

The Private Undergraduate Colleges in China: The Development, Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The structure of private undergraduate colleges in China can be confusing because it includes two distinct types: Independent Colleges and Minban Undergraduate Colleges. Research on their development, challenges, and opportunities remains limited. This study uses qualitative document analysis to examine the history, challenges, and prospects of private undergraduate colleges. The findings show that Independent Colleges, which emerged during the late 20th century under the Open-Door Policy, grew quickly but faced criticism for disrupting the balance with Minban Undergraduate Colleges. In response, the Chinese government implemented policies to transform Independent Colleges and support the growth of Minban Undergraduate Colleges, creating a fairer and more competitive environment. Despite these improvements, private undergraduate colleges still face challenges such as funding shortages, limited research capacity, and high faculty turnover. However, changing market conditions and supportive policies offer significant opportunities for growth. This study provides useful insights for policymakers and educators, highlighting the potential of private undergraduate colleges to strengthen China's higher education system and meet the needs of a rapidly changing economy.

Contribution/Originality: This study represents one of the few reviews examining the development, challenges, and prospects of private undergraduate colleges in China, offering valuable insights to guide policymakers in advancing and legislating for their growth and sustainability.

1. Introduction

Private higher education has significantly influenced global development, accounting for approximately one-third (32.9%) of total higher education enrolments worldwide and representing 56.7 million students (Levy, 2018). Asia and Latin America lead in private higher education enrolments, contributing 48.8% and 42.1% of regional enrolments, respectively (Bothwell, 2021). In China, private higher education, particularly at the

undergraduate level, has played a vital role in the country's growth. As of 2019, China had 434 private undergraduate colleges (PUCs) compared to 822 public universities, making up over 30% of all undergraduate institutions (MOE, 2020). These private institutions enrolled 4,390,307 full-time undergraduate students, accounting for 25% of the total full-time undergraduate student population (MOE, 2020).

However, the fragmented literature on the development of private undergraduate education—especially regarding the two main types of institutions, Minban Undergraduate Colleges (MUCs) and Independent Colleges (ICs)—hinders a comprehensive understanding of this sector. This paper employs qualitative research through document analysis to define these two types of private undergraduate colleges, trace their systematic historical development, and examine the challenges and opportunities they face.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to synthesise scattered data and offer a comprehensive overview of private undergraduate colleges. By analysing the historical context, challenges, and opportunities, this study provides critical insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers striving to improve the management and strategic development of these institutions. Additionally, it aims to identify strategies that enhance the sustainability and quality of private undergraduate education, ensuring its continued contribution to China's educational and economic growth.

2. Method

Qualitative research is typically interpretive and descriptive, with researchers aiming to observe and understand the circumstances being studied without influencing them (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). It provides perspectives to understand individuals' values, interpretative frameworks, cognitive maps, belief systems, and guiding life principles, thereby offering insights into respondents' realities (Omona, 2013). Thematic analysis, a common qualitative research methodology, is used to identify patterns and meanings within data. The approach researchers adopt in analysing themes varies significantly, and effective thematic analysis depends on aligning the objectives, context, and chosen method of the study (Finlay, 2021). Additionally, document analysis is a well-established research method that involves analysing various forms of documents, including novels, newspaper articles, academic journals, and institutional reports (Morgan, 2022).

This study employed qualitative research to examine PUCs in the Chinese context, highlighting diverse scholarly perspectives and values. We used the thematic analysis methodology to explore the types, development, challenges, and opportunities of PUCs. Document analysis served as the primary data collection instrument, with data sourced from reports, theses, journal articles, and conference papers. Key sources included the Ministry of Education in China and multiple databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Chinese academic databases.

3. Results

3.1. The private undergraduate colleges

Private undergraduate institutions in China are higher education establishments that grant bachelor's degrees or higher and mainly consist of two types: ICs and MUCs (Yuan & Wang, 2021).

