

Entrepreneurship Education and Regional Inequality in China: A Comparative Case Study of Two Normal Universities

Jidong Meng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3292-7890>

Chongqing Normal University, China

jidongmeng1234@gmail.com

Abstract

Entrepreneurship education is often presented as a route to employability and innovation, yet its transformative capacity depends on the regional and institutional conditions through which it is enacted. This comparative case study examines Hangzhou Normal University (HZNU) and Chongqing Normal University (CQNU), two teacher-education institutions located in contrasting innovation ecosystems. Drawing on regional political economy, critical policy analysis, and Fraser's framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation, the article analyses 20 policy and institutional documents and 32 semi-structured interviews, supplemented by publicly available contextual information. The cases suggest that HZNU can connect entrepreneurship education to a dense digital-economy ecosystem, whereas CQNU works through a thinner network and a stronger orientation towards employability, local service, and community development. The normal-university mission further makes teaching, postgraduate study, and public-sector careers important reference points, while making education-related and community-oriented entrepreneurship especially salient. The comparison indicates that entrepreneurship education may reproduce regional inequality when resources, evaluation criteria, and entrepreneurial imaginaries privilege coastal high-tech models. It can contribute to education as change only when policy redistributes resources to strengthen substantive capabilities, recognises locally grounded forms of value creation, and includes less advantaged universities and communities in decision-making.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; regional inequality; social justice; normal



Education as Change
Volume 30 | 2026 | #21053 | 23 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/21053>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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universities; teacher education; Chinese higher education; educational transformation

Introduction

Entrepreneurship education has moved from the margins to the mainstream of higher education policy worldwide. It is widely promoted as a way to enhance graduates' employability, stimulate innovation, and support economic growth amid precarious labour markets and rapid technological change (Gibb 2002; Fayolle, Gailly, and Lassas-Clerc 2006; Nabi et al. 2017; Pittaway and Cope 2007). In China, entrepreneurship education has been positioned at the centre of the “innovation-driven development” and “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” agendas and diffused across university types and regions (Mei and Symaco 2022; Wang and Ma 2022). These developments take place within a highly uneven regional landscape. Coastal provinces, especially the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, have dense clusters of high-tech firms, venture capital, and research-intensive universities, while many western provinces and municipalities struggle with weaker innovation systems and more constrained graduate labour markets (Borsi, Valerio Mendoza, and Comim 2022; Shu, Sugimoto, and Larivière 2021; Zha 2020). This spatial differentiation raises critical questions about how national entrepreneurship education policies are translated in distinct regional contexts and whether they mitigate or reproduce regional inequalities.

In China, these dynamics unfold within the institutional configuration of a socialist market economy, where the state retains a strong steering role while actively using market mechanisms to pursue national development goals. Policies such as the “innovation-driven development” strategy, the “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” (shuangchuang) agenda, the Western Development Strategy, and more recent commitments to “coordinated regional development” and “common prosperity” articulate social policies and strategies with Chinese characteristics. They aim not only to stimulate high-quality growth and new industries, but also to ease employment pressures, narrow regional disparities, and maintain social stability. Entrepreneurship education in higher education institutions is explicitly mobilised as a policy instrument to realise these objectives, channelling young people into innovation-oriented sectors while promoting narratives of self-reliance, flexibility, and patriotism under Party leadership.

This article addresses these questions through a comparative case study of entrepreneurship education at Hangzhou Normal University (HZNU) in Zhejiang Province and Chongqing Normal University (CQNU) in Chongqing Municipality. HZNU is located in Hangzhou, a leading digital-economy hub in the Yangtze River Delta, whereas CQNU is situated in Chongqing, a major western municipality shaped by national regional-development strategies. The two institutions are analytically comparable because both emerged from teacher-education traditions and retain public-service missions, while their regional opportunity structures differ substantially.

The normal-university setting matters substantively. Compared with research-intensive science and engineering universities or business schools, normal universities enrol large groups of students whose intended career paths include school teaching, postgraduate study, civil-service examinations, and other public-sector positions. Their entrepreneurship education is judged not only against start-up formation, but also against educational services, digital pedagogy, rural-education projects, cultural education, and community-based innovation. Comparing HZNU and CQNU makes it possible to examine how a shared institutional mission is refracted through unequal regional ecosystems.

Three bodies of literature frame the study.

First, research on entrepreneurship education has documented effects on entrepreneurial intentions, skills, and employability (Fayolle, Gailly, and Lassas-Clerc 2006; Huang et al. 2025; Nabi et al. 2017). Critical scholars, however, argue that entrepreneurship education can individualise responsibility for structural labour-market problems and normalise entrepreneurial subjectivities aligned with market-oriented governance (Berglund, Hytti, and Verduijn 2020; Essers et al. 2017; Fernández-Herrería and Martínez-Rodríguez 2016; Lackéus 2017). Much of this work remains at national-policy or single-institution level and pays limited attention to intranational regional differences.

Second, research on Chinese higher education highlights institutionalised stratification between coastal and inland regions, including unequal distributions of elite institutions, research funding, and graduate opportunities (Costa and Zha 2020; Li et al. 2015; Shu, Sugimoto, and Larivière 2021). Recent work published in *Education as Change* likewise demonstrates that marketisation and state hierarchy jointly shape the regional distribution of academic capacity in Chinese universities (Bu et al. 2024). Entrepreneurship education is often mentioned within innovation strategies, but is rarely examined as a practice that may itself produce, legitimate, or contest regional inequality.

