

Communism's Private Higher Education

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While it is important to recognize the existence of private higher education (PHE) under Communism, it is likewise important to identify and understand the powerful limitations of this peculiar marriage. PHE under Communism has always been comparatively small. It is pointedly circumscribed in the functional missions it can undertake, most notably in religious or other cultural diversity. Above all, PHE under Communism is circumscribed in its political autonomy.

The first stunning fact about private higher education (PHE) and Communism is the very existence of this odd couple. Is not Communist PHE largely oxymoronic? Yet before we become too casual about the oddity, we must appreciate the counterpoint: how limited PHE under Communism has always been.

Marriage: Where and Why

PHE exists in three of the world's five Communist political systems: China, Vietnam, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). North Korean PHE enrollment share is generally placed as 0, notwithstanding the unusual internationally sustained Evangelical Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. Cuba thus stands as the singular case in which PHE remains banned under Communism.

The landmark entry of PHE into Communist systems came with Xiaoping Deng's 1978 historic economic reforms, which opened China to massive marketization after three decades of Communist public monopoly following the Maoist nationalizations, including of pre-existing private education at all levels. Vietnam's opening to PHE was largely coincident in timing, after it had been banned in North Vietnam since 1954 and then in all of Vietnam after national unification in 1975. Lao PDR's "New Economic Mechanism" followed by 1986.

More importantly, the *reasons* for allowing PHE were quite similar across China, Vietnam, and Lao PDR. Key at the macro level was the dilution of economic Communist orthodoxy. Economic dogma receded and the state ceased to be the sole source of ownership, production, and provision. Private business was not only permitted but encouraged. To be sure, rationales for private enterprise were carefully circumscribed: they were process adjustments for efficiency and productivity to better serve the abiding purposes of Communist politics and society. Given the political sensitivity of private property and trade in social spheres such as education, the very term "private" was initially obscured by terms such as "people-founded" or "non-governmental" or "social forces." Vietnam eventually took a globally extreme step by creating a "public autonomous sector" that, without basic public funding, behaves more like the country's PHE than the rest of its public sector. At the same time,

it allowed its PHE to be legally for-profit, followed by a dominance of the for-profit form within PHE that is unsurpassed globally; China too has (more recently) allowed the for-profit form, which many non-Communist systems do not.

PHE under Communism has been, above all, a practical matter. It has enabled Communist regimes to expand access in the face of rising demand for higher education, without public budget encumbrance. One could say something similar about many non-Communist regimes; the point here is that, by allowing PHE, Communist regimes obliterate a previously decisive difference between themselves and other regimes.

Limited PHE Scope: Quantitative

Much as the co-existence of Communism and PHE is real and comprehensible, closer analysis identifies major limitations. Perhaps the plainest are quantitative.

Never has a Communist country had a high private share of total enrollment. By the [leading global dataset](#), tiny Lao PDR is the upper-end outlier at 28.4 percent. Even this is marginally below the global 32.2-percent share and further below the 37.2-percent Asian share and the 45.2-percent Southeast Asian share. China's 13.5-percent share and Vietnam's 13.0-percent share are more modal for Communist regimes (though, curiously, the Chinese regime internally disseminates a higher private share figure than it chooses to pass on internationally, via UNESCO). Computing 0 percent for North Korea and Cuba, we get an average (unweighted by higher education system size) of 11.0 percent for Communist countries—a third of the private average share globally. These enrollment shares tell us more than the mere facts that China has 803 private institutions while Vietnam has 67 and Lao PDR perhaps 60.

Moreover, a historically inclusive enrollment figure for PHE under Communism would be significantly lower than 11 percent. PHE was banned throughout the life of Communist Russia and then of the USSR. It is therefore not a mere coincidence that in their *post*-Communist realities, the largely statist or heavily Soviet-rooted Tajikistan and Turkmenistan would only in a delayed and minimal manner allow PHE. The sharper breaks from Communism in Kyrgyzstan and especially Kazakhstan

brought much more robust PHE sectors immediately in the 1990s, with Kazakhstan's PHE becoming the majority enrollment sector. Elsewhere, Algeria's markedly socialist orientation explains its being the largest higher education system without PHE until the 21st century.

Limited PHE Scope: Qualitative

Greater appreciation of the comparatively small scope of PHE under Communism comes through identifying how Communism restricts otherwise globally widespread rationales, underpinnings, stakeholders, and types of PHE.

Much of global PHE has been religious in origin. Indeed, most PHE sectors have begun with religious institutions. Most contemporary PHE sectors have some or much religious PHE. But no Communist country allows religious PHE. In contrast, among non-Communist countries, Turkey may be the sole one banning religious PHE. Nor do the Communist PHE sectors have ethnic identity- or group-based components. Where China has group-oriented institutions for minority ethnic groups and for women, it restricts them to the public sector. While Communism has bent itself out of shape to allow the market into PHE, it permits no such accommodation to social or cultural pluralism.

Academically upper-end PHE, though not similarly banned, is uncommon under Communism. The point is almost unremarkable for world-class PHE, since such PHE is so rare outside the United States; regardless, political Communism could never allow the freedom required by world-class higher education in the social sciences and arts. Empirically more relevant is the relative paucity of internationally "semi-elite" PHE under Communism. It is one thing to permit social space for non-elite higher education institutions with relatively low status or cultural influence; it is another to allow more ample autonomous space. Vietnam is a partial exception, with a semi-elite chunk within its small PHE sector, but China is a weightier counterexample with its comparatively limited semi-elite presence.

Within the bulk of PHE under Communism—non-elite—there is the demand-absorbing aspect but, again, quantitative limitations thereupon. A striking complement on the non-elite side is the rise and perhaps dominance within Chinese and Vietnamese PHE of "product-oriented institutions," shaped to serve students' direct access to employment. If demand-absorbing PHE is an accommodation largely to spare state burden, product-oriented PHE offers more direct service to the economy.

Ultimate State Control

The most salient private aspect of PHE under Communism remains financial: who pays. As in most global PHE not under Communism, PHE students pay (while even public university students face heftier tuition than in many non-Communist countries). This financial privateness contrasts to the curbs on cultural privateness already noted, and when it comes to governance, politics, and power, privateness is particularly limited under Communism. Although there is some variation at the micro level, where private owners and managers have more operational flexibility than managers do at public institutions (following the general global pattern), the presence of Communist party officials within private as well as public institutions greatly limits private-public divergence.

In macro-politics too there can be only limited PHE-public divergence. Although party and state sometimes choose to make somewhat different public policies for the two sectors, they sometimes put the sectors under one common set of rules. Most of all, the freedom and fate of PHE always remain at the discretion of Communist political leadership, reflective of the general weakness of legal property rights and political liberty. When President Xi recently clamped down generally on private businesses, private colleges felt the sting. Nor is it surprising that China has been restrictive in allowing international branch campuses, authorizing only one that has not been part of public universities and thus under their control. Vietnam, likewise, has only one international branch campus, while it too quite encourages foreign financial investment.

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This article is among recurrent PROPHE contributions to *International Higher Education*.