the problem of excessive income disparities among certain segments of society". In 2004, when the 16th Central Committee met again, it was decided to "take practical measures to address the problem of large income disparities among different regions and members of society". In 2005, at the 5th session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, it was decided to "put the main emphasis on social justice so that citizens can experience the real results of reform and development." Building a peaceful socialist society and working to "promote the idea of social justice and fairness" were decisions made in 2006 at the 6th Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee. The idea that "we should speed up construction to protect equality and justice, which play a vital role in the overall system of society" was put forward together with the development of a harmonious socialist worldview. In addition, systematic guidelines for income distribution at the "macro level" based on economic growth were developed. More importance was desired to be given to social justice, implying the convergence of the low-income group with the middle-income group over time. It was proposed to strictly prohibit income from illegal sources, to effectively regulate the distribution of unjustifiably high incomes, and to promote prosperity and well-being for all. The 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China stated that "the most important thing is to ensure and improve the distribution according to labour, the coexistence of different models in the overall distribution system, and labour, capital, technology, management and other factors of production should contribute to the distribution system. Primary distribution and redistribution are to properly regulate the relationship between efficiency and fairness, and redistribution should pay more attention to social justice."

Compared to the reforms of China's economic system, the changes in social structure are longer, more sustainable and more comprehensive. The most significant of them are as follows.

The course towards industrialisation and urbanisation. Since the reforms that triggered the rapid growth of the economy, the industrial structure has undergone significant changes. For example, the share of manufacturing increased from 45% to 48% from 1978 to 2022, the share of services from 24% to 42%, while the share of mining in GDP declined from 31% to 12% over the same period. At present, the leading positions in the CHN economy are occupied by such industries as automotive, electronics and household appliances. The share of agriculture in the economy has decreased due to the significant expansion of the service sector and the steady growth of industry. China is currently undergoing a phase of industrialisation based on its industrial structure.

At the same time, China's urbanisation rate was increasing. When the new China was formed in 1949, 57 million people lived in cities and the country's urbanisation rate was 10.6%, 3% lower than the global rate in 1900. China was an ordinary agricultural country. Between 1949 and 1978, the urbanisation rate gradually increased, peaking at 19.7% and then rising to 20%. The rapid industrialisation and reforms in the country accelerated the development of urbanisation. In the 29 years from 1949 to 1978, the urbanisation rate increased by more than 7 %, and in the following 30 years (1978-2008) it increased by 45.7 %. According to the 2020 census, the urban population is about 64% and the rural population is 36%. There were 137 cities with a population of 1 billion 411 million on 1 November 2020 and 1 billion 411 million in 2022. 108 of these cities have more than one million people. However, China's urbanisation process is slower than the country's industrialisation. Thus, according to the data for 2020, as already mentioned, 36% of China's population lives in villages, and 25% of the able-bodied population is employed in agriculture. At the same time, the share of agricultural production in GDP today is about 8% of GDP. Currently, urban households earn about three times more per capita than rural households. People who do not work in agriculture have about five to six times more than those who do. This becomes one of the main explanations for the fact that some 200 million Chinese peasants are leaving to work in the cities.

Changes in population structure and family structure. China's demographic structure has already undergone historical shifts. The phase of high fertility, low mortality and high

natural increase has been replaced by a phase of low fertility, low mortality and low natural increase. Between 1952 and 2020, China's population grew from 570 million to 1 billion 411 million. The natural increase rate fell from 20.00 to 5.08 per cent, the birth rate from 37.00 to 12.14 per cent, and the death rate from 17.00 to 7.06. The main reasons for the change in population structure are birth planning policy, social transformation and economic development. China began to implement the birth planning policy in the early 1970s of the twentieth century. Since the early 1980s, it has been implemented among the urban population under the slogan "One family, one child". Significant changes in the demographic structure occurred after the fertility rate declined. From about 6 to 1.3 in the early 1970s, this is the current birth rate. The CPC Central Committee decided to allow citizens to have a third child in May 2021 due to the declining birth rate trend. In 2021, the State Statistics Bureau of the CHN said that 12 million children were born in the country in 2020, 1.5 times less than in 2016. By the end of 2022, there were 850,000 fewer people living in the country than at the end of 2021. This is the first decline in sixty years. The reduction in the social burden ratio has greatly contributed to the country's social and economic progress. However, in less than 30 years, China's population has gone from young and middle-aged to elderly. 12.9 per cent of the country's population is over 60 years old and 9.07 per cent is over 65 years old, according to a 2005 sample survey of 1 per cent of the total population. In the coming decades, three age groups can be distinguished: the working-age population, the general population and the elderly population.

Family and generational systems are evolving in parallel with changes in population composition. The number of extended families is decreasing, nuclear families are becoming more common, and family structure is beginning to acquire nuclear features. The average family size has decreased significantly, from 4.41 persons per family in 1982 to 2.62 persons per family in 2020. In the last two censuses, conducted in 2010 and 2020, the average family size decreased by 0.48 persons in ten years, from 3.10 to 2.62. The number of people in each generation is changing along with shifts in generational structure. The "4-2-1" generational structure of four grandparents, two parents and one child is gradually emerging in megacities, and the "4-2-2" in villages. The traditional Chinese family is threatened by population ageing and shrinking family size.

Changes in the structure of regional development. China's development is not regionally balanced. Although such disparities have always existed, regional development

has improved since the onset of reforms. A physical border running from Heilongjiang Province in the north to Yunnan Province in the south divides China. The distribution of all Chinese citizens within the country is determined by this border. 94% of the country's population lives in 42.9% of the southeastern territory and 6% in 57.1% of the northwestern territory. The distribution of the population on this border is influenced by the environment, as the northwest has a dry climate, while China receives an average of 400 ml of rainfall per year. Nevertheless, the border also has historical significance, as an imperial dynasty ruled the southeast for a considerable period of time. After the reforms, the beach region in the southeast is opening up, growing rapidly, and the disparity in regional development is increasing. The development disparities between the east and centre tend to increase, while the development disparities between the centre and west regions are generally decreasing.

Changes in the ownership system. Before the reforms, China had a centrally planned economy. Unified ownership prevailed in ownership issues, which was further subdivided into communal and state ownership. The reforms eliminated the single state-owned sector of the economy and the private sector expanded rapidly, leading to the creation of small private enterprises employing more than eight people. The creation of new economic sectors supported by foreign businesses followed the opening up of the country's coastal region and the establishment of a special economic zone. The public sector of the economy was divided into several industrial, inter-farm, city and regional economic organisations. The modern economic structure includes the state, collective, individual and private sectors of the economy, as well as other economic forms. The diversity of ownership forms and their new structure emerged with the establishment of state ownership as the mainstream of the economy. As a result of changes in the structures of ownership and social labour, both the structure of jobs and the social class structure of society have changed. This manifests itself in a variety of areas, including work, social status, prestige, living conditions, income, cultural level, spending patterns and intimate relationship dynamics. Significant changes in the composition of occupational groups and social strata had already occurred prior to the reforms, and diversification has been increasing. Chinese society now consists of occupational classes or groups that include executives, labourers, engineers, farmers, servants, managers, and owners of individual and private enterprises. Multi-level interests and desires have emerged due to the division of social classes and the diversity of

businesses. There will always be questions about conflict of interest and gap in needs. Over the reform period, Chinese society has changed from a society with an even (levelled) distribution of income to one characterised by large income gaps. The Gini coefficient, which is used to measure the concentration of income distribution, decreased in the early years after the reforms and has steadily increased since 1985, rising from 0.25 to 0.47 between 1984 and 2021, according to relevant departments and academic institutions. Currently, the richest 1 per cent of China's citizens own more than 33 per cent of the national wealth, while the lowest 25 per cent own only 1 per cent.

Changes in organisational structures. Before the changes, public and private organisations were planned and managed by the government. "One Organisational System" included government departments, enterprises, communes for rural people and non-profit organisations. "One Organisational System" regulated social relations and performed the functions of running society in addition to providing jobs. All aspects of the life of a member of society, were regulated by the "single system of organisation". Workers were totally dependent on this method. Numerous inconsistencies were evident in this context when it came to social guarantees, control of social behaviour and regulation of social relations. This mixing of labour and resources, as well as rigid centralisation, led to an almost complete lack of social mobility and stagnation in society. In 1978, when the reform era began, there were 400 million workers in China. Only 0.4% of them (about 150,000 in the megacities) were employed outside the "unified system of organisation". More than 74 million workers in the people's (state) ownership system and more than 20 million workers in the urban collective ownership system, which included most workers, belonged to this system. Of the 300 million workers in rural and village areas, most belonged to communes. After the reforms, a change in the ownership structure resulted in the emergence of many organisations other than the 'single system of organisation', and this new labour industry adopted a market-based (including competitive) system of appointments. With the collapse of the communes and the abolition of the clan system of appointment, workers in rural areas have also almost completely moved away from the influence of the "single system of organisation", while in urban areas such organisations employ more than 60% of the population. In addition, the influence of the 'single organisation system' has been sharply reduced by the restructuring of the social systems and functions of the state, in particular with the introduction of market-based employment and logistics systems, freedom of

residence and the oriented welfare system. The term 'single organisational system' has given way to the term 'social system' in the fundamental structure of social governance. The need for municipal services has increased. New public and private voluntary groups have emerged as a result of the modification of the social management model. According to the Ministry of Civil Administration, just over 2,000 civic organisations were registered in China in the last stage of opening-up reforms, by the end of 2008 there were already over 414,000, and by 2019 there will be over 816,000. Civic associations, trust funds, industry groups and non-profit organisations are examples of social organisations in China. At present, social organisations in China continue to develop and become more and more important.

All these changes, taken together, have had and continue to have a significant impact on the social class structure and, consequently, on the stratification system of Chinese society. Thus, the current situation of the Chinese working class reflects the many changes associated with economic growth and the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The growth of manufacturing and industry has created a huge labour force that has become a key element of China's economic power. However, contrary to this, social mobility within the working class remains limited due to various factors such as unequal educational opportunities, limited access to high-paying positions, and unequal working conditions in different regions of the country. In studying the current situation and social mobility of the working class, it is necessary to take into account the dynamics of labour relations as well as changes in the economic and social spheres. This is due to the development of industry, the increase in urban population and the impact of global economic trends.

The peasantry in China is facing serious challenges such as urbanisation, changing land policies and economic transformation. As a result, some peasant families face difficulties in maintaining their farmland, and this may lead to increased social stratification. Nevertheless, some reforms to improve rural living conditions and stimulate the agricultural sector can mitigate this process. In addition, the stratification trends of the Chinese peasantry have a direct bearing on changes in the country's agricultural sector and the urbanisation process. The growth of the urban population and the gradual penetration of modern technology into agriculture continue to change the social status of peasants and their level of wealth, creating different strata and groups of the peasant population.

China's middle class is expanding rapidly as a result of economic growth. This class includes people with a variety of occupations, including professionals, businesspeople, and those working in innovative new industries. They have relatively stable incomes and access to certain privileges such as better living conditions, education and healthcare. However, differences in income levels and access to resources between the different strata of the middle class also lead to internal inequalities within this social group. Studies of the middle class in contemporary China demonstrate the dynamic growth of this social group due to the accelerated pace of economic development and increasing urbanisation. Based on the analysis of income level, education and consumer behaviour, we can see the formation of new social strata and classes such as progressive technical intellectuals, white-collar workers, small entrepreneurial class, etc. The middle class plays an important role in shaping China's dynamic economy and social structure, as well as influencing ongoing political processes and social relations.

Analyses of contemporary social stratification in China reveal significant changes in the position of different social classes and strata, their interaction and impact on social dynamics. These changes shape the landscape of the country's social structure and present both challenges and opportunities for different social groups. Understanding these changes and trends is essential for developing social and economic strategies to overcome challenges and ensure the sustainable development of Chinese society.

One of the important dimensions of social stratification is known to be education. We emphasise that "education has a direct impact on the direction of social mobility and social advancement of educated people" [127; p. 62]. Increased access to education after 1978 has promoted the possibility of social mobility. However, serious problems remain in the form of unequal access to higher education and different quality of education (educational services). At the same time, social stratification also affects the way education is received, the quality of education and people's choice of education. Education can contribute to changing the place of an individual in the system of social stratification of an individual by increasing the level of knowledge, qualifications, etc. However, disproportions in education can also exacerbate social stratification, for example, the inequality of rich and poor in educational resources can lead to the fact that the children of the poor will not be able to get a quality education, which will affect their further development and social status.

Thus, the relationship between education and social stratification has a dialectical character of interaction and mutual influence.

We will address these and other issues of the relationship between education and social stratification, and thus social inequality, in contemporary Chinese society in the second part of this thesis.

1.5. Conclusions to Chapter 1

1. Many sociologists have expressed different points of view on social stratification and gave their own definitions of this phenomenon. P.A. Sorokin, E. Giddens, P. Sztopka, T. Parsons, G. Lenski and others also analysed in detail such criteria of social stratification as wealth, prestige, power, education, religion, ethnicity and others. The study of social stratification in *Chinese sociology* is based on Marxist materialist methodology and has been significantly influenced by other sociological concepts and approaches: M. Weber's method of identifying status groups; the concept of social stratification of "New Marxism" (E.O. Wright); the theory of social reproduction (P. Bourdieu), and others.

2. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there have been three stages of change in the social stratification structure of society. For a short period of time, after the founding of New China in 1949, four social classes - workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie - coexisted in Chinese society. This period lasted from 1949 to 1956, and then, due to the completion of "communist re-education", the two main classes of Chinese society - workers and peasants - were transformed into a single layer of workers employed in the state-owned sector of the country's economy in the second stage (1956-1978). Thanks to the CPC's political orientation towards a market economy, industrialisation and urbanisation, and the personal influence of Deng Xiaoping, China entered the third stage, which began in 1978 and marked the country's entry into a period of reform and opening up. This predetermined the formation of a new social class structure of Chinese society and a new configuration of social stratification.

3. In all the three stages listed above, the political decisions of the Chinese Communist Party and the reform of the economic system played an important role. In the first stage, the basic status of the working class and peasantry was consolidated through a series of land reforms and restructuring of the industrial sector. In the second stage, China underwent a social transformation into a new socialist society with Chinese characteristics. A social hierarchy was established in which the working class and the peasantry constituted

the two main classes as a single stratum, and the peasantry had a lower status. After Deng Xiaoping launched the policy of reform and opening up in 1978, the third transition period began in Chinese society, during which the transition to a new market socialist society with Chinese characteristics began, a new social structure including ten major classes was formed, etc. However, one cannot ignore the significant impact on social stratification in China of China's unique Chinese *hukou* household registration system, which is a differentiated instrument of social control, and which has led to changes in China's social stratification structure. The impact of the hukou system on social status and individual development is not only to restrict freedom of choice, but also to determine the status and lifestyle of citizens within their social class. While the household registration system, as a social control mechanism, has helped reduce income inequality among the population and strengthen social equality, it has also had an impact on income disparities in different neighbourhoods and economic sectors.

4. Since 1978, with Deng Xiaoping's sweeping reforms, the country has transitioned to a multi-structured market economy, industrialisation and urbanisation. At the same time, China's social structure underwent very significant changes. As a result of the reform of the economic system from a planned economy to a market economy, many new social classes have emerged. Meanwhile, China's original pyramidal-type social structure has been transformed into ten major social classes, which are divided into the following according to the criterion of occupation: 1) state and public leaders; 2) managerial personnel; 3) private entrepreneurs; 4) specialists, experts, technical personnel; 5) office workers; 6) individual industrialists and traders; 7) trade and service workers; 8) production (industrial) workers; 9) agricultural workers; 10) the unemployed, unemployed and semi-unemployed in urban and rural areas.

However, there is another way to analyse the social stratification of Chinese society, namely from the perspective of the dualistic urban-rural system, which has led to an imbalance in the development of urban and rural populations. In villages, the class structure has the shape of a pyramid, with relatively more social strata at the bottom and fewer strata in the middle. In cities, the class structure has an "olive" shape. In this social context, such a new class with Chinese specificity as "migrant workers" was born. The development of China's social stratification structure has been fraught with contradictions and conflicts caused by the widening urban-rural income gap, the abandonment of agricultural labour by

the cities and the alienation of the urban population from the rural population. As China is going through a special historical period, in the process of continuous socio-economic transformation, many new phenomena and conflicts are emerging, which has also led to the emergence of a number of pressing social problems. In the long term, they will be successfully resolved, China will reach a new level of development. With the strengthening of the market economy, the development of socialist democracy and the improvement of the legal system, social stratification will also take new forms.

5. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China and the CPC, modern China has undergone fundamental changes: accelerated industrialisation and urbanisation; changes in demographic and family structure; changes in the structure of regional development; changes in ownership and organisational structures, including an unprecedented rise in the CHN's international status as one of the leaders in the global transformation of the unipolar world order established by the collective West and the US into a *polycentric system*. Collectively, all these reforms have had and will continue to have a significant impact on the social stratification structure of Chinese society.

The policy of reforms and openness has played a positive role not only in politics and economy, but also contributed to the development of such an important social institution as education. Education, being one of the factors of stratification, is important and significantly affects the position of a person in the system of social stratification. At the same time, the disproportions and imbalances that inevitably arise in the process of development of the educational system become the cause of educational inequality, which is also manifested in modern Chinese society.

Chapter 2. Conceptualising solutions to the problem of educational inequality in contemporary China

2.1. Education as an institutional factor in the transformation of social stratification

An essential component of social differentiation and division of labour is stratification by level of education. Characteristics of social inequality play a significant role in determining access to schooling. At the same time, socio-economic differences are increasingly influencing the selection process in schooling. The Chinese government changed the education system by reorienting it towards the market in the process of the country's reform and opening-up policy nearly half a century ago. Class inequality is a result of the elitist nature of today's education policy. The level of income in the labour market begins to depend more and more on the level of education. One's socio-economic status is increasingly determined by one's cultural background. The Chinese government is investing heavily in education. The 9-year education system has become compulsory, higher education is spreading, and the availability of higher education is increasing rapidly. The cultural level of the population and labour force is gradually improving. However, higher education is still a scarce resource. Competition in this industry is still very high. Therefore, inequalities still exist in higher education.

