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The Strategies and Effects of Re-Branding Private Universities in China: A Comparative Study of Three Private Universities

Xiaoyue Yu[1,a,*]

[1]*Johns Hopkins University,3400 N Charles St, Baltimore, Maryland, United States*
a. yyuxiaoyue@163.com
**corresponding author*

Abstract: Driven by factors such as policy and demographic changes, intensified competition, and market demands, rebranding, or *zhuanshe* in Chinese, has become a common strategy for Chinese private universities to enhance their reputation and competitiveness. This article examines the strategies and effects of rebranding through a comparative study of three private universities in China and identifies three main strategies: adopting names that resemble public universities, strengthening brand positioning and communication, and improving teaching resources and quality. This article also finds that these strategies have led to positive outcomes, including increased enrolment rates, enhanced public perception, and more efficient resource management. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on higher education branding and offer valuable insights for private universities navigating an increasingly competitive and evolving education environment in China.

Keywords: Re-branding, Private Universities, China, Strategies, Effects.

1. Introduction

Private higher education in China has developed in response to changes in social and economic conditions and people's needs. Since the end of the 20th century, private universities have emerged due to economic reforms and population growth [1]. In 1999, the Chinese government implemented a policy to encourage the expansion of private higher education, leading to the establishment of two categories of private institutions, 'private' universities and 'independent colleges' [2]. Today, private institutions play an important role in China's higher education system, enrolling millions of students and providing an alternative choice for students [3]. Although private universities provide some students with the opportunity to attend university, there are also issues with their reputation, such as expensive tuition fees, poor faculties and limited teaching resources, which all point to the question of whether it is necessary for students to attend private universities [4].

In recent years, re-branding has been a strategic priority for many private institutions. This trend has been fuelled by several factors, including the diminishing demographic dividend, intensified competition for student enrolment and the shifting demands of the labour market [5]. Private universities must change themselves according to social development in order to avoid school closures faced by population decline. Re-branding, which often includes name changes, separation from parent institutions and strategic repositioning, aims to attract students, enhance institutional

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autonomy and improve market perception. For example, the process known as 'zhuanshe (转设),' where independent colleges become standalone universities, has gained prominence, reflecting a broader trend toward increased institutional independence [6].

The re-branding landscape of private universities in China is evolving rapidly. To date, 67 universities have finished the process of 'zhuanshe' and 26 universities are still working on the process. These initiatives raise an important research question: **What are the strategies and effects of re-branding private Chinese universities?** This study seeks to explore the question through a comparative analysis of three case studies, offering insights into the strategies and effects of re-branding within the unique context of Chinese higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Branding in Higher Education

The main purpose of branding is to reflect the institution's values and align with stakeholders' expectations [7]. Treating higher education with the brand marketing strategies of a commercial product or company may arouse the disgust of many educators but it cannot be denied that there is much in common between them. The branding of a university includes the location of the school campus, the courses offered, the teaching methods, academic reputation and its world ranking [8]. Students then choose universities that meet their conditions and expectations by comparing the characteristics of different schools [9]. Higher education has various competitors and only by increasing student enrolment can universities improve their market share, which is related to their long-term development and profitability. This is also the embodiment of educational branding [10]. Higher education has increasingly paid attention to branding because the brand explains what a university is and defines its nature. However, there are also complex elements within universities, making higher education unable to be defined by one brand or concept.

Branding in higher education brings benefits [11]. Building a university brand can improve student loyalty, which in turn enhances their support for the university and positively changes their behavioural intentions [12]. A successful university brand can attract more students, especially international ones, and a good employer brand image can retain more teachers and attract outstanding scholars [13]. Students can also contribute to the university's brand-building. For example, students posting photos of extracurricular activities or school events on social media can be interpreted as their love for the school. Additionally, the school can interact with students through various activities to enhance its exposure on social media [14].

2.2. Private Universities in China and Their Branding Problems

According to research, China has the most students studying in private higher education, with over 6 million students pursuing full-time studies to gain a bachelor's degree in 742 private universities. Private universities fall into two categories. The first is called a 'Minban university' (Minban Daxue 民办大学), which is supported by non-governmental financing [1]. The second is the 'Independent College' (Duli Xueyuan 独立学院), a privately managed institution that is not funded by a public university but is affiliated with a parent institution despite having its own campus [3]. Private colleges and universities began to expand in 1999 due to the government's need to boost domestic demand, drive economic growth, postpone the entry of college-age individuals into a sluggish job market and provide more educational opportunities for students. When public funding fell short of achieving these objectives, private investment was permitted in higher education [2].

