

The Evolution and Mainstreaming of Private Higher Education in China

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Abstract

This article provides a critical and comprehensive examination of the mainstreaming of private higher education (PrHE) in China. It addresses three core questions: the historical and regulatory factors that have driven the sector's growth; the structural challenges that private higher education institutions (PrHEIs) face in achieving academic legitimacy and sustainability; and how these institutions compare to their public counterparts in terms of quality, recognition, and research performance. Drawing on scholarly literature, policy analysis, and sector data, the study traces the evolution of PrHE within the broader context of China's educational reforms. It evaluates systemic issues such as quality assurance, governance, funding constraints, and limited research capacity, and explores pathways to enhance institutional quality and global competitiveness. In doing so, the article contributes to the literature by mapping top-performing PrHEIs based on academic reputation and student enrolments, providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and international stakeholders. By synthesising recent developments and highlighting areas for strategic reform, the study positions PrHE as a critical, though still maturing, component of China's higher education system.

Keywords: Evolution, Institutional Legitimacy, Educational Reform, Quality Assurance, Challenges, Private Higher Education, China

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1. Introduction

The higher education (HE) sector in China has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past few decades, paralleling the country's rapid economic and social development. While public higher education (PuHE) has traditionally formed the backbone of this system, private higher education (PrHE) has emerged as a crucial supplementary force, significantly expanding access to tertiary education and diversifying the educational landscape. This article aims to provide a detailed overview of PrHE in China, tracing its development, analysing its current status and discussing the key issues surrounding its quality and future trajectory.

The re-emergence of PrHE in China in the late 1970s marked a pivotal shift in the country's approach to HE provision (Mok, 1997). Following a period where private higher education institutions (PrHEIs) were largely prohibited, the post-Mao era witnessed a gradual opening, allowing for the establishment of non-state funded institutions. This development was driven by the increasing demand for tertiary education, which the public sector alone could not accommodate, thereby encouraging the expansion of private higher education institutions (Altbach, 2016; Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021).

The "walking on two legs" principle, enshrined in the 1982 Constitution, which advocated for the simultaneous development of both public and private education, provided a crucial legal foundation for the growth of PrHE (Chu, 2022; Jones & Wu, 2021; Landsberg, 201; Saich, 2017).

Over the subsequent decades, PrHE in China has experienced remarkable growth (Mok, 2009). By the late 1990s, the number of PrHEIs had surpassed that of public ones, and enrolment in these institutions reached over a million students, positioning China as having one of the largest PrHE sectors globally (Chen & Feng, 2000; Lei, 2012).

Currently, China, home to the world's largest higher education system, boasts the third-largest private sector, enrolling over five million students across more than 700 PrHEIs (Gong, 2025).

These institutions play a vital role in offering educational opportunities to students who may not have gained admission to the highly competitive PuHEIs (Lukoko, 2020). However, the rapid expansion of PrHE has also brought forth various challenges, particularly concerning the quality of education, the social perception of private degrees, and the regulatory oversight of these institutions (Prakash, 2018).

PrHE has undergone remarkable growth in China over the past few decades, emerging as a vital complement to the public sector in expanding access to tertiary education. While its quantitative expansion is evident, there remain significant gaps in understanding the historical, regulatory, and structural factors that have shaped its development and continue to affect its quality, legitimacy, and global standing. This study seeks to explore the underlying drivers of PrHE's evolution, assess the key challenges Chinese PrHEIs face, and examine how these institutions align with or diverge from global standards in higher education. In doing so, the research also aims to identify institutional exemplars and offer evidence-based insights for enhancing the strategic positioning and long-term sustainability

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of the sector. The following research questions guide this inquiry into the evolution and mainstreaming of PrHE in China:

1.1 Research Questions

1. What are the historical and regulatory drivers of private higher education growth in China?
2. What structural challenges do PrHEIs face in achieving academic legitimacy and institutional sustainability?
3. How do PrHEIs in China compare in terms of quality, recognition, and research performance?

1.2 Research Objectives

To address the research questions, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To trace the historical development of PrHE in China in context of educational reforms.
- To critically evaluate the challenges facing Chinese PrHEIs.
- To identify pathways for enhancing institutional quality and international competitiveness.
- To map leading private institutions based on academic reputation and student enrolments.

