The Resurgence and Growth of Private Higher Education in China

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Abstract:

This paper concentrates on two issues. The first pertains to legitimacy, policy and implementation in China's private higher education in terms of its context, definition and characteristics. In terms of the second issue, this paper examines how the flourishing market economy and the policy of decentralization adopted by the Chinese leadership have supported the emergence and growth of private higher education in China. It also explores the implications of such a change to diversity and equity for the national system. It seems that China epitomizes the international tendency to look toward private higher education as a way to meet otherwise contradictory enrollment and financial incentives. With this highly 'instrumental' approach, China's private higher education appears to have a negative effect on diversity and equity in the system.

Introduction:

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, China's higher education has been under the government's control, characterized by the notion of 'central control and allocation' (Williams, Liu & Shi, 1997). It was not until the mid 1980s that the Chinese government began to diversify educational services, allowing and encouraging the establishment of institutions run by the non-state sector. In recent years, private higher education has been undergoing rapid development in China, particularly in big cities. By 1999, there were 1,277 private higher education institutions in the country, hosting 1.23 million students1 (Qu, 2000).

This paper concentrates on two issues. The first pertains to legitimacy, policy and implementation in China's private higher education. This discussion examines the issue in terms of context, definition and characteristics. The second issue has more far reaching implications and pertains to factors affecting diversity and equity. This paper attempts to examine how the flourishing market economy and the policy of decentralization adopted by the Chinese government have supported the emergence and growth of private higher education in China, and explores the implications of such a change to diversity and equity for the national system.

This paper employs the analytical frameworks developed by Geiger (1987) and Levy (1999) in their studies on private higher education. Geiger (1987) makes an important point when he argues for the 'limit of privatization': "In the final analysis private higher education is not a determinative form. Rather, the nature and consequences of private higher education are relative to the national system in which it is embedded" (p. 244). Similarly, Levy (1999) identifies privatization's 'limits to diversity', and argues that "privatization carries isomorphic as well as diversifying effects; diversifying effects may diminish over time" (p. 37). This paper begins with an outline of the conceptual frameworks used within this analysis.

Conceptual Frameworks

According to Geiger (1987), there are three basic forms of privatization in higher education. In the first type, the higher education system is dominated by the 'mass private sectors with restricted public sectors'. The second type is a parallel system in which both the private and public sectors play a role in providing higher education services. In the third type, the private sector plays a very limited role – the 'peripheral private sector'.

Geiger's (1987) thesis, briefly stated, is that the amount and kind of higher education provided by government is the single most important determinant of the size and character of private higher education in each national system. Mass private sectors have arisen in countries where the provision of public higher education has been limited to relatively few institutions of generally high academic standing. The distinctive feature of the mass private sector is the accommodation of a large proportion of students in low-cost, low-quality institutions, created to absorb excess demand, with inadequate resources and part-time staff. Parallel systems are characterized by a symmetrical relationship of private and public sectors, and require three conditions: a) the existence of 'legitimate' cultural groups whose interests are represented in the polity; b) a single high national

standard for university degrees; and c) extensive government subsidization of private institutions in order to equalize conditions with the public sector. Peripheral private sectors emerge to serve purposes not acknowledged by the state, where public sectors are designed to fulfill all of the recognized need for higher education. Government support for higher education is concentrated in the comprehensive public sector. Peripheral private sector institutions are unlikely to have the resources to compete academically with public sector institutions. Geiger maintains that "these factors make peripheral private institutions among the most private in higher education" (p. 237).

Levy's (1999) thesis is not new. Rather, it draws upon perspectives of two bodies of literature that are often consulted to tackle the systemic diversity issue in higher education. One body of literature is essentially descriptive, attempting to track developments in private higher education. This literature usually depicts ample and expanding organizational diversity resulting from privatization (for example, Bowen et al., 1997; Cerych, 1995; Geiger, 1986, 1987; Pan & Wei, 1995; Zhou, 1995). The other body of literature, the 'new institutionalism', is essentially theoretical, attempting to identify, explain and predict developments within organizational fields. The new institutionalism highlights isomorphism, a process of convergence that yields similarities among organizations (for example, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991). According to Levy (1999), the contrast here is that the literature on private higher education more often depicts or assumes rational and free-choice dynamics that lead mostly to diversity, while the new institutionalism finds such dynamics exaggerated, inadequate, or otherwise misleading for depicting and explaining organizational configurations.

