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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Organizational legitimacy and the disciplinary evolution of Chinese higher education: Historical dilemmas and prospects

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ABSTRACT

Higher education as a discipline in China has consistently faced a severe legitimacy crisis. To transcend the limitations of static historical narratives in addressing this issue, this study integrated organizational legitimacy theory with Burton Clark's triangle of coordination model to develop a dynamic analytical framework for tracing the construction, contestation, and reconstruction of the disciplinary legitimacy across different historical periods. This framework was employed to systematically reveal the disciplinary developmental trajectory under the interactive forces of the state, the academe, and the market. The findings indicate that the legitimacy of Chinese higher education as a discipline has been constructed primarily in three stages: The initial acquisition of legitimacy (1949-1977), the period of legitimacy expansion and contestation (1978-2010), and the stage of legitimacy reconstruction (2011-present). Chinese higher education as a discipline has long exhibited an unbalanced legitimacy structure, characterized by an overreliance on regulative legitimacy. This imbalance has driven the disciplinary institutional and theoretical dependence on global models, subsequently contributing to its marginalization within global academic discourse. To address current developmental dilemmas, Chinese higher education as a discipline urgently needs to actively promote interdisciplinary integration, strengthen theoretical innovation and autonomy, and enhance its international influence. Only through the coordinated advancement of this threefold strategy can Chinese higher education achieve a breakthrough and sustainable development.

Key words: organizational legitimacy, disciplinary development, Chinese higher education, institutional change, triangle of coordination model, regulative legitimacy, normative legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

In Western academia, higher education is typically seen as a research field encompassing multiple disciplines, whereas in China, it is seen as a distinct discipline. After more than four decades of development, the discipline of Chinese higher education has achieved significant results in terms of scale and institutionalization, as evidenced by the growth of master's and doctoral degree programs offered at universities, the expansion of the domestic academic community, and the flourishing of academic journals. This institutionalization, however, is accompanied not only by prosperity but also by skepticism regarding the disciplinary legitimacy—a problem manifested in the ambiguity of its core concepts, its underdeveloped theoretical systems, its lack of unique research methods, and a disconnect between disciplinary theory and practice. In recent years, teaching

and research units, such as institutes of higher education in some Chinese universities, have grappled with varying degrees of downsizing or closure. This phenomenon has reignited academic debate over the legitimacy of Chinese higher education as a discipline. Its development has been studied by numerous scholars from a historical perspective, providing detailed accounts of its evolution and key events, but these explorations have predominantly focused on static historical narratives and empirical summaries, thereby failing to systematically analyze disciplinary legitimization as a dynamic process.

To move beyond mere historical description, the present research developed an analytical framework that is based on organizational legitimacy theory and Burton Clark's (1994) triangle of coordination model and applicable to the examination of disciplinary legitimacy. It also adopted a sociological perspective in exploring the internal mechanisms by which legitimacy has evolved in Chinese higher education given that the discipline is confronted with a complex, systemic legitimacy crisis. Such a dilemma of varying degrees and forms also plagues many emerging, marginalized, or interdisciplinary fields in China. Although this study focused on higher education, it may offer insights for other nascent sectors or disciplines in similar predicaments, thereby contributing to the modernization of these domains in China. Theoretically, this study provides a dynamic, triple-legitimacy framework for understanding disciplinary development. Practically, it offers a reflective tool for discipline builders and institutional administrators to diagnose legitimacy gaps and design strategies for sustainable development. For policymakers, the analysis underscores the need to move beyond top-down regulative support and foster environments conducive to theoretical innovation and interdisciplinary integration to achieve sustainable disciplinary development in emerging fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of Chinese higher education as a discipline

The institutionalization of Chinese higher education as a discipline began in the late 1970s during the country's period of reform and opening up. Pioneers, represented by Mr. Pan Maoyuan, who was the founder of higher education discipline in China and devoted his whole life to the birth and development of higher education, were the first to advocate for the creation of the discipline, systematically arguing for its necessity and feasibility at the theoretical level. In 1978, Xiamen University established the country's first Higher Education Research Office, which marked the emergence of specialized research institutions in China. In 1983, the "Discipline of Higher Education" was included in the national

"Catalogue of Academic Disciplines and Specializations", granting it the status of a formal secondary discipline—a classification within China's hierarchical academic system that denotes a sub-field under a primary discipline (*e.g.*, Pedagogy), as distinct from secondary education, which refers to high school level schooling. That same year, the China Association of Higher Education was formally established, and higher education research institutions from various regions were integrated. Xiamen University founded the first master's and doctoral degree programs in 1984 and 1986, respectively, signaling the creation of a specialized system for talent cultivation in higher education (Li & Pan, 2005).