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The expansion of private higher education in China has also brought many problems, such as campus management, student status, awarding degrees and charging high tuition fees [3]. The internal governance system of private universities is imperfect, with an unclear division of responsibilities between shareholders and administrative personnel. Management representatives often prioritise economic returns, leading to interference in academic and other institutional affairs [4]. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of higher education has resulted in a threefold increase in the number of staff at private universities over the past decade, despite their reliance on student tuition fees without government financial support [15]. As the demographic dividend diminishes, the labour market demands more high-quality graduates with advanced skills [5]. Therefore, private universities must adapt their talent development standards to address the issue of producing graduates with intermediate or low vocational skills in response to the new stage of national economic development [16].

2.3. Rebranding of Chinese Private Universities

The term ‘zhuanshe’ refers to the process of an independent college separating from its parent public university to become an independent legal entity. In China, independent colleges are usually established and managed by public universities but over time these colleges develop their own market position and reduce their dependence on the parent institution [6]. The process of ‘zhuanshe’ involves obtaining approval from government authorities and completing relevant procedures to ensure that the independent college can operate independently and enjoy legal rights as a separate entity [17].

There are several reasons for independent colleges to separate from their parent universities. Firstly, the development of independent colleges requires greater autonomy and independence. After separating from the parent university, independent colleges can more freely design their curriculum, admission policies and management regulations, better adapting to market demands and development trends [18]. Secondly, separating from the parent university can reduce the financial burden on the parent institution. Independent colleges usually need to pay a certain percentage of tuition fees to the parent university as management fees, which imposes financial pressure on their operations and sustainable development. Moreover, separation can enhance the independent brand image and reputation of the college. After separating from the parent university, independent colleges can more independently develop their campuses, teaching facilities and faculty teams, creating unique educational characteristics and brand image, thereby increasing their competitiveness and attractiveness.

2.4. Research Gap

Despite extensive research on the branding of higher education institutions and the specific challenges faced by private universities in China, there is a notable gap in comparative studies that focus on the rebranding processes of multiple private universities within this context. Most existing literature discusses branding strategies and their benefits in a generalised manner or focuses on individual case studies without providing a comparative perspective. Furthermore, while the concept of ‘zhuanshe’ and its implications have been explored, there is limited analysis of how different private universities navigate this process and the varying impacts on their market position and stakeholder perceptions.

This study aims to fill these gaps by conducting a comparative analysis of the rebranding strategies of three private universities in China. By examining their unique approaches, challenges and outcomes, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of effective branding practices and offer insights into how private universities can enhance their competitive edge in the evolving educational landscape of China.

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3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research attempts to compare the rebranding strategies and effects of Chinese private universities, focusing on three case studies: Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology, Zhuhai College of Science and Technology and Guangzhou College of Commerce. These universities were chosen due to three factors. First, they are all located in Guangdong, allowing the research to explore re-branding strategies within a specific regional context. Second, they have student populations at comparable levels, making comparisons more objective. Third, all three institutions transitioned from independent colleges to private universities, which aligns with the core theme of re-branding.

3.2. Data Collection

This study utilises both primary and secondary data to ensure the integrity of the findings. Secondary data was obtained from scholarly literature, reports and internal university records, including formal re-branding announcements, promotional materials and statistical information regarding student enrolment and faculty recruitment following the re-branding. These publications provided a comprehensive framework for comprehending the strategic approaches to re-branding.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 key stakeholders including faculty and students from the three universities. During the interviews, the stakeholders shared their insights into the perceptions of the re-branding process and effects on the universities' brand image and operations.

Table 1: Number of faculty and students from the three universities.

	Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology	Zhuhai College of Science and Technology	Guangzhou College of Commerce
Faculty	3	2	3
Students	2	3	2

(source: Author)

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis employed different approaches based on the type of data. The gathered academic literature and institutional documents were examined to identify major themes associated with rebranding in higher education. These themes included brand positioning, institutional autonomy and the financial implications of re-branding.

Interview recordings were transcribed and translated where necessary. A thematic analysis was then conducted, utilising key themes and concepts from the literature as guiding categories for data coding. This approach facilitated a comprehensive comparison of stakeholders' viewpoints with the branding theoretical framework derived from the literature review.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

To protect the privacy of participants, the identities of the interviewees are anonymised in this article. All personal data and interview transcripts are safely saved and will be deleted within one year after the study's conclusion.

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3.5. Limitations

This study faced several limitations. The sample size for interviews is relatively small (15 participants), which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, as all three universities are located in Guangdong, there may be regional biases in the results. Furthermore, the study did not include high-level government officials or senior administrative leaders due to scheduling constraints, which limits the insights from top decision-makers.

4. Re-Branding Strategies of Private Universities in China

4.1. Choosing a Name that Resembles a Public Institution

The Gaokao, China's national college entrance examination plays an important role in this dynamic. Students with excellent grades can study in prestigious public universities, while those who gain lower grades need to consider private institutions. The testing and admission rules have led to negative stereotyping of private institutions by parents and schools [19].

