

Educational Privatization in China: A Case Study

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Teachers College, Columbia University

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Yiwen Wang

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of Mei Jia International School, a private middle school in Guiyang, China, capital of the inland province of Guizhou and home to 4.8 million people. Over the past 25 years, private education in Guiyang has undergone rapid development, with a large number of private schools emerging. While funded by tuition paid by parents, these private schools benefit significantly in many cases from government-subsidized property leases. The incentive for the government to subsidize private schools in this manner is twofold: to advance academic achievement through competition among schools; and to offload educational expenditures to private citizens who can afford to pay tuition for their children. Amidst such fierce competition, Mei Jia needs to vie with other schools for students, teachers, and funding. Through a series of interviews with Mei Jia's principal, teachers, and students, this paper addresses the school's relationship with the government, its management, finances, student enrollment, and teacher recruitment. As an analysis of one middle school, this paper illustrates the evolution and process of private provision of education in a country where private education barely existed a generation ago.

Introduction

In China as well as nations around the world, private schools have long been seen as a complement to public schools, offering more choices for parents and children. Soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, private schools disappeared, however, with that state assuming sole educational authority. It was not until nationwide reform in 1979 that private schools reemerged in China. In conjunction with an opening up of society, economic prosperity fueled the growth of a private school sector.

Most of the research on private schools in China has focused on Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Guangdong, and other economically and educationally developed cities or coastal areas. Few scholars have turned their eyes to the central and western regions. Yet in these places, too, more and more private schools are emerging and changing the local educational ecology. In focusing on Guiyang, capital of the southwestern province of Guizhou, this study concerns a relatively underdeveloped area of China. In Guiyang, private schools have nevertheless rapidly multiplied

over the past decade, taking many teachers from public schools and attracting a large number of students. But while new schools are born every year, there are also many private schools that are dying amidst market competition.

What factors determine whether a private school can flourish in Guiyang? What are the characteristics of parents and children who choose private schools? What is the difference between a private school and a local public school? What inferences can we draw from the boom of private schools? In studying a private middle school in Guiyang, we can provide some empirical evidence to answer these questions.

Background on the Private Education of China

China is a country that attaches great importance to education. The 2017 White Paper on Educational Consumption of Chinese Families found that, on average, Chinese households allocated more than 20 percent of their household income to education. This substantial investment comports with a long-established national commitment to formal learning going back to the era of the Han Dynasty (B.C.202-A.D.8). During the Han, the recruitment and appointment of civil servants and leaders were primarily based on, one, recommendations of aristocrats and local officials and, two, results on exams constructed to measure the capacity to carry out expected duties. Later in the Sui (581-619) and Tang (618-907) Dynasties, the Imperial Examinations were held on a large scale to choose future government officials (DiCicco, 2003).

The Imperial Examination was considered the primary venue for social mobility. At that time, Chinese society was divided into four categories: *shi* (scholars), *nong* (peasants), *gong* (workers), and *shang* (merchants). People of the first category, the *shi*, were those who participated in the Imperial Examination and had the opportunity to become government

officials. In addition to self-study, many candidates partook in *si shu* or *shu yuan*, which can be understood as a primitive form of private school. The main purpose of private education in ancient China was to help students prepare for the Imperial Examination. (Lin, 1999)

Some scholars believe that the earliest private schools in China were established by Confucius (B.C.551-B.C.479) and soon after spread across the land (Lin, 1999). In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), private education reached its peak, with the largest private school comprising a library with up to 100,000 books (Deng, 1997).

From then on, private education was an important part of China's education system, until the Communist Party officially established the People's Republic of China in 1949. Schools became a central tool of the state. By 1956, all private schools were either closed or nationalized (Lin, 1999). This remained the case for a generation, until Premier Deng Xiaoping in 1979 implemented a policy of reform and opening up. Private schools gradually spread across the country (Kwong, 1997).

