

# INDEPENDENT COLLEGE, A UNIQUE INNOVATION, IN THE HISTORY OF CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION- THE TEN YEAR PRACTICE AND EXPLORATION OF NANKAI UNIVERSITY BINHAI COLLEGE

Ting Wen, Min Guo, Dongsheng Zhang

Nankai University Binhai College, Tianjin, China

zhangds@nankai.edu.cn

**Abstract:** Independent college is widely regarded as a unique innovation in the history of Chinese higher education with its advantages of “excellent education, independent administration and private ownership”. Born and developed in the popularizing process of Chinese higher education, independent college has made remarkable achievements and outstanding contributions to Chinese higher education after 15-year hard work and great efforts. With the deepening of all-round reform in Chinese education, independent college now faces a grave challenge to its existence and development. Catching the opportunity when government introduces new policies, living up to the expectations of students and their parents, deepening the reform and innovation, realizing the goal of building high-level independent college through reform and innovation—all have become important tasks for us to study and solve. This thesis is based on the ten-year practice and exploration of Nankai University Binhai College and the rational analysis of founding background, types and existing problems of independent colleges. It studies the university-running model, which features the cooperation with Chinese government, prestigious universities listed in 211 Project and 985 Project, the government of economically developed areas and leading enterprises. Therefore the sustainable and healthy development of independent college will be unswervingly promoted.

**Key words:** Independent college, Chinese higher education, A unique innovation

## Introduction

Independent College was born and developed in the popularizing process of Chinese higher education and the deepening of Chinese educational reform. It became a unique existence in the history of Chinese higher education with its advantages of “excellent education, independent administration and private ownership”. As an important accomplishment in the reform and innovation in Chinese higher educational system, independent college has attained rapid development and made remarkable achievements after 15-year great efforts. The rapid expansion of school scale and the continuous improvement of its educational quality have made remarkable contribution to the scale-up of Chinese higher education, the development of private higher education, the adoption of social educational resources and the cultivation of competent and well-trained people. Independent college has become

an important growth engine of Chinese education and played an important role in promoting educational reform. Now, with the comprehensive reform in Chinese education deepening and the trial running of independent colleges coming to an end, independent college is ready to bring out its full potential in its development and administration despite the grave challenge to its existence and development. The issue of Decree No. 26, i.e. *The Measures for Setup and Management of Independent College* has pointed out the direction for its development. Catching the opportunity when government introduces new policies, living up to the expectations of students and their parents, choosing correctly the development path, realizing the goal of building high-level independent college through reform and innovation—all have become important tasks for us to study and solve. During its ten-year practice, Nankai University Binhai College seeks further cooperation with Nankai University which boasts its advantageous educational resources and Tianjin Binhai New Area which is known as “a new pole of economic growth in China”, and strives to draw social resources into its cooperative university-running model. It successfully finds a sustainable and healthy development road for independent college.

### I. The Founding Background and Types of Independent Colleges

Reviewing the founding background and history of independent colleges, analyzing government’s original intention of establishing them are beneficial to making rational judgment about their prospects and making choices to achieve their sustainable and healthy development. Independent college is to meet the demands of the institutional reform and popularization of Chinese higher education, to fulfill people’s requirement for higher education and to overcome the shortage of educational resources. The development history of independent college can be divided into three important stages from the analysis of the founding background.

#### A. Free Development Stage

Independent college grows out of private affiliated college, and the first one was founded in 1999. At that time, in order to meet the need for the scale expansion of higher education, some regions and universities began to establish private affiliated colleges, represented by Zhejiang University City College, jointly founded by Hangzhou Municipal Government and Zhejiang University. In the initial period from 1999 to 2002, independent college existed and developed in its own unique way.