It has been noted above that historically there have been two major phases in the development of education in China. The first one (1949-1978) was the period of *educational revival* and began immediately after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The Political Consultative Conference held in September 1949 adopted the General Programme of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which defined the cultural and educational policy of the new China, stating that "education in the People's Republic of China should be democratic, developing national, scientific and popular culture". On 1 October 1951, the State Council of the Central People's Government promulgated the Decree on Education Reform, establishing the first academic system of the People's Republic of China, which has been in use ever since. From June to September 1952, the Central People's Government made sweeping changes in the establishment of faculties and departments of institutions of higher education throughout the country, transforming the system of colleges and universities, which was based on the British and

American model before the founding of the CHN, into a system of specialized secondary schools, institutes and universities modelled on the Soviet Union.

Large-scale literacy education was launched. In accordance with the Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy adopted by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on 29 March 1956, the CPC and the people's government took a series of measures to teach literacy to huge numbers of workers and peasants. The results of literacy education were impressive: in the decade from 1949 to 1965 alone, about 100 million young people became literate, and the illiteracy rate, which was over 80 per cent in 1949, had already fallen to 38.10 per cent by 1965.

In three decades of hard work, China has established a relatively complete socialist education system and teaching mode, and has made significant achievements in all fields of education. Primary education has become almost universal, and the net enrolment rate of primary school-age children rose from 49.2 per cent in 1952 to 94 per cent in 1978. Secondary and tertiary education also recovered and developed at a relatively rapid pace: the number of students enrolled in higher education rose from 117,000 in 1949 to 2.28 million in 1978, a nearly 20-fold increase. The gross enrolment ratio in higher education rose from 1.56 per cent in 1949 to 2.7 per cent in 1958. Investment in education rose sharply: from 895 million yuan in 1952 to 6.56 billion yuan in 1978, and from 1.32 per cent to 1.78 per cent of GDP.

The next stage in the progressive development of Chinese education was the stage of its *reform*, which began at the initiative of Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and continues to this day. In December 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC was convened, which opened new horizons for the development of market socialism with Chinese characteristics. Deng Xiaoping proposed that the CPC Central Committee focus on education, demanding that "the cause of education should be compatible with the requirements of the development of the national economy". Chinese education has taken the path of developing socialist education with Chinese characteristics.

College entrance examinations, which had previously been suspended for seven years, were resumed. Deng Xiaoping made important statements that "intellectuals are part of the working class" and "science and technology are the first productive forces". The nationwide debate on "practice is the only criterion for verifying truth" and the nature of

education gradually led to a new understanding of education as a productive force, laying the ideological foundation for reform and openness in education.

Universal nine-year compulsory education provided China with enough labour force to become a "world factory" and industrial power in just 40 years. In 1978, enrolment in universal primary education was 94 per cent. In 1986, universal nine-year compulsory education began, taking a total of 25 years to complete. In 2017, the net enrolment rate of primary education reached 99.91% and the retention rate of nine-year compulsory education reached 93.8%, which exceeded or equalled the average of high-income countries. Illiteracy among Chinese youth has been virtually eliminated; China has eliminated illiteracy in 70 years.

For more than 40 past years, China has consistently put forward strategies to prioritise education, the idea of developing the country through science and innovation, etc. In 1985, the Decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Education System was promulgated. It initiated the reform of the education system and mechanisms under the socialist market economy system. The legal framework of the socialist education system with Chinese characteristics was established, represented by the Law on Compulsory Education, the Law on Higher Education, the Law on Teachers and the Law on Vocational Education, and the Regulations on Academic Degrees.

At the same time, quality education has been fully implemented and the quality of basic education is monitored, which contributes to the qualitative and balanced development of compulsory education. Mass higher education has been achieved, which is moving towards universalisation, and the quality of education is constantly improving. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, more than 240 million people in China now have higher education. In 2022, more than 46 million students were enrolled in higher education. The country's tertiary education enrolment rate in 2022 was nearly 60 per cent (compared to 15 per cent in 2002).

The transformation and expansion of the Chinese education system over the past 40 years are two of the most significant changes. China's education system has changed as a result of the transition to a different socio-economic system. The mechanisms of social differentiation, market growth and elitism in the education system have replaced the planning and paradigm of public education. The pace of development in this area has also

improved educational opportunities. Both elements have influenced stratification and inequality in the education system.

One sign of the beginning of economic change was the return of the examination system in China in 1977. As a result, selection criteria were introduced into the education system, which signalled a shift from a mass education model to an elitist model. The emergence of a market-based economic system also led to the introduction of market concepts into the education system, turning education into a "branch of the economy" and increasing both the cost of education and the diversification of educational investment (i.e. tuition fees).

Before the economic reforms, one of the peculiarities of the Chinese education system was the influence of the ideology of the Cultural Revolution on it. Thus, the idea of equal access to education was abolished, the examination system was abolished, and the duration of educational programmes and the set of subjects taught were reduced. In 1978, there were changes in the educational policy of the state as a result of the ruling party and the country's leadership adjusting their goals. The main goal of the ruling party became economic growth. Socio-economic differences between people became a reality that could not be tolerated. Eliminating class differences and expanding educational opportunities for workers and peasants became the two main goals of education. The skills needed for economic development were in great demand (see: "Implementing the Four Modernisations Policy"). Policies were put in place to bring about changes and improvements in national security, research, agriculture, industry, and education. Education reform led to two significant developments in the face of changing economic conditions and ideologies.

Firstly, the paradigm of elite education replaced the mass education model. The change began when university entrance examinations were reinstated in 1977. Entrance examinations became part of the education system, leading to a rigorous selection process for higher education. The complexity of the subjects taught increased, as did the level of demands in the examinations. At the same time, a distinction began to emerge between elite schools and mainstream institutions. National leading schools, provincial leading schools, city leading schools and district leading schools emerged. Thus, over time, an "aristocratic" education system was also formed. According to Sorokin, the education system at all levels "led to the aristocratisation of society and became a mechanism of stratification" because of the increasingly complex system of testing criteria and rigid

selection of students into elite and rank-and-file schools. (Sorokin, 1927). The most talented pupils (also known as 'gifted pupils/students') were selected and the less able were weeded out. Undoubtedly, the growth of elitist education favours the identification and support of the elite. However, this trend has a negative impact on children from low-income urban families, rural families and children whose parents have little or no education. This group of children becomes the target of inequality policies, which reinforces class stratification in the education system and widens the urban-rural divide in this area.

Second, there has been a transition from a planned system to a market system ('education as a sector of the economy'). Diversification of investment in education (or "multiple sources of financing") is the most important aspect of the transformation. Previously, spending on education came mainly from central government funds. Nowadays, there are various channels of investment. The best academic institutions in China are the only ones funded by the Ministry of Finance. Most are supported by regional budgets. As a result, richer cities and towns now have access to more resources for education than poorer cities and towns. In addition, part of the education fees are set by the educational institutions themselves. In this way, they can "make money from providing services". Parents of students are responsible for paying this part of the fees, resulting in higher education fees and other costs. Low-income families cannot afford this. For this reason, some students in junior high school, high school and higher education are forced to suspend their studies. China has had a free universal nine-year education programme since 2008. Participation in the programme reduces the burden on low-income families and helps to remove economic barriers to access to education. At the same time, colleges have stopped offering free education since the second half of the 1990s. Tuition fees, which have been charged by universities since 1994, have risen every year. As a result, children from low-income and rural families have fewer and fewer opportunities to enrol in higher education, leading to inequalities in access to education.

In 1999, the Chinese government began taking measures to expand access to higher education. As a result, more opportunities for higher education became available. Over the next five years (during the period of the Enrolment Opportunity Policy), the number of students enrolling in higher education increased by an average of 20 per cent each year. In 2005 (the peak of the widening entry policy), university students accounted for about 21 per cent of the population in this age range as a whole: university admissions increased 4.6

times since 1998. Since 2006, university enrolment has declined due to difficulties in finding jobs for recent graduates, but growth has still been 5%.

If we look at the dynamics of the change in the number of students enrolled in various educational programmes from 2015 to 2022, according to the official data published in the *China Statistical Yearbooks*, we can see the following picture. In 2015, in general *undergraduate* programmes of *all higher education institutions*, the total number of students was 26.253 million, among which the number of new students is 7.378 million, and the total number of graduates was 6.809 million. In *secondary vocational education*, the total number of students was 16, 56 million, among which the number of new students is 6.012 million, and the number of graduates was 5.68 million, and in *general secondary education*, the total number of students was 23.744 million, among which the number of new studentsc

In 2018, in general *undergraduate* programmes of *all higher education institutions*, the total number of students was 28.310 million, among which the number of new students was 7.910 million and the total number of graduates was 7.533 million. In *secondary vocational education*, the total number of students was 15.552 million, among which the number of new students was 5.57 million, and the number of graduates was 4.873 million, while in *general secondary education* the total number of students was 23.754 million, among them the number of new students was 7.927 million and the number of graduates was 7.792 million, the consolidation rate of nine-year compulsory education was 94.2 per cent [see: 161] (see: Diagram 2).

In 2022, the total number of students in general *undergraduate* programmes of *all higher education institutions* is 36.594 million, among which the number of new students is 10.145 million and the total number of graduates is 9.673 million. In *secondary vocational education*, the total number of students is 17.847 million, among which the number of new students is 6.507 million and the number of graduates is 5.192 million, and in *general secondary* education, the total number of students is 27.139 million, among which the number of new students is 27.139 million, among which the number of new students is 5.192 million.

Diagram 1. Admission to higher, secondary vocational and general secondary education programmes, 2011-2015.

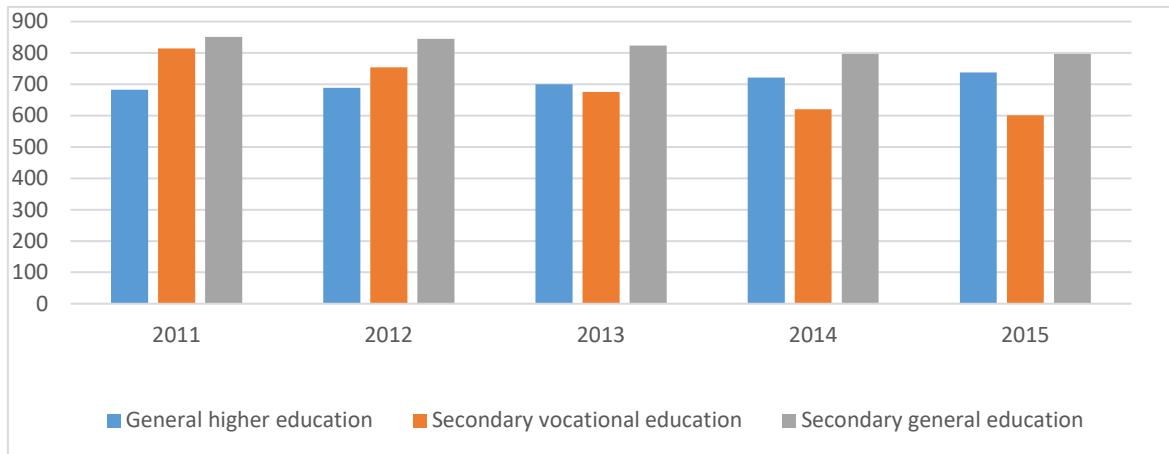


Diagram 2. Enrolment in higher, secondary vocational and general secondary education programmes, 2014-2018.

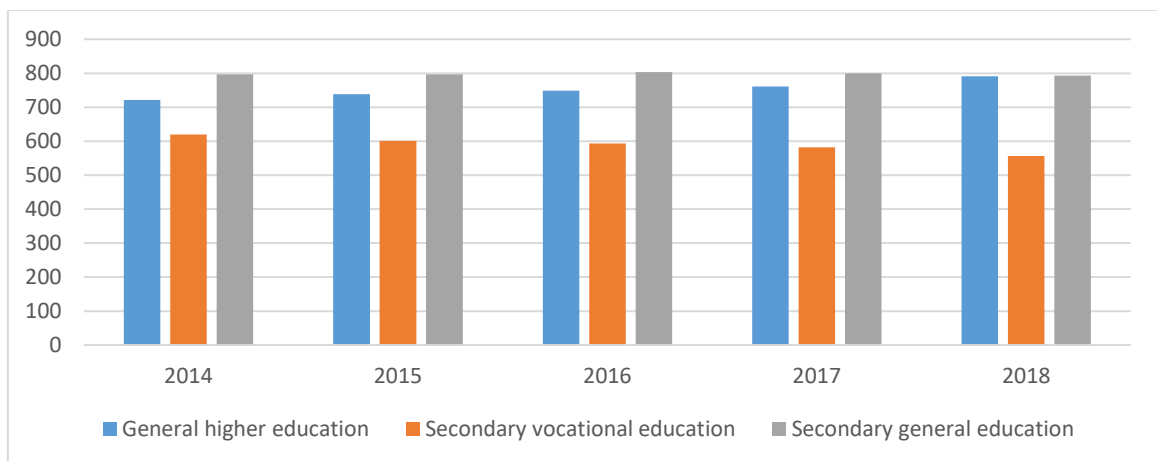
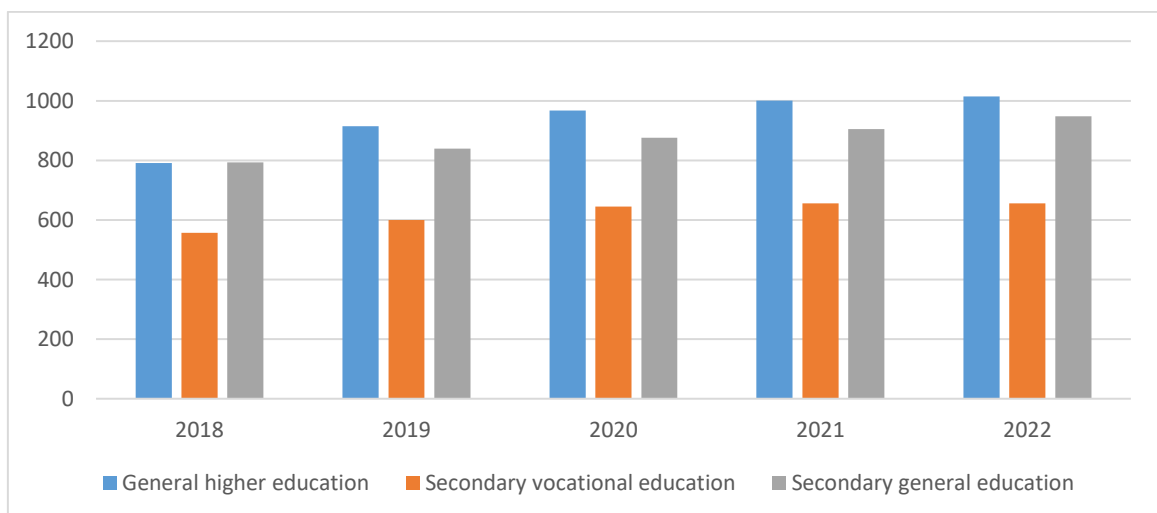


Diagram 3. Admission to higher, secondary vocational and general secondary education programmes, 2018-2022.



Diagrams 1, 2 and 3 show that it is more obvious that every year fewer graduates of general education schools enter secondary special (vocational) educational institutions, while more and more enter higher education institutions. The number of students entering and graduating from higher education institutions, secondary special (vocational) education institutions and secondary general education schools increases annually. This trend was not too obvious in 2014-2018, but starting from 2020, the number of general secondary school graduates entering secondary special (vocational) education institutions is only two-thirds of those entering higher education institutions. Such a phenomenon is a cause for concern in Chinese society.

"Diploma society" and the massivisation of higher education are current issues for the Chinese education system today. Nowadays, there is already a competition for high academic ranks in China, which is related to the "over-education". The widespread pursuit of higher education represents the traditional Chinese learning culture, but also points to the shortcomings of the existing education verification apparatus. It indicates deficiencies in education management and the low social prestige of vocational education.

Currently, there are 2,688 higher education institutions in China, of which 1,423 offer 4-year undergraduate programmes and 1,388 offer 3-year college programmes (Ministry of Education of China, 2019). However, at the same time, as we have pointed out, "the scale of higher education in China is growing, but its structure is not rational" [128; p. 155]. The amount of resources received by each educational institution is different. In 1954, the Communist Party recognised six Chinese institutions as the first set of elite universities ("重点大学" in Chinese), initiating the institutional stratification of higher education in China. There were sixteen such prestigious institutions in 1959, sixty-four in the 1960s, eighty-eight in the 1970s, and ninety-nine in the 1980s. Elite universities have in common that they are overseen by the federal government or the Ministry of Education, while non-elite institutions are under the jurisdiction of provincial or local governments. Non-elite institutions are restricted from admitting the remaining students, while elite universities are given priority admission to students. They are also helped by favourable financial policies. With the Ministry of Education's launch of Project 211 in 1995, which aimed to establish 100 elite institutions by the beginning of the 21st century, the stratification of Chinese higher education became evident (Ministry of Education of China, 2000). The Chinese government provided financial support to the universities in the consortium, as well as

preferential treatment (e.g., favouring the best students for admission). Eighty per cent of graduate students and seventy per cent of national research funding went to the 112 institutions that were part of Project 211 between 1995 and 2008 (Tang & Yang, 2008). To encourage the creation of a Chinese analogue to the Ivy League in the United States, Jiang Zemin, then president of the People's Republic of China, founded Project 985 in 1998 (Jiang, 1998). Over the next two years, 30 more colleges joined the initiative, after the number of colleges became nine in 2009. Although they receive additional funding, all 39 of these universities are members of Project 211.