2. Evolution of Private Higher Education in China

The history of private education in China dates back centuries, with private schools playing a significant role in the country's educational landscape before the mid-20th century (Liu, 2020).

Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, private higher education institutions (PHEIs) played a prominent role in the national education landscape, accounting for approximately 39% of total higher education enrolments (Mok, 2009). Renowned institutions such as Nankai University and Xiamen University exemplified the academic vitality of the private sector during this period (Welch, 2021). However, these institutions were either restructured or brought under state control well before 1949—Xiamen University was nationalised in 1936, and Nankai underwent significant reform following wartime destruction in 1946 (Hayhoe, 2016; Wang et al, 2018).

Table 01, titled "Development stages of PrHE with changing social background," thoroughly outlines the evolution of PrHE in China from 1949 to the present, contextualising its growth within significant societal and economic shifts. The table delineates four distinct periods, each characterised by specific events and prevailing social backdrops, illustrating how policy and broader national development have shaped the PrHE landscape.

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The initial period, **1949–1970s**, is identified as one of "**Stagnation**." During this era, a centralised planned economy dictated the educational sphere, leading to the conversion of all PrHEIs into PuHEIs under the "Adjustment of College and Faculty" policy (Chan, 1992 and Liu, 2018).

"All foreign universities or those financed by foreign religious bodies and governments in China were abolished" in the early 1950s (Huang 2003, p. 232). By 1956, all PrHEIs had been transformed into PuHEIs (Zha 2006, Liu 2018). This reflects a state-controlled approach to education where private provision was largely suppressed, a common characteristic of centrally planned economies aiming for uniform control over resources and institutions (Bray, 2003; Welch, 2021).

Table 01: Development stages of PrHE with changing social background

Years	Development Stage	Events	Social background
1949–1970s	Stagnation	All private universities converted into public universities given the policy of Adjustment of College and Faculty	A centralised planned economy
1980s	Exploration	Examination of Self-study in Higher Education	Reform and Opening-Up Policy transformed China from a centralised planned economy into a market-oriented dynamic economy
1990–1998	Development	Diploma Examination in Higher Education	To further accelerate the reform
1998–present	Rapid Expansion	Expansion of Higher Education	The limited finance of the government on the HE

Source: Liu (2020)

The **1980s** marked a phase of "**Exploration**," coinciding with China's "Reform and Opening-Up Policy." (Chen, 2023; Ji, 2006). The 1980s saw the gradual re-emergence of PrHEIs, driven by the government's recognition that relying solely on public investment was insufficient to meet the growing demand for tertiary education (Ma, 2021).

The "walking on two legs" policy further legitimised the development of PrHE as a supplementary component of the national education system (Landsberg, 2011; Zha, 2012). This transformative policy shifted the nation from a centralised planned economy towards a more market-oriented and dynamic economic system. Consequently, the education sector began to grow. In 1982, the first Minban (PrHEI) was established: Zhonghu Zhehui University in Beijing. At that time, China's gross enrolment ratio stood at a mere 1.55 percent (Liu, 2018). The high demand for higher education, coupled with a limited public sector supply, spurred rapid growth in this sector. By 1986, over 100 PrHEIs had emerged (Liu, 2018). By 1999, the number of PrHEIs across the country reached 1,277, enrolling 1.23 million students (Zha 2006: 56). However, only one institution, Huanghe Science and Technology University, was authorised to grant Bachelor's degrees, while 37 could issue their own diplomas, and the remaining institutions were limited to awarding certificates. This period reflects the nascent

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re-emergence of private initiatives as the state gradually relaxed its tight control over various sectors, including education (Mok, 2007).

The 1990s marked a significant reorganisation of private higher education (PrHE) in China, characterised by the rapid establishment of new institutions to accommodate the growing number of high school graduates seeking tertiary education (Wan, 2006). Between 1990 and 1998, PrHE entered a developmental phase (Cao, 2000), during which initiatives such as the "Diploma Examination in Higher Education" were introduced, signalling a move toward more structured recognition of non-state educational provision (Gu et al., 2018). This evolution was closely linked to national efforts to deepen the economic reforms of the previous decade, reflecting the government's ongoing commitment to liberalisation and its indirect role in promoting educational diversification (Mok, 2009). This period was characterised by diverse forms of private provision, including independently run colleges and those affiliated with public universities but operating with private financing and management (Liu, 2020).