Third, social-justice theory distinguishes redistribution of resources, recognition of identities and practices, and representation in decision-making (Fraser 1995, 1997, 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2003). Educational research shows that apparently progressive reform can reproduce injustice when any dimension is neglected (Gewirtz 1998; Tikly and Barrett 2011; Unterhalter 2009). Applied to entrepreneurship education, the framework asks who gains substantive support, which forms of entrepreneurship are valued, and whose voices shape policy and institutional priorities (Dodd et al. 2022).

Against this backdrop, the article asks:

1. How are national entrepreneurship education policies and discourses translated into institutional arrangements and practices at HZNU and CQNU?

2. What differences emerge between the two universities in terms of infrastructures, resources, networks, and discursive framings?
3. How do students and staff interpret entrepreneurship education through the public-service and teacher-education missions of normal universities, and what are the implications for regional and social justice?

To address these questions, the article assigns a distinct analytical function to each theoretical lens. Regional political economy explains the unequal external opportunity structures surrounding the two universities; critical policy analysis traces how national agendas are translated through curricula, competitions, incubators, funding, and performance indicators; and Fraser's framework evaluates the resulting consequences for redistribution, recognition, and representation. The explanatory sequence moves from regional opportunity structure and institutional mission, through policy enactment and subject formation, to justice consequences and openings for change.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurship Education: Promises and Critiques

Entrepreneurship education is commonly presented as a response to economic uncertainty and as a way to cultivate “entrepreneurial mindsets” that enhance innovation and employability (Gibb 2002; Fayolle, Gailly, and Lassas-Clerc 2006; Sirelkhatim and Gangi 2015). Systematic reviews suggest that entrepreneurship education can affect entrepreneurial intentions, perceived feasibility, and skills, although effects vary by programme design and context (Nabi et al. 2017; Pittaway and Cope 2007). Pedagogical debates have accordingly shifted towards experiential and practice-based approaches such as incubators, competitions, and project-based learning.

In the Chinese context, recent studies link entrepreneurship education to employability, policy exposure, and entrepreneurial decision-making, while also showing that regional entrepreneurial environments condition students' responses (Huang et al. 2024, 2025). Policy discourse presents entrepreneurship education as a means of “high-quality employment” and a route into emerging sectors (Mei and Symaco 2022; Wang and Ma 2022).

However, critical scholarship questions the assumptions behind this optimistic narrative. One line of critique shows how entrepreneurship education can individualise structural problems by treating unemployment or precarity as deficits of attitude rather than consequences of labour-market structures and regional economies (Berglund, Hytti, and Verduijn 2020; Essers et al. 2017; Fernández-Herrería and Martínez-Rodríguez 2016). A second observes that high-tech, high-growth, and venture-capital-backed models can marginalise necessity entrepreneurship, local small enterprises, and collective or social forms of value creation (Dodd et al. 2022; Lackéus 2017). A third conceptualises entrepreneurship education as a governance technology that invites

students to become flexible, self-responsible, and continuously opportunity-seeking subjects (Ball 2005; Fernández-Herrería and Martínez-Rodríguez 2016). These debates provide useful tools, but they often treat national space as homogeneous. There is limited empirical work on how entrepreneurship education interacts with intranational regional inequalities, and on how it may contribute to spatial (in)justice within national systems.

Regional Inequality and Chinese Higher Education

China's rapid development since the late 1970s has been accompanied by pronounced regional disparities between coastal and inland/western areas. Coastal provinces have enjoyed earlier integration into global markets, stronger industrial bases, and higher levels of inward investment, while many western regions have experienced slower growth and more limited diversification (Borsi, Valerio Mendoza, and Comim 2022; Zha 2020).

Higher education is deeply implicated in these patterns. Projects 211 and 985 and the Double First-Class initiative have channelled disproportionate funding and prestige to selected institutions, many of which are located in coastal regions (Costa and Zha 2020; Shu, Sugimoto, and Larivière 2021). Research documents inequalities in access to elite universities by region and rural-urban background (Hamnett, Shen, and Liang 2019; Li et al. 2015), while Bu et al. (2024) show that marketisation and administrative hierarchy jointly structure the regional distribution of academic capacity. Graduates from coastal universities also tend to encounter denser labour-market and innovation networks.

Within this stratified system, universities are expected to serve as engines of regional innovation, talent attraction, and industrial upgrading (Huang et al. 2024). Entrepreneurship education is increasingly central to these expectations (Mei and Symaco 2022; Wang and Ma 2022). Yet the capacity of universities to enact entrepreneurship agendas is conditioned by regional political economy: Coastal universities can connect to dense networks of firms, investors, and intermediaries, whereas many western universities work within thinner and more fragmented ecosystems.

Despite this, research on Chinese entrepreneurship education has largely focused on national policy analysis, single-institution case studies detached from regional comparison, or large-scale surveys of student outcomes (Huang et al. 2025). There is little systematic examination of how entrepreneurship education is differentially shaped in regions such as Hangzhou and Chongqing, or of the social justice implications of such differentiation.

Social Justice, Education, and Entrepreneurship

Social justice in education has been theorised in multiple ways, but a particularly influential account is Fraser's (1995, 1997, 2008) three-dimensional model of

redistribution, recognition, and representation. Redistribution refers to the fair allocation of material resources; recognition refers to the equal respect and valuation of different identities, practices, and knowledges; and representation denotes the inclusion of affected groups in decision-making and public deliberation. Educational scholars have used this framework to analyse how institutions and reforms reproduce or challenge inequalities (Gewirtz 1998; Tikly and Barrett 2011; Unterhalter 2009).

