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From pyramid to "five-finger mountain": spatial metaphors and the discursive reordering of Chinese higher education

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Abstract. Policies that classify higher education institutions are usually examined through the resources and governance arrangements they establish, and less often through the vocabulary in which they describe the order they seek to create. This article analyses how spatial metaphors construct and revise the imagined order of Chinese higher education. It examines a registered corpus of 39 entries—37 distinct Chinese-language sources issued between 1993 and 2026, comprising central policy texts, provincial implementation schemes, institutional self-descriptions, official replies and interpretations, and media commentary—using a metaphor-led critical discourse analysis in which metaphorical expressions were identified, coded on six dimensions, and aggregated into conceptual keys. The order is organised by height rather than by type, and the routes between positions are explicitly closed; height, however, is not carried by spatial vocabulary alone, since terms of level, quality and excellence assign standing without any spatial figure. The re-description of that order proceeds by negating rank while retaining the vocabulary of layout and position, so that change and persistence are announced in the same formulation. On this reading, replacing a metaphor is not the same as moving an order. The study extends the concept of academic drift from institutional behaviour to the level of discourse and specifies a boundary condition for it: where the state sets the categories and closes movement between them, re-description becomes the available mode of description. It also makes explicit a boundary between spatial metaphor and scalar grading that metaphor-only analysis tends to leave unexamined.

Keywords: spatial metaphor, higher education policy, institutional hierarchy, academic drift, China

1. Introduction

Higher education systems across the world have been reorganised around the pursuit of excellence. Governments have established designated programmes that concentrate resources in selected institutions and disciplines, and international rankings have become a reference point both for steering and for public comparison [1]. Research on these initiatives has asked whether they raise research productivity [2], whether they distribute funding more or less unevenly [3], whether world-class status and academic freedom reinforce one another [4], and how ranking pressure reshapes institutional priorities [5]. The instruments are widely shared; whether they produce comparable orders is a separate question. China is an instructive case, because it has revised not only the resources attached to institutional categories but the categories themselves—most visibly in the re-description of vocational education from a level to a type. Studies of stratification infer order

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from structure and outcomes, and studies of drift infer it from institutional behaviour; the vocabulary through which such an order is stated and restated has comparatively seldom been the object of analysis. This study therefore asks how spatial metaphors construct and revise the imagined order of Chinese higher education, and how a change of metaphor relates to the persistence of that order. It responds through a metaphor-led critical discourse analysis of a registered corpus of 39 entries issued between 1993 and 2026. Section 2 reviews the relevant literatures; Section 3 sets out the corpus and the analytical procedure; Section 4 reports the findings; Section 5 discusses them in relation to those literatures; and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stratification as structure

Work on Chinese higher education governance has shown how central authorities retained command over the upper reaches of the system while diffusing expansion to sub-national governments: Yang and Wang [6] describe a vertical elite coalition charged with holding "the heights of tertiary institutional hierarchy" and the key resources attached to it, an arrangement that widened access while also widening regional variation. Later studies have examined how world-class university projects were steered [7, 8], what they required of academics [9], and how vocational provision was organised through project-based mechanisms [10]. Chinese-language scholarship has traced the reorganisation of categories in closer detail: the positioning of vocational education has been described as shifting from a level to a type, a change given legal expression in the 2022 revision of the Vocational Education Law [11], and one whose realisation is treated as dependent on institution-building and on how educational differentiation is cognitively framed [12]. Analyses of classification reform have identified a binary structure and status markers that obstruct parity among types [13], and have located the difficulty in the adjustment of relations among state, market and academic authority [14]; a recent comparison of European classification mechanisms presents evaluation design as a means of relieving "the tension between classification and stratification" [15]. A further body of research treats this order as a structural fact: studies of stratification document how vertical differentiation persists even where it is formally attenuated, showing that in a system with a comparatively flat institutional hierarchy advantage-seeking is redirected rather than removed, moving towards particular fields of study [16]. This literature establishes that orders of this kind are durable. What it does not take as its object is the vocabulary through which an order is stated and restated.

2.2. Academic drift as institutional behaviour

A second body explains durability as institutional behaviour. The literature on academic drift shows how non-university sectors move towards the university model under conditions of institutional isomorphism [17], how reform goals displace earlier regional functions [18], how new institutions accumulate research capacity and redefine their academic profiles [19], and how established arrangements absorb the implementation of new frameworks [20]. The pursuit of distinctiveness by non-university sectors has repeatedly proved elusive [21]. In these accounts, drift is something that institutions do, and position is inferred largely from institutional properties and outcomes; the discursive work through which a re-description is announced, and made to appear coherent, is not the unit of analysis.

2.3. Position, metaphor and space in education

Two further lines of work are available, but have not been brought together. One supplies the vocabulary for thinking about position: field-theoretical work locates actors by the volume and composition of the capital they hold [22], and has been used to show how performance regimes can reproduce hierarchy rather than disturb it—Papatsiba and Cohen [23], analysing research impact in the United Kingdom, find that researchers at more and less prestigious institutions mobilise different capital, and that impact assessment reinforces existing disparities. A second analyses metaphor and framing in education: root metaphors in university strategies [24], frame genealogy as a means of tracing ideology in education policy discourse [25], scales in policy discourse [26], established procedures for metaphor analysis in higher education settings [27], and movement metaphors in the public statements of university leaders [28]. A third treats space as constitutive of organisational life rather than as its backdrop [29, 30]. Accounts of this kind explain why positions are contested, yet they infer position largely from institutional properties and outcomes, leaving open how position is made legible in text. A further question concerns the boundary of the phenomenon: grading is not always carried by figurative language, since terms of level, quality and excellence may assign standing without activating any spatial metaphor, and an analysis confined to metaphor therefore risks understating the resources on which an order depends.