After gaining institutional recognition, Chinese higher education as a discipline entered a period of rapid expansion, with the number of master's and doctoral programs offered growing significantly, research institutions vigorously established in universities, and professional journals of various styles developed rapidly (Bie, 2023). These initiatives formed a vibrant academic community. During this period, as well, Chinese scholars in higher education engaged in comprehensive debates on meta issues such as the objects of research in higher education, the logical starting point for such endeavors, and the methodologies to be used for such purposes (Zhang & Ni, 2019). Concurrently, scholars began to reflect on the foundations of the disciplinary legitimacy. In 2011, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council issued the revised *Catalogue of Disciplines for Degree Conferral and Talent Cultivation* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011). The new version de-emphasized the status of secondary disciplines, allowing degree-granting institutions autonomy in setting up such specializations within the scope of their authority to offer training in primary disciplines. Against the backdrop of the "Double First-Class" initiative, which is a national policy launched in 2015 aimed at developing world-class universities and first-class disciplines, universities concentrated resources in advantageous disciplines, constraining the space of survival for marginalized fields of study, even including the higher education as a discipline itself (Jiang, 2017). This treatment drove the legitimacy crisis to manifest in more complex forms, during which the inherent lack of autonomy in the knowledge system of higher education was also amplified.

The legitimacy of higher education as a discipline in China

Scholars have probed into the legitimacy of Chinese higher education as a discipline since the early 21st century. The disciplinary academic legitimacy refers to the key distinction between this discipline and that discipline, and this distinction is the foundation of such

legitimacy (Wang, J. H., 2004). Chinese higher education had only achieved administrative legitimization and social legitimization but not academic legitimacy (Feng, 2005). It followed a construction path that involved the use of external disciplinary forms to facilitate the creation of its internal knowledge system, but such a structure was incomplete, having only an under-developed basic theoretical scheme (Zhu, 2009). This deficiency prompted adjustments to disciplinary policies and the disciplinary external environment, but these came with a new identity crisis that stimulated a resurgence of discussions. This phenomenon gave rise to an institutional crisis, reflecting a new trend of challenges plaguing higher education (Ye, 2018). This problem was addressed by scholars through different solutions, including breaking through policy bottlenecks and abandoning the pursuit of traditional disciplinary standards as central measures (Fu & Gong, 2021). Its causes and related coping strategies were investigated, but research has ultimately failed to delve deeply into the evolutionary process of disciplinary legitimacy across different historical periods.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organizational legitimacy theory

Legitimacy, a concept widely used in management studies, was first proposed by Max Weber (1997) in sociological research and applied to fields such as politics. Weber's theory was critically adopted and improved by Parsons (1960), who initially incorporated legitimacy into organizational sociology research to explain the phenomenon of convergence in the development of organizational institutional structures. This adaptation advanced the extension of legitimacy from the political ream to the organizational context (Parsons, 1960). The newly emerged school of institutionalism further developed conceptions of organizational legitimacy, with that proposed by Suchman (1995) being the most extensively accepted and used thus far. Organizational legitimacy is a general construct that refers to the legitimacy of the existence of an organization whose actions are regarded as desirable, proper, or appropriate in accordance with a socially constructed system of standards, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Suchman's logic in conceptualizing organizational legitimacy is consistent with Scott's (2020) perspective, which laid the foundation for understanding legitimacy in organizational systems.

On the basis of the discussion above, the present study operated under the assumption that organizational legitimacy is the comprehensive embodiment of a series of actions and strategies adopted by social organizations to gain recognition from the social system. In other words, a legitimate organization is one whose behaviors align with prevailing governmental legal systems, socially established moral norms or industry standards, and public cognitive perceptions. Its survival and development therefore receive ongoing support from the environment that surrounds it.