In addition to Project 21 universities, a number of universities run by provincial governments have signed co-operation agreements and receive funding from both provincial and central government departments. They are also considered prestigious universities. Prior to the introduction of the Double First Class programme in 2017, there were 141 prestigious colleges in the country. The Ministry of Education is responsible for overseeing these national programmes. While participation in the programme is ostensibly determined by research, teaching and reputation, specific criteria have never been made public. Geopolitics also plays a role in inclusion in these categories, as the Ministry of Education has mandated that every province must have at least one university as part of "Project 211." To create a better higher education system with "first-class" institutions and "first-class" majors, the Chinese government launched the Double First Class ("双一流" in Chinese) programme in 2017. At that time, projects 985 and 211 were formally completed. Nevertheless, the ideas behind both initiatives are still being used in industry, science and education [see: 154: p. 327].

Equity and quality are essential to the progress of education. The "Basic Provisions of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and Vision 2035" explicitly refers to building a high-quality education system and charts a new path to becoming a strong educational power in the new era. However, the theme of "high and low" for graduates of prestigious universities is often discussed during the graduation season. For example, graduates from Renmin University of China and Wuhan University have made their way to a cigarette factory where their graduates on packaging lines account for more than 30 per cent of all workers, and there is a college in Shanghai that only hires security guards with postgraduate degrees. After more than 40 years of reform and opening up, China has gradually achieved the dual

transformation of modernisation and marketisation, but the uneven distribution of resources has exacerbated interest differentiation and social stratification, and the irrational structure of social strata has seriously hindered people's pursuit of a better life and threatened the sustainable, healthy and stable development of the social and economic system. Therefore, the new problem of social management in this century is the creation of a sufficiently open social class structure and overcoming the reproduction of social classes [see; 24: p. 30].

Education is a key capital formation strategy because it contributes to human capital, social justice and sustainable growth. Education has long been believed to help people overcome class differences and achieve higher social status. The average education level of China's working-age population is 10.9 years, and the overall enrolment rate of higher education, as we have already mentioned, reaches nearly 60% (according to the results of the National Education Statistics). Higher education in China has reached a stage of high popularity, making it increasingly difficult to achieve "class reversal" through education. "The 1959 generation was educated as if they had stepped on an escalator that automatically goes up," R. D. Putnam observed. - They could go up when they stood on it. But fifty years later, this escalator stopped when their descendants sat on it." [93; p. 291]. It is obvious that in the modern period education brings to hundreds of millions of families and their children the aspiration for class development, the desire for a better life. Therefore, by analysing the dialectical logic of education and social class structure, by proposing strategies to overcome the reproduction of social classes in education in the new times in terms of resource allocation, discipline construction, education management and thus optimising the system, we can contribute to the continuous expansion of opportunities to obtain quality educational resources for the disadvantaged classes and achieve their upward mobility.

Any social order must recognise and address the problem of the relationship between social classes, where the main issues are how the dominant class can maintain its current dominance in a sustainable social structure and how the disadvantaged class can overcome the reproduction of social classes. The improvement of the social class structure depends heavily on education as a fundamental method of enhancing human capital. However, the relationship between education and social class structure has been altered by the enormous social upheavals of the modern period.

According to the degree of possession of social resources, people can be divided into different social classes, and the life of each person bears the imprint of class [see: 111; p. 99]. T. Parsons wrote: "Education is the main way of giving individuals professional qualifications and social skills and at the same time fulfils the function of social stratification and social mobility. Especially in industrial societies, the factors acquired by an individual, centred on the element of education, are crucial for achieving upward social mobility" [88; p. 127]. P.A. Sorokin also believed that "in open societies there are more opportunities for individual upward class mobility, in contrast to closed societies, where the boundaries between different classes are fixed and there are fewer opportunities for vertical mobility ... Schools are a social lift for moving from the bottom of society to the top" [100; p. 260]. In other words, education is a way to achieve upward mobility of individuals. This statement illustrates the important role of education in social stratification and social mobility, and social class is the resources or prestige of an individual in relation to others. Some scholars have also analysed the social mobility function of education from the perspective of heterogeneous groups and concluded that education has a significant impact on an individual's acquisition of social status among different gender or age groups.

Since ancient times, China has had an educational ideology of "to be a scholar means to be an official", "to be a scholar in the field and to be a scholar in the hall of Heaven in the evening", etc. "The imperial examination system in ancient China served as a channel and means of achieving upward mobility for children from the lower strata of society", according to Pan Guangdan and Fei Xiaotong's analysis and study of this relationship in the 1940s [85; p. 11]. "Higher education is an important contributing factor to career development, which is directly related to a person's career advancement after entering society," writes Liu Jingming, who found "a highly significant relationship between diploma level and people's opportunities to enter the middle and upper white-collar classes in society" [72; c. 22]. According to Lu Xueyi and his colleague's research "on the relationship between education and occupational status at first employment, individuals with higher levels of education have relatively higher occupational status at that time, and this phenomenon has always existed regardless of historical periods". According to Zong Hao, "a higher level of education is associated with greater social resources, opportunities for upward mobility, and an increased likelihood of increasing one's social status" [116; p. 122]. Zhao Xin points out that "increased access to higher education enhances individual

capabilities of society members and increases their chances of moving up the social scale" [121; pp. 27-28]. Li Wanliang, in his study of the role of education on different paths of intergenerational mobility, suggested that "education makes a significant contribution to intergenerational upward or downward mobility of occupational status" [48; p. 62] [114; p. 63]. Zhou Xin found that "education significantly reduces the probability of downward intergenerational mobility and increases the probability of upward mobility" [137; p. 366].

Cohesion and exclusivity of groups with common educational conditions or sharing a common culture are all factors in the process of social stratification, which contribute to different educational conditions necessary to achieve a certain professional status, or conflict between different identity groups in the struggle for favourable resources [see: 119; p. 135]. The very term "reproduction" is an economic concept. According to K. Marx, "any society, if in it a part of the product is not constantly processed into means of production or new factors of production, will not be able to continue producing, that is, will not be able to reproduce" [82; p. 519]. The concept of reproduction of social classes is sociological. The sociological approach defines the reproduction of social classes as the process of capital accumulation and the transmission of class privileges from generation to generation. According to Collins, "society is an arena in which different interest groups compete with each other for wealth, power and prestige, and education is an important tool used by each group to realise its interests, so that the nature of schooling is largely determined by different identity groups" [54; c. 1]. Researchers such as Zhang Ming have demonstrated that "access to education depends on the socio-economic level of the family" [123; c. 19]. According to Liu Jingming's study, "survival education and prestige education show the relative advantage of the privileged class tends to decrease and increase, respectively" [73; p. 161]. Furthermore, Li Chunlin illustrated the "cultural reproduction" of how family background affects educational opportunities, arguing that "cultural capital has a cumulative effect on education and socialisation, which in turn contributes to the development of an individual's socio-economic status" [61; c. 55].

All of the above-mentioned scholars argue that there are significant inequalities in access to education, that to some extent the social status of the dominant class is transmitted from generation to generation through the institution of education, and that since members of the dominant class are often the largest beneficiaries of high-quality educational resources, education becomes an inertial mechanism for maintaining the status quo.

In his report to the 19th CPC Congress, Party President Xi Jinping said that market socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and the main social contradiction at this stage is the contradiction between people's growing demand for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development. With the rapid development of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data and the Internet of Things, and the changing concept of social employment, new industries and new occupational groups are emerging, as well as a new type of labour force closely related to new technologies and different from traditional industries. The new industries provide people with more employment choices, promote economic restructuring and social class mobility, and at the same time make new demands on the labour skills and human capital development of employees.

In August 2021, the 10th Conference of the Central Finance and Economic Commission was held under the chairmanship of President Xi Jinping to focus on the lasting growth of shared prosperity. The growth of the middle-income group and the formation of a modern social class structure, driven by a skilled and educated working class, are important symbols and factors contributing to shared prosperity. The middle class is a powerful force for social stability and peaceful growth. However, only less than 30 per cent of Chinese citizens have a middle-class salary, and the formation of an "olive" social class structure is still a long way off. Promoting the interests of all social classes often turns out to be a zero-sum game with no mutual benefit due to differences in resource ownership, and promoting the interests of the dominant class often comes at the expense of infringing on the reasonable interests of the disadvantaged class [see: 109; p. 88].

The deep involvement of power and capital in modern class mobility has exacerbated the undermining of justice by privilege, which has led to a certain degree of "closure" and "solidification" of China's class structure, and the problem of social class reproduction has become more prominent [see: 76; p. 109]. Therefore, education should be more effective in increasing the proportion of middle-income groups, overcoming the alienation of the social class structure in the new times [see: 16; p. 43], overcoming the precursors of social class reproduction and achieving the goal of universal prosperity for all people.

Of the 293 million students currently enrolled in Chinese universities, less than 20% are from rural and underdeveloped areas, with about 60% of them coming from self-improvement and national special programme. If it were not for the national special

programme, the number of students from rural areas would not exceed 10% among Tsinghua University students. In recent years, the proportion of rural students at Peking University has dropped to about 20 per cent compared to the 1980s to mid-1990s, when it consistently exceeded 30 per cent. In 2020, rural students accounted for 54.6 per cent of the total number of students in the country, but less than 20 per cent of rural students attended Peking University, accounting for 45.4 per cent of the total number of students. In contrast, more than 80% of urban students attend Peking University, and urban students are much more likely than rural students to attend Peking University [see: 75; p. 19]. The complexity of the process and uncertainty of educational outcomes, as well as the uneven distribution of access to education among different segments of the population, contribute to serious social stratification. As a result, education is largely the basis for reproducing the existing social stratification in Chinese society.

2.2. The current state of educational inequality in the CHN in the context of geographical (regional) differences, income differences and university differences

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese scholars and Chinese society in general have paid great attention to the issue of education for children from low-income families. The expansion of higher education in the late 1990s and the reform and opening up of China in the late 1970s are directly related to this. Children from low-income rural families are referred to as "*humble students*" in China, and academic research has focused on their educational opportunities, access to schooling, and social mobility. The relationship between the state, society and the individual has changed significantly in two key areas as a result of reform and opening up. The state and society have begun to pay considerable attention to the survival of groups represented by the underclass and to opportunities for individual social mobility. Firstly, the social structure and social stratification changed, from the original "two classes and one stratum" to the current ten-stratum structure of Chinese society [see: 66; p. 57]. Secondly, in a society whose conditions and prospects of life are conditioned by the possession of a higher education diploma, as the examination system and academic standards develop, academic efficiency is gradually replaced by egalitarianism, differences in resource endowment widen the gap between the educational opportunities available to children from different families. Higher education opportunities across the class divide also show a widening trend [see: 144; p.

22]. Finally, socially, children from the bottom of the social class are disadvantaged, and achieving upward social mobility is challenging.

To illustrate the challenges faced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing education and social mobility, online media today often draw on real-life cases and make noise about "education and social stratification" with clever headlines such as the discussion of "small town problem solvers"⁵, "class travellers"⁶ and other groups. The discussion of 'class travellers' and 'small town problem solvers' describes the barriers to education and social mobility faced by young people from low-income backgrounds. The social phenomenon described by the phrase "it is difficult for a poor family to produce noble children" deepens and expands, which not only increases the public's awareness of social stratification and causes irritation because of the impossibility of changing it, but also increases social tensions. "Preparing for success"⁷, striving for famous schools, choosing housing in school districts⁸ - none of this is for children from lower class families. Perceptions of the "futility of schooling"⁹ are still prevalent in many poorer parts of the country.

The Dictionary of Modern Chinese defines "hanmen" as a poor and modest family. Chinese experts sometimes refer to young people from rural areas as "Hanmen scholars", given the socio-economic realities of contemporary China [see: 110; p. 38]. This

⁵ "Small-town problem solver": originally it sounded like a kind of self-deprecation. Those who graduated from prestigious schools are dissatisfied with their current life ("I can't do anything else but problem solving; I'm not good in any other aspects") because in China, the college entrance exam involves solving a large number of similar types of problems and similar types of questions). Nowadays, the term "small-town problem solvers" rather reflects the typical condition of today's youth: no capital, no background, no status. Born in rural areas or small towns, graduating or studying at renowned universities - the only thing they can do is to make tireless efforts. [see: 135; p. 73].

⁶ "Class Travellers" (moving from one social class to another): the essence of class travellers is social mobility, which specifically refers to children from poor families who have achieved upward mobility through their own efforts to change identity and class. But as long as the various ties to the family of origin remain, the inferiority complex and insecurity will have a great impact. Class travellers usually have strong motivation, but after achieving immediate goals, they experience confusion and uncertainty due to the lack of cultural capital in the family of origin and social experience. As a result, one of the main characteristics of this group of people is a sense of split between their original class and the target class of upward mobility [see: 118; p. 7].

⁷ "Preparing for Success": it is an acronym that means moving towards excellence, acquiring good habits and developing better qualities.

⁸ School neighbourhood housing: these are residential houses located near a "good" school. In China, good schools usually have strict admission policies and high quality educational resources, so many parents want to send their children to such schools. To increase the chances of their children getting into a prestigious school, many parents prefer to buy property in the school zone.

The advantage of buying a property in a school zone is that students who live in a school zone have a better chance of being enrolled in a good neighbourhood school that can provide better educational resources and developmental opportunities for their children. In addition, properties in a school zone usually have a higher value and return on investment because the reputation and demand for good schools drives property prices up.

⁹ "The uselessness of learning": it refers to a set of negative attitudes and views about education, knowledge, learning held by certain people or groups of people when assessing social phenomena because of their complexity and because of their lack of understanding.

characterisation implies that the social reality of unequal distribution of resources in the urban-rural divide is conditioned by rural origins and is a by-product of the household registration system. The challenge today is to pay more attention to the history of each individual family, not just its physical location. It is important to look more closely at the actual characteristics of each family, including such things as its structure, ethnicity, income, parental culture [see: 74; p. 83] [see: 142; p. 59]. A clear definition of the term "modest (i.e. low-income) schoolchildren" is necessary due to the geographical differences in rural China and the polarisation of the well-off and the poor in rural society against the background of the country's social development. Also, a precise definition of the term "poor students" allows us to understand the original intention of the policy of admitting poor students, known as "national special programme", "special programme for colleges and universities", and "local special programme". 'Poor students' are usually understood as 'children of farmers' [see: 85; p. 12] and "the first generation of college students" [see: 11; p. 101]. In this paper, "poor students" refers to students from rural families with great economic hardship.

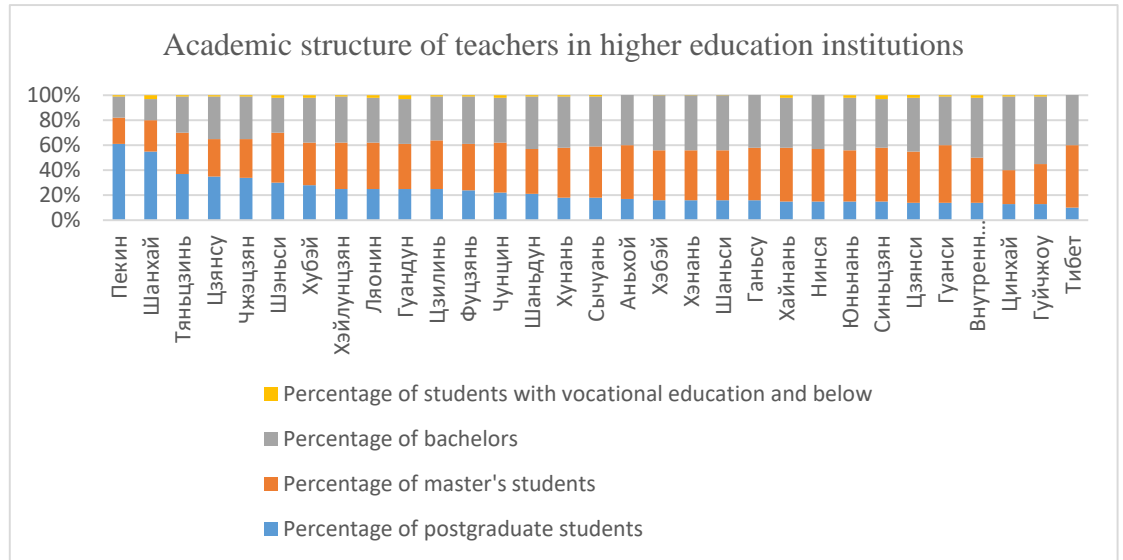
Current empirical research has found that most "poor students" enrol in local colleges and universities. It is difficult for them to enter the leading national colleges and universities. This is one of the major problems of access to education for "students from poor families" (compared to those from advantaged classes). In addition, they continue to experience difficulties in changing identities when applying to prestigious schools and universities, which is the 'hidden harm' that class divisions cause to people [see: 140; p. 31]. Many 'modest students' enrolled in prestigious schools and universities who have prospects but no future. How does the situation of the 'modest family' affect the educational opportunities and access of young people from the lower strata of society in contemporary China experiencing the rise of higher education? In the following sections of the thesis, this topic will be analysed and examined in terms of geographical (regional) factors, the family/parental wealth gap, and the differences of the universities themselves.

