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Socioeconomic and Educational Stratification in Private Colleges in China

Li Hao
lionheart_lee@hotmail.com
Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics Dongfang College, Haining, Zhejiang, China

Abstract： Higher education has always been positioned as a key factor in achieving social mobility and equality in Chinese culture. The assumption that more higher education opportunities from private colleges could help to increase social equality became entrenched in society during the last decades. Basing the analysis upon recent empirical studies conducted in private colleges in China, I review the current situation of educational and socioeconomic stratification in students and teachers respectively. Realising that students and teachers of different socioeconomic origins may have diverse experiences and opportunities in private colleges and labour markets, this study critically reflects upon how variations in economic capital and social capital have impacted on a person's career development and social mobility as private higher education has massively expanded in China. This study finds that in contemporary China, socioeconomic stratification is a more important and influential factor than educational stratification. It also reveals a strong and increasing cumulative effect of family socioeconomic status throughout a person's educational and professional career, which is mainly caused by their socioeconomic strata, instead of educational strata at each transition. This study then concludes that socioeconomic stratification and the crowding-out effect, rather than social mobility and equality, are the likely results of private higher education expansion in China. This study is original and meaningful because it is based on first-hand evidences collected through the researcher's more than ten years of practice and exploration in several private colleges in China.

Key words： higher education, private colleges in China, socioeconomic stratification, educational stratification, equality, social mobility

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Introduction:

Many studies have revealed that students from lower socioeconomic families have lower levels of educational attainment (on average) than students from higher socioeconomic families, because their families are able to use the social and cultural capital to help their children attain higher academic achievements and enter into elite colleges, resulting in social stratification and cultural reproduction (Goldthorpe, 2007; Hauser, 2010). While current studies have clear strengths, there are obvious limitations that should be taken into account because few researchers have adequately conceptualized attitudes and behavior related to socioeconomic and educational stratification in private colleges in China. There is a need to consider the role and culture effects of different strata of higher education institutions and their relationship with students' and teachers' socioeconomic status in interpreting the results. This study is original and meaningful because it is based on first-hand evidences collected through the researcher's more than ten years of practice and exploration in several private colleges in China, not second-hand evidences from researchers in public institutions, observing the condition of private higher education from a long distance.

Higher education has always been positioned as a key factor in achieving social mobility in Chinese culture. The assumption that more higher education opportunities from private colleges could help to increase social equality became entrenched in society during the last decades. It is assumed that, once the higher education for the majority of Chinese people is complete, college graduates will help to better serve society and promote political, economic, social and cultural development in China. Does the reality match the high expectation? Can private colleges become "the beneficial supplement" to China's higher education? In human society, commercialism fosters corruption. For-profit education institutions are undermining equality in their rabid service to the privileged, as can be observed in many cases. This study points out that socioeconomic stratification and the crowding-out effect, rather than social mobility and equality, are the likely results of private higher education expansion in China.

This study finds that in contemporary China, socioeconomic stratification is a more important and influential factor than educational stratification. Students who had failed in National College Entrance Examinations and been excluded from public institutions are able to reproduce their parents' socioeconomic status through studying in private colleges or studying abroad, thus aggravating socioeconomic stratification to a further degree. When meritocracy is increasingly criticized in many other countries, the socioeconomic status of a student's family is still a decisive factor in many social and educational aspects in China, and the "credential society" by Collins et al. (2019) continues to expand and take effect. Patterns of inequality within a country depend partly on the educational context of this country: that is, the internal structure of the educational system, the relationships between the different parts of these structures, and the connections between schools and society.

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Basing the analysis upon recent empirical studies conducted in private colleges in China, I review the current situation of educational and socioeconomic stratification in students and teachers respectively. The structure of this thesis is as follows: Firstly, I analyze the features of private colleges in China. Secondly, I present and comment on empirical findings on educational and socioeconomic stratification of students and teachers respectively in the contemporary private higher education system. Finally, I conclude by discussing evidences pertinent to different impacts of the expansion of private higher education on educational system and on socioeconomic stratification in China.