Applied to entrepreneurship education, a redistributive lens raises questions about how funding, infrastructure, mentoring, and networks are allocated across regions and institutions. A recognitional lens asks which forms of entrepreneurship—for example, high-tech versus small-scale, urban versus rural, individual versus collective—are celebrated, supported, or devalued. A representational lens focuses on whose voices shape entrepreneurship education agendas: Do actors from less advantaged regions, and students from marginalised backgrounds, have meaningful influence, or are policy models derived primarily from elite, coastal institutions?

Emerging work connects entrepreneurship education to social justice, arguing that initiatives often serve already advantaged groups when participation relies on financial, cultural, and social capital they disproportionately possess (Dodd et al. 2022). Other studies identify the transformative potential of enterprise education that foregrounds social and environmental justice, collective agency, and community development (Dodd et al. 2022; Lackéus 2017). The regional and institutional dimensions of such justice, however, remain underexplored.

This article contributes by bringing Fraser’s framework into conversation with regional political economy and critical policy analysis and by treating the normal-university mission as an institutional filter. The aim is not to infer a general coastal-western effect from two institutions, but to identify mechanisms through which common policy can generate unequal capabilities, unequal recognition, and unequal voice in differently situated universities.

In this context, entrepreneurship education is simultaneously a market-oriented policy—encouraging competition, risk-taking, and firm creation—and a social policy instrument aimed at absorbing surplus graduates, promoting grassroots innovation, and legitimising ongoing economic restructuring. This dual role produces characteristic tensions. On the one hand, competitive funding schemes, rankings, and national competitions incentivise universities and students to emulate high-tech, high-growth entrepreneurship models that are often derived from coastal innovation hubs. On the other hand, central documents emphasise “inclusive innovation”, “serving regional development”, and “sharing the fruits of reform and development”, signalling expectations that entrepreneurship education should contribute to social justice and balanced development. The literature on Chinese higher education and innovation has begun to note these tensions, but has rarely examined how they are negotiated in specific regional and institutional contexts, or how they are experienced by students and staff in

less advantaged regions. This study addresses that gap by situating entrepreneurship education at HZNU and CQNU within these policy logics and their contradictions.

Entrepreneurship education in China cannot be understood solely through generic global narratives of neoliberalism or human-capital formation. It is embedded in a distinctive configuration of social policies and development strategies under socialism with Chinese characteristics, where the Party-state uses market mechanisms instrumentally while maintaining strong political and ideological control. Since the mid-2010s, the “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” strategy has been closely linked to broader agendas of “innovation-driven development”, “employment-first” policies, and more recently “common prosperity”. Universities are expected not only to cultivate entrepreneurial competences, but also to contribute to stabilising employment, reducing regional disparities, and supporting major national strategies such as the Yangtze River Economic Belt, the Western Development Strategy, and rural revitalisation.

Normal Universities as a Distinct Institutional Context

Normal universities occupy a distinctive position in China’s higher-education field. Although many have become comprehensive institutions, teacher education, public service, and regional human-capital formation remain central to their histories and identities. Entrepreneurship education consequently encounters a student population for whom stability, professional certification, and public contribution may be more salient than the high-risk start-up identity commonly assumed in entrepreneurship policy. Its relevant outcomes may include new educational services, digital learning tools, after-school provision, rural-school projects, cultural education and community innovation, as well as commercial ventures. This institutional context provides a critical test of whether entrepreneurship education recognises multiple forms of value creation or treats the high-growth technology firm as a universal norm.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three lenses with non-interchangeable functions: (1) regional political economy diagnoses the external distribution of firms, finance, public investment, and labour-market opportunity; (2) critical policy analysis explains how entrepreneurship agendas are translated into institutional technologies and student subjectivities; and (3) Fraser’s redistribution-recognition-representation framework evaluates whether those arrangements enable parity of participation. The normal-university mission mediates the first two stages by shaping what students and staff regard as credible, legitimate, and publicly valuable entrepreneurial action.

Regional Political Economy

From a regional political economy perspective, national territories are internally differentiated by historically produced patterns of investment, industrial structure, and state policy (Borsi, Valerio Mendoza, and Comim 2022). Universities are not neutral knowledge factories; they are strategically positioned within regional innovation

systems, contributing to talent formation, research and technology transfer, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

In China, coastal cities such as Hangzhou benefit from dense clusters of high-tech firms, venture capital, and state recognition as innovation hubs. Western municipalities such as Chongqing are designated as strategic development zones but still face legacies of heavy industry and more fragmented innovation infrastructures. HZNU and CQNU thus operate under distinct regional opportunity structures. Entrepreneurship education at HZNU can draw on Alibaba, Future Sci-Tech City, and a national university science park, whereas entrepreneurship education at CQNU must connect to a more varied and less dense regional economy.

This perspective foregrounds how spatially uneven conditions shape what entrepreneurship education can be in practice, and how national policies may have different effects depending on regional context.

In the Chinese case, regional political economy is shaped by state strategies that formally seek to balance efficiency and equity. The Western Development Strategy and regional-coordination plans prioritise inland regions, yet digital-economy infrastructure, venture capital, and high-status institutions remain unevenly concentrated. The two cases are used to examine this policy tension rather than to claim that every coastal or western university follows the same path.