1. Geographical (regional) disparities: unequal access to "good universities" for urban and rural students

The urban-rural gap, the imbalance between the distribution of educational resources and inherent economic and cultural development underlie the differences in the starting points of individual education depending on the territorial distribution. For people with the

lowest social position, the subjective desire to obtain higher education is lower than the real possibility, as P. Bourdieu notes in his work "Heirs, Students and Culture" [see: 86; p. 6]. Chinese researchers have also found that "lower educational achievements of parents in lower-class families are the main reason for the cultural characteristics of the lower class" [9; p. 188], for example, "lower educational aspirations of parents towards their children compared to urban families" [145; p. 83]. In China's rural cultures in the transition period, traditional family structures are disintegrating, and there is a significant migration of young people from the labour force, leaving many children unsupervised when they are very young. Gaps in family upbringing of children are due to the low level of education of elders and the absence of paternity or maternity. Some adolescents, as a result of lack of nurturing and guidance from elders, do not have moral control over their behaviour, making them more likely to commit crimes and drop out of school. One of the key factors here is the "demonstration effect" that the upbringing of children from lower social strata has on other adolescents. The differences between urban and rural schools in terms of quantity and quality of education are evident: "China's social structure consists of a dualistic system of urban and rural areas. China's 'urban-rural dualism' refers not only to the dual economic structure of urban and rural areas, but also to the dual social structure of urban and rural areas, which also reflects the duality of urban-rural relations, with rural areas being subordinate to urban areas" [129; p. 47]. The dual urban-rural system leads to an imbalance in economic development, and the migration of teachers to the cities causes an influx of rural teachers with high level of teaching and good business qualities to urban schools, even from less developed cities to developed ones. At the same time, the quality of teaching in rural schools may not be guaranteed. Figure 4 shows the differences in the academic structure of university teachers in 31 regions in China. The higher the proportion of highly educated teachers, the more developed the region is and the more attractive it is for talent inflow [see: 30].

Diagram 4. Regional differences in the academic structure of university teachers



As shown in Diagram 4, the regions with the highest proportion of PhDs among Chinese university professors are Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin.

While with the support of family economic capital rural families can help students gain autonomy in school choice and select schools with good teaching quality, in reality very few rural families are able to help their children choose a school, and most rural students end up in the nearest school during the compulsory schooling period. The expression "one step to catch up, one step to overtake"¹⁰ " means that the quality of the school a child currently attends directly affects the quality of the subsequent level of school he or she will be able to attend. Furthermore, the spatial constraints imposed on rural children by the household registration system make it difficult for them to make decisions about quality educational resources, encouraging them to sink further into the mire of social inertia. In today's "diploma society"¹¹ ", a diploma from a "good university" can mean wealth, social status and cultural capital, in addition to a sign of high talent. "Good" university is something like buying a first-class ticket for a long journey, while a "bad" university is like

¹⁰ One step to catch up, one step to overtake: it's a proverb. It says that if you fall behind at a crucial stage, you will never catch up and will fall into passivity.

¹¹ Diploma society: it is a society in which academic qualification is the only criterion for evaluating people. In modern China, with the sharp increase in the number of university students, master's degree holders and doctoral degree holders since the beginning of the 21st century, job seekers are forced to obtain a high level of education in order to have a better career and occupy a higher social status, which has gradually formed the trend of academic qualifications and diplomas. Since academic qualification determines occupation, status, attitude, promotion, evaluation and social relationships, people have developed this concept: level of academic qualification = level of social status = level of value of a person. This concept has led to people desperately seeking high academic qualifications and admission to prestigious universities, which has led to a mismatch between people's entry requirements, schools' capabilities and society's objective needs for talented people, and has affected school education at all levels and in all types of education.

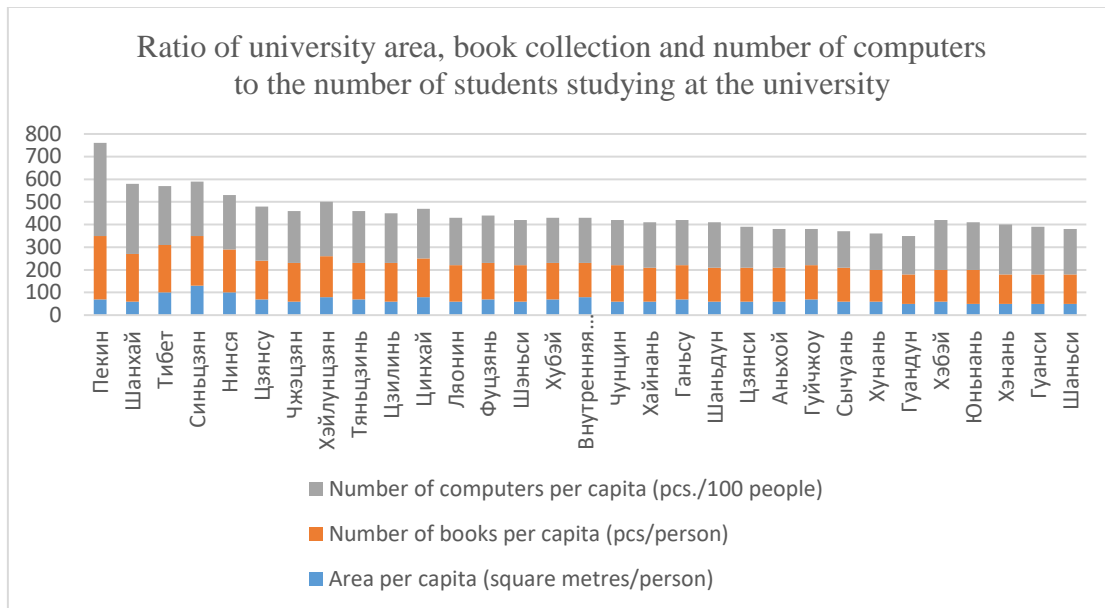
a ticket for travelling standing up. The dual socio-economic structure of urban and rural has objectively led to pronounced urban-rural differences in educational development throughout China's modernisation process. Recently, there has been a qualitative shift in the development of rural education, and both material and programme support of rural educational institutions has been significantly upgraded. However, it should be borne in mind that rural education is still the weakest link in the development of education in China, and the gap between rural and urban education is still quite large. As an example, college entrance examinations: every year, most of the best students come from the city, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for rural children to get into "good" educational institutions.

The backwardness of rural education has not been overcome despite the universal introduction of compulsory education, which gave an impetus to its development. Since higher education has become accessible to all, more and more rural children "jump the threshold of the farm¹²" and enter universities. As a result, getting into a good university has become more and more of a challenge [see: 133; p. 3]. The growth of colleges and universities has given children from low-income families the opportunity to go to college, but has not increased their chances of getting a quality higher education. Even on the contrary: the more opportunities they have, the harder it is to achieve them [see: 71; p. 120]. It is widely recognised that there is a significant difference in the level and quality of education between urban and rural areas, with urban schools having better teaching materials and higher level teachers, while rural schools lag behind metropolitan areas in terms of computer and software [see: 109; p. 88]. Diagram 5 shows the differences in the asset distribution of colleges and universities in 31 regions in China [see: 41]. The ratios of the area of colleges and universities, the number of books and computers to the number of students in colleges and universities in each region are used as indicators to measure the differences in the asset distribution of colleges and universities. The larger the ratio, the higher the level of university endowment in the region, the better the facilities of universities in the region; the smaller the ratio, the lower the level of university endowment in the region, the worse the facilities of universities in the region. The overall quality of education of rural students is generally not as high as that of urban students. Rural children are at a distinct disadvantage in the competition for family cultural capital; most "poor

¹² Jumping the farm threshold: This means that children from rural areas who study hard will be admitted to an ideal university, and when they excel in their studies, they will successfully "jump the farm gate", and parents hope that their children can successfully get rid of the status of farmers.

students" have only to work harder to access the same higher education opportunities. However, in an era of increasing investment in education, the lack of family cultural capital and the limitation of self-effort mean that many rural children simply cannot afford to go to college or pass the entrance exams for a "good university".

Diagram 5. Regional differences in the distribution of assets in the higher education system

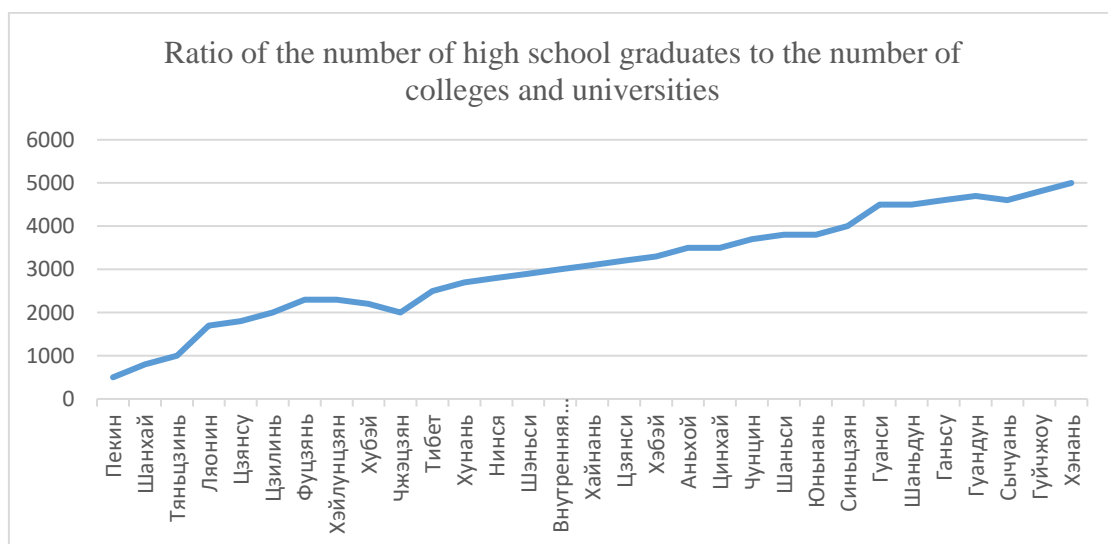


As shown in Diagram 5, the regions with the highest distribution of university assets are Beijing, Shanghai and Tibet, while the regions with the lowest distribution of university assets are Sichuan, Guangdong and Hunan.

Today, there is a real problem of difficulty in accessing quality higher education for students from less developed regions. According to the public assessment, only 137 colleges and universities were recognised as the best ('double first class') until 2021. In 2022, this number has risen to 147, but the total number of colleges and universities is still insufficient. The supply of high quality higher education has not yet kept pace with the growing demand. The resources of high-end higher education are mainly concentrated in Beijing, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai and other economically developed regions. This disadvantages "double first-class" colleges and universities in economically underdeveloped regions. In 2022, the ministries of education, finance and the National Development and Reform Commission announced the establishment of new "double first-class" colleges and universities, which will mainly be located in Guangdong, Shanghai, Nanjing and other major cities. Historically, most of the country's high-quality higher

education resources have been channelled to the eastern coastal region, resulting in a significant regional disparity in higher education development between the central and western regions and the eastern coastal region. This disparity continues to increase over time [see: 103; p. 54]. In addition, since China has a strategy of "localised¹³" admission to tertiary education, children born in the economically advantaged eastern regions, where there are sufficient resources for quality tertiary education, have more opportunities for high-level tertiary education. Children from the less developed areas of the centre and west, on the other hand, do not have access to the same proportion of high-quality educational resources and their expectations of quality tertiary education are difficult to fulfil. As a result, they can only "look forward to admission to famous schools or universities¹⁴". Diagram 6 shows the differences in higher education resources among 31 regions in China [see: 41]. The ratio of high school graduates to higher education institutions in each region in 2022 is used as an indicator of the differences in higher education resources in that region. The smaller the ratio is, the more local higher education resources enjoyed by the region's high school graduates, and the more abundant the higher education resources in the region. Conversely, the larger the ratio, the fewer local tertiary resources enjoyed by the region's high school graduates and the more scarce the region's tertiary resources.

Diagram 6. Regional differences in higher education resources



¹³ "Localised": here: tied to a local (regional) territory.

¹⁴ "To look forward to admission to famous schools or universities": this is simply an extension of the Chinese idiom "to gaze and sigh", which originally meant to lament one's own insignificance before great things. It is now often used as a metaphor for what is beyond a person's power or ability and a sense of helplessness. "Looking forward to admission to famous schools or universities" means that a person can only look at a famous university but feel helpless because he or she cannot study there for his or her own reasons or other factors.

As shown in Figure 6, the areas with the richest higher education resources in China are Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, while the areas with the least higher education resources are Henan, Guizhou and Sichuan.

We have already pointed out that "in modern Chinese society, the presence of local hukou is not considered an advantage, but rather an obstacle" [130; p. 175]. Geographical factors cannot be changed, and political distortions exacerbate the unequal advantages of all strata of society in the distribution of educational resources, especially since the objective contradiction between supply and demand in education increases the tension in the struggle for resources, makes the development of higher education more susceptible to the intrusion and influence of capital and further exacerbates the disadvantage of students from less developed regions in the competition for educational choices.

2. Differences in family/parental income.

As higher education enters the stage of universalisation and people's opportunities to obtain higher education increase significantly, the influence of talent and effort on education attainment is relatively decreasing, and the importance of factors such as cultural capital and family capacity in allocating resources for high-quality higher education is increasing day by day [see: 10; p. 7]. The term "high-quality higher education" means, firstly, higher education of a high standard (educational institutions offering this type of education are usually built to the standard of "twice first-class"); secondly, it is higher education of a *special* standard (educational institutions offering this standard are usually colleges and universities with distinctive features). Both kinds of colleges are considered "good universities" in the higher education market in terms of employment. All universities in China are divided into five categories, including the so-called "good universities". Whether they graduated from a so-called "good university" or a regular university, there are significant differences in the qualifications obtained by children from urban and rural areas. For more details, see Tables 1 and 2 [see: 40].

Table 1. Differences between rural and urban areas in the educational profile of university graduates

	City	Village
Vocational training	19.8%	34.3%
Bachelor's degree	69.0%	58.0%
Academic Master's programme	6.5%	5.0%
Professional Master's Degree	3.4%	2.2%
Postgraduate studies	1.2%	0.5%

Table 2. Differences between urban and rural areas in the form of educational institution for tertiary graduates

	City	Village
Universities included in projects 985 and 211	36.7%	18.3%
Regular undergraduate programmes	40.7%	43.1%
Vocational colleges	15.2%	30.4%
Educational institutions established on the basis of public funds	3.6%	6.6%
Independent colleges and universities	3.7%	1.5%

Tables 1 and 2 show that there is a significant difference between the graduates of urban and rural colleges in terms of academic performance. The type of graduating institution and educational status of urban college graduates is significantly higher than that of rural college graduates.

In terms of economic opportunities, parents' education level and social status - poor and rich - families differ markedly from each other when looking at the competition for university admission. As a result, children from poor families and children from rich families get different results in the struggle for education. The amount of money a family spends on education depends on its financial situation, and children from wealthy families spend much more than children from poorer families. Social ties correlate with parents' educational attainment and social status. Strong social resources provide young people with additional opportunities to choose quality higher education and also facilitate the acquisition of significant educational resources. Another important component of

increasing returns to education is parental involvement in their children's education. Parents with higher levels of education have a better understanding of their children's interests and invest more purposefully in their children's development. This allows children to develop holistically and build stronger study and test-taking skills. This gives them an advantage on college entrance exams and increases their chances of admission to "quality" and "special" universities. It is important for children from low-income families to improve their test-taking and study skills. For children from low-income families, college entrance exams are a "one-way ticket" to the top class, without which admission to one of the universities is impossible. In case of failure, further advancement will be very problematic. It should be emphasised that admission to a "good university" today is determined not only by cultural achievements demonstrated in entrance examinations, but also by many other factors. Sports and arts are also taken into account. Children from affluent families use their resources and connections to choose a sports or arts specialisation at a better university. They also have more opportunities for social internships and apprenticeships, translating the family's serious cultural capital into a top-notch education for their children. "Children of the poor" are at a disadvantage from the very beginning of the educational competition, as these economically disadvantaged families are unable to improve the overall quality of their children's education while ensuring their children's basic educational needs [see: 14; p. 61].