3. Method

3.1. Analytical approach: metaphor-led critical discourse analysis

This study asks how spatial metaphors construct and revise the imagined order of Chinese higher education, and how a change of metaphor relates to the persistence of that order. It is designed as a qualitative documentary study of metaphor in policy and media discourse. The analytical procedure combines three elements: the identification procedure of MIP [31]; the discourse-dynamics tradition of metaphor-led discourse analysis [32]; and, from the critical metaphor tradition, the notion of a conceptual key rather than corpus-based frequency.

Two clarifications about this combination are necessary. First, although the study is informed by critical metaphor analysis, it does not adopt its corpus-linguistic apparatus: that tradition relies on large corpora and frequency distributions to establish source domains, whereas the corpus assembled here is small and delimited by institutional rather than linguistic criteria, and the analytical interest lies in the replacement of one metaphorical order by another. The discourse-dynamics approach suits such material because it was developed for small, socially oriented corpora and requires that the rationale for each analytical decision be made explicit, which strengthens the trustworthiness of the procedure [32]. The domain-specific adaptations described in Section 3.4 are made in that spirit. Second, adapting MIP to a particular domain and language has precedent: Atmawijaya [33] modified MIP for political discourse and reported inter-coder agreement using Cohen's kappa, while O'Halloran [34] cautioned that metaphor identification at the level of register is vulnerable to over-interpretation and requires checking against evidence of conventional usage.

Analysis proceeds at three levels. At the first, metaphorical expressions (vehicles) are identified in the corpus. At the second, expressions are grouped into conceptual metaphors. At the third, conceptual metaphors are aggregated into a conceptual key: a set of metaphors that together sustain a particular representation of the educational order. The study's claims are located at the third level; the first two levels supply their evidential basis.

Because the object of analysis is a spatial imaginary, the procedure must distinguish spatial metaphor from spatial vocabulary. Orientation words such as upward, vertical or position may occur without activating any metaphor. The coding scheme therefore separates two strata, described in Section 3.5.

3.2. Researcher positionality

The analysis was conducted by a single researcher, whose position in relation to the field is stated here rather than bracketed. The author is based at a vocational-sector university in mainland China—an institution whose classified status is itself one of the objects of the corpus. The author holds no affiliation with any of the bodies that issued the documents analysed.

The author's assumptions about the object of study are recorded as follows: that vocational education is a category of education rather than a rank within it; that the vocabulary of level and height is consequential for how such a status is read; and that the corpus would contain both classificatory and stratifying formulations and would not treat them as synonyms. This stance converges with a position the corpus itself advances—that vocational education is a distinct type holding equal status—and the convergence is therefore treated as an analytic condition of the study rather than as an external bias to be declared and set aside. Because the corpus is in Chinese and the report is in English, the author's bilingual position is part of the analytic situation: identification is carried out on the Chinese originals, and the rendering reproduced in this article is the author's translation (Section 5.7). Three measures follow from this and are recorded as procedural commitments of the study. First, every expression belonging to the family of classification, type, parallelism and mutual recognition was checked for the co-presence of vertical morphemes (leading, traction, front rank, level, height, upgrading) within the same segment, with the notes arising kept in the coding record. Second, the assumptions recorded above were re-read after coding, so that shifts in the author's reading are documented rather than asserted. Third, the coding decisions bearing on this boundary were made visible in the codebook and in the disposition table produced by the codebook audit (Section 3.6).

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3.3. The policy corpus: sampling, sources and archival procedure

The corpus as registered comprises 39 entries issued between 1993 and 2026, corresponding to 37 distinct retrieved sources, and is organised into five genealogical layers. Layer A (foundational stratification) contains central-government documents that established and revised the vertical differentiation of institutions. Layer B (type positioning and classification) contains Party–State and ministerial documents that introduced and later formalised institutional types. Layer C (mobility governance) contains documents concerned with progression pathways between and within educational tracks. Layer D (media and counter-discourse) contains news commentary and publicly circulating commentary that recontextualises the policy vocabulary. Layer E (background and evidential pool) contains provincial implementation schemes, institutional self-descriptions, official replies and press-conference interpretations, and the historical founding document of the stratification system, retained so that the genealogy of the classificatory vocabulary can be traced beyond the central–media axis.

The sampling plan specified 38 items; the coding register contains one entry more. Three features of the registered set bear on how recurrence is counted. First, one planned document (retrieval ID E-5; label DOC34) was archived but never carried into the coding environment and is treated as missing, with no register row, rather than reconstructed from secondary sources. Second, one document (E-10) is entered twice, appearing as

two rows under the label DOC39 with different registered lengths. Third, two labels (P11 and DOC17) register the same document (B-16) with identical segment and character counts and are treated as a single source family, so that recurrence across the pair is not counted as recurrence across two sources. Full bibliographic details for every coded item are reported in Supplementary Appendix A1; the correspondence between retrieval identifiers and coding labels was re-established after coding by matching every verbatim quotation in the locked evidence matrix (759 quotation fingerprints across 37 labels) against the retrieved full texts, with 35 labels matching at high confidence and the remaining two assigned by register order and verified by content inspection. Date of access was uniform across the corpus (2026-10-03).