In 2002, the Chinese government issued the Non-state Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China, which established the legal basis for local governments to provide strong support for private education. The law stipulated: 1) private schools must be secular; 2) private schools must have the same status and rights as public schools; 3) private schools may be public-private joint ventures, with sites, for example, owned by the state but entrusted to private managers; 4) education administrative departments at the local or county level must supervise private education; 5) private schools may be run as non-profit or for-profit operations, with the exception of schools at the compulsory level (grades 1-9), which may be not run as for-profit operations; and 6) private schools shall establish school councils and corresponding supervisory bodies. With this law, the number of private primary and secondary schools in China

mushroomed from 2,358 in 1994, enrolling 451,000 students, to 16,527 in 2006, enrolling 12,568,000 students (Chan, & Wang, 2009).

The Education System of China

In 1986, China implemented a nine-year compulsory education program, with six years of elementary school followed by three years of middle school (or junior high school). Children begin elementary school at age six and complete middle school at age fifteen. In 2006, the government vowed that such compulsory education would be free. Following middle school, students take the *zhongkao*, the entrance exam for high school. In 2010, about 83 percent of the students in the country passed the senior high school entrance examination and proceed to the next level (Xinhua News Agency, 2011). Following three years of high school, students take the *gaokao*, the college entrance examination. In addition, students who complete compulsory education can choose to enter secondary and tertiary colleges for technical education.

Whether a student can go to college or not depends entirely on his or her score on the *gaokao*. However, higher education resource allocation and enrollment vary greatly among provinces and cities. In 2017, the number of *gaokao* examinees in Shanghai was 51,000, and the number of planned college enrollment was 46,800, with the admission rate as high as 92 percent, ranking the city first in China. For the entire province of Guizhou, the number of examinees was 412,000, with anticipated college enrollment number of only 69,500. The admission rate was thus as low as 17 percent, ranking Guizhou last among provinces across the country (Ministry of Education of China, 2017). This is to say that exam results alone do not determine college matriculation. Geography matters a lot, as well.

Methodology

This analysis employs a case-study approach and is qualitative in nature. Mei Jia International School (hereafter referred to as Mei Jia), which was established in 2011, was selected as the research object. This paper will explore its operation mode, management system, and daily life. One principal, four teachers, and two ninth-grade students partook in in-depth interviews from November 21, 2018, to December 14, 2018.

Mr. Changwen Zhang, the principal interviewed, left Guiyang No.19 Middle School, a key public middle school, in 2008, and founded Yong Mao Middle School. He left Yong Mao Middle School in March 2014 to serve as the principal of Mei Jia until he retired in August 2018. Among the four teachers interviewed, Mr. Xiao Liu is a senior teacher. He once taught at Guiyang No. 19 Middle School together with Principal Zhang, and then followed Principal Zhang to teach in the private school. The other three teachers are young. Ms. Su Wang taught in Yong Mao first and then transferred to Mei Jia, with a total of seven years teaching experience. Ms. Chen Li also taught in Yong Mao first and then in Mei Jia, with a total of 10 years teaching experience. She left Mei Jia in July 2018 to start her own business. After graduating from college in 2014, Mr. Tao Zhou joined Mei Jia.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese remotely via WeChat or Skype, were recorded with the permission of all interviewees, and translated into English later by the author. A set of questions regarding financing, administration, teaching force, curriculum, extracurricular activities, parent-school relationships, recruitment, and other related aspects were discussed during the interviews (see Appendix A).

The study derives from two sources: 1) the interviews with these school stakeholders; 2) relevant information published by the school, such as school promotional materials, admissions brochures, school newsletters, and campus websites (<http://www.gyacis.com/>).

The Educational Landscape of Guiyang

Guiyang is the political, cultural, economic, and educational hub of Guizhou Province. Guiyang has three counties, six municipal districts, and one county-level city, with a total population of about 4.8 million. The per capita GDP in 2017 was 74,493 RMB (about \$10,800), the per capita disposable income of urban permanent residents was 32,186 yuan (about \$4,663) (Guiyang Statistics Bureau, 2017).

In 2017, there were 246 middle schools, 10 of which were private, 14 of which were private and overlapped with senior high schools (grade 7-12), and 102 of which were private and overlapped with primary schools (grade 1-9). The number of students from grade 7 to 9 was about 150,000, of which about 34,600 were enrolled in private schools (Department of Education of Guiyang, 2017).