Finally, **1998-present** is characterised by "**Rapid Expansion**." This era witnessed a significant "Expansion of Higher Education" as the government's "limited finance on the HE" sector necessitated alternative funding and provision models (Wang, 2000; Wu, 2008). By 2008, the private sector had become an integral component of Chinese higher education (Cai & Yan, 2011).

This period corresponds with the massification of higher education in China, where private institutions played an increasingly vital role in accommodating a rapidly growing student population that could not be fully absorbed by public universities due often to resource constraints (Hayhoe et al. 2012).

The landmark Private Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China, enacted in 2002, provided a clearer legal framework for PrHE, classifying it as a public welfare undertaking and ensuring its equal legal status with public education (Liu, 2023). This law paved the way for more standardised development and increased governmental attention to the sector.

In the 21st century, PrHE in China has continued to evolve, marked by increasing diversification in the types and levels of programmes offered. While initially focused on vocational and technical training, many private institutions now offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees across a wider range of disciplines (Stewart, 2015). The government has also begun to implement classified management, distinguishing between non-profit and for-profit private colleges, reflecting a more nuanced approach to regulation and funding (Liu et al, 2021).

The table 01 effectively illustrates the symbiotic relationship between socio-economic transformation and the policy shifts that have alternately constrained, enabled, and ultimately fostered the substantial growth of private higher education in China.

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3. The Mainstreaming of Private Higher Education in China

The rapid expansion of PrHEIs in China over recent decades is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by a complex interplay of socioeconomic shifts, market demands, and strategic government policies (Yang & Prasansaph, 2024). This burgeoning sector has become an indispensable component of China's higher education landscape, significantly contributing to the nation's capacity to educate its vast population. These institutions are financially independent of the government, primarily funded through tuition fees and private foundations, although they remain subject to governmental regulations (Wang, 2010).

3.1 Key Characteristics:

- **Diverse Institutional Types:** PrHE in China includes a range of institutions, from independent private colleges (*minban daxue*), meaning "people-run universities," represent the more traditional form of private higher education in China (Hu & Ghasemy, 2024; Wang & Mok, 2017). The term "minban" is deliberately employed by the Chinese government to emphasise their non-state sponsorship while avoiding the politically charged connotation of "privatisation" within a socialist context (Hu & Ghasemy, 2024). While independent colleges (*duli xueyuan*) represent a distinct category within China's private higher education landscape, characterised by their unique historical development and structural relationship with public universities (Yu & Ertl, 2010).
- **Autonomy in Management:** While operating under the purview of government regulation, *minban daxue* (independent private colleges) generally exhibit greater operational autonomy compared to their public counterparts. This extends to crucial areas such as internal management, curriculum development, and faculty recruitment (Lin et al., 2005). This enhanced flexibility is a defining characteristic, enabling these institutions to be significantly more responsive to dynamic market demands and the evolving needs of their student body. For instance, they can more quickly introduce new programs aligned with industry trends or adapt teaching methodologies to enhance student employability, a nimbleness often less apparent in the more rigidly structured public university system.
- **Regional Distribution:** The geographical distribution of PrHEIs in China reveals a notable concentration in major urban centres, particularly within the economically prosperous provinces of Eastern China (Chen & Wu, 2011). This clustering in regions like Shanghai, Beijing, Shandong, and Guangdong is not coincidental; it reflects a strategic alignment with areas of high population density, robust economic development, and consequently, greater demand for higher education (Gaofeng et al, 2021). These provinces offer richer resources, more developed infrastructure, and larger student pools, making them attractive locations for the establishment and operation of PrHEIs (Borsi et al, 2022). Conversely, this concentration also highlights a potential disparity in educational access and provision between the more developed

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eastern seaboard and the less economically advanced central and western regions of China (Han et al, 2023), a challenge that ongoing policy efforts may seek to address.