Entrepreneurship Education as Policy Discourse and Governance Technology

Drawing on critical policy studies and governmentality (Ball 2005; Essers et al. 2017), entrepreneurship education is understood as part of a wider policy discourse that constructs particular visions of economic development and desirable citizens. In China, discourses of “innovation-driven development” and “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” frame students as entrepreneurial subjects responsible for creating their own opportunities and contributing to regional and national development (Mei and Symaco 2022). At the same time, these discourses are infused with socialist and nationalist themes—such as serving the people, contributing to regional revitalisation, and realising the “Chinese Dream”—which position entrepreneurship as a way to reconcile market competition with collective welfare and Party leadership.

These discourses are operationalised through governance technologies: curricula, incubators, competitions, performance indicators, and funding schemes that shape institutional behaviour and student subjectivities. Entrepreneurship education thus becomes a way of governing students’ futures, encouraging them to internalise norms of risk-taking, self-responsibility, and continuous self-improvement.

Crucially, policies are not simply implemented; they are translated and enacted in specific institutional and regional contexts. HZNU and CQNU interpret national entrepreneurship policies in light of their histories, capacities, and local environments.

Analysing policy and institutional documents, and staff narratives, as discursive practices helps to reveal how different imaginaries of entrepreneurship and regional futures are produced.

Fraser's Three-Dimensional Model of Social Justice

Fraser's (1995, 1997, 2008) model of redistribution, recognition, and representation provides a normative and analytical framework for assessing the justice implications of regionally differentiated entrepreneurship education. Redistribution directs attention to the unequal allocation of resources and opportunities—funding, infrastructure, mentoring, networks—between HZNU and CQNU, and how this shapes students' ability to engage meaningfully in entrepreneurship education. Recognition focuses on how different forms of entrepreneurship and regional identities are valued or devalued. High-tech, digital economy entrepreneurship in Hangzhou may enjoy higher status than small-scale or locally oriented ventures in Chongqing. Representation concerns whose voices shape entrepreneurship education agendas and evaluation criteria, both at the national level and within institutions. Fraser argues that these dimensions are intertwined: Maldistribution is often justified by misrecognition and stabilised by misrepresentation. A just entrepreneurship education system would need to address all three dimensions simultaneously.

Integrating the Framework

The three lenses operate as an explanatory chain rather than as parallel vocabularies. First, regional political economy specifies the unequal opportunity structures within which each university acts. Second, critical policy analysis traces how those conditions and each university's teacher-education mission shape the enactment of curricula, competitions, incubators, funding rules, and success metrics. Third, Fraser's framework evaluates whether these enactments redistribute substantive capability, recognise regionally and educationally grounded forms of entrepreneurship, and represent affected students, universities, and communities in decision-making. This sequence links context, institutional practice, and normative evaluation while allowing evidence of resistance and alternative practice to qualify the reproduction argument. The analysis asks not simply whether entrepreneurship education exists, but what participants can actually do through it, which forms of value creation become legitimate, and who has authority to define success.

Research Design and Methods

Comparative Case Study Design

The study adopts a comparative qualitative case-study design focused on HZNU and CQNU. The cases are matched on institutional type—both are comprehensive normal universities with enduring teacher-education and public-service missions, but differ in regional innovation-system density. This most-similar-institution/different-context logic makes the comparison useful for tracing how regional opportunity structures

interact with institutional mission. It does not isolate a purely regional causal effect because the institutions also differ in history, organisation, and local partnerships.

The purpose is analytical rather than statistical generalisation: to develop conditional explanations that can be examined in other normal universities and regional settings. Accordingly, the article avoids treating HZNU as representative of all coastal institutions or CQNU as representative of western China.

Data Sources

The study draws primarily on two sources of empirical evidence: policy and institutional documents, and semi-structured interviews. Publicly available contextual information was used only to situate the two cases within their regional and institutional settings. Table 1 summarises the coverage, composition, and analytical roles of these materials.

First, the documentary corpus comprised 20 policy and institutional documents selected for their relevance to entrepreneurship education and regional development. These included national and subnational policies on innovation and entrepreneurship; development strategies issued in Zhejiang/Hangzhou and Chongqing; and documents produced by HZNU and CQNU, including strategic and implementation plans, curriculum documents, regulations governing entrepreneurship centres, science parks and incubators, and relevant public communications. The documents were used to examine how entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial success, and regional development were framed at different policy and institutional levels. Because policy and institutional texts represent formal priorities and authorised accounts, they were not treated as direct evidence of programme implementation or participants' experiences.

Second, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the two universities. At HZNU, the 18 interviewees comprised five teachers involved in entrepreneurship education, 10 students who had participated in entrepreneurship courses, competitions, or incubation activities, and three alumni entrepreneurs. At CQNU, the 14 interviewees comprised four staff members from the university's innovation and entrepreneurship college, four teachers, four students, and two alumni entrepreneurs. This composition enabled comparison across institutional roles and provided evidence concerning participants' experiences of entrepreneurship education, their understandings of entrepreneurial opportunity, and their perceptions of institutional and regional constraints. No focus groups were conducted.

Fieldwork at HZNU was conducted from 15 to 29 July 2025, and fieldwork at CQNU took place from 20 to 30 September 2025. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and transcribed for analysis. Student interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes, whereas interviews with teachers, administrative staff, and alumni entrepreneurs lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interview excerpts used in the article are translated into English and identified only by institution and broad participant role in order to protect confidentiality.