Wang and Yan (2018) describe ICs as a hybrid model combining elements of public and private education. Their names typically integrate those of public and private universities, such as Yunnan University Dianchi College. Unlike MUCs or public undergraduate colleges, ICs represent a new, formalised type of higher education institution with a distinct social identity. In this model, Chinese public universities collaborate with social entities, leveraging market mechanisms to operate (Cao, 2006; Tong, 2012; Wang & Yan, 2018). Dong (1999) categorises ICs as second-tier institutions affiliated with public universities but with innovative governance structures, including distinct management and funding systems. These colleges differ from traditional second-tier faculties (e.g., arts, science, engineering, and medicine) in public universities. Academic disciplines do not restrict ICs, unlike specialised second-tier colleges, and they demonstrate unique university management and operational practices (Cao, 2006; Dong, 1999; Zhou, 2005). MOE (2003) formalised this arrangement through the "Settings and Management for Independent Colleges" policy, which defines ICs as institutions where public universities partner with social organisations or individuals to provide undergraduate education funded by non-state financial resources.

MUCs, in contrast, represent a model of undergraduate education distinct from public institutions. These colleges rely on private funding and operate under market-driven mechanisms, primarily sustaining themselves through tuition fees (He & Ye, 2016). MUCs, known as people-run colleges, derive their name from "Min," which translates to "people" in Chinese. In a socialist context, the term "Minban" is preferred by the Chinese government to distinguish these institutions from public counterparts while avoiding associations with privatization (Lo, 2014).

The Chinese State Council introduced the "Regulations on the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education" in 2004, later updated in 2021 (The State of Council, 2021). This legislation grants MUCs rights equal to those of public institutions, including equal access to higher education, employment opportunities, social benefits, and participation in merit awards. It also defines MUCs as non-profit institutions (The State of Council, 2021). Unlike ICs, MUCs operate independently of public funding or financial support from government sources.

3.2. The development of private undergraduate colleges

3.2.1. The background of the development of private undergraduate colleges

Political and economic changes over the past century have significantly influenced the development of PUCs in China. Particularly, the decentralization of political structures and economic planning, along with Opening-up Reform, has significantly shaped the evolution of PUCs (Lo, 2017; Wu & Li, 2021). As government funding and resources proved insufficient to meet the growing demand for higher education, the Chinese government increasingly relied on market forces and the private sector to fill the gap (Wu & Li, 2021; Zhou, 2005).

At the same time, public undergraduate universities faced funding shortages, leading parents—whose incomes were rising—to seek alternative educational opportunities for their children. This situation prompted criticism of the central government for perceived inequities in higher education provision (Tong, 2012; Wang & Yan, 2018). Additionally, the mass expansion of higher education in China during the late 1990s and early 2000s spurred the establishment of independent colleges within prestigious public universities.

Concurrently, some private higher vocational colleges were upgraded to PUCs, further diversifying the higher education landscape (Gao, 2015; Wang, 2009; Wu & Li, 2021; Zhou, 2005).

3.2.2. *The development of Independent Colleges*

The earliest form of PUCs, known as ICs, can be traced back to the founding of the International Women's College at Tianjin Normal University in 1992. Tianjin Normal University established this second-tier college by utilising its name, faculty, and management resources (Zhang, 2003). Subsequently, similar institutions emerged in Shanghai, including the College of Air Transportation at Shanghai University of Engineering Science and the China Europe International Business College, among others. This concept spread to other regions, including Zhejiang and Jiangsu Provinces (Cao, 2006). Unlike typical second-tier colleges, ICs primarily fund themselves through tuition fees rather than government allocations. They also enjoy greater autonomy in enrolment, orientation, and student allocation (Su, 2012). However, ICs are typically required to give 30% or more of their tuition revenue to their parent public universities (Jili University, 2009).

Crucially, ICs benefit from shared teaching and management resources with their parent universities, deriving significant advantages despite not receiving direct government funding (Fei, 2012). They also recruit a large number of students with lower national entrance examination scores, enabling them to receive graduation certificates bearing the prestigious branding of their parent universities (Fei, 2012). However, this arrangement has created substantial inequities, hindering the development of peer institutions, namely, MUCs.