Undoubtedly, children from low-income families possess such traits as hard work, perseverance and other positive qualities. However, in higher education, these positive traits lose their initial environmental dependence, making it more difficult for children from poor families to continue to achieve higher levels of financial success. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds will find it much more difficult to compete with their classmates from wealthier families, even after more than a decade of diligent study. The obvious difference between urban and rural students is even more evident in terms of post-college employment, as shown in Diagrams 7, 8, which illustrate the differences in employment between urban and rural college graduates in two dimensions - college graduates' starting salaries and job satisfaction - based on data from the 2017 CGSS China General Social Survey [see: 40]. Regarding job satisfaction, five gradations are distinguished. "very satisfied", "satisfied", "satisfied", "average", "dissatisfied" and "very dissatisfied", corresponding to scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Diagram 7. Differences between urban and rural areas in starting salaries of university graduates

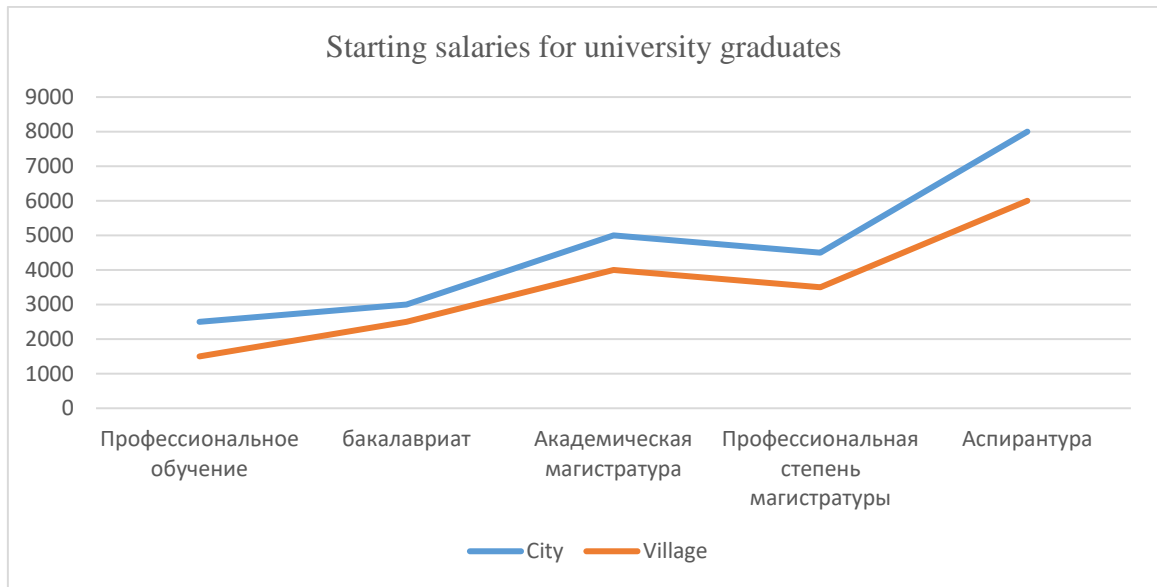
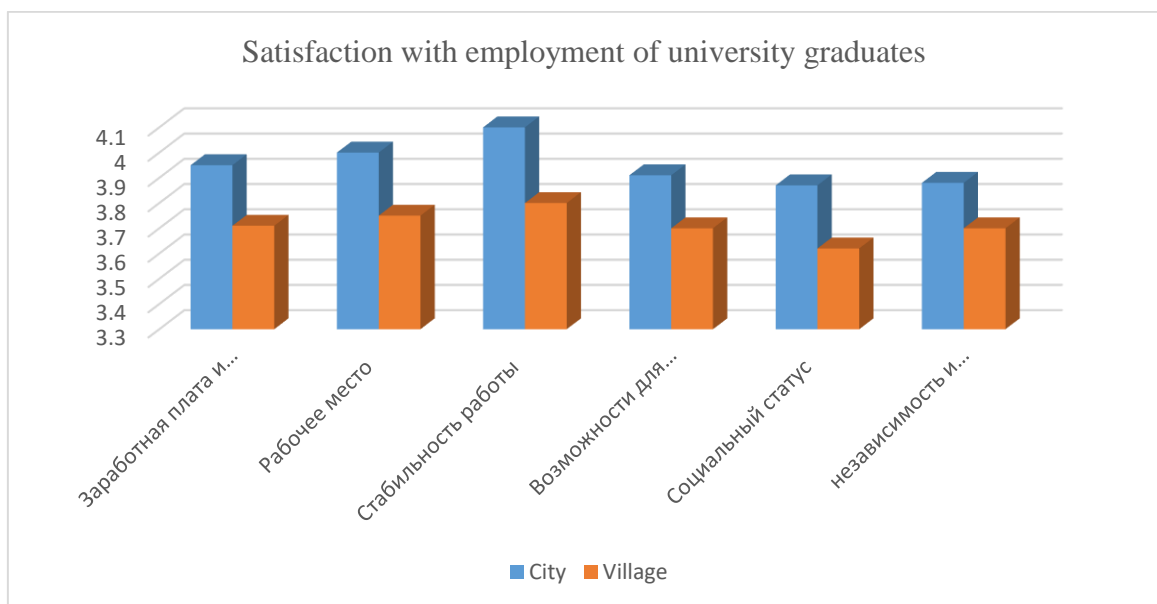


Diagram 8. Differences between urban and rural areas in satisfaction with employment of college graduates



The results of the study show that with the same level of education, the starting salary of rural college graduates is significantly lower than that of urban college graduates, and job satisfaction of rural college graduates is lower than that of urban college graduates on all dimensions.

3. Differences of universities.

The majority of schoolchildren from low-income families do not have the opportunity to "change their fate through education" after graduating from secondary school and entering "good" universities, and are forced for many reasons to join society at a young

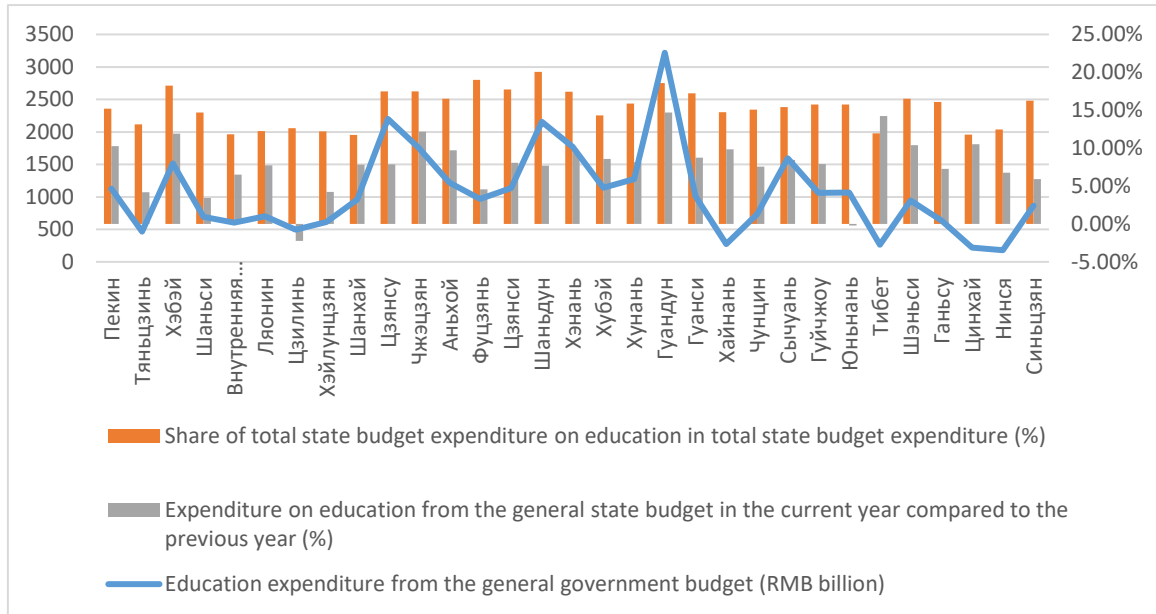
age. Some children from low-income families enter universities and technical colleges to develop their professional abilities. Despite the positive outlook on the future of vocational education, many students nevertheless face difficulties in social advancement. However, this is an inevitable result of the development of higher education, and they still find it difficult to enter leading academic universities. Only some exceptional, hard-working children from lower-class families enter universities and realise their dream of higher education. Although the mass model of education tends to raise the level of education for all, and degree inflation makes the expression "students everywhere" familiar, affluent children from middle-class families still make up the majority of students in elite schools [see: 152; p. 1671]. Although they made up 70-75%¹⁵ of all university students in 2011-2015, only 3.37% of "first-generation students"¹⁶ were enrolled in "Project 985" institutions, 8.59% in "Project 211", and 45.58% in community colleges and universities [see: 138; p. 37]. The development of a new "theory of futility of study" at the stage of mass education, further inflation of higher education diplomas increased the concerns of lower class families about investing in education, and also created a sense of injustice in obtaining it. As a result of the presence of appropriate cultural symbols, such as a diploma from a prestigious institution and a flamboyant style of interaction with others more in line with the preferences of recruiters, an individual's social mobility through a degree appeared to be linked to their background and the quality of their CV in the graduate society. Thus, despite the fact that an increasing number of young people from lower social strata receive higher education, it is still difficult for them to move up the social scale using the resource of education.

The problem of educational inequality in China is most often reflected in the unbalanced distribution of educational resources, which can be more accurately illustrated by using financial investment in education in different regions as a starting point. Figures 9-12 show official data from the Statistical Yearbooks of China for the period 2019-2022 for the 31 major provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government (excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) from the National Education Expenditure Statistics data [see: 161]: Diagram 9 [see: 162], Diagram 10 [see: 163], Diagram 11 [see: 164], Chart 12 [see: 165].

¹⁵ The data are from the China College Student Survey (CCSS) project led by Professor Shi Jinghuang of the Graduate School of Education at Tsinghua University.

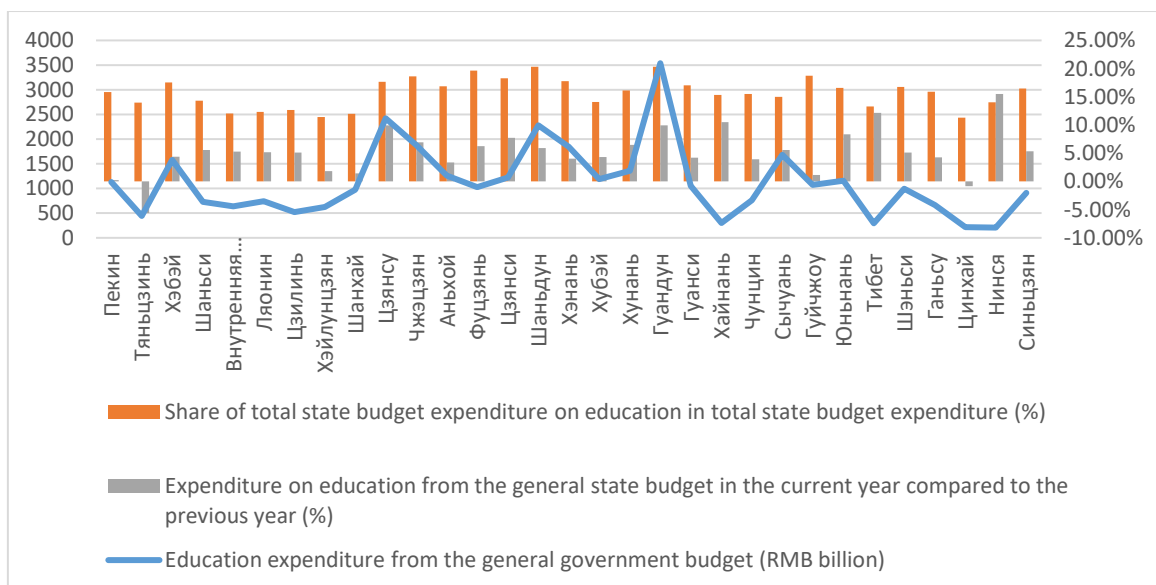
¹⁶"First Generation Student": this is the first person in a family to attend university.

Diagram 9. Total State Budget: Education Funding in 2019.



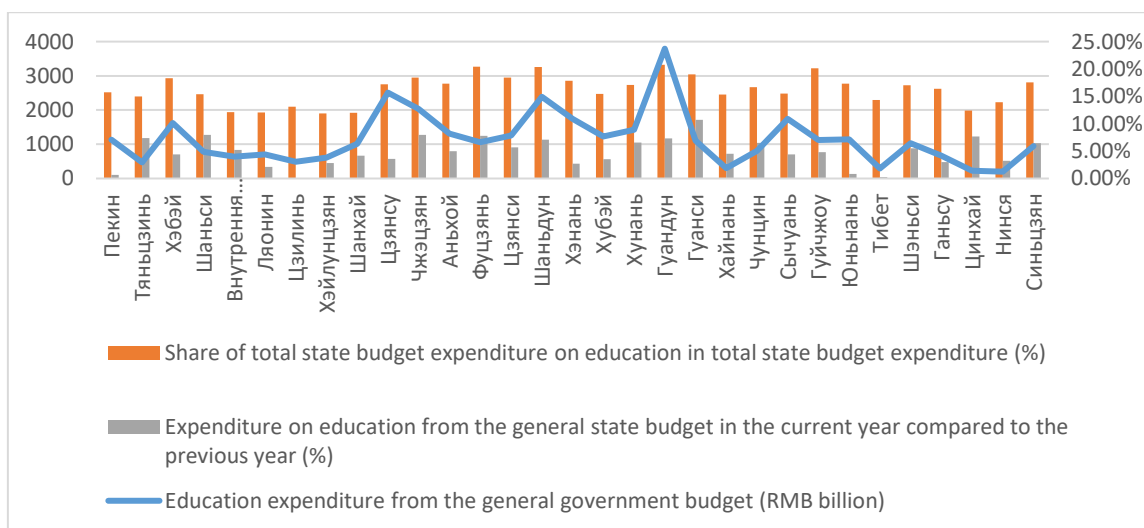
According to Diagram 9, Municipalities directly under the central government and some large education provinces invest more in education than the vast majority of provinces in China. In the northern region, the financial investment of the municipalities of Beijing and Tianjin is almost the same as that of the entire province of Hebei; and the combined financial investment of the three northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning is not even comparable to that of one of the southern provinces, Zhejiang or Jiangsu. In the north, Shandong and Henan provinces stand out, but because of their large populations and large number of universities, the actual average financial investment of each prefecture-level city is not comparable to cities such as Beijing or Tianjin.

Diagram 10. Total State Budget: Financing of Education in 2020.



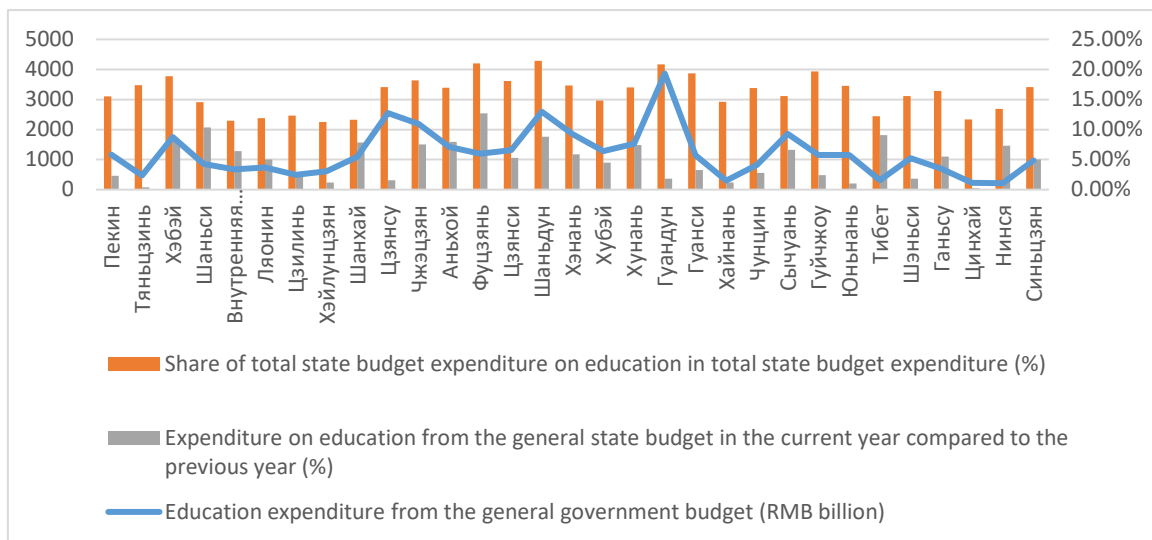
China has five autonomous regions, all four of which, with the exception of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, are located in the north and north-west of the country. Of these four autonomous regions, the total education budget is only slightly higher than that of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region because of the inclusion of Xinjiang, which is supported by government policy. In the column "Education expenditure from the total state budget in the current year compared to the previous year", compared to 4.2 per cent in Guangxi, Tibet is 12.26 per cent and Ningxia is 15.53 per cent, a difference of about 10 per cent, which strongly emphasises the imbalance in education expenditure and the unbalanced distribution of education resources among different regions.

Diagram 11. Total State Budget: Education Financing in 2021.



According to Diagram 11, despite belonging to the same region, the financial expenditure on education also varies greatly due to the different policies of education resource allocation. In the southern region, Hainan and Guangdong provinces are separated only by the Qiongzhou Strait, but in the three-year statistical table for 2019-2021, the financial expenditure on education in Guangdong province is 10 times that of Hainan province. Shandong and Liaoning Provinces, located in the eastern coastal region and northern China, are separated only by the Bohai Sea, but Shandong Province's financial expenditure on education is almost three times that of Liaoning Province.

Diagram 12. Total State Budget: Education Financing in 2022.



Looking at the total state education budget by region in 2022, Guangdong, Jiangsu and Shandong occupy the top three spots, allocating more than 250 billion yuan. Twelve provinces and two municipalities directly under the central government, including Zhejiang, Henan, Sichuan, Hebei, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei, Yunnan, Beijing, Guizhou, Guangxi, Fujian, Shanghai and Shaanxi, will spend between 100 and 200 billion yuan. Of the regions listed, with the exception of Shandong, Henan, Hebei, Shaanxi and Beijing, the rest being located in the southern and eastern parts of China, Shandong, Henan and Hebei, with their large populations and large number of colleges and universities, have also been much less effective in terms of the actual effect of financial investment in education than other regions. Not surprisingly, the municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai, due to their special position in China (political and cultural centres as well as centres of economic gravity), spend more on education.