The features of private colleges in China

With the rapid expansion of higher education in China since the late 1990s, educational and socioeconomic stratification within educational system has been accelerating. It is claimed that private higher education in China has emerged to meet new demands brought by the political and economic reforms over the last decades. According to Frost & Sullivan, the international marketing consulting company, the number of private colleges has increased steadily since then, and there are currently more than 740 private higher education institutions in China. The total number of students enrolled in private higher education in China increased from 5.3 million in 2012 to 6.3 million in 2016 and is expected to further increase to eight million in 2021. The compound annual growth rate of students enrolled in private colleges and universities was 4.7%, which exceeded the compound annual growth rate of students enrolled in higher education by 3.2%. Currently, about 22% of students in higher education are studying at private institutions. In three years' time, this is expected to increase to 24%. It shows that the enrollment growth of private universities is higher than that of public universities. Concomitant to the development, pursuit of in-depth education is often seen as a change to the educational curriculum and make research an integral part of private higher education. Dramatic developments in higher education seem to be occurring in China. However, after decades of development, private education providers seem to have not achieved their promised goal of providing reliable and quality education services, and in fact, aggravated social inequity in China to a higher degree.

The idea of colleges as sites of social reproduction rather than transformation is an important theme in educational sociology, and Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein's theories of cultural reproduction have a dominant position in this theme. Reproduction theory has focused on the ways in which people with higher socioeconomic status will use the educational system to reproduce and legitimize their privileged position. (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). The expansion of private higher education in China has also generated a great influence on labour markets and social stratification. In the meanwhile, returns of higher education have flattened out recently and social mobility has slowed down in general. For the perspective on

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socioeconomic stratification in higher education institutions, it is important to consider the organizational and cultural context of these institutions alongside the progress of students' and teachers' career development. Realising that students and teachers of different socioeconomic origins may have diverse experiences and opportunities in private colleges and labour markets, this study critically reflects upon how variations in economic capital and social capital have impacted on a person's career development and social mobility as private higher education has massively expanded in China.

Another feature of private colleges in China is that it has extremely high tuition fee barrier. A burgeoning middle-class in China presents vast opportunities for private higher education to become an important area for investment. According to Frost & Sullivan, the total revenue of the Chinese private higher education industry has been increasing steadily from CNY69.6 billion (US$10 billion) in 2012 to CNY95.4 billion (US$13.9 billion) in 2016 and is expected to further increase to CNY139 billion (US$20.2 billion) in 2021. With globalization, more and more foreign investments enter Chinese private higher education system in pursuit of profit. They generally pay more attention to making money than social equity. One result was for private colleges to respond to this reality, and profit-oriented cultures to mushroom across school campuses. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, according to Li et al. (2008), many founding presidents or chancellors of private colleges in China were entrepreneurs or well-placed government officials. Whether they hold much faith and ideal in higher education or not is still a question because a good education is not the major reason for their wealth and high social status. Generally speaking, they are more businessmen than educators who are also looking for profit rather than equality. On the other hand, many students in China's private higher education institutions are from upper-class families. Although they have failed in the National College Entrance Exams, probably the only scenario that the economic and social capital of their families cannot help them directly, it doesn't mean that their families' socioeconomic capital cannot help them to reproduce their privileged positions in society after graduation.

Private colleges in China receive little public funding, and largely dependent on student fees. The income of private colleges in China comes largely from students' tuition fees, which account for about 80% of the total income (MoE and SIES 2003, 89). Because the providers of private colleges have to invest their own funds, under the consideration of financial benefits, they tend to adopt more cost control measures. For example, in order to meet the requirements of the provincial education bureau, a private college mandated every teacher to donate at least ten books to the school library collection. As a result, many teachers donated pirated books to the school library to save money and express ostensible obedience. In this case, the quantity of library books may have met the requirements of the provincial education bureau, but the quality of book collections is low.

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In order to stand out, private higher education institutions need to establish their reputations by improving career-oriented education and help students develop professional skills. The success of private colleges will depend on their ability to leverage their resources to help students meet the labor market's ever-changing needs and secure a decent job after graduation. Most private colleges promise to provide an entry to the labour market for their students through the training of technical and vocational skills. However, one major problem is that vocational training is mainly conducted within the narrow confines of the traditional classroom activities and theoretical models in private colleges. Another problem is that both private higher education providers and employers in the labour market cannot predict what kind of technical or vocational skills will be useful and in demand after four years of college study. Therefore, neither of them will make promises to take the responsibility of employment after students' graduation. The third problem is that most technical or vocational skills are attainable during in job training, and it is usually more effective and efficient in this way. The fourth problem is that many technical or vocational skills are not sustainable in one's career development. For example, a lot of private colleges in China provide courses and degrees in Information Technology, but a lot of technical skills related to computing and programming they learnt at school become obsolete soon after their graduation. Both private higher education providers and students know that information technology graduates who are skilled at programming will be able to obtain a high-salary position in the labour market, but these positions are usually short-lived and unsustainable. After several years of working in the information technology industry, an amount of programmers have to change their career or face the risk of expulsion due to their outdated knowledge system and the crowding-out effect.