The boundary of the corpus is institutional rather than theoretical: it comprises the set of central-level documents that construct or revise the classification of higher education institutions in the period studied, together with provincial schemes that implement that classification, institutional self-descriptions that position single organisations within it, official replies and press-conference interpretations that gloss it, representative media commentary that recontextualises it, and one historical document that founded the stratification the reform revises. Cessation was determined by documentary completeness, not by theoretical saturation; saturation is not an appropriate stopping criterion for a corpus produced by an administrative system rather than generated by the researcher.

Documents are retrieved from official publication channels: the State Council gazette and government portal for State Council documents; the Ministry of Education portal for ministerial documents and published replies; provincial government and education-department portals for provincial schemes; institutional official websites for self-descriptions; the archives of issuing news organisations for media texts; and a verified legal-database transcription for one historical document whose gazette original survives only as a scan.

For each document the following are recorded: full title in Chinese, issuing body, document number where one exists, date of issue, date of access, and URL or archival location. Where a document exists in more than one version—as with the Vocational Education Law, revised in 2022—the version analysed is specified, and earlier versions are retained where the revision itself bears on the analysis. Where an official interpretation is published alongside a document, it is treated as a separate corpus item rather than as part of the document, because interpretations often introduce metaphorical vocabulary that the document itself does not use.

The unit of analysis is the metaphorical expression as it occurs within a sentence. Longer stretches—paragraphs and whole documents—are treated as the context in which expressions are read, not as units of coding. This unit was chosen because MIP operates on the lexical unit within its immediate context, and it is stated explicitly here because the corpus is documentary rather than interactional and the unit is therefore not self-evident. Corpus composition is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Composition of the corpus

Coding label	Segments	Characters
P01	115	5,809
P02	100	5,911
P03	165	5,967
P04	67	4,287
P05	124	7,306
P06	180	5,139
P07	107	5,152
P08	72	4,107

Table 1. Continued

P09	128	6,806
P10	787	31,175
P11	23	1,199
DOC12	22	1,369
DOC13	123	5,357
DOC14	217	11,367
DOC15	70	4,385
DOC16	236	9,571
DOC17	23	1,199
DOC18	252	11,520
DOC19	38	2,184
DOC20	178	9,200
DOC21	148	6,211
DOC22	77	4,702
DOC23	40	1,990
DOC24	55	3,210
DOC25	58	3,393
DOC26	30	1,470
DOC27	36	1,545
DOC28	28	1,003
DOC29	112	3,092
DOC30	118	5,900
DOC31	51	2,192
DOC32	242	8,567
DOC33	35	2,036
DOC35	42	2,760
DOC36	16	1,461
DOC37	23	1,528
DOC38	303	14,466
DOC39	85	5,083
DOC39	71	3,800
Total	4,597	213,419

Note. Segments and characters are the registration facts held in the coding environment. For every entry, the correspondence between the coding label and the retrieval identifier, together with official title, issuing body, document number, date of issue, corpus layer and archival location, is reported in Supplementary Appendix A1. Date of access was uniform across the corpus (2026-10-03). Two entries share the label DOC39 with different registered lengths (the same document entered twice), and one further pair of entries (P11 and DOC17) registers the same document under two labels with identical counts; the 39 entries therefore correspond to 37 distinct retrieved sources, and one planned document (DOC34) was archived but not coded. Eleven entries (P01–P11) carry a registration-type setting that does not match the documentary design of the study; the corrected type assignments are reported in Supplementary Appendix A1.

3.4. Metaphor identification: MIP and its domain-specific adaptation

Identification follows the five steps of MIP, with two additional domain filters. For each text, the researcher reads the full sentence and establishes the lexical unit (step 1); determines its basic meaning, taken as the more concrete, more bodily, earlier-acquired and more frequent sense (step 2); compares basic and contextual meaning and establishes whether the two can be related by similarity (step 3); asks whether the contextual meaning concerns educational structure, institutional standing, progression pathways or talent type (step 4, first domain filter); and asks whether the basic meaning belongs to a spatial or geometric domain—for example tower, apex, base, above, below, position, rank, layer, bridge, road, gate or chain (step 5, second domain filter). Only expressions satisfying all five steps enter the main coding table: expressions that fail step 3 are treated as literal; those that fail step 4 are recorded under other source domains in a separate table; and those that fail step 5 are excluded or recorded in the supplementary table.

Two aspects require comment. First, steps 4 and 5 are additions to MIP and constitute the study's domain-specific adaptation; they are necessary because the study concerns a particular kind of spatial imagining of education, which requires that both source domain and target domain be constrained. Second, MIP was developed for English, and its application to Chinese requires explicit rules: lexical units are delimited as words rather than morphemes, following the segmentation conventions of the source texts, and compound expressions whose spatial element is transparent—for example expressions rendered as upgrading, channel or chain—are treated as single units. Scholarship on metaphorical motion and spatial construal in Chinese provides the descriptive basis for these decisions [35], as does work on metaphor in Chinese political discourse [36, 37].

3.5. Coding scheme and conceptual keys

Each expression is coded on six dimensions, with a seventh field for internal inconsistency (Table 2). The dimensions are language expression (M1); source domain (M2); geometric logic (M3); target domain (M4); order of imagination (M5); presupposition and occlusion (M6); and internal inconsistency (M7).

Two design decisions should be made explicit. The first concerns the distinction between explicit spatial entities and orientational expressions. Expressions such as *pyramid*, *ceiling*, *overpass* or *track* are concrete entities and are coded as Level 1. Expressions such as *vertical mobility*, *all in their proper place*, *world-class ranks* or *gradient system* contain a spatial element but no entity; they are coded as Level 2 and analysed separately. Level 2 expressions characterise the spatial register of the corpus as a whole and are not counted as metaphors in the Level 1 analysis. The distinction matters because the intelligibility of a newly introduced metaphor depends on the extent to which the ground has already been prepared by orientational language.