Levy (1999) notes further that important limitations mark the organizational diversity brought about by private higher education. He argues that privatization is often but not always about something different, innovative and rationally responsive to stated goals. He uses the new institutionalism's core concept of isomorphism to illustrate why and how private higher education closely resembles public higher education, failing to add great diversity to the system. In his analysis, Levy basically follows DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) formulation of isomorphism, which identifies three chief categories: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism. According to DiMaggio and Powell, coercive isomorphism results from pressure applied by cultural expectations and by other organizations on which the organization of interest is dependent. Mimetic isomorphism stems from uncertainty caused by poorly understood technologies, ambiguous goals and the symbolic environment. Normative isomorphism arises primarily from professionalization, involving two aspects of professionalization: the first is the homogenizing influence of established norms, and the second is the growth and elaboration of professional networks. To Levy (1999), two implications can be identified when isomorphism is related to contemporary higher education privatization, in terms of intersectoral (private resembling public) and intrasectoral (private emulating private) dynamics. First, isomorphism can inhibit the appearance of private characteristics within the public sector. Second, it can block the very emergence or subsequent growth of a separate private sector. The new institutionalism highlights evidence that organizations operate chiefly in routine, unreflective, constrained modes. These modes lead to extensive copying -- isomorphism.

Phases of Development of Private Higher Education in China

Private education has existed in China through the centuries ever since the days of the Spring and Autumn periods (770 to 475 B.C.), and flourished in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.). During the Tang Dynasty (619 to 907), while higher education institutions were maintained mainly by the government, private academies of learning (shuyuan) started to grow, and persisted all the way through to the late Qing period (1636 to 1911) (Ding & Liu, 1992; Yang & Peng, 1992). It is estimated that there were about twelve hundred such academies in the Ming period, and the number rose to over nineteen hundred academies by the Qing period (Chen et al., 1981).

Since the Opium War of the mid-1800s, private missionary schools and universities gradually arose all over China. By 1917, 80% of the total university student population were from missionary universities (China National Institute of Educational Science Research, 1995). Even in 1950, shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, 77 of the total of 227 universities were private, holding over 40% of enrollments (Min, 1994). However, following in the footsteps of the Soviet model, all the private institutions of higher education were transformed into public ones by 1956, after the reorganization of universities and departments. With this, the long history of private higher education in China closed its first chapter, and Chinese citizens became accustomed to free education provided by the state sector. The second chapter of the new development of private higher education in China can be traced back to early the 1980s when China launched its economic reform.

The economic modernization drive has not only fostered the growth of a market economy but has also caused a structural change in education. Reform in educational structure started in the mid-1980s, reshuffling the monopolistic role of the state in provision of education. It has manifested a mix of private and public consumption (Cheng, 1995; Hayhoe, 1996; Mok, 1996). It is worth noting that, in China, the definition of a private institution is complex. It is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly the difference between private and minban or people-run educational institutions. The term minban refers to institutions run by the non-state sector, including privately and collectively (such as a Democratic Party or other legally approved groups) owned institutions2. But very often, people use the terms 'private' and 'minban' interchangeably. Those working in privately-owned institutions tend to label their institutions as minban instead of private for the sake of 'survival': the former term has a nonprofit implication, and, in a society like China's where there is a considerable asymmetry of information between providers and consumers of educational services, consumers can have greater trust in nonprofit organizations.

In general, the new growth of private higher education in China in recent years can be divided into three different periods that outline the rise, rectification and development of private higher education from 1982 to the present.