In addition, publicly available contextual information was consulted to situate the two cases within their regional and institutional settings. This material concerned broad features of local development priorities, entrepreneurship-education infrastructure, and university links with industries, schools, communities, and innovation initiatives. Because the available information varied in scope, date, and reporting basis, it was not assembled or analysed as a comparable indicator dataset. It was used only to support contextual interpretation, not to triangulate the principal findings, rank the universities, measure programme effectiveness, or estimate causal effects.

Table 1: Data sources and analytical roles

Data source	Coverage and composition	Analytical role
Policy and institutional documents	20 documents covering national policies; Zhejiang/Hangzhou and Chongqing development strategies; and HZNU and CQNU plans, curriculum documents, entrepreneurship-centre and incubator regulations, and public communications	To identify policy framings, institutional priorities, representations of entrepreneurial success, and the translation of national policy into regional and university practices
Semi-structured interviews: HZNU	18 interviews: five entrepreneurship-education teachers, 10 participating students, and three alumni entrepreneurs	To examine participants' experiences, aspirations, perceived opportunities and constraints, and interpretations of entrepreneurship education
Semi-structured interviews: CQNU	14 interviews: four innovation and entrepreneurship college staff members, four teachers, four students, and two alumni entrepreneurs	To examine participants' experiences, aspirations, perceived opportunities and constraints, and interpretations of entrepreneurship education
Publicly available contextual information	Officially or institutionally published background information concerning regional development priorities, entrepreneurship-education infrastructure, and university links with industries, schools, communities, and innovation initiatives	To situate the cases and support contextual interpretation; not treated as a comparable indicator dataset or as independent evidence of programme outcomes

The policy and institutional documents and the interviews constituted the study's principal empirical evidence; publicly available information served only as contextual background. Formal policy and institutional claims were compared with participant accounts but were not assumed to demonstrate actual implementation, while interview accounts were not used to infer the prevalence of particular views among the wider university populations. The coding and interpretation were independently checked by another researcher. Triangulation focused on whether documentary and interview evidence across policy levels, institutions, and participant roles supported, qualified, or contradicted the proposed explanations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Documents were read for how entrepreneurship, students, institutions, and regional development were framed; which forms of success were made visible; and how resources, responsibilities, and policy voice were allocated.

First-cycle coding combined deductive categories from the framework—opportunity structure, governance technology, redistribution, recognition, and representation—with inductive expressions in the materials, including “competition certificates”, “digital economy opportunities”, and “fallback strategy”.

Second-cycle comparison examined convergence and divergence across site, documentary level, and participant role. Claims from policy and institutional documents were compared with interview accounts but were not treated as equivalent evidence of programme implementation or participant experience.

The analysis retained counter-examples, including HZNU students who resisted high-tech entrepreneurial ideals and CQNU participants who developed community- and education-oriented projects. These negative cases qualify any simple coastal-success/western-deficit narrative.

The interview materials were transcribed and analysed thematically. Selected excerpts are identified by institution and broad participant role to protect confidentiality. Because short quotations illustrate mechanisms rather than sample prevalence, the article does not infer frequency from the number of excerpts presented.

Triangulation proceeded by examining whether policy and institutional framings and participant accounts supported, complicated, or contradicted the same proposed mechanism across the two cases. Publicly available contextual information was used only to interpret the regional and institutional settings and was not treated as an independent source for validating programme outcomes. The resulting explanations were then assessed through Fraser’s three dimensions rather than collapsed into a single measure of programme quality.

Ethics, Positionality, and Evidentiary Limits

All participants received information sheets and signed informed-consent forms. Pseudonyms are used for individuals; institutional names are retained because they are central to the regional comparison, while sensitive details are anonymised. Quotation labels remain deliberately broad to reduce deductive-identification risk.

The researcher is a Chinese higher-education scholar with professional experience in entrepreneurship-education policy. This positioning enabled contextual interpretation but could also normalise official policy categories. Reflexive notes were used to record assumptions and to retain evidence that challenged a simple reproduction account. The study remains limited by its two cases and available source metadata: It cannot estimate

population prevalence, compare all normal universities, or demonstrate that region alone caused the observed differences.

Findings: Divergent Enactments of Entrepreneurship Education at HZNU and CQNU

This section presents the findings under four subheadings: (1) infrastructures and resource ecologies; (2) discourses and imaginaries of entrepreneurship; (3) student and staff experiences and perceptions of (in)justice; and (4) mechanisms of (re)production and openings for change.

Unequal Infrastructures and Resource Ecologies

HZNU has developed a high-capacity entrepreneurship ecosystem closely linked to Hangzhou's digital economy. A central node is the National University Science Park, established with substantial investment and recognised both as a national university science park and as a national science and technology business incubator. It provides office and laboratory space, mentoring, and access to networks for student and staff ventures. HZNU also operates a dedicated student entrepreneurship park, explicitly tasked with supporting innovation and entrepreneurship education, gathering qualified staff, and offering practice platforms for student projects.

Entrepreneurship education at HZNU is not confined to a single faculty. Instead, it is embedded across disciplines through required and elective courses, co-curricular activities, and competition preparation. The university has also co-established the Alibaba Business School, focusing on internet and e-commerce entrepreneurship, further strengthening links to Hangzhou's digital economy.