Private schools in Guiyang started relatively late compared to other developed regions. Xing Nong Middle School, the oldest existing private school in Guiyang, was founded in 1993 as a tutoring center with 36 students. In 2018, it comprised 108 classes, enrolling more than 5,300 students (Xing Nong School Web site).

In the two decades since the establishment of Xing Nong Middle School, a large number of private schools have successively emerged in Guiyang, including Zhong Tian Secondary School (founded in 2002), Yong Mao Middle School (founded in 2008), New World International School (founded in 2009), and Mei Jia International School (founded in 2011).

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Middle school education itself in Guiyang went through significant changes over the past decade. Ten years ago, the best middle schools in Guiyang were the No.7, No.17, No.18, and No.19 middle schools as well as the No.2 Experimental Middle School. All five schools are public schools. According to government regulations, if students choose to attend a public school, they can only enter the school designated by the government according to their household address. However, at that time, these schools also conducted their own entrance examinations to enroll cross-regional students with good scores as “transient students.” These students could study in the name of auditing, and an auditing fee would be charged by the school on a semester basis. This process was permitted by the government until 2004.

The termination of this process coincided with the establishment of many private schools. These schools have since taken away many excellent teachers from these key middle schools, some of whom went on to assume leadership positions at these private schools. For example, Principal Zhang and one of the vice principals, Ms. Weng of Mei Jia, were both from Guiyang No.19 Middle School. The departure of these teachers combined with the termination of enrollment of cross-regional students spelled the decline of the elite public schools. Given that the private schools, by contrast, can choose their own students beyond the local region, they began to climb in performance and appeal.

The Profile of Mei Jia International School

Mei Jia International School was established in Nanming District of Guiyang City in 2011, providing education to students from grade 7 to 9. It is a private boarding school, with funding from the Shanghai Start Education Group. Mei Jia joined the Guiyang No.3 Experimental School Group in 2017. The annual tuition fee in 2018 was about 35,000 yuan (or approximately \$5,100).

It was a medium-sized school, with 218 students and seven classes. There were 100 students in three classes in grade 7, 60 students in two classes in grade 8, and 58 students in two classes in grade 9. There are 28 full-time teachers: eight of them form the school management teams; six are senior teachers; and the remaining 14 are young teachers.

Covering an area of about 33,300 square meters, the school has a teaching building, a student dormitory, a gym, a science laboratory, a library, 16 piano rooms, music, art, and multimedia rooms, and other special classrooms.

In general, the school adheres to the mission of “low entry score and middle exit score, middle entry score and high exit score.” In the seven years since its establishment, students’ performance in the senior high school entrance examination has been constantly improving. According to the latest data released by the school, the average score of the 2017 graduates in the senior high school entrance examination was 536 points (the full score is 650 points), and a quarter of the graduates have entered the top four first- and second-class public exemplary high schools in Guiyang: Guiyang No.1 High School, Guiyang No.3 Experimental School, Guiyang No.6 High School, and the High School affiliated with Guizhou Normal University.

1) Government

Principal Zhang believes that the past ten years have been the golden period for the development of private education in Guiyang. One of the main reasons is the support of the government. On the one hand, because the government advocates equal education, public schools can only accept students classified by household address; as noted, since 2004, they have been barred from selecting students by exam scores. The government has focused its effort on popularizing the nine-year compulsory education and guaranteeing education for the children of

migrant workers who come from rural areas to work in cities. Yet the government has focused less on improving the quality of teaching in public schools.

This makes many parents feel that the learning needs of their children cannot be fully satisfied in public schools. Parents with better family conditions tend to send their children to private middle schools: 1) to better prepare for the fierce competition of the *zhongkao*; 2) some of them choose combined schools which have grade 7-12 to make it easier to enter their own high school. While the public schools are fully funded by the government and the students there will not be charged for any fee, the tuition fee for private schools is generally more than 30,000 yuan (or approximately \$4,300) a year, which is almost the same as the per capita disposable income in Guiyang. This allows students from high socioeconomic families to be concentrated in private schools. To Mr. Liu, who has taught in both public and private schools, this development is cause for significant concern. In his opinion, the government should take more responsibility for education instead of leaving elite education to private schools, which is leading to segregation between students from different SES backgrounds.