The Rise of Private Higher Education (1982-1986)

In March 1982, exactly thirty years after the closing of the first chapter of private higher education, China inaugurated its first minban higher education institution – the Zhonghu Zhehui University – in Beijing, the nation's capital city (China National

Institute of Educational Science Research, 1995). In December 1982, the National People's Congress, China's national legislature, promulgated a new Constitution of China, with the nineteenth article stipulating that "the state encourages collective economic organizations, governmental enterprises and other social groups to initiate and administer various kinds of legal educational activities." In 1985, a policy paper entitled the Decision on Reform of the Educational Structure, issued by the Central Committee of the China Communist Party, indicated that the state attempted to diversify educational services by encouraging all democratic parties, non-governmental organizations, social bodies, retired cadres and intellectuals, collective economic organizations and individuals subject to the Party and governmental policies, and to actively and voluntarily contribute to developing education by various forms and methods (Hu, 1999; Wei & Zhang, 1995).

This period saw the expansion of over one hundred minban and private higher education institutions across the country. Private higher education has been developing since then (Hu, 1999).

The Rectification of Private Higher Education (1987-1991)

In 1987, the State Education Commission promulgated a document, Provisional Regulations on the Social Forces Running Educational Establishments, which attempted to rectify some of the disorders in the governance and management of minban schools as well as in their conferring of diplomas, among other issues and problems encountered (Zhu, 1996). It seems that those very issues and problems made the education authorities more prudent in handling private higher education affairs, and "skeptics are beginning to take notice of this resurgence" (Yang, 1997, p. 8).

In order to provide a forum for the community of private higher education, a first national conference on minban higher education was held in Wuhan, Hubei in January 1989, at which more than 70 minban higher education institutions were represented. The conference came up with a platform of five concrete suggestions on issues of importance, as well as a call for the educational authorities to take a more liberal approach to reform (Wei & Zhang, 1995). During this period of rectification, the quality of minban higher education institutions varied significantly, and thus regulation of them seemed necessary.

Development of Private Higher Education (1992-present)

The year of 1992 marked the advent of spring for China's private higher education, when Deng Xiaoping undertook his southern inspection tour, at the beginning of year, to advocate renewed economic reform. Shortly after Deng's tour to Southern China, the China Communist Party openly endorsed the adoption of a socialist market economy in its 14th National Party Congress.

Recognizing the fact that the state alone can never meet people's pressing educational needs, the Chinese leadership has deliberately devolved responsibilities to other non-state sectors to engage in educational development. In 1993, the Program for Educational Reform and Development of China stated for the first time the national policy towards the development of non-state-run education as "active encouragement, strong support, proper guidelines, and sound management" (Hu, 1999). In 1995, China's Education Law was promulgated, with the 25 articles reconfirming that the state would

give full support to enterprises, social forces, local communities and individuals to establish schools under the legal framework of the People's Republic of China (State Education Commission, 1995). On October 1, 1997, the State Council officially enacted the Regulations on the Social Forces Running Educational Establishments, which put the governance of private higher education on a firm legal basis. There are eight chapters in the Regulations, the contents of which cover the legal status of private higher education institutions, the criteria for the establishment of such institutions, the formal procedures for applying to set up such establishments, the process of evaluation and appraisal by the educational authorities, and the internal administration and governance of these institutions (State Council, 1997).

By 1994, there were altogether more than 800 private higher education institutions across the nation. This number has been steadily growing ever since to 1230 in 1996, 1252 in 1997, and 1277 in 1999. Among these, only 37 are fully recognized by the Ministry of Education, with authority to grant their own graduation diplomas, while the remainders can only issue students with certificates3 (Hu, 1999; Mok, 2000; Yang, 2000). All in all, the resurgence and growth of private higher education indicates that China has already shifted from state monopoly to a mixed economy of education.