The second concerns the assignation of geometric logic. A single expression may carry more than one value. To avoid arbitrary coding, the dominant spatial action is recorded as the primary value and remaining elements as secondary values. The expression *shifting from a pyramid to a five-finger mountain* thus takes parallelism as its primary value, with encompassing and verticality as secondary values: the mountain retains peaks and valleys even as the single apex is displaced.

Scalar grading terms—level, quality, excellence, grades and comparable markers—are held outside the spatial-metaphor set by design and recorded separately. A single sentence may therefore carry both a scalar marker and an explicit layer term without this counting as double coding.

Table 2. Coding scheme: dimensions and recorded values

Dimension	Label	What is recorded	Values / strata
M1	Language expression	The metaphorical expression as it occurs within the sentence	Verbatim expression in the Chinese original
M2	Source domain	The domain from which the expression is drawn	Spatial or geometric (main set); expressions failing the domain filter are recorded under other source domains in a separate table
M3	Geometric logic	The spatial action the expression performs	A primary value plus secondary values. Where an expression carries more than one spatial action, the dominant action is recorded as primary; e.g. *shifting from a pyramid to a five-finger mountain* takes parallelism as primary, with encompassing and verticality as secondary
M4	Target domain	What the expression construes in education	Educational structure; institutional standing; progression pathways; talent type
M5	Order of imagination	The configuration of the educational order that the expression projects	Recorded per expression; maintained in the memorandum
M6	Presupposition and occlusion	What the expression takes for granted and what it renders invisible	Recorded per expression
M7	Internal inconsistency	Mismatch between a metaphor and the policy category to which it is attached—for example, where an image of five parallel peaks organises a classification of three institutional types	Recorded; mismatches are retained rather than smoothed over
Stratum	Level 1 / Level 2	Level 1: explicit spatial entities (*pyramid*, *ceiling*, *overpass*, *track*). Level 2: orientational expressions containing a spatial element but no entity (*vertical mobility*, *all in their proper place*, *world-class ranks*, *gradient system*)	Level 1 enters the main analysis. Level 2 characterises the spatial register of the corpus as a whole and is not counted as metaphor in the Level 1 analysis

Expressions are aggregated in two steps. First, conceptual metaphors are formed from expressions sharing a source–target mapping. Second, conceptual metaphors are grouped into conceptual keys on the basis of

recurrence across texts. Where a metaphor recurs across policy and media documents, the recurrence is recorded as a chain, with the sequence of documents noted. Recurrence is treated as analytically significant rather than as duplication, because a metaphor acquires self-evidence through repeated use across texts.

A seventh field records instances where a metaphor does not match the policy category to which it is attached—for example, where an image of five parallel peaks organises a classification of three institutional types. Such mismatches are retained rather than smoothed over.

3.6. Quality assurance, audit trail and exclusion log

The codebook and the coding assignments were audited before the version used for the analysis was locked. The audit did not review every assignment. Sampling was capped at 60 quotations per code, drawn across sources in rotation, which yielded 2,620 reviewed coding decisions; codes with heavier assignment counts are therefore represented by a bounded sample, and no claim is made that the full assignment set was inspected. The audit produced 579 items flagged as doubtful, together with 255 suggestions for definition revision and 115 signals for splitting or merging existing codes.

Each flagged item was then classified in a disposition table under one of five headings: revision of a code definition; relocation of an assignment to another code; discarding of an assignment with a logged reason; marking of an assignment as counter-evidence; or reallocation to the subject-position layer. The dispositions were applied in the coding environment, discarded assignments entered the exclusion log (Section 3.6), and the codebook and evidence matrix were then locked at the version reported in this article; earlier versions remain retrievable, so that any reading in the findings can be traced to the version in which it was produced.

Where the coding environment generated an initial interpretation for an assignment, or ran two passes over the same material, the output is a machine-generated candidate rather than a human judgement. Agreement between two passes of the same model is a property of that model—self-consistency—and is not reported here as inter-coder agreement or as Cohen's kappa. Such outputs were treated as proposals to be accepted, revised or rejected by the author, and those decisions are recorded in the coding log.

Coding was conducted by a single researcher. No inter-coder agreement statistic is reported, and Cohen's kappa was not computed. A second independent human coder was not available for this corpus, and reporting a coefficient in that situation would misrepresent the procedure: a value computed between the author and a second pass of the same model would be an index of model self-consistency, not of agreement between human coders. Independent human double coding and formal reliability testing remain a requirement that this study does not meet; it is stated as a limitation (Section 5.7) rather than compensated for by other devices.

Three devices support the credibility of the analysis in place of member checking, which is not applicable here, since the policy documents analysed have no participants who could confirm or contest a reading. The first is a full audit trail, comprising the coding log, the versioned codebook, the disposition table produced by the codebook audit and the reflexive memo. The second is an exclusion log listing every expression considered and rejected as a metaphor, together with the reason for exclusion and the alternative domain under which it was recorded, included so that readers can assess whether the inclusion threshold has been applied consistently. The third is the record of recurrence chains described in Section 3.5. These devices correspond to the audit-trail and thick-description strategies used to establish dependability and transferability in qualitative research more generally [38].

Reporting follows the *Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research* (see [39] on the provenance of this checklist). The *Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research* (COREQ) is not used, because its items address interviewing and focus-group procedures—interviewer characteristics, interview duration, transcription conventions—that do not apply to a documentary study. As Peditto [40] notes, the two checklists

differ in their criteria and in the methods to which they apply, and a single standard for qualitative reporting would be unduly restrictive. A completed mapping against the checklist, including items marked not applicable with reasons, is provided in Supplementary Appendix A2.