From the above four charts 9-12, it can be seen that the current distribution of educational resources in China can be visualised using national education expenditure as a starting point. The overall picture is an imbalance between East and West, between North and South, between regions supported by national policies and other regions, and between mega-developed cities and other cities, which can generally be characterised as inequality between territories. Of course, the unequal distribution of educational resources between regions is analysed not only at the macro level of the country, but also in terms of the fees charged by different universities in different regions for different majors, as well as the costs of the daily life of students. The table below summarises the fees for representative

provinces and cities and representative professions in 2023 [see: 30] [see: 165] [see:166]
(see Table 3):

Table 3. *University tuition fees and fees for different specialisations in representative provinces/cities in 2023.*

Province/city	Current tuition prices
<i>Shanghai</i>	<p><i>On April 17, 2023, Shanghai Municipal Organisation carried out the optimization of public colleges and universities to form the mechanism of fee hearing to adjust the basic tuition fee standards for humanities to no more than 6,500 yuan/student/academic year, science, technology and physics classes basic tuition fee standards to no more than 7,000 yuan/student/academic year, medical basic tuition fee standards to no more than 7,400 yuan/student/academic year, arts basic tuition fee standards. The average tuition fees of public colleges and universities are adjusted from 5,420 yuan/student, academic year, to 7,215 yuan/student, academic year, with an adjustment rate of about 33%. After the adjustment, the tuition fee costs for new students have increased, and the average additional cost will be about RMB 1,795 per student per academic year (for two semesters). The new fee policy is proposed to be implemented from the autumn academic year 2023.</i></p>
<i>Jilin</i>	<p><i>On 17 March 2023, Jilin Province issued the Notice on Structural Adjustment of Tuition Fees for Students of Public General Education Colleges and Universities in Jilin Province, which structurally adjusted the tuition fee standards and set the upper limit of basic tuition fees to be RMB 4,600 for humanities, RMB 4,800 for social sciences, RMB 5,000 for natural sciences, agriculture and physical education, RMB 5,400 for engineering and RMB 5,600 for medical sciences per student</i></p>

<p><i>Sichuan</i></p>	<p><i>On 18 January 2023, the Sichuan Provincial Development and Reform Commission published the announcement of the hearing on the adjustment of the tuition fee standard of public colleges and universities in Sichuan Province (2nd), proposing to adjust the tuition fee standard of humanities, natural sciences and medical universities from the autumn academic year of 2023 onwards. After the adjustment, the tuition fees of humanities universities will be 4800 yuan per year, natural sciences and engineering universities will be 5200 yuan per year (both increased by 1100 yuan); medical universities will be 5800 yuan per year (800 yuan per year for clinical medicine, 1700 yuan per year for non-clinical medicine. Year, non-clinical medicine increased by 1700 yuan/student - year).</i></p>
<p><i>Shanxi</i></p>	<p><i>In August 2022, the Shaanxi Provincial Development and Reform Commission, the Provincial Finance Department, the Provincial Education Department and the Provincial Market Supervision Administration announced the items and standards of fees and charges for ordinary colleges and universities for autumn 2022 in Shaanxi Province. Specifically, the tuition fees for full-time public students (students enrolled in the class of 2021 and subsequent academic years) are RMB5,000 per academic year for humanities majors, RMB6,000 per academic year for science and engineering majors, RMB6,500 per academic year for medical majors, RMB11,000 per academic year for theoretical arts majors, RMB14,000 per academic year for practical arts majors. The tuition fees for relevant specialities in some schools may be increased by a maximum of 7-10% based on the above standards for the same specialities.</i></p>
<p><i>Shandong</i></p>	<p><i>In August 2022, the Shandong Provincial Development and Reform Commission, the Provincial Department of Finance and the Department of Education jointly issued the "Notice on</i></p>

	<p><i>the Clarification of Fee Standards for Higher Education Institutions", which clarifies the basic tuition standards for undergraduate, college and university per student per academic year: 4,000 yuan for majors in literature, law, history, philosophy and education, 4,500 yuan for majors in science, engineering, agronomy, economics, management, and majors in physical education and sports. 4,500 yuan, 5,400 yuan for majors in medicine, 8,000 yuan for majors in art in non-art colleges and universities (6,000 yuan for majors in art theory and other majors enrolled according to art categories). The new tuition fees took effect from 1 September 2022.</i></p>
<p><i>Anhui</i></p>	<p><i>In July 2021, Anhui Provincial Development and Reform Commission, Anhui Provincial Department of Finance, Anhui Provincial Department of Education issued a document on the adjustment of Anhui Provincial State Normal Colleges and Universities student learning standards, after the adjustment, the new standard is divided into university-grade college learning standards and university-grade college learning standards. For example, in university-grade colleges and universities: 4900 yuan per student per academic year for humanities, 5200 yuan per student per academic year for natural sciences, 5500 yuan per student per academic year for medicine, 8000 yuan per student per academic year for arts. Anhui University, 5000 yuan per academic year for humanities majors, 5400 yuan per academic year for natural sciences; University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei University of Technology, general professional majors, 5500 yuan per academic year.</i></p>
<p><i>Liaoning</i></p>	<p><i>In March 2021, the Liaoning Provincial Development and Reform Commission, the Provincial Department of Finance and the Provincial Department of Education jointly issued the Notice on the Adjustment of the Tuition Policy for Students of</i></p>

	<p><i>Provincial Public General Education Colleges and Universities, in which they optimised the tuition structure for students of public general education colleges and universities in four categories: arts, history, science and technology, medicine and arts, and determined the upper limit of the standard of tuition for each student</i></p>
Henan	<p><i>In June 2020, the Henan Provincial Development and Reform Commission, the Provincial Finance Department and the Provincial Education Department jointly issued the Notice on the Adjustment of Tuition Fee Standards of Public General Education Colleges and Universities, which clarifies that a new tuition fee standard will be introduced for new students enrolled in public general education colleges and universities from the new academic year in autumn 2020. The specific standards are adjusted as follows: bachelor of arts and sciences, 4,400 yuan per student per year; science and engineering, 5,000 yuan per student per year; medical class, 5,500 yuan per student per year; and art class, 8,000 yuan per student per year. At the same time, the independent price-setting power of colleges and universities was expanded accordingly, allowing colleges and universities to independently determine their own teaching standards within a set range.</i></p>
Hebei	<p><i>In July 2018, Hebei Province reformed the tuition fee formation mechanism of public general education colleges and universities. The standard of student tuition fees was adjusted accordingly. It was: 4,600 yuan per student per year for arts and science categories, 4,900 yuan per student per year for natural sciences and 5,200 yuan per student per year for medicine. Arts and sports is 8000 yuan per student per year.</i></p>

<p><i>The five autonomous regions of China</i></p>	<p><i>Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the average tuition cost of colleges and universities is 3000-3500/student per academic year; Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the average tuition cost of colleges and universities in the region is 3200-4500/student per academic year; Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the average tuition cost of colleges and universities in the region is 3000/student per academic year; Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the average tuition cost of colleges and universities in the region is 3500/student per academic year. (Since there are only four general higher education institutions in the Tibet Autonomous Region, one of which is located in Xiangyang City, Shaanxi Province, and is not representative, it was not included in the scope.)</i></p>
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Due to the difference in geographical location and economic development level, the tuition fee standards of provinces, municipalities, autonomous regions of some colleges and universities are not the same. From 2018 to 2023, a number of provinces have issued documents to adjust the tuition fee standards of colleges and universities in their provinces. Colleges and universities in Anhui, Henan, Shandong, Shaanxi, Liaoning and many other provinces have announced tuition fee increases, mostly ranging from 20 to 35 per cent. It is clear that one of the main differences between public and private colleges and universities is the level of fees. Tuition fees at public colleges and universities are significantly lower than those at private colleges and universities, and therefore attract a large number of candidates in the battle for places at public universities. From the current summary of tuition fees in public colleges and university, it can be seen that in most colleges and universities, the total tuition fees mainly range between 5000-6000 yuan. At the same time, the level of tuition fees in fields such as arts, sports, etc. is much higher and the upper limit can be more than 100,000 yuan - that is, there is a wide range of tuition fees in different colleges and universities and in different fields of study. In terms of tuition fees at public colleges and universities in different provinces, those in Liaoning, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Jilin, Henan and others located in the north and west of China are relatively low. Fees at most public colleges and universities range from 500-1500 yuan per student per academic year. In China, university tuition fees are charged by academic year:

a student usually has to prepare 5000-8000 RMB for a year, while those studying creative or sports specialities have to prepare between 8000 and 15000 RMB. University tuition fees usually include tuition and living expenses. In addition, daily expenses (food, travel, etc.) must be taken into account, which usually range from 1,000 to 2,000 RMB per month. If the child is more frugal, excluding summer and winter holidays, the annual living expenses are almost the same as the tuition fee, which is about 5000 to 8000 yuan. Thus, it will take 10000-15000 yuan a year to study at a regular university. But these are only the basic expenses. For example, if the university is located in a metropolis such as Beijing, Shanghai or a new first-tier city such as Chengdu, Xi'an, this amount may only be enough for a couple of months.

2.3. Social barriers in China's education system and education policy

In addition to the above-mentioned factors of educational inequality in China, such as inequality between regions of the country, inequality in income and inequality in the distribution of educational resources, it is necessary to note the existence of a number of social barriers that prevent equal opportunities for access to quality education. These include the lack of necessary family cultural capital, and the deterioration of the educational situation for people from poor families, including enrolment in educational institutions.

1. Family background culture: lack of initial advantages for students from poor families

In his "theory of cultural capital" P. Bourdieu argues that since the cultural capital accumulated by fathers can be immediately transformed into educational achievements of children, the family as the primary environment of cultural capital production has a direct impact on the educational growth of children. First of all, the educational level of parents influences the trajectory of children's education and determines what the whole family expects and commits to from children's education. If parents have a high level of education, they show high expectations, make high demands on their children's education and are willing to make upfront investments in education. In addition, they are influenced by their family upbringing and have a strong attitudinal foundation. Therefore, even if children from upper-class families are less capable than their parents, they can still use the cultural capital accumulated by their fathers to find ways to develop themselves.

In contrast, parents from poor families tend to be less educated, unable to see education as an opportunity for development. They do not realise that education is an investment of

"one book per million profit"¹⁷ ". In their minds, the ideas of small farmers are still vaguely present, not realising that investment in education can yield good returns. In such families, due to the reality of the situation, immediate interests are the first priority, and since there are few expectations and long-term plans for children's education, it can be difficult to create a favourable environment for children's learning.

In addition, children's cultural capital is influenced by their parents' views on education. Some parents from economically disadvantaged families are unable to provide effective education for their children because they often lack sound educational ideas and teach their children in archaic ways. As a result, they not only fail to provide sound guidance to their children, but may also contribute to their children's loss of interest in learning. Some parents even hold "no-go" attitudes, limiting their children's ability to attend school in the hope that they will enter the labour force as soon as possible and start earning money to support the family. At the same time, parents' lack of access to up-to-date knowledge prevents them from keeping up with the times, which can also hinder their effective interaction with their children.

Finally, it should be emphasised that an essential component of cultural capital is a favourable family environment. Parents' interests and humanistic views can have a positive influence on their children in the area of family education. Poor families find it difficult to create a favourable learning environment for their children because the parents themselves do not have developed reading skills and the necessary cultural capital. Parents are the most important educators because they are in constant contact with their children from the moment they arrive, and their words and actions have a significant impact on young children. Parents from low-income families spend a lot of time and energy every day trying to make ends meet. As a result, they do not have enough time to spend with their children. They find it difficult to help them build real learning skills in their children. For this reason, the best opportunities for the younger generation to develop interests and hobbies are missed. Thus, low levels of cultural capital are a reality for economically disadvantaged households, making it difficult for children to develop aspirations for development and ultimately hindering aspirations for upward mobility.

¹⁷ One book per million profit, a Chinese idiom, means to invest the least amount of capital in pursuit of the greatest profit.

2. Imbalance in the distribution of educational resources: worsening of the educational situation for students from poor families

Although Chinese society has great cultural wealth, not everyone has access to it. Because of the disparity in the amount of cultural capital that exists in different regions, students living there may have very different educational experiences. Firstly, economic underdevelopment is now a major factor hindering the development of education in underdeveloped regions. As a result, students living in different regions have access to different educational resources. On the one hand, high-quality educational resources and environment in China are generally scarce and concentrated in economically developed regions. Economically backward areas often face shortage of educational resources, low quality teachers, and poor quality school equipment and software. On the other hand, stratification among the lower strata of Chinese society has increased and the phenomenon of "education-induced poverty"¹⁸ has emerged, arising from the need to spend money in the face of competitive consumption of educational services. Parents from poor families are forced to compete for diplomas so that their children can get higher education. To get their child into a reputable school, some parents take out loans or borrow money to rent (or even buy) property in the city, but such decisions are very risky and can lead to additional financial burden on the whole family. Also, in the current educational selection system, differences in family background and cultural capital cannot be ignored. Rich families have the opportunity to raise several generations of high-achieving students due to their advantages in economic development, while poor families have to face the harsh reality: "it is difficult to raise noble children in poor families".

Second, in terms of the distribution of cultural capital, education policy has reached a tipping point. Economically developed regions, in addition to their economic advantages, have similar benefits in educational practices. Because of the dominance of the 'localised' admission process, and because the eastern coastal region is home to most of the country's best colleges and institutes, students in this region naturally have access to higher-class educational resources. In the past, the state has also skewed the distribution of important educational resources in favour of the eastern region, resulting in significant disparities in

¹⁸ "Education-induced poverty" - means that the cost of education of family members (usually higher education) clearly exceeds the family's capacity, resulting in the actual standard of living of the family being below the national poverty standard. At the present stage, poverty is mainly not related to education expenditure at the compulsory education stage, but mainly due to higher education expenditure at secondary school and university level.

the distribution of these resources among students from different regions. Compared with economically developed regions, the total amount of cultural capital in backward regions is inherently in a state of deficit, and students are inevitably disadvantaged in their education. It can be said that backward regions have "innate flaws and acquired disadvantages" in terms of possessing and acquiring cultural capital. The distribution of public education resources in China favours the eastern developed regions, which disadvantages the modern educational base and teaching staff of less developed regions [see: 143; p. 90]. This skewed distribution of educational resources makes it difficult for students from underdeveloped regions to access the cultural capital of society and, as a result, increases the level of educational backwardness in these regions. In addition, it is more difficult for children from low-income families to break free from the shackles of their social stratum. A lot of effort must be made to do so.

At present, the conflict between public demand and supply in education is shifting from a structural conflict caused by the imbalance and insufficient provision of quality education to a general supply deficit. In April 2021, China's Ministry of Education released the benchmark report on the balanced growth of compulsory general education in the country in 2020. At the end of 2020, the basic balanced growth of compulsory education in counties was realised in 26 provinces and 2,809 counties, with the central and western regions accounting for 95.3% of the total. The problem of inequitable distribution of resources for compulsory education in China remains serious to date, and the existing social class system clearly reproduces itself.

It should be emphasised that, firstly, the differences in regional economic development have a direct impact on the differences in education level. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, in 2020, the total education expenditure in Beijing was 112.8 billion yuan, increasing by 0.23% over the year, and the total education expenditure per primary and secondary school student was 35411 yuan and 63603 yuan respectively. Meanwhile, in Qinghai Province, the total public education expenditure in 2020 was 21801 million yuan, down 0.85% year-on-year, and the total public education expenditure per pupil in primary and secondary schools was 15646 yuan and 19603 yuan respectively, accounting for only 44% and 30% of the total. The per capita education expenditure on junior high school students from the state budget was 15646 yuan and 19603 yuan, only 44% and 30%

compared to Beijing Municipality [see: 156]. It is not difficult to see that there is still a large gap in the distribution of China's educational resources in geographical terms.

The data of the seventh national census shows that in 2020, the urbanisation rate of China's resident population reached 63.89%, and the acceleration of urbanisation and China's long-standing urban-rural dual structure have accelerated the flow of rural labour force to the city. The social dilemma of "the city is crowded, townships are weak, villages are empty" has exacerbated the imbalance in the distribution of high-quality educational resources between urban and rural areas. In addition, the gap in the distribution of quality education between schools has become more prominent. During the ten years of the school cut and merger policy that began in May 2001 and ended in September 2012, the number of primary and secondary schools in rural China halved, Education ceased to be a tool for "changing destiny", and the problems of distant, difficult and expensive education became shackles for the upward mobility of the peasant class. Under the conditions of new social changes, the "imbalance and insufficiency" of educational resources characterise the real picture of what is happening in the educational sphere.

In July 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden of Compulsory Education Students and the Burden of Extracurricular Education" (hereinafter referred to as "Double Reduction"), as well as subject teaching and learning under the "Double Reduction" policy in education. The said policy has practically put an end to subject-based learning. It is obvious that students from families with higher income will have more opportunities to participate in extracurricular education than students from families with lower income, and they will have more choices. The inequality of educational opportunities and the gap between students from disadvantaged and privileged backgrounds will inevitably increase if more and more parents turn to out-of-school counselling, leading to a reduction or even withdrawal from schooling. Thus, quality educational resources are monopolised by the rich, not through the "back door", but precisely under the conditions of a "fair" education system, when money can buy quality educational resources, gain an advantage in all entrance exams, get into the best universities, create quality social networks, and find better opportunities for obtaining and continuing education. The split in the reproduction of social classes is exactly what is meant by the

term "Matthew effect" in education¹⁹. As a result of the social shifts that have occurred, the degree of differentiation of resources in education is becoming increasingly evident, which also makes it difficult to fully exploit the role of education in ensuring social mobility, when the dominant class monopolises resources for quality education.