In reality, private colleges in China have developed a schizophrenic personality of being both a profit-seeking enterprise and an educational institution. Tensions between these identities are reflected in the campus culture, daily teaching practices and operations of college organizations. In China, the party and the state government own all educational institutions in whole or in part, and they are closely monitored by the authorities. However, during the last decades of market-based reforms, even state-owned institutions must compete for students and sponsors. On the one hand, social and economic environment influences education in ways that may facilitate or impede its operation, and on the other hand, educational contents need to be reflective of the social and economic climate of the day. Higher education institutions, especially private colleges are increasingly under corrosive pressures from the market economy, propelling them to reckon with the new environment. Although education in private colleges is showing signs of deviation from political norms, no social institutions, particularly those pegged into the web of superstructure, harbour illusions about freedom from ideological restrictions. As a matter of fact, the ideological control is even stricter in

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private colleges, because many private college students are from privileged families, and it is highly likely that they will reproduce their parents' high socioeconomic status after graduation; for underprivileged students from the opposite side of the socioeconomic strata, it is highly likely that they will become disadvantaged in the labour market, and their minds also need to be trained in line with the main-stream ideology for the purpose of maintaining social stability. Several educational issues thus arise as a result of the tug-of-war between ideological and economic demands. Especially in vocational colleges, students are required to memorize all manner of jargon and quotes from mountains of books, but this kind of knowledge will not help them much in workplace practices. The seemingly irreconcilable discrepancies between ideal and reality, the classroom study and the workplace practice are a major source of frustration in China's private higher education.

Socioeconomic and educational stratification of teachers in private colleges

Li and Morgan (p.30) suggest that "teaching in private higher education is not a good choice for qualified and active academics". However, why do so many elite institute graduates want to teach in China's private colleges? Why do so many teachers in China's private colleges continue to pursue an academic career by trying to publish in academic journals? According to Collins et al. (2019), low-rank colleges constantly make effort to try to simulate the structure and operations of top institutes, but it is only part of the reason. Socioeconomic and educational stratification happen in all institutions, but more salient in China's private colleges. Decades ago, most college and university teachers in China were outstanding graduates from elite universities, many of them from low-income countryside families. They became middle-class city dwellers through their own diligence and dedication in school education. However, with the current deteriorating economy, more and more people from wealthy families in China start to chase more stable job positions with higher social status in Chinese culture, such as civil servants and public school teachers. One evidence is that, according to the State Administration of Civil Service in China, a total of 1.38 million people took the National Public Servant Exam to compete for 14,537 positions in 2019. The competition of recruitments in public education institutions is no less fierce.

In order to get a teaching job in China's colleges or universities, a master's degree is the minimum prerequisite. Decades ago, students who had been excluded from public higher education in China used to have no chance of becoming college teachers, but they are able to attain such a position through private higher education and their families' social network nowadays. In contemporary China, it is much more possible for elite institute graduates with insider connections to get a teaching job in elite institutes, public non-elite institute graduates with insider connections to get a teaching job in public institutes, and elite institute graduates without any insider connections have to look for teaching jobs in private colleges. Sometimes, it is inevitable for them to compete and get involved in conflicts with their counterpart

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teachers from the other end of socioeconomic strata: graduates from low-reputation private colleges but with social and economic capital.

Many people may presume that teachers graduated from elite institutes could become the advantaged group in private colleges due to their higher educational strata. In fact, just the opposite is usually true. With the support of their parents' economic capital, a student who had failed in the National College Entrance Examinations can enter a private college to obtain a bachelor's degree, then spend about one year studying in Europe to earn a master's degree. With the right social network, he or she can then secure a teaching job in a college. Many of them are able to become college teachers before the age of 25, which means that they are generally more energetic and more appealing to students than their counterpart teachers from low-income countryside families.