- **Funding Model:** Unlike public universities that receive substantial government funding, private institutions rely heavily on tuition fees, which are generally higher than those at public universities (Cai & Yan, 2011). This funding model can influence their operational efficiency and resource allocation (Rumbley et al, 2023). While the HE sector has adopted certain market criteria such as profitability and affordability, alongside principles like fee-charging and self-supporting operations, these markets fundamentally differ from conventional commercial or purely private markets (Dill, 2007; Mok, 1997).
- **Admission Requirements:** Admission to PrHEIs in China often presents a less competitive pathway compared to their public counterparts. This is frequently evidenced by the fact that some private universities do not mandate the rigorous National University Entrance Examination (Gaokao) as a primary admissions criterion (Li & Xue, 2022). Instead, PrHEIs typically establish their own distinct admission criteria. These may include, but are not limited to, a focus on applicants' minimum high school academic grades and demonstrated language proficiency, particularly for programmes taught in foreign languages or those with an international focus. Furthermore, a nuanced aspect of private university admissions is their capacity to cater to specific market segments, including the elite. While many PrHEIs serve a broad demographic seeking access to higher education, a subset of PrHEIs are strategically positioned to meet the demands of affluent families. These institutions may offer specialised curricula, enhanced facilities, or international partnerships that appeal to students from privileged backgrounds, thereby creating a distinct admissions track that considers factors beyond standardised test scores (Hartley & Jarvis, 2022). This dual approach highlights the diverse roles PrHEIs play within the broader Chinese higher education landscape, ranging from expanding mass access to providing niche, high-value educational experiences.
- **Programmatic Focus:** Initially, the strategic focus of many PrHEIs in China leaned heavily towards vocational and applied programmes, a pragmatic response to market demands for skilled labour and a means to differentiate themselves from traditional public universities (Gong, 2025). However, a discernible trend has emerged, indicating a deliberate expansion into a broader spectrum of academic disciplines, encompassing both undergraduate and increasingly, postgraduate levels. This shift reflects PrHEIs' evolving ambitions to enhance their academic prestige, attract a wider pool of students, and align more closely with national imperatives for a diversified, high-quality higher education system that includes advanced research capabilities (Hu & Ghasemy, 2024; Liu et al., 2022). This expansion signifies not only a maturation of the private sector but also its growing integration into the comprehensive academic landscape of Chinese higher education.
- **Student Satisfaction Focus:** Student satisfaction is a critical indicator of institutional quality and success, particularly within the context of private higher

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education, where tuition fees often necessitate a strong value proposition for students (Qureshi, & Khawaja, 2021). In this sector, student satisfaction is a multifaceted construct, encompassing perceptions of teaching quality, learning resources, support services, and overall university experience (Qureshi, Khawaja, & Zia, 2021). For private institutions, understanding and addressing these dimensions are paramount for student retention, positive word-of-mouth, and sustained enrolments.

- **Contributions to Higher Education:** PrHEIs have demonstrably reshaped China's tertiary landscape, primarily through their substantial contributions to expanded access. They have been pivotal in the massification of higher education (Xu, 2021), stepping in as crucial providers when public universities reached their enrolments limits. This has enabled millions of students who might otherwise have been excluded to pursue higher education (Kwiek, 2016; Levy, 2011), significantly easing pressure on the public system and driving a notable increase in the nation's Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) (Wang & Liu, 2011). By accommodating a broader spectrum of students, PrHEIs have effectively democratised access to higher education, aligning with national development goals. Beyond access, PrHEIs have fostered diversification of offerings, often demonstrating greater flexibility in responding to market demands by introducing programs in emerging fields and adopting innovative teaching methodologies (Dineen & Niu, 2008). Furthermore, some private universities have been instrumental in internationalisation efforts, leading transnational higher education initiatives, forging collaborations with foreign institutions for joint

4. Challenges Facing Private Higher Education in China

Despite its significant contributions, PrHE in China faces several persistent challenges that need to be addressed to enhance its quality and reputation.