In 1997, the Asian economic crisis, which significantly impacted China, prompted the Chinese government to expand higher education as a strategy to cultivate talents and boost the economy. This led to rapid growth in the number of ICs. Between 1999 and 2003, Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces established 24 and 22 ICs, respectively (Lo, 2017). Similarly, Liaoning Province founded 27 ICs, and Yunnan Province added 8 ICs (Lo, 2017). China established over 360 ICs by 2003 (Wang & Yan, 2018; Zhang, 2003). Geographically, the more developed South and Central regions of China housed the majority of ICs, while the West had fewer, indicating regional economic disparities (Zhou, 2005). By 2008, the MOE reported the establishment of 369 ICs (MOE, 2008).

Despite this progress, criticisms and controversies surrounding ICs persisted. One major critique was that ICs enrolled students with lower entrance examination scores and charged high tuition fees, yet awarded degrees bearing the prestigious names of their parent universities, creating perceptions of unfair competition with MUCs. Critics regarded this as speculative behaviour. Additionally, public universities profited significantly from their IC partnerships without necessarily prioritising educational quality (Wang & Yan, 2018). Some even questioned the classification of ICs as public or private, characterising them as "Greek" entities (Wang & Yan, 2018).

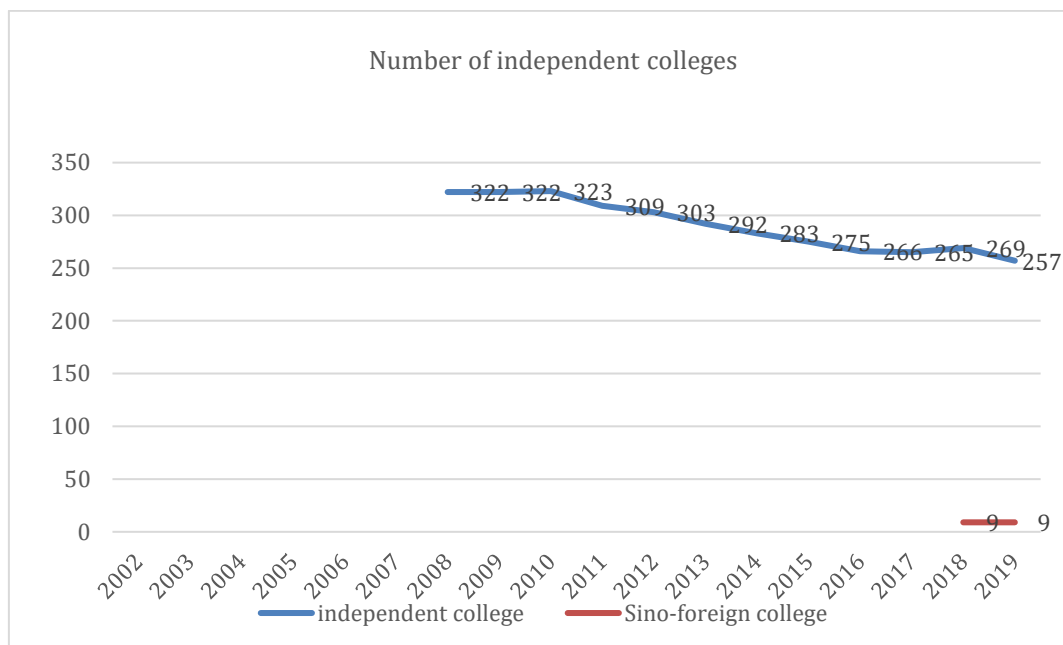
In response, the MOE (2003) introduced the Setting and Management for Independent Colleges policy, which clarified the ambiguous status of ICs. The policy encouraged ICs to pursue one of three paths: "cancellation," "merger," or "transfer." This meant that some ICs exited the market, merged with their parent universities, or transitioned into fully MUCs (Wang, 2016).

