

Property Ownership and Private Higher Education in China: On what grounds? by Spring Su, Lanham MD, Lexington Books, 2011, 204 pp., £39.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7391-4379-7

Any book dealing with core issues within the Chinese higher education system is to be viewed with interest, especially if it sets out to inform a wider readership of recent developments. In recent decades, tertiary education has expanded globally both in terms of the number of universities and in terms of student enrolment. Newman and Couturier (2002) have estimated that in Asia the demand for higher education will have grown by some 48 million students between 1995 and 2020, by which time there will be a need for an estimated 37,000 new universities globally to meet existing demand. As Gerard Postiglione, the editor for the series of which this book forms a part, points out China has developed the largest higher education system by volume of any nation, with unprecedented rates of growth in the number of universities. Within this general growth the private university sector has expanded rapidly and plays an increasingly important role.

Su's book is concerned with the way that policies relating to property ownership of private higher education in China 'could potentially place limitation on further growth' (3). Based on a theoretical framework and case studies, her book explores issues of property ownership of private universities from legal, economic, managerial, and financial perspectives.

Spring Su is a research fellow at the Wah Ching Centre for Research in Education in China at the University of Hong Kong. She is also a board director and the former CEO of a Hong Kong-listed biotechnology company and continues to serve as the head of the Yenping Tsai Educational and Cultural Foundation. Su received her PhD in comparative and international education from Columbia University, and an MSc and a postgraduate certificate from LSE and Birkbeck, London respectively, so she brings a formidable professional and academic background to her subject.

Su adopts a comparative method, drawing on evidence and examples from other countries so as to analyse distinctions between non-profit and for-profit private universities. She underlines characteristics of for-profit private universities and analyses how current regulations in property ownership of private universities potentially restrict the development of these universities. The final chapter consolidates the preceding analyses with a number of practical policy recommendations related to the development of private universities in China.

This book introduces a series of policies which have been issued by the government to guide the development of private universities over the last ten years. With the development of private universities, the problem of the property ownership in private universities is gradually revealed. Regarding a non-profit organization, the 2004 Non-governmental Non-profit Corporate Enterprises Accounting System of the Finance Ministry states that 'the providers of the resources are not allowed to get financial return and conduct for-profit business, and do not have resources ownership.' In contrast, the Law of Private Education Promotion points out that private universities have property ownership of assets that come from the sponsors, donated property, and running accumulation, and the sponsors are allowed to obtain reasonable return from running the private universities. Due to legislative incoherence on the property ownership of private universities, the usual attributes of profit, non-profit, and the property ownership of private universities is vague and unclear.

Over the past year there have been subtle but significant shifts in official government formulations concerning the relationship of private universities to their status as property-owning entities. Very recently, in September 2013, the Legislative Affairs Office of the Central State Council recognized the legitimacy of for-profit status but remained concerned to protect

the legal requirement for such universities to retain a link with non-commercial interests in the wider community. Thus these shifts in policy relating to establishing a privately owned HE sector reflect wider ideological shifts from within government in the economic and financial spheres. The debate will now progress to whether the state will loosen its control over management within such private universities.

The growth in the number of private universities has resulted in increasing academic interest across China. While this is one of the few books on this topic in English in the academic field at the moment, the shifts outlined above will inevitably increase interest among potential donors, partners, and investors. Su advocates improvement in government quality evaluation systems. She calls for publicly disclosed evaluation indicators so that the process becomes transparent. She also calls for easier access to bank loans and tax exemptions for donations. Implicit in these positions lies an underlying support for the expansion of the private sector, something that of itself raises a range of problematic issues. The book will contribute to raising the levels of recognition of the private universities and also of the challenges they face at this point in time in China.

References

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