#### B. The Pilot Stage

In the latter half of 2002, the Ministry of Education, on the basis of repeated researches, has made assessment about private affiliated colleges, holding that the running mode of private affiliated college has demonstrated advantages after four-year practice. In order to encourage, guide and specify the social funds being introduced into higher education, the Ministry of Education issued document No.8 in 2003, i.e. *On Standardizing and Strengthening the Management of Independent College Run in New Mechanism and Mode by Universities*. This document for the first time renamed the private affiliated college ‘independent college’, specified its nature, guiding principles, and established the university-running principle of “excellent education, independent administration, private ownership”. To be specific, excellent education puts emphasis on bringing in excellent educational resources; independent administration stresses the legal and institutional independence; private ownership underlines the private attribute of independent college. Starting from Document No.8, independent colleges made the transition from free development to standard operation with the support of the national policies. Simultaneously, in the latter half of 2003, the Ministry of Education inspected, cleaned up and rectified over 360 private affiliated colleges. This measure closed down more than 100 independent colleges and had 249 independent colleges re-registered and put on file. Since then, independent college won the wide acclaim from the society for its three characteristics .

### **C. Standard Operation and Self-development Stage**

Since the implementation of Document No.8, there was a large-scale and high-speed development in independent colleges. However, driven by the pursuit of profits, some independent colleges raised serious concerns for its non-standard operations, The Ministry of Education attached great importance to this phenomenon, after investigating and soliciting opinions from all sides, it issued Decree No. 26 in 2008, i.e. *The Measures for Setup and Management of Independent College*, in which policies and systems related to independent college are modified, attribute of independent college defined, rights and interests of independent college, applying universities and relative sponsors clearly explained. From the issue of Decree No.26, independent colleges started the standard operation and self-development. At this stage, Ministry of Education proposed a five-year transitional period of Inspection & assessment, and offered 5 choices for independent colleges. First, continue to operate in the mode of independent college; second, step back to apply to run public college; third, be changed into private ordinary college; fourth, be incorporated into other private colleges; last, be closed down.

Looking closely at the founding background and development history, independent colleges lack uniform mode in practice, which resulted in the diversified types of independent colleges. They can be roughly divided into 4 types in terms of the funding resources and cooperative patterns.

#### **A. Independent Colleges Sponsored by Public Universities and Private Funds.**

This type agrees with the cooperative university-running mode stipulated in Decree No.26 issued by Ministry of Education, and accounts for 1/5 of all independent colleges. This type is more likely to make the mistake of sacrificing educational quality due to excessive pursuit of profits.

#### **B. Independent Colleges Affiliated to Public University with Non-governmental Investment**

This type of college is established independently, with all the funds coming from private investment. It is supported by public universities only in its teaching faculty and teaching administration. The proportion of these “borrowing shell” colleges is relatively low.

#### **C. Independent College Solely Sponsored by Public University**

It is the so-called “school within a school” mode, accounting almost half of all independent colleges. Usually, the school conditions and standard are limited by that of host universities.

#### **D. Independent College Sponsored by Public University, Government and Private Investors.**

This type draws investments from public university, local government and private enterprises. Although this type at present does not have a large percentage, it enjoys a stable development, an optimistic growing trend, an excellent educational quality and a high social identity, thanks to the stable private funding resources negotiated and invited by local government.

By analyzing the founding background and the types of independent colleges, it can be concluded that: First, as a new emerging force, it aroused great concern of Ministry of Education, which issued a series of official documents to standardize and regulate its operation; second, despite the alive and flourishing prospect, independent college faces long-term and arduous tasks; third, independent college should advance toward the goal of “improving quality, standardizing the administration”, it is required by Decree No. 26 to choose one appropriate university-running mode out of the five options, and also to bring out its full potential to realize its characteristic development.

## **II. Major Achievements and Problems of Independent Colleges**

### **A. Major Achievements.**

In recent years, under the guidance of Ministry of Education and local educational administrative departments, with continuous rectification and self-improvement, independent colleges have made historic

contribution to China's educational development by advancing its educational quality, upgrading its teaching facilities, improving educational mechanism and standardizing university-running process.

There are three outstanding achievements from a macro perspective.

**1. Independent colleges provide the people with more opportunities to receive higher education.**

Independent college meets people's diversified demands for higher education, and promotes educational equity and social stability. It has, to a large extent, advanced the popularizing process of Chinese higher education, expanded the scale of higher education, and explored the path to develop higher education with Chinese characteristics.

According to the educational statistics issued by Ministry of Education in 2013, there were 1170 universities and colleges nationwide, among them, 292 were independent colleges, accounting for 24.96%, and undertaking 1/3 undergraduate enrollment expansion responsibility. Since the founding of Binhai College, it has maintained a sound momentum in recruiting students. In terms of the number and quality of the enrolled students, the college ranks among the top colleges in the same category in China.