Organizational legitimacy has also been classified by foreign scholars from various perspectives. It was first categorized by Singh *et al.* (1986) into internal and external legitimacy before it was subdivided by Aldrich and Fiol (1994) into sociopolitical and cognitive legitimacy. Singh *et al.*'s (1986) classification is relevant to the stakeholders of organizations, government agencies, and so on, which evaluate organizational behavior according to established standards or regulations and grant it recognition accordingly. Aldrich and Fiol's (1994) categorization refers to the degree to which a new organization is familiar to, recognized by, and accepted in society as a whole, particularly through the process of communication. On this basis, Suchman (1986) proposed his classical three-dimensional classification: Pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy is based on rational evaluation and related to stakeholders' judgments about the benefits that an organization brings. Moral legitimacy is associated with stakeholders' normative evaluations of an organization, while cognitive legitimacy stems from taken-for-granted understandings of the environment, representing a state wherein an organization is accepted unreflectively as necessary or inevitable. Meanwhile, Scott (2020) revised Aldrich and Fiol's (1994) classification, further refining sociopolitical legitimacy into regulative and normative legitimacy. Regulative legitimacy centers on formal laws and regulations or social standards, while normative legitimacy emphasizes conformity to specific social value systems. The author further proposed that organizational legitimacy encompasses cognitive, regulative, and normative legitimacy (Scott, 2020). Regulative legitimacy revolves around compliance with formal rules, laws, and regulations; normative legitimacy relates to adherence to institutional norms, values, and beliefs; and cognitive legitimacy concerns the degree of understanding and acceptance by the general public. This classification has been widely used in subsequent research.

The triangle of coordination model

In the 1980s, Burton Clark (1994) conducted a cross-national study of higher education organizations, revealing the fundamental components of higher education systems from an organizational perspective. Based on this work, Burton Clark (1994) initially proposed and constructed the triangle of coordination model and argued that the state, the market, and academic authority are three key forces influencing the development of a higher education system. A balance among these three forces is a necessary condition for the

sustainable development of higher education; weakening any single force would lead to imbalance, trapping higher education within a distorted structure. Following its introduction, numerous scholars have utilized this theory to conduct extensive and in-depth research across various areas, including higher education policy and management, the cultivation of professional degree postgraduates in local universities, undergraduate major construction in universities, higher vocational education, and international comparative education.

Theoretical framework

Organizations are embedded in social and political institutional environments, and their practices and structures reflect influence from external rules, traditions, and social beliefs. Therefore, organizational legitimacy theory is an important lens through which to study organizations operating in strong institutional environments, such as schools (Wu & Shen, 2010). Every institution, whether a company, nonprofit organization, or school, must persuade the public of its legitimacy to survive (Shirley, 2015). Organizational legitimacy helps institutions access and acquire the resources that are critical for their growth and survival—a reality that is especially true for start-ups or new organizations facing the liability of newness (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). The acquisition of such legitimacy is therefore a crucial requirement for emerging institutions.

One such nascent domain is Chinese higher education as a discipline, which is characterized by a short history of over 40 years. Its formation and evolution have also been confronted with problems of compliance with national laws and regulations, conformity to social norms or industry standards, and the attainment of broad social recognition. Put differently, the essence of its origins and development lies in a continuous process of acquiring, enhancing, and maintaining legitimacy. Through the lens of organizational legitimacy theory, we can both statically identify the legitimacy of the discipline as viewed in a specific institutional environment and dynamically reveal the process through which it interacts with the external environment via strategic actions to seek recognition.

Correspondingly, this study extended the application of organizational legitimacy theory to the context of disciplinary development. In defining legitimacy and identifying its dimensions, the research drew on Scott's (2020) classification framework, namely, regulative, normative, and cognitive legitimacy. Specifically with respect to the discipline of interest, regulative legitimacy emphasizes that development must align with relevant national disciplinary systems, such as whether it is included in China's formal national catalogue system and whether it can gain recognition and support from educational authorities. Normative legitimacy underscores whether the discipline can establish a standardized internal knowledge system and external social institutionalization adapted to existing disciplinary standards as well as whether it can secure acknowledgment from the academic community. Cognitive legitimacy refers to recognition by the general public of the disciplinary value and function, manifested as support via public opinion, media attention, and public understanding and acceptance of the disciplinary significance.