Context, Rationale and Characteristics of Private Higher Education in China

In China, prior to reform, the state played a dominant role not only in decision-making but also in the implementation of educational policies through the Ministry of Education, its executive arm. The Ministry of Education, regardless of regional differences and variations, tried to manipulate all major decisions and work out every detail for local institutions for a variety of issues including the design of curricula and syllabuses, deciding on textbooks, academic calendars, student admissions4, graduate job assignments, budgets, salary scales, and personnel affairs. The adoption of a centralization policy in the higher educational sphere gave the central government a relatively tight control over financing, provision and management of education. It was believed that, since China had started to build a socialist central planning economy, the higher education system should thus be brought under the direct leadership of the government so as to best serve the centrally planned manpower needs. Living in this policy context, Chinese citizens were accustomed to free public education. However, over the years, the excessive government control resulted in deficiencies in the system. In fact, Chinese higher education drew upwards of 90% of its budget from the central government, while catering to less than 2% of the appropriate age group (Zha, 1994).

Openly realizing that the state alone cannot provide sufficient educational services to satisfy heightened social aspirations and parental expectations, the State has deliberately devolved responsibilities to other non-state sectors to engage themselves in educational endeavours. In return, it has continuously reduced its subsidies, provision and regulation by emphasizing the importance of individual responsibilities, and by encouraging local communities and social organizations to create additional educational opportunities. Reshuffling the monopolistic role of the state in educational provision, the reform in educational structure that began in the mid-1980s has manifested a convergence towards a mix of private and public provision (Cheng, 1995; Hayhoe, 1996; Mok, 1996). Coinciding with the theory of 'multiple channels' in financing, the state describes the use

of a mixed economy of welfare as a 'multiple-channel' and 'multi-method' approach to the provision of educational services during the 'primary state of socialism', indicating a diffusion of responsibility from the state to society (Cheng, 1990; Mok, 1996).

After the endorsement of a socialist market economy in 1992 in the 14th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, self-financing and fee-charging principles have been widely adopted and finally legitimized in China's higher education system. From 1997 onwards, all students enrolling in higher education have to pay tuition fees. The central government therefore encourages a more direct relationship between those who provide educational services and those who pay for them. In fact, it is now difficult to draw a very clear public-private distinction in China's education sector. This is particularly evident when one considers that public schools are becoming more 'private' as ideas/principles and practices that are popular in the market/private sector are also employed by public schools. In this regard, for a robust discussion on development of private higher education in China, it would be necessary to include not only institutions that call themselves private but also public institutions that in many ways appear increasingly to be private, thus making the distinction between private and public problematic.

Put in a global policy context, the growth of private higher education, coupled with the adoption of market principles and strategies in recovering education costs, suggests that China is moving towards a similar global process of privatization. The process of privatization involves a fundamental restructuring of state activities in relation to the extent of social intervention. Recent decades have brought considerable questioning of the state's ability to continue monopolizing the provision of public services. Realizing the importance of productivity, performance, and control, governments worldwide have begun to engage themselves in transforming the way that services are managed (Flynn, 1997). With emphasis given to effectiveness, efficiency and economy in the delivery of public services, privatization is introduced into the administration of the public services (Mok, 1997; Walsh, 1995).

In essence, privatization is concerned with the transfer of responsibility originally shouldered by the state to the non-state sector, or with a change in the nature of government involvement (Foster, 1992; Johnson, 1990). Being one of the major public responsibilities, education is unquestionably affected by the strong tide of privatization, which suggests that a less state directed approach is adopted, and which advocates market ideologies and practices in running education services. In short, the prominence of privatization in the educational sphere seems to be a feature of the globalization agenda.

In a very recent study, Altbach (1999) maintains that the prominence of private higher education is linked to the ideology of privatization that is so influential at present, and with the trend worldwide to cut public spending.