The existence of ICs also hindered the growth of MUCs, contributing to an environment of inequality. The lower entrance scores and perceived inferior quality of IC students damaged the reputations of their parent universities. Additionally, high management fees paid to parent universities and restrictions on teaching staff further impeded the development of ICs themselves (, 2014; Yang, 2013).

As a result, the development of ICs began to decline after 2009. Between 2008 and 2019, 65 ICs either disappeared, merged with other institutions, or transitioned into MUCs (MOE, 2020). Since 2009, the growth of ICs has slowed significantly. The following section outlines the changes in ICs as documented by MOE (2020).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of ICs declined between 2008 and 2019, with 65 institutions either closing, merging, or transitioning into MUCs. Most of the remaining ICs have since been converted into MPUs.

Figure 1: The Number of Private Undergraduate Institutions



Source: MOE (2020)

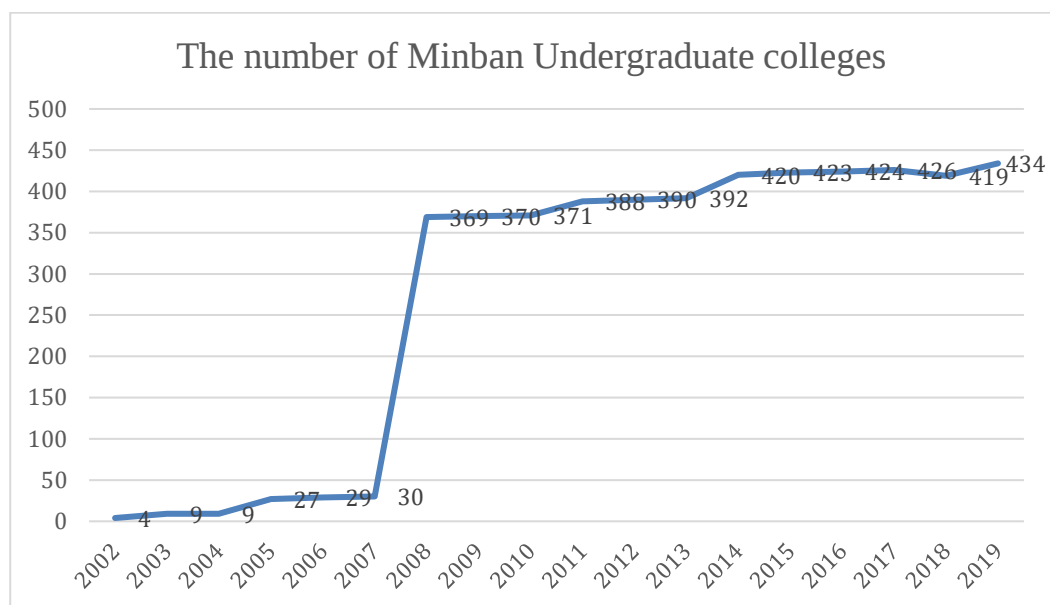
3.2.3. The development of Minban Colleges

Minban Colleges disappeared after policy prohibitions, as societal doubts about their quality persisted. Until 1998, only one MUC existed (Wang & Yan, 2018). By 2004, the number had increased to nine (MOE, 2020), highlighting the challenges in their development. MUCs faced significant difficulties, such as their certificates not being recognised due to inadequate teaching quality and insufficient staff resources that failed to meet the MOE standards. Many MUCs, having evolved from higher vocational colleges, self-study exam centres, technical training institutions, and adult education providers, lacked the necessary experience to manage undergraduate programs (Bie & Li, 2023). In other words, these MUCs lacked the expertise to manage undergraduate education and lacked established theories or concepts specifically tailored to their operations. Furthermore, the absence of supportive policies hindered public trust in MUCs, while Chinese ideological preferences for government-run institutions further undermined it (Xu, 2005).