**2. Independent colleges foster competent, highly-skilled people.** Over the past 15 years, independent colleges have fostered over 3 million graduates for the society, partly meeting the demand of regional economic and social development for competent and well-trained people. The initial employment rate of the independent college graduates is the fourth highest compared with that of other universities and colleges of various types. Taking our college as an example, up till now, 15,262 students have graduated, with an average graduation rate of 96.97%, employment rate of 94.01%, The Major of Auction and Pawn has an employment rate of 100% for several years. For ten years, nearly 1,000 graduates from our college have been admitted to the postgraduate programs of universities at home and abroad, among them, more than 100 graduates admitted to such key universities of 985 Project and 211 Project as Peking University, Nankai University and Tianjin University. Some students have even pursued their further studies in New York University, the University of Edinburgh and other prestigious universities abroad. Each year, a large number of graduates are employed in Bank of China, China Railway Group, Yili Group, China Electronics Technology Group and other well-known enterprises and institutions. The graduates from Binhai College have been widely acclaimed by their employers for their competence.

**3. Independent colleges activate social educational resources.** Independent colleges fully mobilize non-governmental sectors to jointly run the school, and absorb abundant non-fiscal educational input. They have successfully solved the problem of people's growing demand for higher education with insufficient higher educational resources. At present, the social funds drawn by independent colleges have amounted to 60 billion Yuan, accounting for over 11% of national higher education expenditure. Given all that, independent colleges are the precious treasure of Chinese higher education, which should not receive marginalized management. The establishment of high-level independent colleges has become the call of the times.

**B. Major Problems**

In recent years, China has attached great importance to the development of independent colleges, which has in turn greatly promoted the healthy development of these colleges. However, with the all-round reform in higher education deepening, some deep-seated problems existing in independent colleges are emerging, and the pressure of existence facing them gradually increased. The problems existing in administration, mechanism and distribution of educational resources hindered the strength of independent colleges being fully unleashed.

**1. The Board of Trustees in independent colleges is not effective.** Some independent colleges have no board of trustees, some, though installed with one, do not have standard discussion methods, the board could neither meet and discuss as required nor carry out their duties in earnest. As these boards of trustees fail to bring the functional roles into full play, the decision-making and the executive are uncoordinated, President-directed system under the leadership of the board cannot be implemented, which harm the initiative, spontaneity and

creativity of independent colleges.

**2. Independent colleges lack standard administrative mechanism.** Some independent colleges still follow the administrative mode of their host universities, with members of the administration appointed by host universities, therefore over-centralization weakens the initiative and innovation of the president of independent college when running the school. Some colleges are overly dependent on their host universities, and refer all the important decisions to them for instructions, such submissiveness suppresses their initiative and flexibility, restrains the university-running features from forming. Some suffer rigid internal management and over-stuffing, the effective recruitment system and competition mechanism are not in place, which fail to prepare the faculty and staff members for both promotion and demotion, both employment and dismissal, therefore the developing vitality undermined.

**3. Property rights are not clear.** As to the structure of ownership, many independent colleges don't have qualified stakeholders but virtual cooperators. Till now, some independent colleges still face the problem of not having their property transferred under their names. Some cooperators lack the correct understanding of "non-profit" feature of education, overtly pursuing profits in its running process, keen on the infrastructure construction, ignoring the investment in education, therefore the teaching quality is affected and the sustainable development inhibited. Some independent colleges are obsessed with the development of popular disciplines and majors, they ignored the basic disciplines and humanities, accordingly, the intensive construction is weakened, and the educational quality is sacrificed.

**4. Regulatory policy and assistance from the government are not in place.** The government does not offer financial support or implements too "rigid" college enrollment policy to independent colleges, thus resulting in the struggling difficulties facing them.

### **III. Practice and Exploration of the University-running Cooperation between Famous Universities Listed in Project 985 and Project 211 and Local Government**

We realized from our practice that the key to retain the great vitality of independent colleges lies in the solution of problems in university-running mode, administrative mechanism and educational resources. With multiple modes open to selection, we show our bold innovation in finding the most suitable one geared to our individual reality. We managed to reach all standards asked of independent colleges. We pride ourselves on sufficient funds, abundant educational resources and clear property rights. Our college fully demonstrates the features of "excellent education, independent administration and private ownership".