3. inequalities in enrolment practices and talent selection: barriers to progression for students from low-income families

According to P. Bourdieu's "theory of cultural capital", "academic qualifications and diplomas are important institutionalised cultural capital" [see: 79; p. 13], and school is a key place where institutionalised cultural capital is transmitted. [see: 79; p. 13], and school is the key place where institutionalised cultural capital is transmitted. According to Bourdieu, the benefits of cultural capital created by the family "must be institutionalised through education, which not only reinforces class relations of production but also gives legitimacy to the production and transmission of hierarchies" [see: 19; p. 134]. In the context of education, parents' contribution to the cultural capital of the family has a significant impact on children. The cultural capital possessed by parents plays an important role in what influences their children in today's selection-oriented education system where everyone has to compete for a degree. Cultural capital is directly related to material wealth and well-being. Above all, parents' cultural capital conditions their children's school choice. The most common method of school admission in China at present is zoning, which on the one hand seems fair and reasonable, but at the same time makes it difficult for children from poor families to get into the best schools. Families with significant cultural capital can afford to spend a lot of money to buy modern school devices etc., can not only take the initiative to choose a quality school, but also invest more to help their children understand and pursue their own passions (which will give the child a greater advantage no matter where they are in their education). Families with low levels of cultural capital, on the other hand, find it difficult to afford the high costs of school choice; this forces their children to attend the local neighbourhood school or borrow textbooks from other institutions. Children from low-income families are unable to enrol in good schools and benefit from high-quality educational resources because of these inequalities in school choice, which in turn result from inequalities in family cultural capital. Academic achievement is greatly

¹⁹ "Matthew effect": refers to the phenomenon of unequal distribution of advantages, in which the party that already possesses them continues to accumulate and multiply them, while the other party, initially limited, is even more deprived and, therefore, has fewer chances for further success. The term itself was first proposed by R. Merton.

influenced by the education a pupil receives in school and if progress at one stage of education is inadequate, this will directly affect subsequent stages of further education [see: 115; p. 55]. Children from low-income families do not have the opportunity to choose an educational institution on their own, it is difficult for them to succeed in internships and employment. Students from well-off families enjoy the support of their families, which helps them to find more job options. Although aptitude is a major determinant of labour force participation, in some high-paying sectors of society, a high level of family wealth is largely required to enter employment, making it difficult for children from poor and middle-income families to access them.

Unequal access to schooling is to some extent the result of educational policies. Thus, despite urbanisation trends, the problem of school enrolment of children of migrant workers persists. Although the State is taking a number of measures to address this problem, it is still difficult for children of labour migrants to qualify for the same education as children in urban areas and in schools created specifically for them. This is due to the high level of mobility of migrant families and prevents most of their children who come to the cities from getting a good education.

Meanwhile, since the introduction of the university expansion programme in 1999, higher education has been developing at an accelerated pace. According to the "Basic Statistics on National Education", there were 46 million students enrolled in higher education in 2022, and the overall enrolment rate was more than 60% [see: 156]. According to available statistics, there are more than 240 million people in China who have completed higher education. According to the Ministry of Education, there are 3.7 million master's degree candidates in 2021, compared to less than 250,000 in the 1990s. This shows that China's higher education is undergoing a historic transition from mass to universal.

Indeed, an increasing number of poor children have the opportunity to pursue higher education, which increases their chances of upward social mobility and makes it possible to successfully bridge the class divide. The active investment in education by the middle class and the poor confirms the conventional wisdom that education can help these groups increase their capital, gain an advantage over competitors in the labour market and make a social class leap by increasing their income and social status. In addition, since 1999, children from disadvantaged families have had more opportunities to enter higher education, enabling them to compete with those from better-off backgrounds. At the same

time, societal developments have created an urgent need to improve the quality of the labour force, which has led to a significant expansion of education and substantial growth in the education sector. However, the marginal benefit of education has reasonable upper and lower bounds. For example, in China, the number of new jobs was four times the number of university graduates in 2003, but only 1.36 times the number of university graduates in 2020. As a result, the former function of an education diploma is gradually weakening, and this reduces the ability of the lower classes to raise their status and overcome the reproduction tendencies of their social class. Children from poor strata in the process of growing popularity of higher education may find themselves only on the marginal position of the school stratification order, and stratification of higher education in the conditions of new transformations will lead to the division of students' labour capital into a number of categories. As a result, higher education ceases to be a meaningful way for the disadvantaged class to change their destiny.

The scientific and technological revolution has radically changed the mode of socio-economic growth from factor-based to innovation-based as a result of a new scenario not seen before. This has had a significant impact on the nature, scale and structure of labour demand. How to balance the mismatch between supply and demand in the education and labour market has become the new challenge of education in the new era. Education is an important channel and effective supply link in the labour market, so it is inevitable that it will be closely related to technological changes and market needs. A report on the employment of Chinese college students in 2020 published by McKesson Research Institute showed that computer, electronic information and automation-related majors are currently the highest-paying majors. Traditional specialities such as law, philology and others have turned into "red cards", while specialities in information security, software engineering, computer science, digital media arts and applied technologies of the Internet of Things have acquired the status of "green"²⁰. In recent years, specialists in interdisciplinary fields have been increasingly in demand on the labour market, while in traditional professions such as law, publishing, accounting, etc., unemployment has been rising, with losses of some 75 million jobs over the past five years.

²⁰ From "red cards" to "green cards": "green card" refers to occupations with lower unemployment, higher employment, wages and job satisfaction, these are occupations with increasing demand for them, with the continuity of the "green card" indicating the continuity of employment benefits in the respective occupations; "red card" refers to occupations with higher unemployment, lower employment, wages and job satisfaction

At the same time, such promising fields as software and application development, data analytics are expected to add 100 million new jobs by 2035 [see: 124; p. 11]. In order to adapt to the needs of workforce development in a market economy and not to be swept away by the wave of technological revolution, the transformation of the economic structure in the context of new social changes places increased demands on the overall development of the individual. This requires adjusting the goals of personnel training from the "professional" to the "comprehensive" level, which in turn implies a shift in the practice of talent search and development, starting from school - from specialisation to comprehensiveness.

2.4. Social resources for addressing educational inequality in contemporary Chinese society

During the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), the phenomenon of "*noble sons from humble families*" emerged. Zhang Qian writes: the reason for its emergence was that "on the one hand, as a result of political and educational reforms aimed at destroying the ancient social structure of the rich and influential strata of the population, students from poor families had to rely on educational competition to ensure social mobility; on the other hand, it was due to the actions of poor students themselves, who achieved upward mobility through their own efforts" [135; p. 73]. Before the advent of colleges and universities, people who received a college education were considered and labelled "noble". Getting a major meant having in the future "an iron rice bowl²¹" and the opportunity to eat "national food²²", and for students from poor families, the prospect of professional advancement. After the number of universities increased, especially after higher education entered the mass enrolment stage, university graduates and undergraduates were no longer considered and labelled as "noble children". Since the state no longer distributes jobs in a planned manner and the number of university graduates is increasing every year, the mass enrolment of higher education and the growing number of universities have led to the fact

²¹ "Iron rice bowl": as the name suggests, made of iron, very hard, it cannot be broken. People usually extend the meaning of these words to denote, for example, a stable job, no worries about income, etc. For a long time, the "iron rice bowl" has been the object of people's envy and aspiration: if one gets this bowl, one will be able to eat, have clothes, and live happily. And if one does not have this "bowl", one will live in hardship and have no peace of mind.

²² "National food": literally, this expression refers to the group of people who receive food from the government and, by extension, to non-agricultural households. Once a person gets a non-agricultural hukou, he usually gets a job. This means that he has a regular source of income and basic social security, which means he can lead a stable and relatively decent life. At present, the term refers specifically to those participants in the system who are financially supported by the state.

that it has become difficult to rely on quality education. As mentioned above, China's gross enrolment rate in higher education has reached 59.6% by the end of 2022. (For comparison, in 2019, the figure was 51.6 per cent). A significant number of top professional colleges and universities have become effortlessly accessible to many high school students. (At the same time, prestigious universities have historically had a low proportion of freshmen from rural areas, much lower than the proportion of rural residents in the general population [see: 53; p. 86]).

The words "humble family" are added to the words "noble son" to create a contrast, emphasising the difficulties faced by a "noble son from a humble family" in the processes of social mobility in the city and the countryside. In today's China, where rapid changes are taking place and urban-rural differences are shrinking, it is no longer so difficult for children from a poor family to enter college and university, and they themselves can already be called "noble sons".

How does a "noble son" manage to overcome various institutional and cultural barriers in the face of multiple disadvantages, such as unequal distribution of educational resources due to geographical factors and due to differences in higher education institutions?

Various empirical studies based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction have shown that it has limitations when applied to the Chinese context. Thus, Ma Hongjie and colleagues argue that "the model of cultural reproduction is suitable for explaining the current stratification of education in China, but the role of cultural capital for academic performance and educational attainment should not be overestimated" [153; p. 28]. They also note that the role of different types of cultural capital is not the same, there are class differences. Also, the discussion of the concept of cultural reproduction in the Chinese context revealed both the nuances of the relationship between culture and education and theoretical gaps in the ideas about class mobility for socially disadvantaged groups.

The educational level of "noble children from poor families" in China has been the subject of numerous studies, most of which have had two aims: first, they have tried to explain how the phenomenon of "noble children" arises, and second, they have engaged in a debate with the theory of cultural reproduction, trying to extend, partly transcend, and partly overthrow this theory of cultural reproduction, which has almost achieved academic hegemony. In his works, Yang Chunhua proposed the concept of "intangible cultural capital", arguing that "intangible cultural capital is a key factor in the acquisition of social

status by rural families", and that this "intangible cultural capital" refers to "'survival mentality' through personal endeavour or exchange of cultural capital" [139; p. 361]; Anchao writes that "the working family fosters in children respect for the value of work as a quality of mind, this quality makes children more adaptable to modern education, similar to long-distance marathon races" [1; p. 60]; Hu Xulong believes that "the core of the cultural capital of rural families, which provides rural schoolchildren with a basic identity, is only the learning that helps them find a sense of meaning" [112; p. 106]; Cheng Mang put forward the concept of "basic cultural capital", the unique cultural capital of rural children, which is the core of their own identity, which is a kind of "corporeal cultural capital" [119; c. 40].

Many studies conducted by Chinese scholars have shown that university education weakens the effect of family background [see, e.g., 108; p. 15]. Zhu Yanlong emphasises the importance of micro-factors in the chain of access to higher education, especially in the form of intergenerational support, and the mechanism of micro-factors is mainly embodied in two family support strategies, "capital replenishment" and "self-reflection and empathy", which can make the education process of low-income students smoother [11; p. 96]. Wang Zhaoxin uses ego-ethnography to explain the importance of culture and family educational environment, arguing that "reading and studying are the path to individual success and achievement, and an individual's pursuit of a 'good life' in the future and the acquisition of family identity are the most important driving forces for enhancing personal mobility and resilience" [11; c. 27].

There are quite a few studies on how children from lower class families enter and attend elite institutions. At the same time, their authors point out that "children from the lower class continue to experience the undesirable consequences of class division even after entering the best universities" [134; p. 33]. Their parents tend to lack university experience, they lack the knowledge and skills required for an elite university culture, including communication style, academic standards, etc. In the short term, they may simply experience an identity crisis, resulting in low self-esteem, reclusiveness, etc. In addition, compared to their peers from middle-class families, they tend to lack rational plans for their own futures, and their limited outlook or shabbiness due to their background prevents them from taking advantage of opportunities at school that could play an important role in their destiny. In addition, Li Chunlin notes that "they often experience material difficulties and

have to work to cover their basic needs, and this has a negative impact on their academic performance" [62: p. 82]. Although colleges provide many opportunities for education and sports, these opportunities, are closely related to students' cultural interests and abilities as well as their financial status. As a result, children from lower-class families are unable to take advantage of many of the benefits that university provides.

Chinese society as a whole attaches great importance to education. This value is shared by all social strata. On the one hand, there is a traditional culture of respect for teachers and learning; on the other hand, the existence of the household registration system somehow encourages rural people to move to the city to join urban life. They expect that their children's education will change the family's life and lead to a better future. China's current university entrance examination system links class mobility and talent selection primarily to an individual's ability to convert class culture into points rather than class membership. Despite its many shortcomings, the gaokao (All-China State University Entrance Examination) as a method of talent selection is fair in this regard. It increases the likelihood of social advancement through education and gives low-income students the opportunity to experience cultural values.

It is obvious that overcoming or at least reducing the level of educational inequality existing in contemporary Chinese society requires the implementation of a set of practical measures, among which the following can be highlighted: focusing on the "modest family" as a tool to compensate for the lack of family cultural capital; increasing the level of mobility of educational resources; strengthening political control and interaction to stop the intergenerational transmission of educational poverty²³; ensuring mutual support for the development of the educational system; and ensuring the development of a "family culture".

1. focus on the "modest family" as a tool to compensate for the lack of family cultural capital.

The theory of cultural capital points out that "the family is the starting point for the transmission of cultural capital, family upbringing has a profound influence on the development of offspring's life; in order to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty, it is necessary to break the cycle of family poverty" [15; p. 106].

²³ Education poverty refers to the lack of financial resources to cover the cost of education

When a country implements a comprehensive fight against poverty and moves to the stage of consolidating the results of this fight, it needs to pay attention to the reality of educational poverty. Economically disadvantaged households do not have sufficient cultural capital for a variety of reasons, this is undeniable. The state should thoroughly understand the educational needs of low-income families and offer them broader and better educational support. First of all, it is necessary to approach the issue from an ideological point of view and help parents from low-income families to form correct principles of upbringing. In order to make poor families really understand the importance of education and raise their awareness of educational policies to help the poor, the government should strengthen the propaganda and promotion of educational policies to help the poor based on the specific situation on the ground. In addition, the government should take the initiative to improve the ability of poor families to adopt the policy. This will enable them to take advantage of the relevant benefits. Assisting poor families consists of introducing cultural capital through various means. Despite material disadvantage, the poor have special cultural values. For example, their children tend to have a heightened sense of justice, a willingness to fight for it, a desire to achieve higher material status, etc. Therefore, parents can use this advantage to help their children realise their internal incentives to learn. In work with poor families, initiative should be encouraged to search for social resources that promote children's development, their spiritual upbringing, formation of a growth mindset and positive outlook [see: 141; p. 10].

Finally, in order to help low-income families improve their financial situation, it is necessary to restrain the growth of education expenditures. This will help to avoid significant crowding out of other family expenditures [see: 108; p. 19]. To reduce poverty in education, the government should not only increase economic investment, but also focus on capacity building, improve the "circulatory" function of education in poverty alleviation. The government should maintain the social protection of education for low-income families, increase education subsidies and offer them financial assistance. At the same time, the government should adopt a long-term programme to eradicate educational poverty, focusing on empowering low-income families to escape poverty and improve their well-being.

2. Increased mobility of educational resources.

With China's ongoing urbanisation, there are marked differences in the level of educational development in different regions and urban and rural areas. According to the idea of cultural capital, it is necessary to create a flow of high-end educational resources and establish a system of common cultural capital for the whole society. For this purpose, firstly, it is necessary to eliminate the "split" between urban and rural areas, which is expressed in the glaring inequality in the distribution of educational resources within the urban-rural dual system. Only the elimination of such institutional barriers can create an opportunity to develop education in underdeveloped regions. On the one hand, it is important for the state to increase investment in education in rural areas and underdeveloped regions, to end the problem of lack of educational resources and teacher poverty, and to work towards eliminating the disparity between urban and rural education. On the other hand, it is important to expand higher education opportunities for students in these regions and shift the "urban-centric" orientation of the state. For example, urban schools can draw on resources such as libraries, museums and cultural centres to develop high-quality curricula, while rural schools can draw on local geography and local cultural capital. Established special school programmes, for example in the humanities, can ultimately be used as a means to achieve deeper integration of urban and rural schools [see: 36; p. 139].

Second, China has now implemented a principal and teacher rotation system that promotes high mobility of cultural and human capital in the education system. The "Opinions on Promoting the Exchange and Rotation of Principals and Teachers in Compulsory Education Schools within Counties (Districts)" issued by the Ministry of Finance of the CHN in August 2014 clearly states the following: "The exchange and rotation of principals and teachers is an important measure to strengthen the additional staff of principals and teachers in rural schools and weak schools, to solve the problem of school choice, ensure educational equity and balance the development of compulsory education" [140; c. 30]. Rotation of principals and teachers is necessary to improve the quality of education in schools. Active promotion of this rotation within districts and between urban and rural areas contributes to the convergence of cultural characteristics of different schools, interpenetration and elimination of cultural barriers between them. This reduces

the uneven distribution of resources for the development of quality education and narrows the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of competitiveness.

Thirdly, the use of the strategy of scientific and technological development of education for the underprivileged has enabled impoverished and backward areas to obtain better educational resources through information technology. For example, some institutions have introduced first-class online courses to improve the teaching material for students from underdeveloped areas and to a certain extent fill the gap caused by the lack of quality educational resources in the field. Connecting students with renowned teachers has been made possible through advanced online systems and social networks that naturally fit teaching samples from elite schools into the daily lives of large groups of students. Technology can, to a certain extent, free education in underdeveloped regions from time and space constraints, stimulate the flow of various kinds of high-quality educational resources throughout the region, fully activate education in underdeveloped regions, and reduce the disparities in educational development in different regions. This will definitely improve the chances of students to realise their potential.

3. Strengthening political control and engagement to stop intergenerational transmission of educational poverty.

In order to ensure the growth of education in less developed regions, sound and equitable education policies should be vigorously advocated. The development of education in less developed regions is closely related to the national policy. Today, there are plenty of chances for education. The growth of education in both urban and rural areas depends on the availability of quality educational resources. Wealthy and powerful families can choose the best schools for their children, while children from poor families cannot afford the high costs of school choice and therefore do not have access to the best educational resources. Schools at different levels have clearly defined class divisions. Thus, the "Basic Provisions of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Reform and Development of Education (2010-2020)" clearly states that it is necessary to abolish the establishment of key schools and classes, narrow the gap between urban and rural areas in the central and western regions in terms of compulsory education, and actively promote the balanced development of compulsory education. "The implementation of education equality policy should ensure the organic flow of high-quality education resources and decentralised distribution of high-quality education resources, reduce the differences

between regions and schools, and ensure the development of compulsory education in urban and rural areas towards integration" [12: c. 99].

The second challenge is to continue and expand the reform of higher education. Although there are now many more opportunities for young people to pursue higher education, this does not reduce the overall disadvantage faced by children from poor families. The state and the education sector should start from the macro level of society and people's livelihoods, reform the educational resource allocation system, strengthen poverty alleviation and assistance to the weak, increase material and monetary assistance to students from low-income families, and establish scholarships, grants, student loans and other forms of financial assistance to students from low-income families. In addition, it is necessary to increase the availability of high quality educational resources, improve the rules of admission to universities, and lower the bar of requirements for admission of children from low-income families.

