

# Challenges in China's Private higher education, a comparative study on Minban and Independent colleges

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**Abstract:** Minban higher education in China faces several challenges but also has a great potential to develop. Independent colleges as a crucial part of today's Chinese private higher education has been emphasized and the paper uses the example of Xi'an Jiaotong University City College to examine the development and issues in China's private higher education. It analyses the experience of Xi'an Jiaotong University City College, a not untypical independent college (du li xue yuan), through an in-depth case study seeking to explore the question of how does the development of independent colleges.

## 1. Introduction

As Welch states that Private higher education is perhaps the fastest-growing segment of postsecondary education worldwide [1]. It is also the most important component consists of higher education to complement public higher education [2]. At present, private higher education in China is at the beginning of its re-development and facing some corresponding issues. China is such a big country with one fifth of the whole population in the world, so the effective development of private higher education would make a significant difference to private higher education across the whole world.

If one compares Chinese private higher education with other countries in Asia, or across the world, there is a big gap in front of China that also means there is a huge space for China to develop. With the development of its economy and China's broader rise, the increasing demand on education is unavoidable, and plans are that private higher education would shoulder a bigger role in responding to this demand.

Independent colleges, as a new type within private higher education, but also a typical Chinese type of private higher education; it plays an increasingly important role in China. Its fast expansion is one response to the increasing demand for higher education, however, some problems have emerged along with its development which need to be solved through relevant policies.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This paper will use a mixed methods design, which will collect and analyses both qualitative and quantitative data, the mixing can avoid the inadequacy of just quantitative or qualitative methods' limitations in capturing the details of a situation. According to Terrell, mixed-methods can provide an investigator with many design choices which involve a range of sequential and concurrent strategies which become a widely used mode of inquiry to analysis (2012). A small case study will be conducted in this study for qualitative data collection which including three in-depth semi-structured interviews and one focus group with a different target group of people; the case study will provide more sources of ideas on specific points which would be helpful for an in-depth analysis.

History of private Higher Education in China

Private higher education in China has a long tradition. Throughout history it has played a remarkable role in Chinese society. Private schools existed more than two thousand five hundred

years ago with the first surge evident in the spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.). Private higher education institutions only finally disappeared at the end of the Qing Dynasty with the policy to abandon private higher education taken by the current governors in 1901 [3].

## 2.1 Minban Gaoxiao

In China's private education history, different forms of private institution were evident at different times. In the early twentieth century, there were missionary universities sponsored by foreign churches, and private universities by individual businessmen. However, in 1952, those private universities were either merged into the public system or simply closed [4]; thereafter private higher education disappeared in China for some decades. A blank occurred in the Chinese private higher education history until the Ministry of Education issued "The Trial Measure of Higher Education Self-Study Program" in 1981 to encourage people to acquire higher education certificates through self-study programs beyond taking regular higher education [5]. Minban institutions started to appear again in some cities to provide remedial courses to help those who wanted to achieve that goal. Beijing China Social College was the first Minban College opened in 1982 (Levy, 1999), which was approved by the Ministry of Education after the adoption of the "reform and open door" policy.

Education in China can be generally divided into two sectors--- Minban and Gongban, which means "people-run" and "state-run" public universities respectively. The term "Minban", that is called private education in English, first appeared during the Second Civil War (1927-37) [6]. Minban education embraces every level from kindergarten to higher education, while minban gaoxiao refers to non-state higher education institutions, or private colleges and universities (Gaoxiao is the Chinese words for higher education). "Minban" is now widely used to refer to private higher education in China. As in the West, Chinese minban colleges and universities are classified as "private", but it is not exactly the case. For Chinese minban institutions are somewhat different from the Western conception of "private" in the way they are organized, governed, and financed. For instance, most of the Chinese minban institutions are financially supported by students' tuition and fees only, there is not much private donation. Some minban universities or colleges have a kind of affiliation with local government institutions, though they do lack financial support from the local government. There are three different types of minban gaoxiao in China at present, general minban higher education institutions, private adult higher education institutions and "Du li xue yuan" (see Chapter 4 in detail), which translates as Independent College [7]. None use state funds, but have significant differences. The first type--- general minban higher education institutions are commonly be known as private higher education; adult higher education institutions are mainly focused on students who are preparing for the self-study higher education examination, thus admission doesn't require passing the gaokao (National Higher Education Entrance Examination ). Independent colleges are often established with the strong support by prestigious public universities, indeed normally they use the public university's name and have very close relationship with their "mother institutions".

