MANAGING INSTITUTIONS:
SURVIVAL OF MINBAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MAINLAND CHINA

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Minban education has already established its position in China’s education system. Diversification, uneven development across regions, market-oriented, coexistence and confusion of multiple ownerships are its major features. However, there is still limited systematic study on its operation.

The emergence of minban schools represents the parents and students’ need for alternative education. The external demands from these stakeholders, as well as from the government, constitute the institutional environment impelling the survival and development of minban schools. At the same time, the individual schools themselves are also responding to and shaping the institutional environment.

This study adopts the ideas of new institutionalism to analyze minban schools as a form of organization, and its interaction with the institutions. The study of institutions includes the regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions. This study aims to explore the new features of the evolving educational institutional environment and the strategies that minban schools adopt to manage the institutions in this environment.

Qualitative research methodology - multiple case study - was adopted. As observed in the new educational institutional environment, there are four types of minban schools: the converted minban school, the affiliated minban school, the private capital invested minban school and the
A total of eight minban secondary schools in Taiyuan and Shenzhen were chosen to represent these diverse types of minban schools. Data collection methods such as archival review, field participant observation and in-depth interview, were adopted to collect data.

The study showed that the reemergence of market and its principles, the decentralization of government and segmentation of its power and authority, the bureaucratic profession coupled with the consumerist profession of teachers, and the investment-oriented and ‘education-as-consumption’ culture engendered an increasingly multiple institutional environment for minban schools. Different types of minban schools co-existed, with each type of school occupying their own unique location in the continuum from ‘domesticated’ and ‘public’, to ‘wild’ and ‘private’.

Differential locations reflected the ‘differential order’ of different types of minban schools in this institutional environment. The converted minban school, the affiliated minban school, the private capital invested minban school, and the international minban school were located, in order, according to their distance from the government and public system. Such hierarchical arrangement of minban schools took shape according to the bureaucratic arrangement of the government’s regulative institution. Concurrently, the normative and cognitive institutions also contributed to shape the boundary of order: maintaining and/or changing the boundary and arrangement of differential order.
The study argued that the institutions influence the differential order of minban schools and through this, delimit the strategies that each school, as an organization within the institutional environment, selected to cope with the institutions. These strategies could be categorized as ‘capitalize’, ‘advocacy’, ‘avoidance’, and ‘isolation’. During the process of interaction between organizations and institutions, the boundaries of differential order changed, and at the same time the components of institutions are interpreted and re-interpreted, which in turn adjusted the room for organization’s autonomy.

Minban schools have greater freedom from regulatory control, and within, different types of schools will have different extent of freedom enjoyed. according to their differential order. However, they all actively derived strategies to manage institutions in order to expand their autonomy. In this process, resources, protection and support (gained from trust), received from the local governments and parents, were mobilized for their own pursuits.

This study confirmed that, alongside the increasing number of minban schools, the demands from these new types of organizations and the parents’ increasing engagement in education, were meaningful in cultivating a primitive form of civil society. However, the function of minban schools proposed by the government seemed more of a myth than reality. They could not lead to a substantial improvement of the educational system. The government still maintained substantial control
on *minban* schools through the power vested upon them by the bureaucratic structure, and re-penetrated into the new institutional environment via new forms of regulation and governance.
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