Located in the core of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei City Agglomeration, Binhai College stands in Dagang Ecological Park of Higher Education in Tianjin Binhai New Area District. In order to solve the problems in university-running modes, mechanism and educational resources, during its early years, Binhai College collaborated closely with the prestigious Nankai University and the government of Tianjin Binhai New Area, and has formed its own unique characteristics. Now Binhai College still sticks to the university-running principle of "building first-class college with distinctive characteristics from a high starting point", and intensifies its efforts to cooperate with strong institutions and complement each other's advantages. The college has been awarded by National Institute of Education Sciences (NIES) and other institutions as the most competitive independent college in China and one of the top ten independent colleges in China. It has also been awarded by Tianjin Education Committee and Tianjin Personnel Bureau as an outstanding institution in Tianjin's education system.

We learned from our practice that the adoption of the model of joint cooperation between famous universities and local government not only conforms with the regulation proposed by Ministry of Education, – establishing independent colleges by universities and social organizations using non-governmental financial funds, but also demonstrates the innovation in cooperative modes. The local government participates in the university-running process by performing its function in organization, coordination and supervision, this socially-acclaimed

model effectively prevents the educational quality being harmed by the pursuit of profits by investors, and reduces the possibility of administration interfering educational independence, and ensures the non-profit feature.

**A. Sticking to the Principle of Running the University by Law, Ensuring the Implementation of the Regulations Concerning Independent Colleges Proposed by Ministry of Education.**

For ten years, Binhai College has been upholding the principle of running the university by law and practicing scientific administration. With the support from and cooperation with Nankai University and the government of Binhai New Area, Binhai College from the very beginning gained its independence in the following 7 aspects: It has its own campus and teaching facilities; it enrolls students independently; it grants students graduation certificates of Nankai University Binhai College; it conducts independent financial accounting; its fixed assets now has reached 569 million yuan and has been completely transferred under the name of Binhai College; thus realizing its goal of clear property rights.

**B. Keeping up its Non-profit Feature, Ensuring the Continuous Improvement of Teaching Facilities.**

Excellent school conditions are the basic guarantee for the sustainable and healthy development of Binhai College and the improvement of teaching quality. Some independent colleges, driven by the market, blindly pursues profits, ignores its non-profit feature and social responsibility, which in turn undermined their educational quality. Sponsors of our college believe that although independent college is non-governmental organization, it is by no means the product of market economy; it was founded with the social funds drawn by excellent universities, and for the purpose of meeting the requirements for the popularization of higher education. As the complement to higher education, independent college should represent its non-profit feature. Currently, independent college is in its infancy, requiring the input of nutrition. It should develop from a high starting point, improve its teaching quality, foster more competent people, and make efforts to build its own brand. For this purpose, all the sponsors of Binhai College have rendered their full support in such areas as human resources, funds, land, facilities etc., which greatly improved our college condition and our university-running ability. Binhai College has over 10,000 students on campus, and it occupies an area of 67 hectares. Over the years, there has been a substantial increase in the floor space of school building, the total value of teaching and research facilities, and the number of paper books and e-books.

The “zero-payback” decision made by all sponsors is rarely seen in other independent colleges across the nation, it strengthens the non-profit feature of Binhai College. It is proved that independent college and its cooperators from prestigious universities, local government and social organization have complementary advantages which will help improve our school condition and teaching quality.

**C. On the Basis of the Advantages of Nankai University and Binhai New Area, Binhai College has Formed its Own Unique Educational and Teaching Features.**

We learned from our practice that the independent college sponsored by key research-oriented university enjoys more advantages in improving its ability to foster competent, well-trained people. The opening-up and development of Binhai New Area is an important national development strategy, this strategy provides a broad platform for the curricula design, the adjustment of enrollment, the construction of students’ training base, and the employment of students etc.. For ten years, Binhai College embraced continuous development and innovation by making the best of the quality teaching and educational resources of Nankai University and the geographic advantage of Binhai New Area.