Third, children from low-income backgrounds should be given opportunities for development and growth. Children from wealthy families have significant cultural capital to support their children's career development, unlike "weak" children from poor families. At this stage, the whole society should work towards the creation of a fair employment environment, with special attention to the use of legal, political, economic and other instruments to control the employment market in all aspects. Improving the current employment situation should be the leading strategy. The state, society, colleges and universities should work together to increase the number of employment opportunities for graduate students from low-income families, and to improve their career opportunities through initiatives such as increasing job security. Strengthening vocational education and training is particularly important for increasing the employability of students from low-income backgrounds. The state should accelerate the development of regulations to combat discrimination in employment and create an atmosphere of labour equality in society to end the prejudices faced by students from low-income families in the job search process. To ensure that children from low-income families have access to fair employment opportunities, it is also necessary to improve administrative instruments, judicial remedies and public awareness in combating discrimination in employment.

4. ensuring the interrelation of education and technology: promoting the all-round development of the personality through the creation of new educational disciplines, raising the social status and social viability of "noble sons from humble families".

Education in the new era is evolving from "instrumental" to "technological", from the use of a single learning tool to a new stage of information applications to improve the quality of education and the all-round development of the individual. Technological innovation is becoming increasingly dependent on the fusion and integration of various disciplines, which increases the need for the development of versatile talents. In 2019, the Ministry of Education and other departments officially launched the "Six Perfections and One Peak" 2.0 Plan²⁴, which provides for the comprehensive development of new engineering, new humanities, new medical science and new agricultural science. In December 2020, the Ministry of Education announced the establishment of "interdisciplinary categories" - "integrated circuit science and engineering" and "national security" - in the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council under the Ministry of Education. Thus interdisciplinarity became a separate category. Some scholars have suggested that the urgent need for higher education under the current conditions of economic development is the new practice of training talented young people in colleges and universities, modernising and transforming the traditional professional curriculum. The creation of "new disciplines" requires significant efforts and aims to support the holistic human development and talent needs in the modern era. Talented young people are the main resource for national development and social progress, as well as a fundamental force for social stability.

In July 2021, China's Ministry of Education issued the "Notice on the Establishment of Undergraduate Specialities in General Education Colleges and Universities for 2021", which "requires competent departments of colleges and universities to strengthen guidance, early warning and forecasting to avoid a large number of repeated 'overheated' majors in the same region" [79; c. 14]. In order to form and share resources of high-quality education between cities and villages, as well as between regions, the state should coordinate municipalities to establish educational innovation service platforms in particularly

²⁴ Plan 2.0 "Six Excellencies and One Summit" includes several programmes: Excellence in Education and Training of Engineers 2.0, Excellence in Education and Training of Doctors 2.0, Excellence in Education and Training of Talents in Agriculture and Forestry 2.0", "Excellence in Teacher Education 2.0", "Excellence in Rule of Law Education and Talent Training 2.0", "Excellence in Journalism and Communication Education and Talent Training 2.0", and "Educating High Performing Students in Core Disciplines 2.0". [see: 157].

disadvantaged areas, and make full use of the agglomeration and spillover effect of higher education in the central and western regions of the country, especially colleges and "double first-class" universities.

It is necessary to create all conditions for the development of higher education in the central and western regions of the country, focusing on their unique needs, accelerating the development of "new disciplines" and nurturing talents focused on their activities in a particular region. This involves building an innovative network of regional universities, improving the classification of universities, and maximising the complementary advantages of different types of colleges and universities in terms of discipline teaching, talent concentration and innovation resources. Closer integration of business, academic, research and applied activities is required to produce gifted professionals with a wide range of skills to meet demand. It is also necessary to create a platform for connecting east and west universities, support the development of "new disciplines" in western regions, and build a well-rounded workforce with both theoretical and applied knowledge. This will bridge the educational gap in class reproduction, effectively meet the demand for well-rounded talented individuals in the new era of social change, improve the labour capacity and market competitiveness of the lower classes, and provide conceptual guidance to consolidate the gains in educational poverty alleviation and implement urgent changes in the relatively poor areas of the central and western parts of the country.

5. Strengthening industry-education linkages: the impact of integrating vocational education and labour skills on social mobility processes.

Lack of skills and employment difficulties are important causes of poverty as well as people's return to poverty. Zhang Shezi and Li Yunping note: "Vocational education, as an important part of the education system, focuses on the development of practical skills, performs important functions of 'poverty eradication' and inhibiting the intergenerational transmission of poverty... It plays an important role in contributing to poverty alleviation and gradually becoming the main way of building the labour skills of the disadvantaged classes in the era of high occupational differentiation and thus promoting upward mobility" [136; c. 19]. The document "Some Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Industry and Education" prepared by the General Office of the State Council proposes to deepen the integration of industry and education, and - organically combining the "education chain", "talent chain", "industrial chain" and "innovation chain" - to determine the overall course

of vocational education development in the new era. However, profit-oriented businesses lack the will to integrate industry and education, even though there are national policies and calls to engage in relevant cooperation. This often results in China's professional integration following the principle of "hot at one end, cold at the other"²⁵ .

In addition, the system of vocational education in the country is organised in such a way that it does not encourage university and college graduates to move up the professional ladder. This creates a labour market with a relatively closed and stagnant mobility space, where the choice is limited to professions with low social status, which does not allow moving upwards with the help of social lifts. According to statistics, more than 70 per cent of students from families living in rural and mountainous areas find themselves in this market. The low rate of return on vocational education undoubtedly reinforces the entrenchment of social classes and exacerbates social inequalities. In order to ensure mobility in the labour market and improve the social status of the disadvantaged, vocational education in the new era should pay special attention to the establishment of a new system for training talented young people.

In September 2021, the "National Human Rights Action Plan (2021-2025)" published by the State Council proposes to build a vocational education system in which vocational secondary education and vocational higher education are effectively interconnected and vocational and general education are mutually integrated. Such a system is designed to promote the development of industry-education integration, improve the school-enterprise co-operation system, and form policy guidelines for creating a new type of integration between industry and vocational education.

"The National Plan identifies a number of particularly significant tasks, the fulfilment of which will significantly reduce inequality in education. Firstly, the state should continue to implement the policy of expanding access to vocational education and increasing opportunities for education based on the principle of "job conversion". This means gradually exempting secondary vocational education from tuition fees, expanding the educational cycle, creating a system of continuous vocational education, and paying special attention to the education of students in vocational colleges and universities in order to increase the level of professional adaptation of students

²⁵ The expression "Hot on one end, cold on the other" describes situations where there are two sides to an issue, with one side very enthusiastic and the other indifferent.

Second, for the economic development of industrial regions and the revival of rural areas, it is necessary to create a new type of labour force with comprehensive labour skills. Its social base should consist primarily of people from low-income strata of the population ("new workers", "new farmers"), supported by special state funds.

Thirdly, it is recommended that colleges and universities, higher and secondary vocational schools in relatively poor areas of the country should establish a mechanism for "integrating production and vocational training²⁶" in order to achieve the docking of education goals with production needs, to match the disciplinary structure with vocational skills, and to strengthen the labour potential of economic and social development of the areas.

Fourth, schools, universities and enterprises should fully support innovation and entrepreneurship among students, integrate courses on innovation and entrepreneurship into the existing system of vocational education curricula, and create incubation sites and bases for practical training in innovation and entrepreneurship. By contributing to the steady improvement of professional skills and the social status of low-income strata of the population, a new type of professional integration will effectively overcome the educational gap in the reproduction of social classes and contribute to the process of socialist modernisation.

China's poverty eradication campaign is winning a convincing victory, and one of its five major parts²⁷ - education development - is playing a decisive and innovative role in this. In the new era, China's economy and education system have shifted from accelerated development to stable development: the social division of labour is becoming more complex, market rivalry is intensifying, and the role of supporting creative talents is increasing. The stability of social strata and the successful implementation of socialist modernisation directly depend on education, which serves as the basic strategy for growth and sustainable economic and social development. However, there are still many problems in the development of education, including those caused by the competition of social

²⁶ Industry-education integration refers to the deep cooperation between industry-related organisations and education and research-related organisations in joint education and innovation, and the way to improve the quality of talented young people in industrial enterprises and education and research institutions, which promotes the deep integration and development of both sides.

²⁷ The "five parts" refers to five stages: production development to get out of poverty, poverty alleviation, environmental compensation to get out of poverty (Chinese authorities plan to achieve zero emissions in 2060), education development, and social security.

classes and strata for educational resources. In the new era, education will inevitably play an important role in overcoming the reproduction of social classes on the road to the future, accelerate the formation of a modern social class structure, and pave the way for the fulfilment of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan and the achievement of China's long-term development goals until 2035. At present, China is entering a new phase of qualitative development of education and is moving towards becoming a powerful educational power.

2.5. Conclusions to Chapter 2

1. Differentiation by education level is an important component of social stratification structure. The evolution of public education in China basically coincides with the development of social structure and social stratification, which have undergone two phases of change. In the first phase (1949-1978), the period of educational renaissance that began immediately after the founding of the People's Republic of China, through the introduction of political regulation and a large number of educational reforms and other means, after 30 years of hard work, primary education became basically universal, and secondary and higher education was restored and developed at a relatively rapid pace. China has established a full-fledged socialist education and teaching system, and has made significant achievements in this field.

The second stage of the gradual development of Chinese education was Deng Xiaoping's reform period, which began in 1978 and continues to this day. During this time, China embarked on a path of radical market modernisation and the creation of "market socialism with Chinese characteristics". Over the past years of reform and opening up, China's leadership has continued to promote the strategy of prioritising education, developing the country through education, science, information and technological progress, etc. The legal basis for a socialist education system with Chinese characteristics has been established. Higher education has reached mass scale and moved towards universalisation, and the quality of education has been steadily improved. However, the rapid development of the market economic system has affected the social division and inequality in education.

2. The current problem of educational inequality in China is worth analysing both vertically and horizontally. On the one hand, inequality is reflected in three areas: inequality in access to education; inequality in the distribution of high quality educational resources during the learning process; and inequality in the results obtained at the end of

higher education. On the other hand, it is reflected in geographical differences, differences in family wealth and differences in universities.

In terms of geographical differences, firstly, China's unique household registration system has had a huge impact on both urban and rural development, exacerbating the urban-rural dichotomy and leading to disparities in educational development between urban and rural areas. Currently, children in rural areas still cannot get the same opportunities to access education as their urban counterparts. Second, since the centre of national development in the initial period of reform and opening up was mainly concentrated in the southeastern part of China, where there was a large influx of high-quality educational resources, this has led to a shortage of educational resources and poor quality of education in the central and western regions.

As higher education has entered a stage of universalisation, people's access to higher education has widened considerably, and the gap between rich and poor families has become increasingly apparent. Children of poor families and children of rich parents get different results in the struggle for education. How much a family spends on education depends on its financial situation, and much more money is spent on education for children from rich families than for children from poor families. Strong social resources give young people more options for choosing quality higher education and facilitate their access to a large number of educational resources. And for a child to succeed in higher education, a poor family often has to give everything they have. In China, political regulation has had a positive impact on educational development, but it has also divided the country's universities into different levels, From the so-called "good" top-level universities of Project 985 and Project 211 to the lower-level vocational schools, although collectively called higher education, the educational resources, the quality of education and the content of the diploma awarded at the end of each of these universities are very different.

3. In addition to the above factors contributing to educational inequality in China, there are also a number of social barriers to equal access to quality educational opportunities. For example, the lack of necessary family cultural capital and the deterioration of education quality in poor families. Firstly, the educational level of parents affects the educational trajectory of their children, and parents in poor families tend to be less educated and unable to recognise the importance of education. Secondly, due to differences in cultural capital in different regions and differences in the level of economic development, as well as the

imbalance of public financial investment in education in different regions, economically backward regions often face problems such as lack of educational resources and weak teachers. Finally, we should not forget the obstacles to school enrolment in China. The most common method of school enrolment in China is zoning, which on the one hand seems fair and reasonable, but at the same time makes it difficult for children from poorer families to get into "good" schools and reinforces inequalities in the education received by children in urban and rural areas, as well as in different geographical areas.

4. The motivation for analysing the problem of "students from modest families" in this dissertation is the fact that this topic is a topical one for Chinese society and for Chinese sociology. Three periods of its development can be distinguished. At the initial stage, scholars, based on the results of empirical studies, simply identified the limited opportunities of lower-class children in getting education. Later, scholars emphasised the difficulties faced by lower-class children in pursuing education in terms of their identity and then explained the reasons for the success of some of them from different perspectives (social support, individual effort, etc.). Now the range of research on "students from humble backgrounds" is widening, focussing on their performance in higher education, subsequent personal development, etc. The relationship between personal development and family of origin, the socio-economic status of the individual that he or she eventually attained, etc., for example, is being studied

5. In order to overcome or at least reduce the degree of educational inequality existing in modern Chinese society, a number of practical measures should be taken: first, it is worthwhile to strengthen the propaganda and promotion of education poverty alleviation policies and help poor families, including by introducing cultural capital in various ways to make up for the lack of cultural capital in poor families. Secondly, we should increase investment in education in rural areas and underdeveloped regions, end the shortage of educational resources and teacher poverty, and try to close the education gap between urban and rural areas; through policy and scientific and technological means, we should increase the mobility of educational resources. Thirdly, policy supervision and cooperation should be strengthened, higher education reforms should be continued and expanded, so as to provide opportunities for the development and growth of children from low-income families and stop the intergenerational transmission of educational poverty. Finally,

strengthening the link between industry and education should promote the integration of industry and education and the establishment of a new education system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us summarise some of the results of the thesis research.

Analyses of education as an important factor influencing the social stratification of Chinese society show that there are serious inequalities in the distribution of educational resources in contemporary Chinese society, as well as the heterogeneous and largely elitist nature of education. Nine-year education has become compulsory, higher education is becoming universal, and access to higher education is rapidly expanding and increasing. However, there are still inequalities in this field, which manifest themselves in three main dimensions: inequalities between geographical areas; inequalities in access to education and in the quality of education received as a result of income inequality; and inequalities between different universities. In terms of the geographical factor, due to the imbalance in the development of urban and rural areas, the differences that exist between southeast China and regions in the central and western parts of the country, high-quality educational resources are concentrated in the cities of developed regions, and due to the restrictions imposed by the household registration system, it is often very difficult for children born in economically underdeveloped regions or rural areas to access quality education. On the other hand, in rural and underdeveloped areas, there is a lack of awareness of the importance of education, parents do not pay much attention to their children's education, and there are even perceptions of the "uselessness of schooling". Because investment in education is disproportionate to the results obtained. Although the state has made nine years of compulsory education universal since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the question of whether to continue on to secondary school or vocational training after completing nine years of compulsory education has become a difficult issue for poor families.

In terms of income differences, there is a clear difference between poor and rich families when it comes to university enrolment, and often a poor family has to spend all available resources to enable their child to go to a "good" university and get a "good" diploma. In the process of education, families from lower and even middle strata of society face inequalities related to differences in wages, as well as lack of financial investments in the creation of educational infrastructure and attracting high quality teachers. After completing higher education, children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, after years of diligent

study, still find it difficult to compete with their classmates from wealthy families in terms of lifestyle, work and other social issues. Even with the same level of education, people from rural areas and poor families, for reasons of their background or original social stratum, cannot compete with those from wealthy families

The degree of university development in China is uneven and is mainly due to the imbalance in the distribution of national educational resources. Since the establishment of "Project 211" (1995 - 100 universities) and "Project 985" (1998 - more than 30 universities) universities have been divided into different classes with qualitatively different educational resources and different capital investments, of course, the largest of which are allocated to the "best" universities. In recent years, China has begun a process of universalisation of higher education in which more and more children from poor families are beginning to receive quality education through their own efforts. However, the inflation of higher education degrees has increased the concerns of lower and middle class families about investing in education, and through the availability of relevant prestigious achievements, such as a degree from a ranked university, as well as more external internships, it has become apparent that the social mobility that people gain through a degree is primarily related to their social background and the quality of their CV in the graduate society. As a result, although more and more young people from the lower strata of society are pursuing higher education, they still find it difficult to utilise their acquired educational resources to achieve upward social mobility.

Solving the problem of educational inequality between social strata of modern Chinese society requires the joint efforts of the government and the entire civil society using political and economic means. In the long term, the government should adjust its education development strategy to not just make education universal, but to achieve universal *quality education*, block the intergenerational transmission of educational poverty, increase financial investment in education in underdeveloped areas, and break down rural-urban educational barriers. At the stage of universalisation of higher education, it is necessary to attach greater importance to secondary vocational education and continue to implement the policy of expanding vocational education opportunities, strengthen the mechanism of "industry-education integration", ensure that the aims of education are in line with the needs of production, and ensure that disciplinary structures are in line with vocational skills. At the micro level, it is important to strengthen advocacy for the importance of education

in rural and underdeveloped areas and promote the practice of continuing education; increase financial investment in education in poor areas, reduce expenditure on education for poor families, and develop programmes to eliminate poverty through education.

It is necessary to strengthen attention to education in rural and underdeveloped areas, promote the inflow of high-quality educational resources and provide better access to information technology. In the process of university planning and construction, excessive concentration or even spillover of high-quality educational resources into "best" and "good" universities should be avoided, and strive to share high-quality educational, research and human resources between urban and rural areas and geographical regions.

From the founding of the People's Republic of China to the present day, as a result of changes in the social class structure and social stratification of society, Chinese education has made significant progress in terms of both accessibility and quality. However, at the same time, the existing problem of educational inequality between different strata of society cannot be ignored.

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