To better explain the drivers of change in disciplinary legitimacy, this study used Burton Clark's (1994) triangle of coordination model, positioning the evolution of disciplinary legitimacy within the macro power structure of the stat-market-academia to uncover the dynamics behind the legitimization process. This integrated analytical framework views disciplinary legitimacy as the outcome of the interplay among three forces—state regulation, market orientation, and academic autonomy—shedding light on how the discipline acquired, maintained, and reconstructed legitimacy through policy adjustments, changes in social demands, and interactions with academia. Ultimately, the framework enabled us to form a three-dimensional and profound understanding of how legitimacy has been cultivated in Chinese higher education across its history (Figure 1).
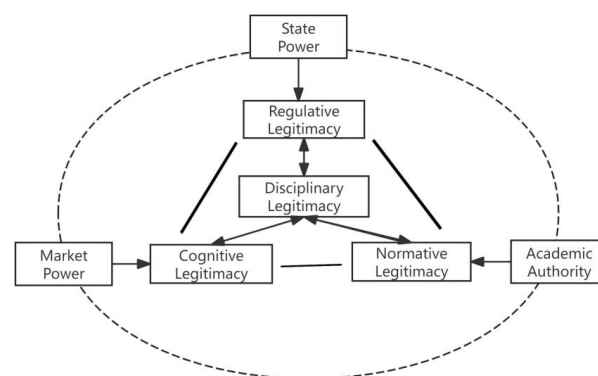

Figure 1. Analytical framework.

The dynamic evolution of disciplinary legitimacy is influenced not only by the regulative pressures stemming predominantly from state policy but also by the interaction between changing public demands and academic forces. Differences in the balance of power among these three in various historical periods have shaped the unique trajectory by which China's higher education as a discipline rather than a field has developed. This progression has sometimes been driven by government promotion of institutionalization and, at other times, expanding due to market needs or evolving according to

the internal logic underlying academia. Analyzing the mechanisms behind these three forces clarifies the process by which disciplinary legitimacy evolves, thereby revealing how the discipline, at different stages of development, adapts its knowledge system, organizational structure, and social functions to respond to multiple external demands.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODO-LOGY

This study employed textual analysis and historical research methods to exhaustively explore the construction, contestation, and reconstruction of legitimacy of Chinese higher education as a discipline. This exploration was guided by these core questions: How was the legitimacy of the discipline constructed in different historical periods in China What controversies did it face in the process How does it seek a new balance in legitimacy given the current environment Data were derived from three main sources: (1) Policy documents, such as the *Catalogue of Disciplines for Degree Conferral and Talent Cultivation*, policies related to the "Double First-Class" initiative, and so on; (2) historical materials on the discipline; and (3) classical works and the literature on the theoretical systems underlying higher education in China. The data were then subjected to textual analysis to identify the characteristics of the construction of legitimacy and the drivers of transformation at different stages. The indicators of regulative legitimacy were clear stipulations regarding disciplinary setup in national policy documents and major adjustments to development policies, such as the addition of discipline codes—the official numbering or labeling system used in China to categorize and administer disciplines—and the approval of degree-granting rights, among other regulations. The indicators of cognitive legitimacy included talent attraction and social recognition in the discipline, as measured by factors such as student enrollment, societal evaluations of employment destinations, and media and public discussions of the disciplinary value. The indicators of normative legitimacy were the degree of recognition within the academic community, which encompassed the maturity of the discipline's core concepts, research methods, and theoretical systems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The legitimization of China's higher education as a discipline

Early legitimization (1949-1977)
In the early years of the People's Republic of China, higher education research in the country primarily involved learning from Soviet experiences, along with some policy and teaching studies, but theoretical research was deficient (Li & Pan, 2005). In the late 1950s, the Pedagogy Teaching and Research Group at Xiamen University began planning the compilation of the "Lecture Notes on Higher Education Pedagogy", which represented a preliminary exploration into the establishment of the higher education discipline. Although this initiative was interrupted for political reasons and resumed only two decades later, it served as an initial basis for subsequent disciplinary development.

During this period, higher education studies were far from an independent domain. Almost no full-time researchers or research institutions specialized in higher education scholarship, and the discipline lacked regulative legitimacy given that it had no recognition from national authorities. Nevertheless, these scattered and spontaneous theoretical explorations sparked a consensus on the value of higher education as a specialized discipline for academic study, to the extent that it shaped the early prototype of an academic community and enhanced the acknowledgment and expectation of its promise in certain academic and public circles. These early achievements cleared the way for the accumulation of preliminary legitimacy for the later establishment of the discipline.