On the other hand, the government has provided strong support to private schools in terms of school land use. The government subsidizes private schools through substantial discounts on property leases. According to the 2013 Guiyang City Center Land Grading and Benchmark Land Price Implementation Rules, published by Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Land and Resource, the average commercial property fee is 810-11,300 yuan per square meter, depending on different uses, while the property fee for educational purposes is only 450-3,525 yuan per square meter. In fact, because the government is keen on attracting investors in high-quality schools, it granted Mei Jia a 10-year property lease for free upon learning that the school was being backed by the Shanghai Start Education Group.

2) Management

The school management of Mei Jia is carried out by the school council. The council members are the principal, vice principals, the officer of discipline, the officer of academic affairs, the officer of logistics, the officer of finance, and shareholders. Decisions on enrollment, recruitment, system formulation, and management of teachers and students are jointly decided by the school council.

3) Teachers

When Principal Zhang came to Mei Jia, the school had been in operation for three years, but the student results did not improve. At the first time of taking over the school, the first thing he did was to change the teachers. At that time, there were 31 teachers in Mei Jia, and 30 of them were replaced.

Currently, there are 20 full-time subject teachers in Mei Jia, except for the eight members of the management team. All the teachers hold teacher qualifications, six of whom are senior teachers. There are four Chinese language teachers, three English teachers, three math teachers, two physics teachers, one chemistry teacher, one biology teacher, one geography teacher, one political science teacher, one history teacher, and three physical education teachers. Although Mei Jia is called an international school, there are neither foreign teachers nor foreign students.

On the reasons for choosing to join the faculty of Mei Jia, three of the four teachers interviewed mentioned that their trust in Principal Zhang was a primary justification. In addition, the teachers mentioned that although the jobs in public schools are relatively stable, the salary at private schools is, on average, higher. Moreover, compared with the salary of public school

teachers, which increases with their teaching experience, the salary of private schools is mainly based on student achievement, class observations, and student feedback. As a result, the teachers interviewed believe that they can better develop their potential in private schools. As many teachers in public schools stay until they retire, vacancies can be rare and competition can be fierce. Private schools provide an alternate route to teaching, though job security is far less certain.

Mei Jia is, in this regard, struggling with high teacher turnover. The two ninth-grade students interviewed said that teachers changed frequently during their three years in the school. They moreover contended this turnover had a significant impact on their learning. Some teachers leave for a career change (as was the case with Ms. Li, one of the teachers interviewed). Some teachers chose to go to other public or large private schools as they are not optimistic about the prospect of a small private school like Mei Jia; some teachers are attracted by higher salaries at other private schools.

Every semester, the school conducts an anonymous questionnaire to students about their views of their teachers. A wide range of questions are asked, such as the teacher's blackboard writing, affinity, patience, helpfulness, attendance, and dedication. The questionnaire even asks students whether teachers end classes early or whether they ask parents for gifts. In addition, the school implements systematic management: 1) teachers need to clock in every morning, afternoon, and evening; 2) teachers need to submit hand-written lesson plans every week; and 3) if the teacher wants to change the arrangement of classes, he/she must apply through the office of academic affairs.

In sum, seniority, attendance, teaching quality (mainly reflected in the student grades), student surveys, lesson observations, and student behavior are the criteria for determining teacher salaries and bonuses as well as retention.

Mr. Zhou said that although he agrees with the rationale for such institutionalized management, some rules and regulations of the school, in his opinion, are too strict, causing a heavy administrative burden on teachers. For example, the requirement that teaching plans must be handwritten not only increases the working hours of teachers but also does not address actual needs. In reality, teachers must adjust the teaching content and pace according to the actual performance of students in the class. The lesson plans could accordingly be far more malleable and thus less onerous to construct.