4. Findings

The findings speak to both parts of the research question: the geometries through which the corpus constructs an imagined order for Chinese higher education, and the ways in which a change of metaphor sits alongside the persistence of that order. Five conceptual keys are presented in turn—ordering by height (3.1), re-layout (3.2), channels, blockages and traction (3.3), the scalar lexicon that grades without using space (3.4), and the actor positions that authorise re-ordering (3.5); the keys, and the codes that carry them, are summarised in Figure 1. The evidence is taken verbatim from the locked evidence matrix for codebook v52. The five conceptual keys and their code groupings constitute the final analytical structure used in this study. Source and instance counts are not reproduced, because both are descriptive facts rather than measures of importance. Quotations are verbatim corpus segments in the author's translation; sources are cited by coding label.

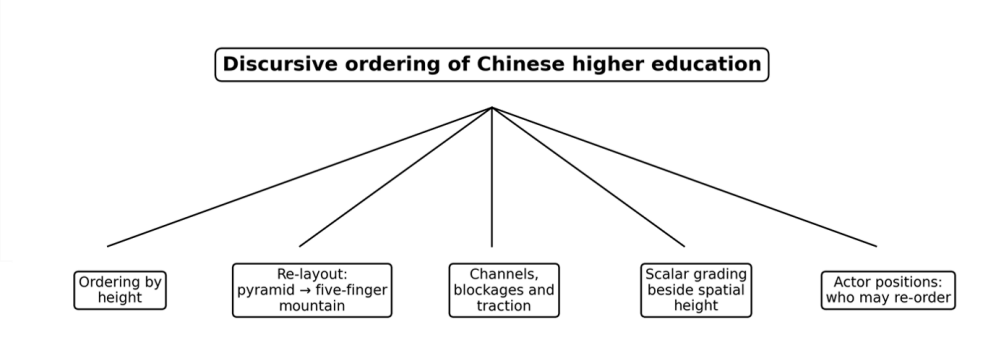

Figure 1. Spatial source domains identified in the corpus. The five conceptual keys are shown as the final analytical grouping used in this study; the figure contains no frequency counts

4.1. Ordering by height

The geometry that recurs most widely in the matrix is vertical. The code Vertical layer hierarchy arranges institutions, degrees and training as higher and lower layers, as in "a high-level, high-tier training system for technical and skilled talent" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author) and "vertical through-connection across vocational education at different tiers" (DOC13; translated from Chinese by the author). A closely related code, high-level positioning, places institutions and personnel at a superior rank through height vocabulary, as in "build a number of high-level vocational colleges and programs" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author). The matrix also records apex positions—Top-level design ("strengthen national top-level design", DOC17; translated from Chinese by the author) and Tip-top talent as vertical apex ("improve the mechanisms for identifying and cultivating top-notch innovative talent", DOC16; translated from Chinese by the author)—alongside base positions that support the whole, such as Supporting force as structural position ("build up the supporting force for serving the major national strategy", DOC17; translated from Chinese by the author).

Movement between layers is imagined and constrained at once. *Vertical upgrade trajectory* records upgrading as upward movement, whereas *Vertical upgrade block* records explicit prohibitions: "secondary vocational schools shall, in principle, not be upgraded to higher vocational schools"; "higher vocational

schools shall, in principle, not be upgraded to undergraduate institutions" (P02; translated from Chinese by the author). *Arrested movement at tier* records the same limitation as a stopping point—"vocational education usually stops at the junior-college level" (DOC26; translated from Chinese by the author)—and *Downgrade as downward movement* records it as descent, in the question "has it been downgraded?" (DOC25; translated from Chinese by the author).

In the media and commentary strand the vertical order becomes an object of explicit talk rather than a background assumption. *Three-six-nine grade ranking* records institutions "divided into three, six and nine grades" (DOC24; translated from Chinese by the author); *Sandwich-layer position metaphor* records "the 'sandwich layer' in the new classification system" (DOC25; translated from Chinese by the author); and *Ranked chain as social hierarchy* records the observation that "the chain of contempt is, in a sense, a linear arrangement of things" (DOC29; translated from Chinese by the author). The matrix nevertheless retains counter-evidence within the same key: *Vertical layer hierarchy* carries "classification is not stratification" (DOC38; translated from Chinese by the author), and *Ranking refusal* records the call to "break the 'five-only' tendency" (DOC18; translated from Chinese by the author).

4.2. Re-layout: from pyramid to five-finger mountain

A second geometry re-describes the same field as a horizontal configuration of positions rather than a stack. Its most explicit expression is the paired codes *Pyramid structure metaphor* and *Five-finger mountain structure metaphor*, which the matrix records on a single construction: "promote the transformation of the university structure from a 'pyramid' to a 'five-finger mountain'" (DOC23; translated from Chinese by the author). Around it cluster codes of arrangement—*Classification frame as geometric container* ("establish a classification framework for universities", DOC17; translated from Chinese by the author) and *Staggered-position development metaphor* ("differentiated tiers and types, precise positioning, distinctive features, and staggered development", DOC31; translated from Chinese by the author).

Within this key, difference is constructed largely through the negation of rank. *Single-yardstick measurement metaphor* records that evaluation should "no longer measure everything with a single ruler to the end" (DOC25; translated from Chinese by the author); *Ranking refusal* records that reform "is not about dividing universities into three, six and nine grades" (DOC23; translated from Chinese by the author); and *Institutional title decoupling* records that "research universities may also be called 'colleges', and applied and skill-type universities may also be called 'universities'" (DOC23; translated from Chinese by the author). The matrix also flags a counter-position inside the same key: *Proper-place positioning*, recorded in the request to guide universities "to position themselves scientifically, each keeping to its proper place" (P02; translated from Chinese by the author), presupposes stable positions, and the matrix notes this as running against an order premised on competition and upward mobility.