4.1 Quality Concerns

Despite their significant expansion and contributions to access, PrHEIs in China frequently grapple with persistent concerns regarding their academic quality and institutional reputation. This scepticism primarily stems from several interconnected factors. Firstly, there are often reservations about the qualifications and academic standing of faculty, which can be less robust compared to their counterparts in well-established public universities (Li & Morgan, 2013; Mok, 2016). This situation is often exacerbated by a prevailing vocational emphasis and market-driven curricula within the sector. While such an orientation makes PrHEIs highly responsive to employment trends and immediate skill demands, it can, at times, lead to a perceived lack of theoretical depth and scholarly rigour necessary for a comprehensive university education (Yang, 2020). Nevertheless, PrHEIs are actively engaged in self-improvement. Many are investing in faculty development programs, undertaking curriculum reforms, and adopting modern pedagogical approaches to elevate their educational outcomes. However, the critical challenge of attracting and retaining top-tier faculty persists due to intense competition

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with the public sector, which often offers better job security, research funding, and benefits (Gong, 2025). To mitigate this, private institutions are exploring innovative strategies, such as offering competitive salaries, fostering a more flexible academic environment, and building stronger industry linkages to enhance faculty engagement and research opportunities.

4.2 Social Recognition

Societal attitudes towards PrHE in China have evolved considerably. Initially stigmatised due to concerns about academic quality, commercialisation, and limited career prospects, many private universities have improved their public image through targeted marketing, alumni success stories, and job placement initiatives (Altbach, 2016).

Degrees awarded by private higher education institutions (PrHEIs) in China often contend with lower social and employer recognition, a significant challenge for their graduates in a competitive job market. Graduates from public universities dominate high-status civil service and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) jobs, while PrHEI credentials are seen as less prestigious (Zha, 2009). Social perceptions are reinforced by unequal access to government scholarships, research grants, and alumni networks (Levy, 2009).

4.3 Funding Constraints

Most Chinese PrHEIs face significant financial constraints due to their exclusion from state budgets and an overwhelming reliance on tuition fees as their primary income source. This funding model severely restricts their capacity for crucial investments in academic infrastructure, such as the laboratories, libraries and research facilities. Furthermore, this over-dependence on fee-based income disincentivises long-term strategic planning and exacerbates financial risk, particularly during periods of declining student enrolment (Altbach, 2005; Marginson, 2011). In response to these challenges, central authorities actively encourage higher education providers to diversify their financial portfolios by exploring new revenue streams (Šestanovic et al., 2022). This push includes seeking investments from private companies, engaging in contract research, pursuing various commercial activities, soliciting donations, and securing loans, among other similar initiatives (Šestanovic, et al., 2023). This broader strategy aims to augment institutional funding beyond traditional state allocations and foster greater financial resilience within the sector.

4.4 Regulatory Environment

The mainstreaming of PrHE in China is largely attributable to a progressive evolution of government policy. Initially, private higher education was merely tolerated, later shifting to cautious encouragement as public institutions proved insufficient to meet the burgeoning demand for higher education (Levy, 2006; Zusman, 2005). A pivotal moment arrived with the promulgation of the "Law on the Promotion of Private Education" in

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2002, subsequently revised in 2016, which provided a more transparent legal framework for PrHE, acknowledging its legitimate role and granting greater operational autonomy while asserting state oversight and regulation (Ding et al., 2025). Despite these improvements in the legal framework, the regulatory environment for PrHE remains complex, often involving greater scrutiny and less direct support for private institutions compared to their public counterparts.

4.5 Competition from Public Universities

The competitive landscape for PrHEIs in China is further intensified by the direct engagement of public institutions in market-driven higher education provision. This phenomenon involves public universities establishing affiliated colleges and non-governmental branches, often referred to as "quasi-private" entities (Mok, 2016). These "quasi-private" entities benefit from public branding while operating under market principles, effectively crowding out independent HEIs (Li & Morgan, 2013). This dynamic underscores the complex and evolving nature of competition within China's higher education market.

4.6 Limited Research capacity

The challenge of establishing a strong academic reputation in some Chinese PrHEIs is significantly compounded by their limited infrastructure, which often restricts the provision of comprehensive learning environments and access to vital resources for advanced study and research. This is further exacerbated by the perceived absence of rigorous peer-reviewed research output from many PrHEIs, leading to the notion that they primarily prioritise teaching over knowledge creation, thus impacting their overall academic standing (Mok, 2016). This teaching-intensive orientation, alongside high staff turnover and restricted access to prestigious national research schemes such as the "Double First-Class Initiative," makes it difficult for most PrHEIs in China to cultivate a robust research culture (Altbach, 2016; Teixeira & Amaral, 2007). Moreover, factors such as heavy faculty workloads and the limited availability of doctoral programmes further undermine their potential for making substantial research contributions (Yang, 2020).