4) Students

In the four years since Principal Zhang took over, he said that Mei Jia has struggled in enrolling new students. Although students at Mei Jia have, on average, posted better scores each year on the senior high school entrance examination, the number of applicants for Mei Jia has not increased. Only about 100 students apply for admission to Mei Jia each year. This is mainly because private education has entered a period of intense competition in Guiyang. First of all, in recent years, more and more famous universities have established affiliated high schools in Guiyang, including Beijing Normal University, Renmin University of China, and Peking University. These schools usually have sufficient financial backing to attract experienced teachers and pedagogical support from the colleges. Second, many famous local high schools have also set up their own international schools or middle schools. For example, Guiyang New World International School is organized by Evergrande Guiyang New World Real Estate and

Guiyang No.1 High School, which is the only first-class exemplary high school of Guizhou Province.

In competition with these schools, Mei Jia has been struggling to survive. In order to cope with this competitive pressure, Mei Jia decided to cooperate with Guiyang No.3 Experimental High School and become a member of its group of schools in 2017. Guiyang No. 3 Experimental High School (grades 10-12) has gained fame in Guiyang in recent years due to its strict student management and leading college entrance examination results. After becoming a member of this school group, two students of Mei Jia can enter No.3 Experimental High School without taking examinations every year. Correspondingly, each year, the No.3 Experimental High School enrolls a grade 7 class in the name of Mei Jia. These students will take a class in No.3 High School but nominally they are students of Mei Jia because No.3 Experimental High School is not qualified, as a high school, to enroll students in grades 7 to 9. The reason No.3 Experimental High School took this step is to cultivate its own high-quality students from lower grades to cope with the competition from other high schools.

As for why the two students interviewed said they chose Mei Jia, both pointed out that the boarding school environment allowed them more time to get assistance from their teachers.

5) School experience

A typical day of Mei Jia is shown below:

Timetable of Mei Jia School	
7.00	Morning Exercise & Breakfast
7.50	Morning Reading
8.15-9.00	1 st class period
9.10-9.55	2 nd class period
9.55-10.20	Class break exercise
10.20-11.05	3 rd class period
11.15-12.00	4 th class period
12.00-14.00	Lunch & Noon break
14.15	Dictation for English
14.30-15.10	5 th class period
15.20-16.00	6 th class period
16.10-16.50	7 th class period
17.00	Physical training
18.00	Dinner & Shower
19.00	Self-study at classrooms
22.00	End of Self-study & Return to the dormitory for Grade 7 and 8
22.30	End of Self-study & Return to the dormitory for Grade 9

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The students study in school from Monday to Friday, leave school for home on Friday afternoon, and return to school for evening self-study on Sunday. Mei Jia applies the dual teacher-in-charge policy, by which each class has two teachers at the helm. Each teacher stays on campus for two nights to accompany their students. The school usually arranges senior teachers to partner with young teachers, which can also help young teachers evolve.

In the stage of compulsory education, the Chinese government requires that both public and private schools must follow the syllabus of the Ministry of Education when arranging the teaching content and class schedule. In Mei Jia, students each week attend six periods of Chinese language and literature, six periods of math, four periods of English, three periods of physics, two periods of chemistry, and two periods of physical education classes. In addition, students must partake in one hour of exercise every day.

Teaching in Mei Jia is still focused on preparing students for the high school entrance examination. The school holds regular examinations every two weeks, monthly exams, a mid-term exam, and a final exam every semester. After each monthly exam, a parent meeting will be held to publicize all exam results and rankings.

On the school Web site, Mei Jia advertised that they provide students with a wealth of extracurricular activities. In reality, students in Mei Jia have a narrow range of extracurricular activities to choose from. Although art festivals and sports meetings are held every year, there is no regular training or extracurricular involvement. The main extracurricular activity of students is “the second class,” which is still based on subject learning, and is a disguised remedial class.

Discussion

The emergence and growing prosperity of private education in Guiyang over the past two decades has shown that the demand for personalized education is increasing. As the government no longer allows public schools to accept high-score cross-regional students, which gradually deprives the former elite public schools of their high-score students, the private schools gain the opportunity to shine. Parents who can afford the high tuition fees of private schools believe that sending their children to private schools will help them better prepare for the high school entrance examination as well as the college entrance examination.