There was not a clear line between minban gaoxiao and independent colleges in the first couple of years when independent colleges just emerged, so that some people may have thought independent colleges were actually public universities as they appeared to have such a close relationship with their mother universities. Until 2008, the definition has been stated clearly in the 26th Order from the Ministry of Education---"Independent college establishment and management measures" (《Measures for the establishment and management of Independent Colleges》) that "independent colleges are the crucial part of private higher education" [8]. This edict means minban gaoxiao includes independent colleges.

By 2013, there were 424 general Minban higher education institutions, 298 adult higher education institutions and 287 independent colleges (the independent colleges' number has grown up to 323 by 9th April 2014 [9]; in total 1009 minban gaoxiao in China in 2013 [10], according to the speech on the 2013 Chinese private education association annual conference, given by the vice Minister of Ministry of Education Lu Xin [11] " Study and understand the spirit of the third plenary session, and promote

the healthy development of private education” . The total enrolment of students in all types of private higher education was about 5,330,000 or around 22 per cent of the whole college student population. This expansion will persist: according to “The National Guidelines for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020)” by 2020, the total higher education enrollment will reach 35 million and the gross enrollment rate will reach 40 percent [12], which provides great potential for the further development of private higher education.

## **2.2 Independent college**

Before 2003, some sort of independent colleges already existed, but under a different name - what were called state-owned and people-run secondary college. They were part of the enlargement of higher education scale after the higher education massifying process that began in 1999 [13]. In 2003, the Ministry of Education published “Some Opinions Concerning Managing Independent Colleges Affiliated to General Universities as a Pilot Project of New Mechanism and Mode” [7] in order to regulate the existing state-owned and people-run secondary colleges. “Independent colleges” for the first time became a new concept. Independent College (Du Li Xue Yuan) denotes an independent secondary college affiliated to general higher learning institutes, formerly known as state-owned and people-run secondary college. They are privately financed colleges with undergraduate courses and above, established by public universities in collaboration with non-governmental enterprises, organizations and individuals. The first independent college was founded in 1999---Zhejiang University City College [14]. During the past 15 years, independent colleges developed very rapidly. In 2014, there were 323 independent colleges in China [9].

The “Opinions” document stipulates that public universities, as the selected applicants to run the independent colleges on an experimental level, can rely on their advantages in human resources and intangible assets to attract investment from enterprises, public sectors, associations as well as individuals to set up a new independent higher education organization, which has the independent status of a legal person and independent campus, and is independent in granting academic credentials and accounting. Its operation follows the mechanism used in Minban institutes. By emphasizing increasing higher education resources from different social sources and improving the school running mechanism by taking the example from minban institutes, “Opinions” aims at reforming the management system in state-owned universities as well as attracting and optimizing resources.

Du Li Xue Yuan can attract social funds by relying on public universities while operating in the private sector. The advantages for independent colleges are more than the normal minban gaoxiao: the fame of their mother universities could make them very attractive for students who are going to apply for private universities, especially compare with normal minban, which have no advantages to compete with independent college. First, the diploma award is a really attractive point for students as they can get a graduation certification from the college which is managed by the mother public university. Most who achieve the requirements for diploma could get their bachelor degree from the mother institution, just with “Xx College” at the end. However, normal minban gaoxiao student can just get a graduation certification without any award for their diploma. Second, study resources are much better than normal minban, since they can get support from their mother universities. Third, establishing an independent college is much easier than minban, and normally, more resources would be available for independent colleges than minban just simply because of the fame of their mother universities.