Legitimacy expansion and contestation (1978-2010)
The college entrance examination system was restored in 1977, after which the higher education sector gradually realigned with the correct course. In 1978, China's first formal institution for higher education research, the Higher Education Research Office at Xiamen University, was officially established. In the same year, educators, represented by Pan Maoyuan, called for theoretical investigations, conducting theoretical discussions of the problems plaguing the development of the sector at that time. In 1979, eight units, namely, Xiamen University, East China Normal University, Beijing Normal University, Tsinghua University, Nanjing University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Lanzhou University, and the Shanghai Higher Education Bureau, began joint preparations in Shanghai to establish the National Higher Education Research Association. In 1980, a preparatory meeting of the China Association of Higher Education was held with the participation of 34 units, and in 1981, the Chinese Society of Education held its second annual conference in Fuzhou to deliberate over the outline of China's first higher education textbook (Pan, 1998). At this stage, higher education research primarily served to restore and reconstruct national higher education, with its legitimacy derived from the disciplinary response to practical national education issues and the preliminary establishment of an academic organizational system. Although a prototype of the target academic community had yet to be included in the agenda for the national disciplinary catalogue, such

an exemplar was formed through the establishment of associations, journals, and research institutions, accumulating strength for the succeeding expansion of disciplinary legitimacy.

In 1983, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council promulgated the "Catalog of Disciplines and Specializations for Conferring Doctoral and Master's Degrees in Higher Education Institutions and Research Institutes (Trial Draft)", which formally listed higher education as a secondary discipline under pedagogy. This development translated into legal recognition and institutional status for the discipline, for which the state also guaranteed the resources necessary for its construction and development (Zhang, 2017). The same year witnessed the formal establishment of the China Association of Higher Education, which initiated the organized development of Chinese higher education research. Master's and doctoral degree programs, higher education research institutions, and professional journals devoted to the sector also successively gained legitimate status. The continuous expansion of research institutions led to the stable growth of the academic community, with an increasing number of scholars devoting themselves to investigations and practical pursuits in the discipline. All these accomplishments consolidated the normative and cognitive legitimacy of Chinese higher education.

Nevertheless, the acquisition of regulative legitimacy could not resolve the inherent crisis related to normative legitimacy within the discipline. That is, the latter did not automatically translate into internal academic recognition for Chinese higher education. Before this discipline was listed in the catalogue of disciplines, landmark theoretical monographs had not been published. In its initial stage, the discipline was compelled to refer to related disciplinary systems, motivating certain scholars to assess this nascent higher education as largely a transplantation of pedagogy—or, more strictly speaking, general pedagogy—simply operating under the principle that equates the sector with "the combination of educational principles and higher education practice" (Wang, H. C., 2009). This orientation made it difficult to highlight the uniqueness of higher education studies. From *The Lecture on Higher Education* published in 1983 to *Higher Education* in 1984, the established framework was fundamentally grounded in general pedagogy, and the research to which the discipline devoted itself emphasized only the characte-ristics of a higher education discipline shaped by that pedagogy (Wang, J. H., 2007). After the 1990s, many higher education scholars endeavored to liberate the discipline from the framework of ordinary pedagogy by demonstrating the distinctiveness of higher education (Pan, 2001; Zhang, 2017; Zhang & Ni, 2019). This was accomplished by identifying research targets, exploring research methods, searching for disciplinary paradigms,

and designing theoretical systems (Pan, 2001; Zhang, 2017; Zhang & Ni, 2019). Debates also promoted the development of the basic theoretical underpinnings of higher education and advanced the formation of a broader disciplinary identity and consensus in the academic community.

Despite such progress, however, China's higher education is still a "developing, improving and maturing discipline" (Gong, 2011). Undeniably, the birth of higher education studies in China stemmed not from the natural maturity of the internal structure of the discipline but, to a considerable extent, from catalysis by external forces. To this day, the country has established only a partially autonomous knowledge system for higher education. This deficiency means that while the discipline appears to flourish in terms of institutionalization, it remains weak with respect to academic discursive power.