5. Enhancing Quality Standards

To address the challenges and enhance the quality of PrHE in China, various efforts are underway, aiming to align these institutions with the standards expected of stakeholders. These efforts span several key areas:

5.1 Quality Assurance Mechanisms

The Chinese government and accreditation bodies are increasingly focusing on quality assurance in PrHE. This includes the development of evaluation frameworks, the

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implementation of accreditation processes, and the promotion of continuous improvement within institutions (Cao & Li, 2014).

5.2 Faculty Development:

Recognising the importance of qualified faculty, there are initiatives to support the recruitment, training, and professional development of teachers in private higher education institutions. This includes encouraging advanced degree attainment, providing opportunities for research, and promoting pedagogical innovation (Chen, 2003).

5.3 Research Enhancement

While historically research has been less of a focus in many private institutions, there is a growing recognition of its importance in enhancing academic quality and reputation. Efforts are being made to build research capacity through funding for research projects, the establishment of research centres, and collaborations with other institutions (Wang & Liu, 2014).

5.4 Curriculum Innovation

Many private universities are focusing on developing market-relevant curricula that meet the needs of the economy and society. This includes incorporating practical training, promoting interdisciplinary approaches, and leveraging technology to enhance teaching and learning (Zhuang, & Liu, 2022).

5.6 International Collaboration

Engagement in international collaborations, such as joint programmes with foreign universities and the exchange of students and faculty, can contribute to raising the academic standards and global visibility of PrHE institutions in China (Ennew & Fujia, 2009).

6. Leading PrHEIs in China

Mapping leading PrHEIs based on their academic reputation and student enrolments offers valuable insights into the emergent stratification and qualitative evolution within China's private higher education sector. As illustrated in Table 02, this analytical exercise extends beyond mere enrolment figures to encompass nuanced indicators, such as recognition and programmatic diversity. For instance, institutions like Xi'an Eurasia University are recognised for their strength in business education and innovative teaching models. At the same time, Wuchang Shouyi University is noted for its historical significance and broad disciplinary range, both of which contribute to its academic standing. Similarly, Beijing City University and Zhejiang Wanli University demonstrate robust academic reputations through strong links with public sectors, foreign partners and international collaborations. Furthermore, institutions like Shanghai Jian Qiao University and Hangzhou Dianzi University

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Information showcase high graduate employability and specialised curricula in areas like digital literacy and AI, reflecting their responsiveness to market demands and contributing to their perceived quality. This multi-faceted approach to mapping helps delineate the leading PrHEIs that are not only significant in scale but also impactful in their academic focus, industry alignment, and commitment to quality.

Table 02: Top ten PrHEIs

Rank	Institution Name	Province	Notable Features
1	Xi'an Eurasia University	Shaanxi	Strong in business education; modern teaching model
2	Wuchang Shouyi University	Hubei	Among oldest PrHEIs; wide disciplinary range
3	Beijing City University	Beijing	Strong links with public sector and foreign partners
4	Shanghai Jian Qiao University	Shanghai	High graduate employability; career-focused curriculum
5	Hangzhou Dianzi University Information	Zhejiang	Emphasis on digital literacy and AI curriculum
6	Yang-En University	Fujian	Industry-backed; early adopter of private HE reforms
7	Jiangxi University of Technology	Jiangxi	High enrolment; vocational training leader
8	Zhejiang Wanli University	Zhejiang	International partnerships and urban focus
9	Guangdong Baiyun University	Guangdong	Multidisciplinary growth with R&D centres
10	Nanfang College, Sun Yat-sen University	Guangdong	Transitioning to full independence

Note: Rankings are illustrative, based on enrolment size, recognition, and programme diversity.

6. Discussion

The evolution of PrHE in China represents a significant transformation within a rapidly modernising system. Its re-emergence in the post-Mao era was driven by state recognition of the need to expand capacity and diversify educational pathways beyond the constraints of the public sector. This policy shift, formalised through initiatives such as the “walking on two legs” approach, provided the ideological and regulatory foundations for the legitimisation of non-state actors in higher education (Mok, 1997). Since the 1990s, the sector has expanded remarkably, with over 700 private institutions serving millions of students, especially those excluded from elite public universities due to competitive entrance thresholds (Levy, 2006; Yang, 2020). The academic profile of these institutions has also evolved, moving from purely vocational and remedial programmes to broader undergraduate and even postgraduate offerings in business, IT, and design (Mok & Lo, 2007; Altbach, 2005).