4.3. Channels, blockages and traction

A third key figures the field as a set of conduits through which people and resources should move. *Passage as spatial conduit* records the channel vocabulary, as in "keep the career-development channel unobstructed" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author). *Passage-opening metaphor* records the removal of barriers as opening a passage—"open up the channels for vocational school graduates in employment, household registration, recruitment, professional-title review and promotion" (DOC13; translated from Chinese by the author)—while *Unblocked flow metaphor* records unobstructed movement along such passages: "the channels for academic advancement, career promotion and social ascent have become more unobstructed" (DOC26; translated from Chinese by the author).

The same key holds the obstacles. *Blockage-point metaphor* records the instruction to "identify the blockage points" (DOC22; translated from Chinese by the author); *Bottleneck constriction metaphor* records the need to "break through bottleneck constraints" (DOC18; translated from Chinese by the author); and *Last-mile distance metaphor* records the problem of "the last kilometre" (DOC22; translated from Chinese by the author). Opening and constriction are therefore kept as separate codes rather than reconciled.

The geometry of movement is completed by force and direction. *Traction as vertical demand relation* makes state demand the pulling force on provision: "establish a mechanism for adjusting disciplinary provision and a talent-training model driven by the traction of scientific and technological development and national strategic needs" (DOC16; translated from Chinese by the author). *Traction as vertical leading relation* makes one reform group lead another—"with vocational undergraduate education as the traction force" (DOC15; translated from Chinese by the author)—and *Domain-facing orientation* records an outward orientation toward domains: "oriented to the market and to promoting employment, oriented to practice and to strengthening competence, oriented to everyone and to teaching according to aptitude" (DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author). *Guidance as orientation* records the policy version of the same move, as in "market-oriented" (DOC13; translated from Chinese by the author) and "foreground the employment orientation" (DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author).

4.4. Scalar height beside spatial height

The matrix separates out a class of value terms that grade institutions, people and outputs without any spatial figure. *Scalar grade term* records level and quality vocabulary as graded properties ("high-quality development", DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author); *High-quality talent as scalar grade* records "high-quality technical and skilled talent" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author); *Degree-level hierarchy* records degree tiers ("vocational school education is divided into secondary vocational school education and higher vocational school education", DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author); and *First-rate as scalar rank* records superlative grading applied to outputs ("build a batch of first-rate core textbooks for undergraduate and postgraduate education", DOC16; translated from Chinese by the author). By design these are scalar grading terms standing outside the spatial-metaphor set, and the same sentence may carry a scalar marker and an explicit layer term at the same time. The consequence for the present analysis is that the vertical order described in 3.1 is carried only partly by spatial vocabulary: it is sustained as much by a grading lexicon that does not itself use space.

4.5. Positions: who may re-order

The matrix records a further cluster of candidate codes that assign positions to actors, and these bear directly on who is authorised to re-order the field. *Institutional autonomy position* records "vocational schools' autonomy in internal bodies, post establishment, staffing plans, teacher recruitment and professional-title appointment" (DOC13; translated from Chinese by the author) and, elsewhere, the requirement to "implement schools' autonomy in running their institutions" (DOC16; translated from Chinese by the author). *Institutional self-determination* records disciplines "whose designation is advised to be determined by the universities themselves" (P03; translated from Chinese by the author). Against these, other codes locate authority above the institution: *Party leadership over education* ("vocational education must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China", DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author) and *Shared governance responsibility* ("party committees and governments at all levels should increase institutional innovation, policy supply and investment", DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author; "government coordination, tiered

management, local predominance, industry guidance, school-enterprise cooperation and social participation", DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author).

Positions are also assigned to non-state actors and to the people the order is meant to serve. *Enterprise as key schooling subject* records that "the state gives play to enterprises' role as important subjects in running schools" (DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author); *Anti-discrimination positioning* records the instruction to "organise in due course the clearing and adjustment of discriminatory policies against technical and skilled talent" (DOC20; translated from Chinese by the author); and *Equal-status positioning of vocational graduates* records that they should "enjoy the same treatment as graduates of ordinary schools" (DOC13; translated from Chinese by the author). Where the media strand speaks as a voice rather than as policy, agency is attributed to individuals: *Student as active chooser* records those who "actively chose a secondary vocational school" (DOC27; translated from Chinese by the author).

Please note that all sources are corpus documents coded in the project's locked evidence matrix (codebook v52); no external literature is cited in this section.

5. Discussion

5.1. A change of metaphor inside a persisting order

This study asked how spatial metaphors construct and revise the imagined order of Chinese higher education, and how a change of metaphor relates to the persistence of that order. The findings offer a two-part answer. First, the corpus orders the field by height rather than by type: institutions, degrees and personnel are placed as higher and lower layers, as in "a high-level, high-tier training system for technical and skilled talent" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author), and movement between layers is regulated in explicit terms —"secondary vocational schools shall, in principle, not be upgraded to higher vocational schools" (P02; translated from Chinese by the author). Second, the re-description of that order is achieved chiefly by negating rank: "promote the transformation of the university structure from a 'pyramid' to a 'five-finger mountain'" (DOC23; translated from Chinese by the author); "no longer measure everything with a single ruler to the end" (DOC25; translated from Chinese by the author). The change of metaphor and the persistence of the order therefore appear within the same formulations rather than in sequence. The discussion below interprets the final analytical structure reported in the Findings.