An observable tendency in current higher education system is that it is getting easier and easier for privileged people to get a high degree from another country or in China, and convert their economic and social capital into cultural capital. In 2019, Chinese TV and film star Zhai, who had obtained his doctorate in 2018 and then been accepted as a postdoctoral candidate at the top Peking University at the age of 31, lost his doctoral degree due to findings of plagiarism. Zhai's doctorate was revoked only because he admitted in public that he didn't know what CNKI was during his online live video streaming, thus resulting in much dispute about the attainment of his doctoral degree and the consequent investigation. This example may seem extreme but actually not rare in the contemporary world. As a matter of fact, some students in private colleges can join the "3+1.5" transnational education programs in China, spending only half a year overseas after four years of study in the private college to get a master's degree. If they want, students from well-off families are able to spend a substantial amount of money and about 3 more years to get a doctorate overseas or in China. Therefore, besides popularity, teachers from underprivileged families also cannot compete with teachers from privileged families in higher degrees due to lack of time and economic support. Publishing articles in academic journals seems to be the only savior for teachers from low socioeconomic strata, because writing academic articles depends mainly on researchers' diligence and dedication. In the process from writing to publication, one's social and economic capital cannot be easily converted into cultural capital.

In order to attract students from the limited student resources, some private colleges resort to the entertainment culture and try to work with the mass media to mould teachers as popular stars. A typical example is an article from a local newspaper, which was passed around through social media among students and teachers in a private college. The first several sentences of the article introducing a "star teacher" read like this: "With long legs and big eyes, this tall and young teacher at the age of 26 also has the face of a movie star. He was

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once a previous graduate, and now the most popular teacher in this college. He is very friendly and approachable, and likes to play mobilephone games with his students. He is a person who enjoys having fun and delicious foods. Within only half a year, he has frequented many restaurants nearby, and maybe you too can have an encounter with this 'star teacher' in one of the restaurants close to this college." Similar articles abound in today's Chinese mass media, introducing "male god teachers" or "goddess teachers" in non-elite institutes, based on teachers' appearances instead of academic achievements. This kind of local mass media helping to propagate a private college is also a case of the so-called "local cooperation between institutes and corporations", which is highly advocated in private colleges in China. Higher education institutions are supposed be places to provide trainings for students' minds and brains, but instead, a teacher's body figure and facial appearance are becoming the selling point for some institutes. Judging from similar cases, it is obvious that the entertainment culture is rampant in some private colleges, and the mass media have helped to increase such a tendency. These cases are also signs showing that many students in China start to believe that a person's congenital resources far outweigh the importance of hard work.

Most private college graduates from well-off families are fashionable, and when they become teachers at a young age, they are generally much more popular among students than teachers from low-income countryside families. In these cases, families with socioeconomic advantages can not only use the economic capital to help their children attain higher education, but also are able to use their social capital to help their children secure a teaching job and flourish in the higher education system. The result is that the reproduction of their socioeconomic strata is accomplished. Because teachers from low-income countryside families cannot compete with those fashionable and wealthy teachers for popularity among students, it usually results in lower grades in the Student Evaluation of Teaching, lower payment and lower positions in private colleges. This situation naturally put those teachers of low socioeconomic status into even more disadvantaged conditions. The result of such competition is similar to the squeezed domino effect: privileged people start to use their economic and political capital to occupy more social and cultural resources, forcing ordinary people who had the chance to enter into the middle class through their efforts in higher education to slip down into the bottom of society, and making it even more difficult for underprivileged people to change their socioeconomic status.

In China's private colleges, the workload of full-time teachers is very high because they often have to teach more than 16 lessons a week, and at least two different courses each semester. Therefore, they have to spend a lot of time in teaching preparation, giving lessons and marking students' assignments, which usually result in physical and emotional exhaustion. The funding for academic and scientific research in China's private colleges is normally very low, which makes it difficult for teachers to improve their professional career due to the lack

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of resources and motivation. Because the achievements of academic and scientific research are the most crucial criteria in the promotion of college teachers' professional titles, and the promotion naturally leads to more economic benefits and higher social status, some teachers are striving to carry out their research in an environment of heavy workload and limited research resources. However, for teachers from families of high socioeconomic status, doing research is neither a necessity, nor a preferred activity. It is a common practice for private colleges in China to recruit a large number of new teachers each year, because it is difficult for them to keep those experienced teachers inside. After several years of service in private colleges, some established scholars or teachers who find insider connections will leave and join public institutions. Many teachers consider working in private colleges as an entry level position and a stepping stone, not a position with long-time career development. However, the situation is changing nowadays because more and more elite institute graduates come to work in private colleges, but only a small proportion of them have the opportunity to become established scholars or find insider connections in public institutions.

