CHAPTER 11

On the “Transitional Stage” from Elite to Mass Higher Education

In 1999, the State Council approved and distributed the “Action Plan for Rejuvenating Education in the Twenty-First Century” submitted by the Ministry of Education. In this document it was put forward that by 2010 the gross higher education enrollment rate in China should have reached 15% among young people of the right age. In other words, higher education in China would enter the massification stage, on which most of the countries in the world have reached a consensus. Professor Martin Trow, an important representative of the theory of the massification of higher education in the Western world, once divided the development process of higher education into the stage of elite education (with a gross enrollment lower than 15%), the stage of mass education (with a gross enrollment rate between 15% and 25%) and the stage of universal education (with a gross enrollment rate higher than 25%). Is China’s higher education still in the stage of elite education? Should we cultivate elites according to the nature of elite education? These are some of the theoretical issues concerning the development process of higher education. A sound recognition and understanding of this process is key to the effective planning and deployment of China’s higher education reform and development in the twenty-first century. We believe that if we examine the actual conditions of China’s higher education in accordance with the rules of development, before the number of students reaches that of the stage of massification, there must be a “transitional stage,” and that China is currently in this transitional stage. This article aims to probe into the characteristics of the transitional stage of China’s higher education massification by analyzing the dissemination and corroboration of Trow’s stage theory of higher education development and studying the practical process of China’s higher education massification, with a view to shedding light on the basic features and rules of the transition of higher education from the stage of elite to mass education.

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Higher education in the United States, with its long history of three hundred years, had spanned the millennium development of higher education in Western Europe and entered into the stage of massification in the 1940s. By the end of the 1960s, the number of undergraduates had exceeded half of the population aged 18–21. During this period, the scale of higher education in many Western European countries had also been multiplying. The expansion of scale resulted in a series of qualitative changes in such aspects of higher education as the concept, functions, curriculum, management, enrollment, and selection of students. Trow, an American education sociologist and professor at the University of California-Berkeley, has been studying higher education development in the United States and Western European countries since the Second World War. After probing into the quantitative and qualitative issues in the process of higher education development in these countries, he consecutively wrote a series of long articles, including “Reflections on the Transition from Mass to Universal Higher Education” (1970), “The Expansion and Transformation of Higher Education” (1972), and “Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education” (1973). He explored the relationship between quantitative growth and qualitative change by using the higher education gross enrollment rate as the indicator and thus divided the history of higher education development into three stages, namely, “the stage of elite higher education, the stage of mass higher education and the stage of universal higher education.” He holds:

The nature of elite higher education of some countries will basically remain unchanged before its scale expands to be so large as to be able to provide study opportunities for around 15% young people of the right age. When the percentage reaches 15%, the nature of the higher education system starts to change and transform into mass higher education; if this transition is successful, then mass higher education can develop to cover 50% people of the right age without changing its nature. When the percentage exceeds 50%, which means that higher education starts to step into universal education quickly, a new higher education model will inevitably come into being.3

3 Ibid., 63–71, 75.