### 3. Unbalanced distribution

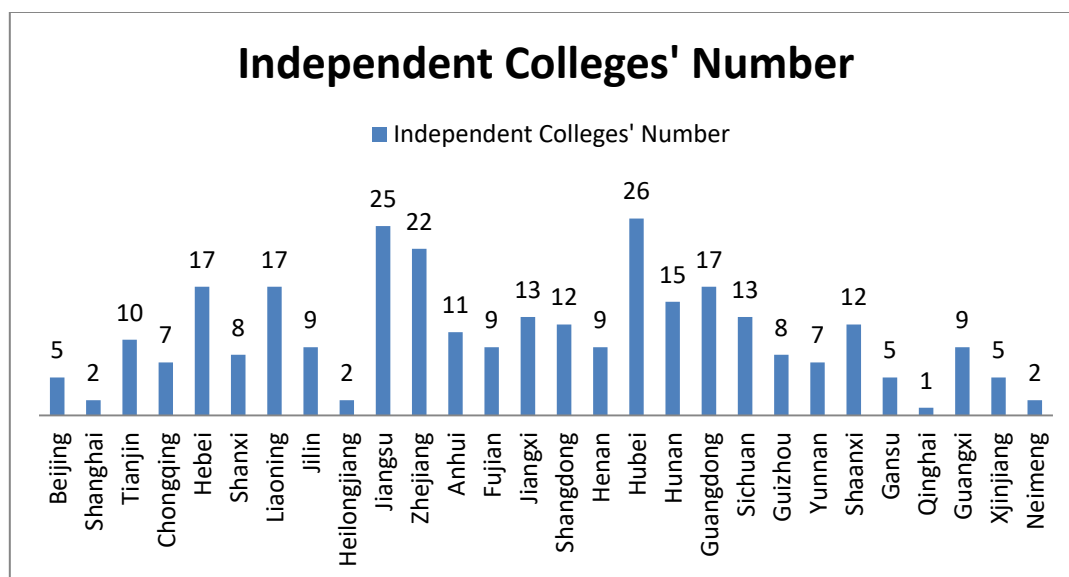


Figure 1. Number of Du Li Xue Yuan, by location, 2013

Source: Ministry of Education, 2013

Scrutinising the number of independent colleges in each province and four municipalities (zhixiashi) in Figure 1, above, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the eastern China has most independent colleges, that there are less in the centre, and much less in the west. We also can tell there is a big variation - Hubei had most with 26 independent colleges, while some provinces like Tibet with no such colleges. The difference varies with geography. There is no surprise that the three largest - Hubei, Jiangsu and Zhejiang – which contain 26, 25 and 22 independent colleges respectively, are in the leading position, if we take these provinces’ backgrounds into consideration. Firstly, Jiangsu and Zhejiang were the two regions that first started independent colleges in China, while all three provinces are in well-developed areas in China with a high economic growth rate since the open and reform era instituted in 1979. Hand in hand with this economic growth, the demands of job market also grew commensurately, which boosted the huge number of people seeking higher education. This increasing demand for higher education was a crucial reason leading to the emergence of independent colleges. Second, investors’ capacity to invest in these colleges and the student’s ability to pay for the high tuition are the two fundamental requirements to set up an independent college. As seen above, the three provinces are all located in the east of China which hosts more enterprises with sufficient private capital to invest in education and more students from wealthy families who can afford, and are willing to pay for, the high costs for higher education than other regions. Third, independent colleges also need the strong support from prestigious public universities which are again unevenly located across China. The most developed regions like Beijing, Shanghai and eastern provinces have the majority of national key public universities, while far fewer exist in central and western China. Regarding the close relationship between independent colleges and whose public universities, it’s not hard to imagine why there is a significant difference between each province. All in all, we can tell that the level of development of independent colleges is a logical outcome of local capital market and student sources.