Linking to these stereotypes is the institution's name, which provides the first impression of a university. People don't always have time to browse all the universities' information and can judge the quality of learning by the meaning of the name. As participants said:

'.....if the name is poor or has a negative connotation, I will eliminate it. Yes, this will give me a negative impression and lead me to believe the school must be bad. On the other hand, if the name of the school sounds like a public university, I will get a positive impression and choose it' (Student A).

'I am more supportive of the name change, because it will give the independent institution a new name which sounds like a public university, and it is also an important way to attract students, and after the name change, it has become independent from the previous parent school in terms of reputation, forming a new institution with its own unique management method....' (Teacher F).

Most respondents believe that a name that sounds like a public institution can significantly improve a school's brand image and social recognition. This not only makes students and parents feel more comfortable but also attracts more quality faculty members and students. This strategy can significantly impact public perception and attract prospective students by aligning the institution's identity with established academic excellence.

But there are also some shortcomings from the name change process. Most private universities will still highlight their specialty subjects when they change their names, such as Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology, which is also a school with specialties in the polytechnic subjects; at the same time, these schools also teach subjects such as dance and art, which leads to many art students not choosing this school.

As a student stated, *'..... the names of the colleges and universities usually reflect their key majors and strong majors, which means that they would pay less attention to the education of other majors, therefore, if my major is not in this field, I will not consider the university as it would not bring me good teaching' (Student B).*

4.2. Strengthening Brand Positioning and Communication

Brand image helps the institution to occupy the target market. This differentiation is essential for standing out in a competitive marketplace and for consumers to recognise and prefer a brand over its competitors [20].

Interviewees mentioned the need for schools to clarify their brand positioning and strengthen brand communication during the re-branding process. For example, a detailed brand communication plan should be formulated to enable the community to better understand the school's characteristics and

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strengths through multi-channel publicity activities (e.g., media conferences, social media promotions, on- and off-campus publicity, etc.).

'.... It's like a person with a new hairstyle, and the whole person's mental outlook is different. By changing its name, schools can reposition themselves and present new educational concepts and development directions to the outside world... the comprehensive innovation of teaching philosophy, teaching quality and campus culture, so that the society can see a new and more dynamic education brand' (Teacher B).

'This is not only a new label, but also a comprehensive upgrade of the school's culture, values and strategic direction' (Teacher D).

The publicity department played an important role in this process by researching the opinions of students, faculty and alumni to ensure that the new name is both culturally rich and reflective of the school's characteristics. According to the research, best practices for improving reputation and brand recognition include conducting thorough market research, and engaging stakeholders [21]. This approach ensures that the institution's unique strengths and values are communicated effectively to its target audience. As an interviewee said:

'The publicity department researched the opinions of students, faculty and alumni to ensure that the new name was both culturally rich and reflective of the school's identity. Moreover, they publicised the name change through multiple channels, including a media conference, campus website, and social media, emphasising the positive meaning behind the name change and striving for a smooth transition' (Teacher B).

4.3. Improving Teaching Resources and Quality

Schools should invest more in teaching resources after re-branding to improve the quality of teaching and students' learning experience. Respondents indicated that there were significant improvements in teaching resources, facilities and faculty after conversion, which not only enhanced the academic standard of the school but also strengthened its competitiveness.

'The most important branding problem that independent colleges need to solve is how to maintain the original academic reputation and teaching quality, so as not to let outsiders have the misunderstanding that 're-brand = decline in the level of the school', and to shape a new brand image, so that the school will stand out among the many colleges and universities, and to attract high-quality students and faculty.' (Teacher A)

'Our school opened a new campus after the name change, most of our teachers used to be master's degree holders, but now the school has started to recruit a large number of PhDs and has also brought in a lot of professors, and the teaching resources have been improved.' (Student C)

In addition, through the introduction of advanced teaching equipment and materials and improvements in teaching methods and the curriculum, schools are able to better meet market demands and enhance the overall quality and competitiveness of students in employment.

5. Effects of Re-Branding Private Universities in China

5.1. Improved Enrolment Rates

Following the re-branding, the universities experienced a noticeable improvement in student enrolment, as a teacher stated,

'Enrolment is very favourable when a school sets 'zhuanshe' as the development goal. Schools at this stage of the land area, school building construction, faculty and other more aspects will be improved than the original, so in the enrolment promotion stage students in comparison with other schools will find this school more attractive than other institutions.' (Teacher C)

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The 'zhuanshe' process requires independent colleges to rename their schools, usually based on the school's strong disciplines and direction of growth. Therefore, the name gives an idea of the school's characteristics, which more accurately screens the intended student population.