HZNU's location in the western Hangzhou innovation corridor, adjacent to Future Sci-Tech City, Dream Town, and technology firms, increases the visibility of mentors, internships, and start-up role models. One HZNU staff interview condensed this campus-city relationship into the phrase "entrepreneurial environment". The phrase is analytically useful, but it does not imply that every student can access the ecosystem on equal terms.

By contrast, CQNU's entrepreneurship education infrastructure is coordinated through the Innovation and Entrepreneurship College, which oversees courses, training, competitions, project cultivation, and incubation. The college has set up on-campus incubation spaces and provides small grants and training to student teams. CQNU is located in Shapingba university town and participates in Chongqing's emerging innovation initiatives, including initiatives linked to Western (Chongqing) Science City.

Compared with HZNU, CQNU's entrepreneurship-support ecosystem was portrayed in the documentary and interview materials as thinner and more fragmented. The partnerships described in the materials were concentrated in manufacturing, logistics,

culture, tourism, and educational services, while access to digital-platform firms, investment networks, and sustained specialist support was described as more limited. Staff accounts emphasised constraints in funding, dedicated personnel, and legal and financial expertise; students reported limited incubation space and weak follow-through after competitions or small grants.

In short, both universities have responded to national entrepreneurship education policies, but they do so from very different infrastructural starting points. HZNU can anchor entrepreneurship education in a national-level science park and dense digital economy networks; CQNU relies on a single college and emerging city-level initiatives in a still-cementing innovation system.

Viewed through the policy commitment to coordinated development, the cases reveal a tension rather than a settled national pattern: Formal support for western innovation coexists with market agglomeration and the concentration of high-capacity science-park, platform, and investment networks in coastal cities. Entrepreneurship education can transmit regional advantage when policy expects institutions to compete on common outputs without equalising the capabilities required to produce them.

These infrastructural differences shape how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial futures are discursively constructed in each institution.

Divergent Discourses and Imaginaries of Entrepreneurship

At HZNU, the analysed institutional documents and public communications repeatedly use the terms “digital economy”, “internet plus”, “innovation ecosystems”, and “global competitiveness”. Success stories feature technology-based ventures in e-commerce, data, or creative industries and position entrepreneurship education as a route to “new economy talents”. This documentary vocabulary constitutes evidence about institutional recognition and aspiration; it does not by itself establish student uptake or venture success.

At CQNU, entrepreneurship is more often framed as locally anchored and service-oriented. Institutional materials emphasise employability, regional service, and community contribution, while staff interviews repeatedly invoked the need to “connect with local industries”, “support rural revitalisation”, and “help students stay and develop in Chongqing”. Highlighted projects include educational services, cultural and creative micro-enterprises, tourism-related ventures, and small-scale online businesses.

These discourses produce different imaginaries of success. HZNU foregrounds the scalable digital entrepreneur, whereas CQNU negotiates between national innovation language and contextually feasible forms of local service. CQNU staff perceived national competitions and evaluation criteria as benchmarked against coastal high-tech models, which can cast locally useful ventures as “second tier”. This is a claim about perceived recognitional hierarchy, not a measured assessment of every competition.

The shared teacher-education mission sharpens the comparison. In both institutions, entrepreneurship competes with established pathways into teaching, postgraduate education, civil-service examinations, and public-sector employment. HZNU's digital-economy ecosystem makes technology-oriented and education-related ventures more imaginable alongside these pathways, whereas CQNU more often connects entrepreneurship with educational services, rural education projects, and community-based initiatives. Thus, regional context does not simply increase or reduce entrepreneurship; it shapes which entrepreneurial practices appear legitimate, feasible, and consistent with a normal university's public-service mission.

Student and Staff Experiences, Aspirations, and Perceptions of (In)justice

Students' and staff's accounts show how infrastructures and discourses translate into lived experiences.

At HZNU, many students described entrepreneurship education as one option within a broader opportunity portfolio that included internships, research, and postgraduate study. A recurring phrase in the coded accounts was "digital economy opportunities"; staff and students also pointed to competitions, workshops, mentors, and subsidised space. For some, these resources reduced the cost of testing an idea. For others—especially students with fewer financial resources or stronger teaching aspirations—the high-tech, high-growth ideal remained distant or misaligned.

However, not all students at HZNU feel equally positioned to benefit. Students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds report being cautious about taking financial risks, even with university support. Some feel that the emphasis on high-tech, high-growth ventures does not align with their skills or aspirations.

At CQNU, accounts were more ambivalent. Students valued courses and small grants and described tutoring, cultural products, and online retail projects, yet "competition certificates" recurred as a practical reason for participation. For these students, entrepreneurship activities could add evaluation points without becoming a credible long-term career. Limited finance and mentorship combined with the comparative attraction of public-school, civil-service, and state-sector employment. The finding is not that CQNU students lack entrepreneurial aspiration; rather, institutional rewards and regional risk structures can separate participation from viable venture continuation.

Staff at both universities expressed commitment alongside pressure. HZNU staff described expectations to produce visible success stories and maintain external partnerships. CQNU staff described the difficulty of meeting common policy targets with fewer specialist resources while avoiding unrealistic demands on students. These accounts show how performance technologies can intensify unequal burdens even when formal policy requirements are similar.

Within this dataset, HZNU participants more often treated the opportunity structure as broadly enabling, while CQNU participants more often named structural disadvantage in relation to coastal universities. References to high-tech judging criteria and coastal “innovation models” illustrate how material differences become recognitional hierarchies. These contrasting accounts are analytically suggestive, but the sample does not support prevalence estimates beyond the two cases.