At the same time, the unbalanced distribution of higher education resources would lead to issues around it, like inequalities in education especially when considering the household registration system (hukou) and quota admission system in the gaokao. To solve this problem, the government could encourage the development of independent colleges in central and western China; for example, government subsidies could be given as incentives.

#### 4. Compare with General Minban Gaoxiao

Even through independent colleges and general minban gaoxiao are both part of private higher education in China, there are also several differences. First and foremost, they operate under different regulations. General minban gaoxiao are established under the “The law on promoting the development of minban education” whereas independent colleges are reliant upon administrative rules from the Ministry of Education. Secondly, independent colleges are all at undergraduate level, but general minban can be undergraduate level or at lower level just provide professional training. Thirdly, independent colleges are hosted by public universities and cooperate with private sectors, whereas general minban just have private resources. This is also the easiest way to distinguish between these two different types of private higher education. Besides these differences, the common thing is they are all run in independent financial system without any subsidies from the government.

#### 5. Case study

The case study was conducted in Xi’an Jiaotong University City College (XJTUCC) to collect data. The data collected for this case study consisted of interviews with the participating administrators and students. I conducted three one-on-one in-depth interviews and a focus group with four students who were currently studying in the college. The choice of the interview method was motivated by the consideration that while the one-on-one interviews would allow the collection of detailed information about an individual’s beliefs, attitudes and practices, the focus groups would be useful in capturing the breadth of views and encouraging discussion that might be less forthcoming in individual interviews [15]. All the one-on-one interviews and the focus group were semi-structured and organized around a set of prepared questions and topics centering on language ideologies, practices, and management. While the one-on-one interviews on average lasted about half an hour, the focus group lasted about an hour and half. All the interviews and the focus group were conducted in Chinese, audio-recorded with the permission of participants, and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

A case study can provide “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit”. Case-study methodology was chosen because it is well-suited for developing an in-depth, contextual, and holistic understanding of the educational development [16]. The case-study design has been adopted in Xi’an Jiaotong University City College, since it allows the examination of how independent colleges operate in China currently, as a growing, essential part of private higher education. Independent colleges are a new, popular and crucial format of private higher education that claims to provide more job-aligned curriculum and training, and which enrolls 22 % [11] of the college student total in China. Hence, examining this new institutional form could yield insights into private higher education’s current development.

The data collected for this case study consisted of interviews with some participating administrators and students. I conducted three one-on-one interviews and a focus group with four students (picked up by the staff from the college, he told me the process was by random) who were currently studying in the college. The choice of the interview method was motivated by the consideration that while the one-on-one interviews would allow me to collect detailed information about an individual’s beliefs, attitudes and practices, the focus group data would be useful in capturing the breadth of views and encouraging discussion that might be less forthcoming in individual interviews [15]. All the one-on-one interviews and the focus group were semi-structured and organized around a set of prepared questions and topics centering on language ideologies, practices, and management. While the one-on-one interviews on average lasted about half an hour, the focus group lasted about an hour and half. All the interviews and the focus group were conducted in Chinese, audio-recorded with the permission of participants, and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

XJTUCC (Xi’an Jiaotong University City College) is a typical independent college under the umbrella of its mother institution--- Xi’an Jiaotong University (XJTU), which is one of the top nine universities in China (a member of the so-called C9). Its practice may reflect some general conditions

evident in many other independent colleges in China. However, this case study does not claim that its findings are representative of the wider situation of Du Li Xue Yuan in China.