5.2. Ordering by height: position that has to be spoken

The vertical geometry is the most widely distributed in the matrix. Its most striking feature is not that it ranks, but that it ranks through words whose function is to make position legible: a school can be described as "build[ing] a number of high-level vocational colleges and programs" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author), and a stage of education can be narrated as one that "usually stops at the junior-college level" (DOC26; translated from Chinese by the author). Read alongside field-theoretical work, this suggests a refinement. Bourdieusian accounts locate actors by the volume and composition of capital they hold [22, 23]; the corpus adds that position has to be *stated* to be operable, and that the vocabulary of height performs that statement.

The reading is consistent with the higher education literature on stratification. Yang and Wang [6] trace how Chinese central authorities established what they term a vertical elite coalition to "command the heights of tertiary institutional hierarchy"; Zarifa et al. [16] find that flatter university hierarchies do not remove advantage-seeking but redirect it. What the corpus adds to this literature is the textual register in which such hierarchies are continuously restated—including in its media and commentary layer, where the order becomes

an object of talk: schools "divided into three, six and nine grades" (DOC24; translated from Chinese by the author), a "chain of contempt" that is "a linear arrangement of things" (DOC29; translated from Chinese by the author). Two counter-examples are retained rather than smoothed away: "classification is not stratification" (DOC38; translated from Chinese by the author) and the call to "break the 'five-only' tendency" (DOC18; translated from Chinese by the author). Their presence indicates that the geometry is contested within the corpus itself; on textual evidence alone, it is not possible to say how it is enacted in resource allocation.

5.3. Re-layout through negation, and a boundary condition for academic drift

The second key is where the argument becomes more specific. The literature on academic drift explains convergence towards the university model as an institutional phenomenon, driven largely by isomorphism [17], by actors' attachment to existing institutional arrangements [20], and by reform goals that displace earlier regional functions [18, 21]. The present corpus suggests that drift can also operate at the level of discourse, and that it need not take the form of upward imitation. Its form here is a re-description that proceeds by negating rank while retaining the grammar of position: a "classification framework for universities" (DOC17; translated from Chinese by the author), "differentiated tiers and types, precise positioning, distinctive features, and staggered development" (DOC31; translated from Chinese by the author), and an instruction that reform is "not about dividing universities into three, six and nine grades" (DOC23; translated from Chinese by the author). The extension, then, is from drift as something institutions do to drift as something a policy vocabulary can perform.

The corpus also supplies a condition under which this concept needs to be qualified. Drift presupposes sectoral differentiation and institutional room to move; where the state sets the categories and closes the routes between them—"higher vocational schools shall, in principle, not be upgraded to undergraduate institutions" (P02; translated from Chinese by the author)—vertical movement is constrained administratively, and re-description becomes the available mode of description. A tension inside the same key should be registered rather than resolved: the request to guide universities "to position themselves scientifically, each keeping to its proper place" (P02; translated from Chinese by the author) presupposes stable positions, whereas field-theoretical accounts assume ongoing positional struggle. The matrix records this as counter-evidence to an order premised on competition and upward mobility, and it is reproduced here as such.

5.4. Grading without space

The third key bears on how such orders are studied. Methodologically, the coding separated spatial metaphors from scalar grading terms, and the matrix shows that grading is carried by both: height vocabulary in "high-quality technical and skilled talent" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author) sits beside grading that uses no spatial figure at all, as in "three grades to determine assessment results" (DOC33; translated from Chinese by the author) or "build a batch of first-rate core textbooks for undergraduate and postgraduate education" (DOC16; translated from Chinese by the author). This bears on a line of work that treats root metaphors and framing as the means by which higher education is imagined and governed [24-26], including work in which movement metaphors are analysed in their own right [28] and established procedures for metaphor analysis in higher education settings [27]. The present study's contribution to that line is a boundary: an analysis confined to metaphor will understate the linguistic resources on which the order depends. The scalar terms were listed separately by design, so no inference is drawn about their relative weight in the corpus.

5.5. Who may re-order

A fourth reading concerns agency. The corpus positions institutions as autonomous while locating the categories that frame autonomy above them. Schools "flexibly and autonomously set up programmes according to the catalogue" (DOC20; translated from Chinese by the author), and disciplines are recorded "whose designation is advised to be determined by the universities themselves" (P03; translated from Chinese by the author); universities also hold "autonomy in internal bodies, post establishment, staffing plans, teacher recruitment and professional-title appointment" (DOC13; translated from Chinese by the author). Against these, authority is articulated through leadership and shared governance—"vocational education must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China" (DOC14; translated from Chinese by the author) and "party committees and governments at all levels should increase institutional innovation, policy supply and investment" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author). This speaks directly to comparative work on central–local steering [6], to studies of Chinese higher vocational governance [10], and to studies of the place of vocational education in mobility and status systems [41-43]. On this evidence, re-ordering is authorised from above; the corpus cannot show how authority is exercised in practice.

5.6. Contributions and implications

Empirically, the study provides a systematically coded account of the spatial source domains through which a corpus of higher education texts figures an order. Conceptually, it proposes two moves: extending academic drift to the discursive level, and making explicit the boundary between spatial metaphor and scalar grading. Contextually, it specifies a condition under which drift is administratively constrained. Methodologically, it offers a replicable coding procedure with an auditable single-coder trail, an exclusion log and SRQR-based reporting.