Despite these achievements, private HEIs in China continue to grapple with structural challenges. One persistent issue is the enduring perception of inferior academic quality and weaker institutional legitimacy when compared with public universities. These perceptions

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have been shaped by differences in faculty qualifications, research output, and graduate employability outcomes (Zha, 2009; Mok & Jiang, 2018). The sector's predominant reliance on tuition-based funding limits its ability to invest in high-quality infrastructure and research capabilities, reinforcing these disparities (Li & Morgan, 2013; Altbach, 2016). While the enactment of the Private Education Promotion Law (2002) established a clearer legal framework, PrHEIs still operate under heightened regulatory scrutiny and with less access to state subsidies and research grants (Mok, 2009; Yang, 2020).

To address these systemic constraints, significant reforms have been initiated. Increasing attention to quality assurance through accreditation and third-party evaluations has improved institutional accountability and academic standards (Mok, 2022). Faculty development programmes, greater autonomy in curriculum design, and strategic international partnerships have begun to elevate both the teaching and research profiles of leading private institutions (Mok & Han, 2016; Marginson, 2011). Additionally, growing attention to labour market alignment and entrepreneurial skill development reflects an awareness of the need to produce graduates ready for globalised, knowledge-based economies. These initiatives suggest a sector striving to transition from access-oriented expansion to one more firmly rooted in academic excellence and societal value (Mok & Marginson, 2021).

7. Conclusion

PrHE in China has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades, evolving from a marginal and supplementary alternative into a dynamic and increasingly integral component of the national higher education system. It has played a critical role in expanding access, diversifying programme offerings, and responding to the growing demand for tertiary education (Mok, 1997; Yang, 2017).

However, PrHEIs continue to face persistent challenges related to academic quality, social legitimacy, and sustainability of funding models (Levy, 2009; Li and Morgan, 2013). These challenges are further compounded by uneven regulatory oversight and limited research capacity, which constrain their ability to compete with public institutions in both reputation and academic output (Zha, 2009; Mok, 2016).

To address these challenges, there has been a growing emphasis on improving institutional governance, enhancing faculty development, fostering internationalisation, and aligning curricula with global standards and labour market demands (Marginson, 2011; Mok, 2016). Strengthening research capacity and embedding quality assurance mechanisms are particularly essential for PrHEIs seeking greater academic legitimacy and global recognition (Altbach, 2016).

Looking ahead, the trajectory of PrHE in China depends on a sustained commitment to quality enhancement, strategic investment in academic infrastructure, and greater societal acceptance of PrHEIs. With stronger regulatory frameworks and collaborative partnerships, both domestic and international, China's private universities are well-positioned to make

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meaningful contributions to the country's broader goals of educational excellence, innovation, and global engagement (Marginson, 2011; Yang, 2020).

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Shahid Hafeez is a distinguished figure in the educational consultancy field, serving as the Chairman of ASFE Consultants UK since 2010. With over a decade of dedicated experience, Shahid has been instrumental in shaping the educational trajectories of countless students, providing expert guidance and strategic insights to navigate the complexities of higher education.

Under his leadership, ASFE Consultants UK has emerged as a trusted name in the educational consultancy sector. The firm specialises in offering comprehensive consulting services to students aspiring to pursue higher education domestically and internationally. Shahid's profound understanding of the educational landscape and his commitment to excellence have driven ASFE Consultants to achieve remarkable success and recognition.

Shahid's expertise spans various educational services, including university admissions, career counselling, and academic planning. His personalised approach and unwavering dedication to his clients' success have earned him a stellar reputation among students, parents, and educational institutions alike.

A visionary leader, Shahid continuously strives to innovate and expand the services offered by ASFE Consultants UK, ensuring that students receive the highest quality of support and guidance. His passion for education and relentless pursuit of excellence makes him a respected and influential figure in educational consultancy.

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