By 2007, only 27 MUCs existed (MOE, 2020; Yuan & Wang, 2021). However, with the transformation and decline in the number of ICs, the upgrading of private vocational colleges, and reduced competition from ICs, MUCs captured opportunities for growth (Liu & Zhang, 2010). The government also implemented policies to support their long-term development. In 2020, the central government introduced the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010) to encourage the expansion of MUCs (MOE, 2010). Additionally, in 2013, the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) issued The Decision of the Central Committee on Several Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform, adopted during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee. This document emphasised "the decisive role of the market in resource allocation and the complementary role of the government," providing strategic guidance for private education reform (Li & Lu, 2014). These reforms advocated for "equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal rules" for private undergraduate institutions, laying the foundation for their transformation and growth (Li & Lu, 2014). Consequently, these policies significantly facilitated the development of MUCs.

As shown in Figure 2, MUCs began to expand from 2008, maintaining stable growth from 2008 to 2019, reaching 434 institutions. Most MUCs have evolved from private higher vocational colleges or have transitioned from ICs.

Figure 2: The Number of Minban Undergraduate Colleges



Source: MOE (2020)

3.3. The challenges of private undergraduate colleges

Initially, funding is a critical challenge for PUCs (Liu & Guo, 2016). Expanding PUCs without government support restricts their ability to increase tuition fees. When tuition fees exceed what residents can afford, enrolment may decline. Thus, relying solely on tuition revenue for substantial expansion, quality improvement is unrealistic (Liu, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014).

From the students' perspective, employment outcomes for PUC graduates are often less promising. These graduates predominantly secure positions in lower-level job markets, which provide fewer opportunities for professional growth and are associated with lower

levels of job satisfaction (Zhang, 2019). This issue is partly due to the lack of clear employment guidance and strategic planning within PUCs. Moreover, many training programs fail to emphasise psychological readiness and social responsibility, leaving students with less defined career goals (Zhang, 2013).

In terms of human resources, PUCs face significant challenges. Many faculty members are young, holding only bachelor's or master's degrees, and have limited teaching experience. Faculty often teach 16 to 20 hours per week, leaving little time for research or professional development opportunities (Ozturgut, 2015). High turnover rates are common due to low salaries and limited benefits (Xia & Yue, 2010). Additionally, part-time instructors from public universities often cannot dedicate sufficient time to teaching and research in PUCs (Ting, 2019; Zeng, 2011). Furthermore, because some PUCs originated as vocational colleges, they retain staff who lack the advanced qualifications required for undergraduate education, resulting in lower teaching quality (Gao, 2015).

In terms of research, PUCs struggle with limited research capabilities and a lack of innovation. Teaching staff often prioritise instructional duties over research due to time constraints (Zeng, 2011). Faculty in PUCs also have less access to research funding compared to their public university counterparts, diminishing their motivation for scholarly work (Wen, 2019). Additionally, PUCs often lack middle-aged, experienced researchers who can build and lead robust research teams (Xia et al., 2012).

Lastly, PUCs face challenges in internationalisation. Their lower institutional reputations and limited academic programs make it difficult to attract international students (Zhao, 2018). Many PUCs programs are not aligned with international academic standards, further reducing their global appeal. Moreover, faculty members at PUCs face challenges in participating in international exchange programs, limiting opportunities to enhance their skills and establish international networks (Liu, 2022).

3.4. Opportunities for private undergraduate colleges

PUCs represent a form of applied-orientated undergraduate education. With rapid economic growth, the demand for applied-orientated talent has become urgent, while the capacity of state-supported undergraduate education remains relatively limited (Mao, 2018). To address the need for application-orientated professionals, the state has actively supported the growth of PUCs, providing them with significant opportunities for expansion (Mao, 2018).

MUCs, in particular, have gained a more competitive environment for student recruitment and institutional operations following the transformation of ICs. Most ICs, after transitioning into MUCs, have gained increased autonomy in their operations (Yao & Chen, 2021). This shift eliminated the need for management fees to their former parent universities, allowing these institutions to allocate more resources to improving teaching quality and research capabilities. With their prior management experience from public universities, these transformed colleges have continued to develop steadily and have earned market trust (Yanjin & Wang, 2024).