The competition brought by the senior high school entrance examination and the college entrance examination system nevertheless drive private schools like Mei Jia, making them formidable pressure-cookers. The comprehensive quality education and rich extracurricular activities promised at the beginning gave way to the exigencies of a rigid exam culture.

With the support of the government and the desire of families for the best opportunity for their children, many prestigious universities in developed regions have also come to Guiyang to establish affiliated secondary schools. This migration of outside competition has at once intensified the exam culture and placed greater pressure on local private schools to enroll students and attract teachers. Mei Jia, in response to this competition, chose to join the No.3 Experimental High School Group. More and more small and medium-sized private schools are likewise teaming up with other schools, setting up school groups, or offering preferential admission to students in each other's schools.

Mei Jia's story is just a miniature illustration of the educational privatization that is taking place in China. Like many countries that hope to promote education innovation and meet

different educational needs through education privatization, China is still on the road of exploration. One evident cost of this privatization movement is segregation among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This calls for serious consideration by educational stakeholders in Guiyang as well as across the country.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

General:

1. What is the status of education in Guiyang? Has there been any change in the educational environment in recent years?
2. What is the attitude of the Guiyang government to private schools?
3. What support is there in policy?
4. Do you think there will be any changes in the educational status of Guiyang in the next few years?

Financing:

1. How much impact do personal relationships have on school funding?
2. What is the state of investment in the school?
3. Do investors have any requirements for the school?
4. Do you need to borrow money from banks and governments?
5. Is there any difference in taxation between private schools and public schools?
6. What is the total tuition fee for the school for one year?
7. Is there any other income? What is the total income of tuition fees?

Government Relations

1. How important is the government's support for the school?
2. Is it important to have a personal relationship with people in the government?
3. In what ways does the government have the greatest impact on schools?

Students Enrollment:

1. What is the school's enrollment strategy?
2. How to evaluate student applicants?
3. What is the content of the entrance exam?
4. How many students apply for admission each year and how many are admitted?
5. Are there any subsidies for difficult student schools?
6. What are the rewards for outstanding students?

Teacher:

1. How is the quality of the school's faculty as a whole?
2. What is the standard for choosing a teacher?

3. How to attract teachers from public schools? Does anyone choose to go back to public schools?
4. How much autonomy does the teacher have in teaching? Do you support teachers in teaching experiments?
5. What is the age structure of the teacher?
6. Is there an age gap? Are there many retired/young teachers?
7. Are all the teachers from local communities?
8. Are there foreign teachers?
9. What is the teacher's salary standard? Are there benefits other than salaries?
10. How can schools reduce the pressure on teachers and encourage teachers to work with greater enthusiasm?
11. The work of teachers in private schools is relatively unstable. What is the impact on your teaching? How does the school solve this problem?

Management:

1. How does the school implement standardized management?
2. What is the management structure of the school?
3. Will management be affected by investors?

4. As a principal, how much autonomy do you have?
5. Have there been any conflicts in management? How to solve?

Classroom:

1. What is the difference between an international school and a regular school?
2. How does the school evaluate student learning? (How many exams)
3. How can teachers help students achieve their learning goals?
4. Does the teacher help students solve problems other than learning?
5. What is the teacher's philosophy? How to apply it in teaching?
6. How does the teacher motivate the students to learn?
7. What is the one-day curriculum?
8. Does the teacher do one-on-one teaching?
9. How is the teaching equipment in each classroom set up?

Extracurricular activities:

1. Does the school provide extracurricular activities like music, painting, etc.?
2. Does the school help students improve their independent living, leadership, social skills, and work abilities?

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3. Is the school's curriculum choice oriented to the senior high school entrance examination?
4. Does the school help students prepare for the senior high school entrance examination?
5. What kind of extracurricular activities does the school provide? Does the school support students to organize their own extracurricular activities?
6. How many students participate in these extracurricular activities?

Parent:

1. What role does the parent play in the child's educational process?
2. How do parents know how their children are studying at school?
3. How does the school ensure that parents are in close contact with the school?

Prospect planning:

1. What is the school's 5-10 year outlook?
2. Who is going to do these planning?
3. How to ensure the implementation of these plans?