Socioeconomic and educational stratification of students in private colleges

In their theories of reproduction in education, Bourdieu and Passeron point out that higher education does not change social inequality, but rather enhances the reproduction of social strata, mainly through the transmission of cultural capital in educational achievements. Wu (2017) also points out that the internal stratification of China's higher education is manifested not only in the different types of institutions students can attend but also in their stratified opportunities in acquiring human capital, social capital, and political capital in those institutions. These factors have a deep impact on students' subsequent career paths and socioeconomic status after their graduation.

Students who choose to study in China's private colleges are chiefly young people who have finished secondary education, but failed in the National College Entrance Examinations and have been excluded from public higher education in China. Because private colleges can only begin to take in new students after the recruitment of public institutes in China, according to Duan and Zhao (2015), in order to compete for a limited number of students, fierce competitions happen each year among private colleges, and most of the them drop the screening mechanism. In the situation of great shortage of qualified students, it is obvious that students in private colleges have uneven learning abilities and are generally at a much lower academic level than students in public institutes. In their case study of private higher education in *Xi'An*, Shen and Yan (2006) found that compared with their counterparts in public institutes, students in private colleges were shown to have a more privileged family background. When we consider that most private college students are those who are able to afford the substantially greater tuition fees, it is easy to understand that the majority of them come from families with more economic capital.

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Shen and Yan (2006) found that low-income families also looked to send their children to higher education institutes, even if it was a private college with much higher cost. Why do they want to pay a high price for a college with a poor reputation and suspicious quality? Some believe the major reason is that the returns of higher education have been escalating since the early 1990s in China (Graduate School of Education, Peking University 2005). However, the rapid expansion of higher education also causes the apparent effect of increasing graduate unemployment (Li, Ding and Morgan 2008). Yet, there is an information imbalance city dwellers and countryside people in China. A large number of countryside people consistently believe that education is the only way to change their children's fate and realize social mobility. In order to test this argument, I conducted a survey in 2019 with freshmen in a private college on whether they believed that higher education could change their fate. The result is that an overwhelming 178 out of the 216 (about 82.4%) students answered "Yes", only 16 out of the 216 (about 7.4%) students answered "No", and the rest of them answered "Not Sure" (about 10.2%). Because in Chinese culture, education has always had the position equivalent to religious beliefs in other cultures, there is a cultural tradition behind people's enthusiasm to participate in higher education in China. Stories of people changing their fates through higher education abound in Chinese societies. It is also the reason why the ancient educator Confucius is still worshiped in Chinese temples until today.

It is claimed that providing professional training and quality education is the major task for private colleges. However, there is a key question that many researchers fail to mention or try to avoid: Is quality education really desired in private colleges? Any teacher who is working full-time in private colleges should know that the Student Evaluation of Teaching is the key system of assessing teachers' performance in school. In fact, it is a common practice in private colleges for the grades of the Student Evaluation of Teaching to be published yearly in accordance with teachers' grade sequence. The results of the Student Evaluation of Teaching are also directly related to teachers' year-end bonus and promotion.

Plenty of studies have discussed that many students are focusing on getting the best grades with the least amount of effort in school. It can also be proven by my recent survey in a private college with 215 students: when asked what the most important element is in getting a job after graduation: 39 (about 18.1%) answered diplomas and professional credentials, 28 (about 13%) answered social connections and family network, and 148 (about 68.9%) answered professional skills and abilities. However, when required to make efforts and finish memorizing 1000 English words in one semester of 16 weeks, students' reactions are varied. In the first semester, the requirement of memorizing English words was mandatory and directly related to their final results of College English. As a result, 196 out of the 243 students (about 80.7%) had finished this goal, but the teacher received a low grade in the