As the economy has progressed and the central government has decentralised, the market's role in higher education has grown. This shift has led to a more transparent, equitable, and competitive environment, fostering the growth of PUCs. As a result, more

parents and students are choosing PUCs as a viable option for higher education in China (Liu & Zhang, 2010).

4. Discussion

The findings show that market demands, government policies, and societal needs have significantly shaped the development of PUCs in China, which began at the end of the 20th century. Initially, the rapid expansion of ICs, particularly in more developed regions, addressed the growing demand for higher education. However, this expansion had unintended consequences, creating barriers for the development of MUCs due to competition and perceived inequities in the market. The societal preference for public-affiliated institutions further exacerbated this challenge, leaving MUCs with limited recognition and support.

The shift in government policy has been crucial for the growth of MUCs. Policies designed to regulate ICs and support their transformation have allowed MUCs to establish a fairer competitive environment. This policy shift reflects an awareness of the need to balance the private and public higher education sectors to ensure fair access to educational opportunities.

Despite these positive developments, the study highlights ongoing challenges for PUCs, such as insufficient funding, employment difficulties, and the limited research capacity of teaching staff. Addressing these issues is essential for the sustainable development of PUCs. While PUCs have more autonomy and flexibility than public HEIs, their continued reliance on tuition fees limits their ability to invest in quality improvements. The findings also indicate that without targeted strategies to enhance research capabilities and international appeal, PUCs may struggle to attract both high-quality students and faculty.

Nonetheless, the competitive environment created by market-orientated reforms provides opportunities for PUCs to differentiate themselves by focusing on applied education that meets the needs of China's evolving economy.

This study contributes to the understanding of the complex dynamics between ICs and MUCs in China's higher education landscape, offering insights for policymakers and educators aiming to foster balanced growth in the sector. Likewise, this research could provide deeper insights into the long-term sustainability of PUCs and their role in China's broader educational ecosystem.

Based on these findings, we propose the following recommendations:

First and foremost, historical and economic needs, as well as market and societal demands, drive the development of PUCs. Recognising this, the government has formulated policies and initiatives to align the development of PUCs with market needs. Ultimately, PUCs may replace ICs. Therefore, empowering PUCs through autonomy, policy formulation, and legislation is crucial.

Furthermore, the government has played a significant role in shaping the development of PUCs through macro-level policy guidance. However, governmental actions have also influenced the challenges faced by PUCs, including unequal access to college admissions for students and disparities in treatment between staff at public colleges and PUCs. To

ensure equal access to student admissions and equitable social welfare benefits for PUC staff, we need legislative measures at the national level.

At the institutional level, the study suggests that with sufficient investments in faculty development, research, and student support services, PUCs can leverage their flexibility to better align with market demands and enhance the quality of their teaching, research, and student support services. Meanwhile, international market participation is crucial for improving the quality of PUCs, as it can provide diverse, valuable experiences and examples for their development. Additionally, PUCs can compare themselves to their international counterparts and learn from their strengths.

This paper primarily focuses on the literature review and highlights the need for further exploration of challenges and opportunities through empirical studies, such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches. Future research could investigate the trajectories of other types of PUCs and explore how transformed ICs adapt to the market environment in the post-transition period.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the development, challenges, and opportunities of PUCs in China, focusing on ICs and MUCs. While ICs initially met the growing demand for higher education, their rapid expansion created inequities that hindered MUCs. Subsequent policy reforms helped balance the landscape, enabling the growth of Minban Undergraduate Colleges. Despite progress, PUCs still face challenges, such as limited funding, faculty turnover, weak research capacity, and limited internationalisation. However, increasing marketisation and supportive policies offer a more equitable environment for growth. Future research should explore the adaptation of transformed Independent Colleges and other private universities. Overall, private undergraduate colleges hold significant potential to enhance China's educational landscape by aligning with evolving societal needs.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

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