Counter-narratives are equally important. CQNU students and staff reframed entrepreneurship through rural education, cultural heritage, and community needs; HZNU participants also explored social and education-related ventures beyond platform growth. Such practices reveal a transformative possibility particularly relevant to normal universities: Entrepreneurship education can support educational experimentation and collective problem-solving when locally grounded public value receives material support and institutional recognition.

These experiences illustrate how national social and development policies are translated on the ground. For HZNU students, the socialist market-economy promise that “innovation and entrepreneurship” will generate high-quality opportunities appears more attainable, even if unequally distributed across social groups. For CQNU students, the same slogans can feel more like normative expectations than realistic pathways, given local labour-market structures and limited ecosystem support. Staff at both universities must mediate between policy expectations—such as contributing to regional revitalisation and common prosperity—and the concrete constraints and risks faced by their students.

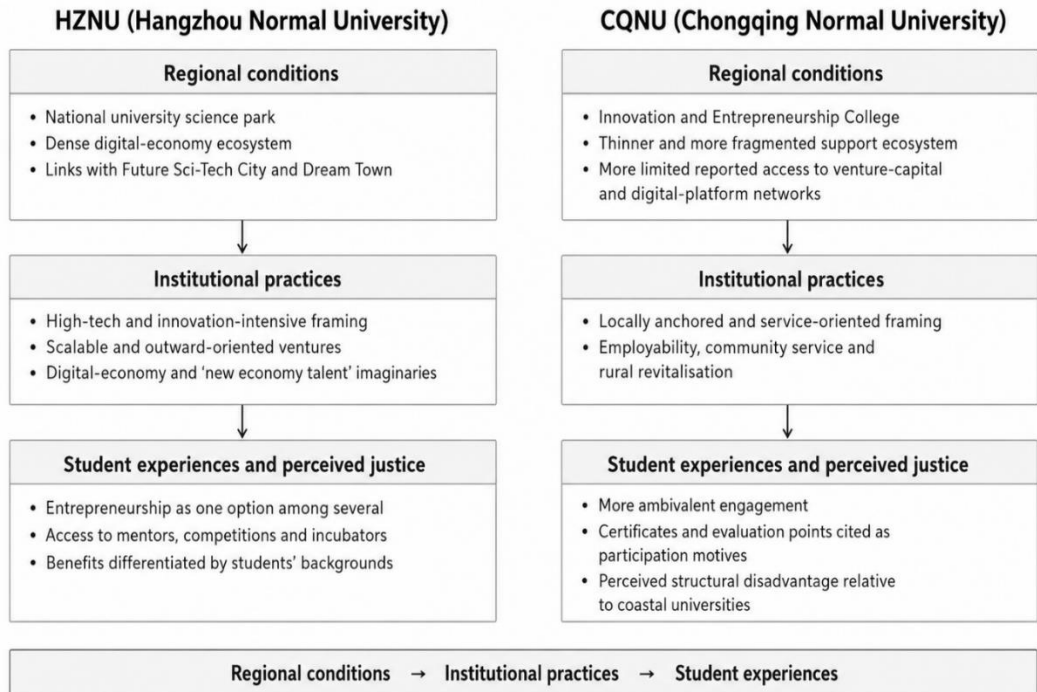


Figure 1: Regional conditions, institutional practices, and student experiences in the two normal universities

Mechanisms of (Re)production and Openings for Change

The comparison identifies three conditional mechanisms through which entrepreneurship education may reproduce regional inequality when common policy instruments are layered onto unequal ecosystems.

1. Maldistribution of resources and ecosystem density: HZNU's access to national-level science-park infrastructure, digital-economy firms, and municipal innovation networks expands funding, mentoring, and brokerage capacity. CQNU's more fragmented ecosystem restricts the continuity of support. The cases suggest that formally equal programme requirements may generate unequal substantive capability.

2. Misrecognition of regionally and educationally grounded entrepreneurship: Evaluation criteria and success stories that privilege scalable technology ventures can discount small-scale, education-related, rural, and community-based projects. Such misrecognition matters because it affects legitimacy, confidence, and access to subsequent support, not merely symbolic status.

3. Misrepresentation in policy and institutional governance: "Best practice" models derived from dense coastal ecosystems can narrow the influence of western institutions

over funding and evaluation rules. Within universities, students, schools, and communities have limited formal authority to define which problems entrepreneurship education should address. The evidence indicates a representational risk; it does not establish the composition of every national policy body.

The mechanisms reinforce one another: Resource concentration makes coastal models more visible; visibility turns those models into standards of merit; and limited voice makes the standards difficult to contest. Conversely, change in one dimension is unlikely to be durable without movement in the others.

Openings for change are visible but fragile. HZNU's social and education-related projects and CQNU's rural-revitalisation and community initiatives show that participants can appropriate entrepreneurship education for purposes beyond high-growth venture creation. Whether those practices become transformative depends on resources, recognition, and voice rather than on curricular expansion alone.

Discussion

The two cases illuminate a specific contradiction in using entrepreneurship education simultaneously as innovation policy, employment policy, and a vehicle of coordinated development. Competitive funding, performance indicators, science parks, and national contests can reward institutions already connected to strong markets, even while official discourse emphasises inclusion and common prosperity. The relevant question for education as change is not whether entrepreneurial activity expands, but whether educational arrangements enlarge the substantive capability and public voice of students and institutions positioned outside dominant innovation centres.