For those drafting policy documents that frame tracks as parallel, the corpus suggests a textual check rather than a prescription. If the intent is parity, it is worth examining whether scalar terms continue to assign grade in the same sentence, as height vocabulary does in "build a number of high-level vocational colleges and programs" (DOC12; translated from Chinese by the author). For those designing classification-based evaluation, "no longer measure everything with a single ruler to the end" (DOC25; translated from Chinese by the author) coexists with grading vocabulary in the same corpus; on this evidence the wording can change while grading terms persist. Applications beyond the examined document types, and any assessment of effects, fall outside this study.

5.7. Strengths and limitations

Five limitations follow from the design. First, the corpus is small and institutionally bounded, and the analysis therefore supports claims about the discursive construction of order in these texts, not about the distribution of metaphor in Chinese educational discourse more broadly. Second, the absence of participants means that readers' interpretations cannot be examined; the analysis can establish what the texts make available as a way of imagining the educational order, not what audiences take from them. Third, because the corpus is in Chinese and the report in English, translations of illustrative expressions are the author's and the analysis is conducted on the Chinese originals; where a spatial element is not fully carried over in translation, this is noted at the point of citation. Fourth, coding was carried out by one researcher working with a versioned codebook, an audit of sampled assignments and an exclusion log, but without a second independent coder; no reliability coefficient is therefore available, and the codebook and evidence matrix are reported as locked analytical versions rather than as a formally validated instrument. Fifth, the corpus is bounded by what could be retrieved and coded at the access date: one planned document was archived but not carried into the coding

environment and is excluded from all counts; one central document (B-16) was available only as the official key-points dispatch, its full text not having been released at the access date; and one historical document (E-10) is held as a verified transcription because the official gazette version survives only as a scan. The correspondence between coding labels and bibliographic records, including these three features, is fully documented in Supplementary Appendix A1.

The main strength is traceability: the analysis rests on a locked evidence matrix in which every quotation is verbatim and every counter-example is retained, so that claims can be checked against the corpus, including those that do not fit the main reading. The corpus spans 1993–2026 and combines central policy texts, provincial schemes, institutional self-descriptions, official replies and media commentary, which allows the vertical order to be observed both as governance and as public commentary. Two further qualifications bear on how far the conclusions travel. First, the study analyses text: it cannot show how institutions act, how resources are distributed, or how readers respond, and the counts in the matrix are descriptive facts that were not treated as measures of importance. Second, the author's own position should be borne in mind: the analysis was conducted from within the vocational sector whose classified status is at issue in the corpus, and the author's prior stance—that vocational education is a category rather than a rank—converges with a position the corpus itself advances. Rather than a disqualification, this makes reflexive scrutiny of the coding of classification terms necessary; it is a condition of the reading offered here rather than an external limitation. All quotations are the author's translation from the original Chinese.

6. Conclusion

This study asked how spatial metaphors construct and revise the imagined order of Chinese higher education, and how a change of metaphor relates to the persistence of that order. The analysis of a registered corpus of 39 entries—37 distinct retrieved Chinese-language sources issued between 1993 and 2026—answers the question in two parts. That order is organised by height rather than by type, and the routes between positions are explicitly closed; yet height is not carried by spatial vocabulary alone, since terms of level, quality and excellence assign standing without any spatial figure. Its revision proceeds by negating rank: the corpus announces a change of geometry, "promote the transformation of the university structure from a 'pyramid' to a 'five-finger mountain'" (DOC23; translated from Chinese by the author), while retaining the vocabulary of layout and position that the earlier geometry supplied. Change and persistence are therefore co-present rather than sequential. Replacing a metaphor, on this reading, is not the same as moving an order: the order's reproducibility appears to rest on a grading capacity that operates both with and without spatial figures.

Two implications follow. Conceptually, the study extends academic drift from institutional behaviour to the level of discourse, treats position as something stated as well as held, and specifies a boundary condition for drift: where the state sets the categories and closes movement between them, re-description becomes the available mode of description. For those drafting policies that present tracks as parallel, it suggests a textual check rather than a prescription.

The limitations are set out in the discussion and methods sections, and they indicate four directions: applying the procedure to other layers of the corpus or across systems; reception studies with university staff; work with bilingual readers on what translation attenuates; and independent double coding, together with a coding register in which a text appearing under two labels is counted once.

The account offered here is bounded by the documents analysed and by the period they cover: it shows what these texts make available as a way of imagining an order, not how that order is realised in practice.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no competing interests. The author's institutional location is disclosed in Section 3.2 as an analytic condition of the study rather than as an interest.

Data availability

The corpus consists of publicly available documents. Full bibliographic details for every coded item, including the correspondence between coding labels and retrieval identifiers, are reported in Supplementary Appendix A1. The coding register, together with the codebook, the exclusion log and the coding records, is available from the author on reasonable request.

Use of AI-assisted tools

The coding environment used in this study generated candidate interpretations of metaphorical expressions and performed an automated audit of the codebook; both are documented in Section 3.6. All coding decisions were accepted, revised or rejected by the author, and agreement between two automated passes is reported as a property of the model rather than as agreement between coders. AI-assisted tools were also used for language editing, document organisation and formatting during manuscript preparation. They were not treated as authors, sources of evidence or independent coders. The author reviewed and takes responsibility for all analytical claims, citations and final wording.

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Appendix

Appendix A1. Source crosswalk

The correspondence between the coding labels used in this article and the full bibliographic record of each item in the corpus, including retrieval identifier, corpus layer, official title, issuing body, document number, date of issue, archival location, registered segment and character counts, and the sections in which each item is quoted.

Appendix A2. Reporting checklist mapping

A completed mapping against the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research, including items marked not applicable with reasons (Section 3.6).