Nankai University is a key comprehensive university directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. It is one of the 211 Project and 985 Project universities in China. Nankai University was a non-

governmental university, it was founded in 1919 by patriotic educators Zhang Boling and Yan Xiu. It is the alma mater of Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the People's Republic of China. It has fostered a large number of outstanding people such as Chern Shiingshen, Wu Dayou and Cao Yu. In the past one hundred years, Nankai University enjoys a high reputation both at home and abroad by its long history, glorious tradition and prudent school ethos, and it has made great contributions to the revival and prosperity of China. For the past ten years, Binhai College made great efforts to develop Binhai College into a first-class independent college by inheriting the excellent school tradition of Nankai University and fostering competent people for the society.

Binhai New Area was established in November 2009 with approval from the State Council. It lies on the east coast of Tianjin, at the joint between Bohai-rim Economic Belt and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei City Agglomeration. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as part of the national development strategy, Binhai New Area will play an even greater role in promoting economic revitalization in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei and Bohai-rim Region, the interaction between the east and the west, and the coordinated development of the national economy. Nankai University Binhai College is located in Dagang Higher Education Eco-Park in Tianjin Binhai New Area, adjacent to Tianjin Port, TEDA, Dongjiang Bonded Port, Airport Economic Area, Harbor Economic Area, and Nangang Industrial Zone. The development and opening-up of Binhai New Area with remarkable geographic advantages offered a historic opportunity for the development of Binhai College.

**1. Scientifically defining development direction and setting cultivation objective.** Direction and cultivation objective determine the future of a college. Establishing a high-level independent college needs to make suitable choice in multiple social needs. Our development direction and cultivation objective are as follows: To meet the needs of economic and social development and the students' diversified demands, Binhai College strives to foster competent, well-trained people by promoting the development of students' all-round capabilities and the improvement of their moral integrity, intellectual ability, physical strength and aesthetic values. Efforts are also made to develop the college into one with its particular characteristics, with the application-oriented undergraduate education as its basis, the improvement of educational quality as its guideline, the scientific research and internationalization as its support, and the offering of service to the society as its obligation. Moreover, we collaborate closely with Nankai University in curricula design, teaching facilities construction, faculty and staff training, thus promoting greatly our university-running ability.

**2. Strengthening the cultivation of faculty and staff.** Faculty is an important guarantee for improving educational quality and enhancing the core competitiveness of college. The college strives to build a strong faculty of outstanding teachers with professors from Nankai University as the core, its own full-time teachers as the backbone and excellent part-time teachers as a supplement, so as to maintain the sustainable development of the college. Binhai College has nearly 600 full-time faculties. The deans of the departments in the college are from Nankai University, and they are the professors or experts with rich experiences in teaching and management.

The college also has a perfect teaching supervision system. Professor Chen Hong, former executive vice president of Nankai University and chairman of Tianjin Federation of Literary and Art Circles, is the head superintendent of Binhai College. Professor Che Mingzhou, former superintendent of Nankai University, and other experts and scholars have also been hired to supervise the education in the college. In addition, Feng Daxuan, the eminent former vice president of Taiwan Tsinghua University, was appointed as honorary professor of Binhai College, Miyaoka Naoki, head of Nippon Color and Design Research Institute, was appointed as visiting professor of Binhai College. These measures provide effective support for the improvement of teaching and management in the college. All these above-mentioned advantages formed the unique features of Binhai College.

**3. Developing characteristic majors.** Major construction is closely linked to the existence and development of the college. The curricula design is closely related to but not a simple duplicate of the advantageous disciplines of Nankai University, our college highlights its characteristics in setting up majors and

aims especially to foster well-trained people to serve the development and opening of Binhai New Area. By doing so, Binhai College successfully avoids major similarities with other universities and colleges. It is committed to cultivating urgently-needed, highly-skilled people for regional development. At the same time, Binhai College actively searches for its development direction and locates the growing points in its major construction. Binhai College sets up and reforms majors in accordance with the market requirement, establishes majors together with enterprises or foreign universities and strengthens the key discipline construction. It set up new majors such as Internet of things technology, financial engineering futures dealing and management, industrial engineering, communication engineering, digital media technology, etc., Which are warmly welcomed by students and relevant enterprises. Now, there are 40 majors in its 9 departments (economics and management, finance, foreign languages, law and government, arts, information management, computer science, electronic science, environmental science and engineering), which fall into 7 disciplines.