## 6. The Teaching Force

Teaching quality is a crucial element of a university. There are currently 11,700 students in the college and 550 teachers, which yields a student: teacher ratio of 1:21.3 which exceeds but is close to the national requirement of 1:18 [14]. While slightly over the requirement, it still a good figure compared with most Du Li Xue Yuan which often vigorously seek to increase enrolments: while on its own no guarantee of quality, it is a reassuring index. A further index consists of its teaching staff: 60-70% of CCXJTU teachers are drawn from the mother university - XJTU, all of whom work part-time in the City College. The remaining 30-40% of teachers work full-time and are hired by CCXJTU directly. As Zhang Xuetao, the head of the Students' Employment Center of XJTUCC said, most of this group are very young teachers, just graduated from university, without teaching experience. The part-time Lecturers take a shuttle bus from the home university to the XJTUCC campus, give a two hour lecture, and rush back to Xi'an Jiaotong directly after the class because they normally have a lot of work that needs to be done in Xi'an Jiaotong rather than in the City College. These part time lecturers put much more focus on their teaching in Xi'an Jiaotong University than XJTUCC, as the student joked with exaggeration in the interview that "the lecturers could so hard to be seen after classes even harder than see the president of the country". This results in little communication between teachers and students in the college, and no time for research. Indeed, in interview, the XJTUCC Principal confirmed that "there is almost no research thing happening in the college, we just have classes". According to the Principal, this teacher employment system provides relevant, high teaching quality while maintaining profits, (since there is a big salary difference between part time and full time employment). The concern here is does this high proportion of part-time teachers provide the same quality of teaching to the students from XJTUCC as students in XJTU? The Principal argued that the college has a totally different curriculum which is more suitable for the students in XJTUCC than the regular programme of XJTU. To ensure teaching quality, all the College lecturers (including those from XJTU) are asked to prepare a detailed teaching plan each semester for different teaching programmes. The other way to ensure the high quality of teaching is to examine the students' test results. According to Professor Chen, around 10% of students fail, on average, which is much the same ratio as found in XJTU. In XJTUCC, student surveys are also routinely conducted at the end of each semester as a helpful method to assess teaching quality; their use is regarded as an efficient way to improve teaching quality [17].

There is a wide recognition among people, especially parents that teachers from a university of high repute could give much more to students than teachers from a normal university, even if in practice, as seen above, they are just there to give a quick lecture, before rushing back to their regular duties at XJTU. According to the Employment Centre of XJTUCC Zhang, this teaching resource is now a real attraction for many students and parents who choose XJTUCC. Teachers from XJTU can convey some of their thinking to the students from the "mother" institution, compared with the less well trained full time lecturers. Zhang also said that the teaching atmosphere brought by the teachers from XJTU is an essential part of the reason that students from the college can more easily gain a decent job than students from a normal Minban.

## 7. Conclusion

The high speed of Du Li Xue Yuan development, might pose a hidden danger of over enrolment. According to Lu's (2012) speech that the goal is to make the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) of higher education reaches 40 per cent in 2020. The GER in 2013 is 34%, so it needs to keep the increase at 1 per cent every year to reach 40 per cent by 2020. That is not an easy step. In terms of the students' population total, this goal means 2,454,620 more students would need to enrol in higher education in the seven years (2013-2020), or an average of 350,660 more students going to colleges and

universities every year from year 2013 to 2020. That is a huge number and might even exceed capacity, especially at this moment, when most universities and colleges are already at saturation point, [18]. Also, the growing number of teachers may not match the growth in student numbers [19]. As I mentioned above, the former Minister of the Ministry of Education Zhou pointed out in 2007 that China's higher education enrolment would not decrease but the expansion would proceed at a lower speed. In addition, the Ministry of Education had rethought the earlier policy on expansion, and stated that the decision made in 1999 to enlarge the scale of higher education had been hurried, without adequate consideration of longer-term consequences [20].

Therefore, just putting more students in these existed higher educational institutions is not feasible. Might it be possible to set up more colleges to contain more students? It would be a practical way to reach the goal as it relieves the pressure on state finances, on one hand, while on the other hand allowing the growth of a more applied private sector in China to something like the level of other countries. There is a gap of colleges' number between China and other developing countries, a wider gap compared with developed countries. From this point, set up more Du Li Xue Yuan is a pathway to settle this problem, although their development would need to be carefully regulated, to avoid the proliferation of low-quality providers.

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