'The university's name attracted more prospective students, especially those who may have previously disregarded the institutions due to perceived lower quality.' (Teacher C)

However, the name change is a double-edged sword, benefiting enrolment while affecting the choices of a small percentage of the student body. As a student said,

'I'm dance performance major, and when I was applying for college entrance exams, even though some colleges offered dance program, the name of its school was a polytechnic or something like that causing me to not want to consider those colleges, and would make me feel like I was going to school in a place that wasn't relevant to my field.' (Student B)

However, this issue is easy to solve by strengthening the enrolment promotion and providing students with more information about their majors. Following this, the enrolment impact of 'zhuanshe' and changing the name of colleges and universities is still more beneficial than harmful.

5.2. Enhanced Public Perception

'Zhuanshe' and re-branding also help to increase the trust between the university and the public. Independent colleges which were affiliated with public universities, may have given the public the impression that they had limited autonomy and management capability, while 'zhuanshe' is telling the public that the school is becoming fully privately-run and gaining greater autonomy to plan its curriculum and other affairs. As a teacher said,

'In my admissions process over the past decade, I have often been asked 'What is the relationship between your school and the public school in its name?' but now that we have a new name for our school, parents' and students' perceptions of the school have shifted, and they will embrace the character of this school rather than basing it on the name of the original public school.' (Teacher E)

The process of re-branding is also often accompanied by an upgrade of the school's culture and educational philosophy. When a school repositions its educational philosophy, campus culture and teaching methods, the public will see that the school is operating in a more modern and innovative way. These changes increase the public's confidence in the quality of education and the future of the school, transforming it from a 'second choice' to a dynamic and promising educational institution. This is confirmed by two students:

'When my school didn't change its name before I was less inclined to tell people where I went because they could tell by the name of the school that I hadn't been admitted to a good college, but the school's current name accentuates its own identity and no one will question its relationship with the public school.' (Student A)

'I'm a business major student, my school's current name and direction is business-related, and I'm currently applying for a master's degree overseas, so my educational background would be a good fit for the discipline I'll be attending in the future.' (Student C)

5.3. More Efficient Resource Management

Another critical internal effect of re-branding is the improved allocation and management of resources. As the schools are no longer restricted by the management framework of public universities, schools can proactively seek cooperation with enterprises, alumni and other external organisations to obtain donations, sponsorships and industrial cooperation opportunities. As a teacher confirmed,

'Our school cooperates with enterprises a lot due to the growth of the number of students, 'zhuanshe' increases the number of enrolments from 1000 to 3000, with the growth of enrolment, student employment rate is also important.' (Teacher A)

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The revised organisational structure enabled these institutions to optimise administrative procedures and more effectively distribute resources to important sectors, such as faculty development and infrastructure. By emphasising core competencies and diminishing reliance on other entities, the universities effectively allocated resources, resulting in enhanced academic standards and campus advancement.

Moreover, 'zhuanshe' is an opportunity for schools to attract outstanding faculty members. It requires the school to reach a target number of teachers, therefore the school will introduce PhDs or teachers with senior titles; this will make the school's faculty level higher than that of other institutions in a short time. This was confirmed by Teacher F,

'I joined this school last year and was attracted to it because it offered a good salary package, and during the interview process I learned that the school was in the process of converting, so it would pay more attention to teachers with PhDs.' (Teacher F)

6. Conclusion

This study explores the strategies and effects of re-branding private universities in China, focusing on a comparative analysis of three institutions: Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology, Zhuhai College of Science and Technology and Guangzhou College of Commerce. These universities were chosen because they provide a valuable context for studying the dynamics and impact of re-branding efforts in terms of their shared experience of 'zhuanshe'.

This research identifies three key re-branding strategies employed by these strategies. Firstly, they renamed the school according to its academic characteristics and strategic development, letting the public learn the advantages of the school from the name. Secondly, the universities strengthened their brand positioning and communication, using comprehensive marketing and outreach efforts to convey their renewed educational philosophy and institutional identity. Thirdly, they invested in upgrading their teaching resources and quality, enhancing faculty qualifications and infrastructure to better meet market and educational standards.

This study also revealed three significant effects of these re-branding strategies. First, there has been a significant increase in enrolment because students perceive the renamed school as more prestigious and academically more credible. Second, the re-branding effort has raised the public's perception of these universities, promoting trust and recognition among stakeholders. Finally, these institutions have experienced more effective resource management, using their newfound independence to optimise administrative processes, form external partnerships and attract high-quality teachers.

This study provides insights and strategies for private school re-branding but it only addresses one aspect of a broader challenge facing private universities. As competition intensifies and demographic shifts lead to a shrinking student population, these institutions must look beyond re-branding to develop long-term brand-building and marketing strategies. Therefore, further research should examine how private universities can establish their brand-building strategies to adapt to the changing market and remain competitive.

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