**4. Extensively carrying out the international university-running principle.** The key to the existence of independent college is to have abundant educational resources at its back. Taking international university-running path, elevating the international university-running capacity is an urgent requirement for the Chinese higher education as well as for optimizing educational resources. For this reason, Binhai College takes international university-running cooperation as an important strategy, and draws experience from Nankai University's international cooperation, and explores the effective channels to foster competent well-trained people together with international(regional)universities. Binhai College carries out exchanges and cooperation with foreign institutions of higher-learning and puts cross-cultural concept into its teaching and campus culture so as to embody its university-running idea of being international and opening to the outside world. Binhai College has established cooperative relationships with more than 10 international (regional) universities and research institutions, including St. Cloud State University, the University of Huddersfield, BPP University, Northumbria University, Josai International University, Hakodate University, Heian Jogakuin University, Nippon Color and Design Research Institute, Edith Cowan University, Mingdao University, Nankai University of Science and Technology. Binhai College has kept improving its undergraduate "2+2" joint training projects in finance, software engineering, environmental management, psychology, accounting and other professional fields. It also actively promotes Sino-foreign cooperation in its major development, recommends its graduates to pursue further studies or participate in short-term exchanges abroad, encourages its teachers and staff to receive trainings abroad, and co-sponsors international conferences.

For ten years, thanks to the supports from various circles, Binhai College has made a marked advance in university-running and has won wide acclaim. In 2013, the college won the second prize at the 7<sup>th</sup> teaching achievement contest for institutions of higher learning in Tianjin. Binhai College has been named twice as a pilot unit for patent work in Tianjin by Tianjin City Intellectual Property Office. The college attaches great importance to arousing students' interest in learning and stimulating their creativity. In recent years, the students have worked out more than 5,000 innovative designs and successfully applied for 405 national patents. In 2012, with the accreditation of its "College Students Business Incubation Base" by Tianjin Municipal Science and Technology Commission, the college became an incubator for technology enterprises under the leadership of the commission. As the first model base in Tianjin for college students' business incubation, it has attracted 13 projects of which 5 companies that were registered and operated on the campus only have developed into independent incorporated companies registered at the industrial and commercial departments to engage in operation and management. The business of the registered companies in the incubation base covers a wide range of fields: IT, processing and production, energy development, manufacturing, new materials research and development, and biotechnology, etc.

In academic competitions, our students competed with students from key universities, they made



outstanding achievements and won nearly 100 key awards at the national or municipal level, such as first prize at the National University Logistics Design Competition, first prize at the national contest on professional software development and design, second prize at the National Undergraduate Electronic Design contest, third prize at the first International College Mathematical Modeling Invitational Tournament (in China Division), and third prize at the national information technology application competition. Jin Ke, a student from the Department of Foreign Languages of Binhai College, won the first prize at the 2013 National English Contest for College Students (in Beijing and Tianjin Division).

The Dragon Boat Team of Binhai College has several times won prizes in the International Collegiate Dragon Boat Invitational Tournament, World University Dragon Boat Championships, National College Dragon Boat Championships, and Tianjin Haihe River Dragon Boat Festival. In 2012, the Rowing and Dragon Boat Branch of Chinese College Students Sports Association granted the highest honor to Binhai College, as one of the top ten colleges in China that have made outstanding contributions to the sport.

In 2012, 267 volunteers from the college provided services to TWAS General Meeting, the Ninth National University Games, Tianjin Summer Davos Forum and other exhibitions and events, which were covered on the mainstream media. Their services won wide acclaim from the organizers. At the Ninth Universiade, the volunteers won two honorary titles from the Organizing Committee and Tianjin Television Station. In October 2013, when the East Asian Games was held in Tianjin, students of the college volunteered to provide services to the badminton games.

It shows that independent college jointly established by key universities and local government have huge potential and a bright future. On the basis of our ten-year achievements, we will live up to the expectations of the country, the society, the students and their parents, deepen the reform and improve the administrative scheme and ability, and establish new university system. We will forge ahead to develop Binhai College into an outstanding independent college with distinctive characteristics, and promote the globalization of education.

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