The comparative analysis of HZNU and CQNU has several implications for debates on entrepreneurship education, regional inequality, and social justice.

First, the study regionalises entrepreneurship education. A common national policy is enacted through unequal configurations of firms, finance, public investment, and labour-market opportunity. Regional political economy conditions not only programme resources but also which futures become imaginable to students.

Second, the study identifies entrepreneurship education as a site where spatial hierarchy can be reproduced or contested. Common competitions and performance criteria are not neutral when the capabilities required to meet them are regionally concentrated. The contribution is a conditional mechanism claim, not a two-case estimate of a national coastal-western gap.

Third, the normal-university comparison adds institutional mission to this regional account. Teacher education and public service mediate how entrepreneurial policy is interpreted: Enterprise may mean a digital start-up, but it may also mean educational technology, rural-school support, cultural learning, or community provision. Evaluating

normal universities primarily by venture counts risks misrecognising forms of educational and social value central to their mission.

Fourth, Fraser's framework shows that injustice is multi-dimensional. Resource gaps constrain substantive participation; dominant entrepreneurial imaginaries devalue locally grounded practice; and limited representation stabilises both. Increasing courses or competition entries in western universities cannot produce parity of participation if evaluation rules and policy voice remain unchanged.

Fifth, these perspectives provide a multilevel account of inequality in entrepreneurship education. Regional political economy identifies uneven access to resources and opportunities; critical policy analysis examines how these conditions are translated into institutional arrangements and student subject positions; and Fraser's framework evaluates their implications for parity of participation. Educational transformation is assessed not by programme expansion alone, but by whether entrepreneurship education broadens substantive capabilities, recognises diverse forms of entrepreneurial and social value, and increases the influence of affected groups over relevant decisions.

Taken together, the counter-examples complicate accounts of entrepreneurship education as only a neoliberal imposition. Participants can redirect entrepreneurial learning towards community and educational purposes. Yet agency should not be romanticised: Without redistributive support, recognitional change, and representative governance, locally transformative initiatives remain fragile and dependent on individual effort.

Conclusion

This article has examined how entrepreneurship education is enacted at HZNU and CQNU and what the comparison suggests about regional inequality, institutional mission, and social justice in Chinese higher education. Regional political economy explains different opportunity structures; critical policy analysis traces their institutional translation; and Fraser's framework evaluates the resulting distribution of capability, status, and voice.

HZNU connects entrepreneurship education to a dense digital-economy ecosystem and gives greater visibility to scalable technology ventures. CQNU works through a thinner network and more strongly links entrepreneurship to employability, local service, and community development. In both institutions, the normal-university mission makes teaching and public-sector careers central reference points and renders education-related entrepreneurship analytically important.

The two cases suggest that entrepreneurship education may reproduce regional inequality when resource flows, evaluation criteria, and entrepreneurial imaginaries privilege coastal high-tech ecosystems. They also show that reproduction is not

inevitable: Education-related, socially oriented, and community-based projects provide openings for change when supported institutionally.

To enable entrepreneurship education to contribute to parity of participation and inclusive regional development, policy should connect each diagnosed mechanism to one of Fraser's justice dimensions:

Redistribution. Establish ring-fenced funding for less advantaged universities; multi-year seed funds; interregional mentoring networks; shared legal, financial, and intellectual-property services; and partnerships with firms, schools, and community organisations. Funding formulas should account for ecosystem scarcity rather than reward only prior outputs.

Recognition. Broaden competition and evaluation criteria beyond high-tech growth, external investment, and rapid scaling. Education-related ventures, social entrepreneurship, rural revitalisation, cultural projects, and community-based provision should be assessed for pedagogic quality, public value, local sustainability, and the capabilities they create.

Representation. Include western universities, normal-university students and staff, schools, local communities, and regional intermediaries in designing funding schemes, competitions, and evaluation standards. Participation should involve agenda-setting and decision authority, not consultation after criteria have been fixed.

For normal universities, these reforms could be implemented through education-venture studios, school-community living laboratories, shared digital-education platforms, and credit-bearing projects co-designed with local schools. Such arrangements would connect entrepreneurial learning to the public-service mission rather than positioning start-up creation as the only legitimate outcome.

The study's scope requires caution. Two purposively selected institutions cannot represent all coastal and western universities, and regional context cannot be separated completely from institutional history and organisation. The evidence identifies plausible mechanisms rather than their national prevalence or causal magnitude. Future research should compare additional institutional types and regions, publish fuller category-level sample metadata, examine gender, social class, language, and rural-urban origin, and follow education-related ventures longitudinally to assess whether short-term participation becomes durable public or economic value.

Entrepreneurship education becomes education as change only when it alters the conditions under which people can participate, the forms of contribution that institutions recognise, and the voices authorised to define success. The HZNU-CQNU comparison indicates that formal expansion without these changes can shift structural risk onto students and reproduce regional hierarchy. Conversely, coordinated redistribution,

plural recognition, and representative governance can turn entrepreneurial learning into a means of educational experimentation, community problem-solving, and more inclusive regional development.

Funding

The 2026 Higher Education Teaching Reform Research Project (General Project): “Research on Curriculum Education Reform of ‘Three-Dimensional Penetration’ for Integration of Specialised Education and Innovation in Local Normal Majors Driven by Dual-Core OBE-EDT” (Number: 263110).

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