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Student Evaluation of Teaching. In order to make the comparison, in the second semester with the same group of students, the requirement of memorizing English words changed into voluntary. As a result, controlling other factors, this time only 52 out of the 243 students (about 21.4%) had finished this goal, and 32 out of the 52 students (about 61.5%) made the least amount of effort and barely achieved that goal by finishing less than 1100 words. The other result was that the teacher received a 3 points higher grade in the Student Evaluation of Teaching this time. This grade lifted the teacher from the low teaching performance category into the medium teaching performance category in this college. Students' behaviours seem to be contradictory to their own beliefs, but this contradiction is easily explainable because claiming to make efforts is always much easier than making actual efforts. A conclusion can be drawn from this case study is that most students in China's private colleges lack self-motivation in study. The other possible conclusion is that quality education is actually something that both students and teachers are advocating in public but trying to avoid in practice. It would be difficult challenges for human nature to ask students to choose their conscience of hard study over easy grades and to ask teachers to choose their conscience of quality education over obvious economic benefits.

It is undeniable that many teachers in China's private colleges are trying to reform and improve their curriculum content. They are introducing modern teaching technologies into their classrooms to make them more attractive. However, they have failed to grasp the real reasons behind students' absent-mindedness: A. Many students choose or are forced by their parents to stay in the higher education system because they can accept the ideology of the usefulness of higher grades and diplomas, but they are not interested and have little faith in classroom teaching contents; B. No matter how hard teachers are trying to use digital devices and multimedia to make their lessons interesting, the same digital devices used for entertainment purposes like gaming and video streaming will always be more attractive to average students.

Empirical findings show that family background has a significant impact on the possibility of a successful job search and on starting wages in the labour market for graduates from private colleges (Li and Hou 2007). Wu (2017) also finds that family socioeconomic status and residence locations continue to exert direct influences on students' future development. According to Frost & Sullivan, the proportion of fresh higher education graduates among the overall young unemployed population in China has grown from 35% in 2005 to 45% in 2016. Within the current private higher education system, students from underprivileged families will have even fewer opportunities to acquire high quality education at school, and they will become the most disadvantaged of all during their job search after graduation. One unexpected but understandable by-product for China's higher education expansion is that many young college graduates have decided not to give birth to the next generation. They

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have realized that, through their own experiences in the labour market and in society, the socioeconomic status of their families is still a decisive factor in many aspects, and years of study in colleges cannot help much in changing their socioeconomic strata and realizing social mobility. Their giving up to the birth of the next generation is both a sign of awaking self-awareness and a way of resistance to the social reality.

Conclusion

This study is concerned with empirical studies of the impact of socioeconomic status differentials and cognitive outcomes on varied experiences within China's private colleges. It reveals a strong and increasing cumulative effect of family socioeconomic status throughout a person's educational and professional career, which is mainly caused by their socioeconomic strata, instead of educational strata at each transition.

Socioeconomic inequality amplified the disparity in ability to acquire higher education and employment between different socioeconomic strata, placing less fortunate people at an increasing competitive disadvantage. It is generally assumed that this increasing competition has a negative effect on social mobility and equality of opportunity (Gerber 2000). Li and Morgan (2008) also point out that the expansion of private higher education has not improved access by students from low-income families, but aggravated social inequities.

Some of the problems in China's private higher education have been exposed for more than a decade, but continue to exist until today. It is difficult to presume that the situation will change in the near future, because many privileged people's benefits are involved in and depend on this higher education system. It also should be noted that all the phenomena discussed above in socioeconomic stratification in higher education institutions may be most salient in private colleges, but not totally unobservable in public colleges and universities in China.

Higher education used to be an effective way to improve social mobility and equality, but it is increasingly becoming a system to strengthen socioeconomic stratification, benefiting only people of high socioeconomic status. If not much could be done to change the current situation from the education sphere, the mass media should take the responsibility to better inform those underprivileged people about the truth in higher education, help them make more sensible decisions on whether to spend a substantial amount of money and time, which are already in great shortage in their lives, to pursue this kind of higher education with doubtful returns.

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Hao Li was born in Kunming, China in 1978. He graduated from Yunnan University, China. He received his doctoral degree in Education in 2014.

He is currently teaching in Foreign Language Department, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics Dongfang College, Haining, China. His research interests include sociology of education and sociolinguistics.