> Private higher education is one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing segments of postsecondary education at the turn of the 21st century. A combination of unprecedented demand for access to higher education and the inability or unwillingness of governments to provide the necessary support has brought private higher education to the forefront. Private institutions… are expanding in scope and number, and are increasingly important in parts of the world that have relied on the public sector. A related phenomenon is the "privatization" of public

institutions in some countries. With tuition and other charges rising, public and private institutions look more and more similar. (p. 1)

The foregoing discussion seems to suggest that China's recent growth of private higher education resembles the worldwide experience of privatization. However, closer scrutiny indicates that China's experience is certainly different from that in much of the world because the strategies adopted by Chinese leadership are highly 'instrumental' in terms of creating more educational opportunities in response to emerging market needs. The aim is to improve administrative efficiency and effectiveness as well as to resolve the financial difficulties of the State-provided free education, rather than to make a fundamental shift of value orientation towards 'public choice' ideas. This point could be revealed by the condemnation of the 'private element' in the educational sector by not allowing 'profit-making' arrangements (see Article 6 of Chapter I in the Regulations on the Social Forces Running Educational Establishments). Also, it is clearly stated by Article 5 of Chapter I in the same document that the "state restricts social forces from running higher education institutions". Some scholars argue that it is because the Chinese leadership has not committed itself ideologically to the private sector (Mok, 2000).

Furthermore, non-state higher education institutions, acknowledging the immense difficulties in competing with their state-funded counterparts, deliberately differentiate themselves from state-funded institutions by specializing in practical and 'market-driven' courses. Put in another way, higher vocational education is almost the universal choice among private institutions. In addition to State-stipulated areas of study, the curricula of these private institutions commonly emphasizes foreign languages and computer training as well as other practical subjects5. Only a handful of the private institutions are officially recognized by the government, and a high concentration of their students have failed elsewhere to gain access to state higher education institutions. It seems, then, that China's private higher education institutions cluster at the bottom of the national system. It seems that the resurgence of private higher education in China has not created the first or second type of privatization in higher education as outlined by Geiger (1987). Rather, it is Gieger's third type of private higher education that is emerging in China. Such a development suggests that the private higher education plays a very limited role, characterized by the term 'peripheral private sector'.

The Effects on Diversity and Equity

Discussions on private higher education inevitably invite discussions about diversity and equity. For private higher education, the issue of diversity is significant. "To make a difference, for better or worse, private higher education must bring something important not otherwise found in the higher education system" (Levy, 1999, p. 15). However, there is a paradox in worldwide privatization: for all the ideological push associated with privatization and linked to private-public distinctiveness, much of the practical drive is merely to reduce state costs and responsibilities instead of promoting diversity. Typically, a feasible way to do so is simply to promote growth that is rarely special or distinctive in terms of academics or innovation. Unfortunately, this is what is happening in China.

When the concept of isomorphism is applied to this analysis, it is fair to say that in China, where government coercive forces for conformity are traditionally significant,

coercive isomorphism historically has helped to abolish private higher education, and now serves to delay creation of a distinctive private higher education. With close scrutiny, it is not difficult to identify coercive and non-coercive isomorphism, in particular mimetic isomorphism, in China's context.The State and the public higher education sector are the chief coercive forces. In China, the public higher education sector remains much larger than the private sector in terms of enrollment size, and greater still in financial terms. Given its predominance in expensive fields of study, graduate programs and research, the private sector is thus forced to be isomorphic to the public sector, and very narrow in scope and purpose. In a very conforming society like China, many private higher education institutions are just duplicates of the public institutions in terms of curriculum, teaching and learning arrangement, and evaluation and assessment. Under severe financial constraints, they are very bound to traditional delivery methods. Furthermore, private institutions survive only when they can claim some success in preparing these students for public examinations, by which these students are assessed in the same arena as those in public institutions.

The notion of normative copying through professionalism is also pertinent to this analysis, as most professors and sometimes administrators in China's private higher education institutions are drawn from the public pool. As private higher education is new and rapidly developing in China, it depends on graduates of public programs, often socialized to certain norms. Most of China's private institutions rely heavily on retired professors from public universities as their teaching staff. In fact, what most characterizes the private sector's teaching staff is a low level of professionalism, but this lack of professional or normative isomorphism leaves room for mimetic isomorphism. The very weakness of professional forces can add to the force of mimetic isomorphism that is driven by the need to copy in situations where an institution is otherwise ill equipped to set its own course or to gain legitimacy through innovation. Thus, there is a tendency for many private higher education institutions to refer to themselves as secondary colleges affiliated to a public university. This assists them in gaining legitimacy and in building their reputations. Besides, it is common for new private institutions to copy their peers to gain a footing and legitimacy.

As noted earlier, the goal of educational reform in China is to improve efficiency, not to realize egalitarian ideology. Hence, the move towards privatization favors only the elite and wealthy families who are privileged to start with because of their social status and financial capability. Letting market forces fully determine who studies at private higher education institutions ensures that only students who can afford the tuition will be able to attend. As a result, private institutions contribute little to social mobility or to providing educational opportunities for bright but underprivileged students. As earnings are associated with learning in a knowledge-based society, and because higher education is still the only means for a person to legally change from rural to urban citizenship, the emergence of private higher education is likely to perpetuate social disparity.

In China, such a move to privilege the privileged doesn't seem to attract much opposition. There could be two explanations. The first, and perhaps the most essential, is that meritocracy prevails in the society of China. In such a culture of meritocracy, the concept of equity goes only as far as students of the poor families are not deprived of opportunities for competition. The second explanation is that a society like China is basically a planned and conforming one. Despite the move towards more liberal policies

in recent years, a collective tradition still underlies the political ideology, and the public is used to the governmental arrangement.

Conclusion

The last decade has witnessed the resurgence and growth of private higher education in China. One major purpose of the growth of China's private higher education is to supplement inadequate public sector and state finance in higher education. After all, China still has only a small percentage of the pertinent age cohort in higher education – less than 8% – a percentage deemed too low for China's economic aspirations. At the same time, China has a market-oriented goal of escaping the constraints that revolve around state finance. China thus epitomizes the international tendency to look to private higher education as a way to meet otherwise contradictory enrollment and financial objectives. With this highly 'instrumental' approach, China's private higher education appears to have a negative effect on diversity and equity in the system. A flourishing market economy and the policy of decentralization adopted by the Chinese government have supported the emergence and growth of a private higher education system in China that fosters unquestionable disparities and contradictions that suggest a need for further research.

Endnotes

1. These figures are provided to contrast with the 1,942 public institutions of higher education in China in 1999, with an enrolment of 7.42 million students (including 233,600 postgraduates). While the private education sector might approach the public sector in terms of the number of institutions, it remains far behind with respect to enrolment size. (Source: China Education and Research Network).

2. Literally, in Chinese, minban has a strong collective implication, while private (sili) points to individual assets. It is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly the difference between private and minban educational institutions. Actually, according to the "Regulations on the Social Forces Running Educational Establishments", both minban and private institutions are not allowed to make profits, but people simply don't believe the private institutions would do so.

3. Among the 37 officially recognized private institutions, only one – Huanghe Science & Technology University – awards baccalaureate degrees, while the others provide only two- or three-year programs, leading to credentials similar to the diplomas that are awarded by the community colleges in USA or the colleges of applied arts and technology in Canada. The 37 institutions have an enrolment of only 46,000 students, while the vast majority of students in private institutions have to take nationally uniformed examinations at end of their studies for certificates of higher education qualifications (Sources: Qu, 2000; Yang, 2000; Zhang and Liu, 2000).

4. In the pre-reform era, the Ministry of Education, the official body responsible for making and implementing educational policy, tightly controlled student enrolment, under which system students were allocated to different universities without their consent, let alone taking account of students' interest and choice. With reform, university authorities

generally have more autonomy and enjoy flexibility in recruiting students, especially after the adoption of decentralization policy in the educational realm since the mid-1980s.
5. Their programs concentrate in such areas as English, Japanese, computer applications, business administration, accountancy, law, finance, marketing, designing, journalism, nursing, international trade, traditional medicine, clerk training, and archives management. For more details, please see Zhongguo minban jiaoyu wang [China private education network], available online http://www.cvedu.com.cn

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