In the late 1990s, massive enrollment in higher education came with numerous new challenges, prompting increasingly stronger public calls for the professionalization and scientification of the discipline. This development signaled the entry of Chinese higher education into the popularization stage. To maintain the effective operation of a major university or even a large-scale higher education system, it is far from enough to rely on the management experience of traditional universities. This practical requirement elevated higher education research from the margins toward the center, thus enhancing public understanding of this discipline. Amid these advances, Chinese higher education secured important opportunities to improve public recognition and social influence by offering policy consultation services and cultivating specialized talents.

Concurrently, however, the rapid expansion of Chinese higher education as a discipline potentially diluted its cognitive legitimacy. In the early 21st century, many master's programs of the discipline were confronted with varying degrees of difficulty with respect to guaranteeing employment for graduates. Graduates from some local universities found it increasingly challenging to secure jobs related to higher education, motivating them to revert to their undergraduate specializations and engendering a curious phenomenon where master's degrees of the discipline were neither academic nor applied (Li, 2011). The discipline had now cultivated a sizable academic community, but the declining quality of talent cultivation and the deteriorating employment situation continuously diminished public social expectations for the discipline, thus threatening its cognitive legitimacy.

Reconstruction of legitimacy (2011-present)
Adjustments to national disciplinary policies significantly

affected the regulative foundation of higher education as a traditional secondary discipline. In 2011, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council approved the newly revised *Catalogue of Disciplines for Degree Conferral and Talent Cultivation*, which encompassed only disciplinary categories and first-level disciplines. Secondary disciplines were autonomously established by degree-conferring units authorized to offer first-level disciplinary degrees. The lists of secondary disciplines set up by degree-granting institutions were periodically published by the Ministry of Education, indicating that the importance of such disciplines gradually declined. Furthermore, amid the "Double First-Class" initiative, many universities adjusted and optimized their disciplinary structures to stand out and gain national support. Their disciplinary development strategies generally focused on advantageous disciplines, so under selective resource allocation, non-advantageous, peripheral disciplines often became strategic "sacrifices" (Ye, 2018). For example, compared with chemistry and mathematics, which yield more academic outputs at a faster rate, higher education is often regarded as a non-advantageous discipline, struggling to gain attention amid the new round of disciplinary adjustments. Due to its relatively low contribution to university rankings based on discipline, higher education faces the risk of being eliminated or merged with the disciplinary structures of universities. The policy adjustments attendant on the implementation of the "Double First-Class" project, while promoting disciplinary competition among universities, have also curtailed the development of higher education studies as a discipline.

Facing changes in the institutional environment, the academic community has called for the redisciplinarization of Chinese higher education studies. Many scholars in China advocate the enhancement of the disciplinary status of Chinese higher education to further increase the stability of its disciplinary structure and broaden its developmental landscape. Note that redisciplinarization in this context does not mean passive adaptation to existing disciplinary systems but an active reexamination and adjustment of disciplinary boundaries, positioning, and attributes on the basis of the laws governing disciplinary development. Accordingly, scholars have proposed redividing first-level disciplines under the category of pedagogy (Fu, 2017), whereas others have suggested incorporating higher education into this system as a primary discipline (Chen & Zhang, 2022). Such ideas provide new possible paths for clarifying disciplinary affiliations and enhancing the status of higher education. Efforts to advance higher education as a principal pedagogical sector are intended to secure policy recognition and institutional support.

The destabilization of the regulative foundation underlying higher education has thoroughly exposed its deficiency in terms of normative legitimacy, as highlighted by the weakness of its autonomous knowledge system and its lack of theoretical innovation. The compounding of the aforementioned crises, coupled with the structural contradiction between talent cultivation and social needs as well as the sector's insufficient capacity to respond to major practical issues, ultimately drove the widespread questioning of the disciplinary value among the public, potential students, and the intellectual community. This scrutiny, in turn, considerably diminished the cognitive legitimacy of Chinese higher education as a discipline.

Dilemmas of legitimacy in the higher education as a discipline

Institutional dependence

The development of any discipline is difficult to separate from the influence of the institutional environment where it operates. Thus, such disciplines exhibit varying degrees of institutional dependence. However, only the disciplines that must rely on a system to develop and survive are considered institutionally dependent realms, of which a typical example is the Chinese higher education discipline (Li, 2017). This means that every adjustment in disciplinary policy profoundly affects the longevity and evolution of the discipline, as its advancement is perpetually shrouded in the uncertainty originating from external institutions. For a long time, the structure of legitimacy in Chinese higher education has been unbalanced and overly reliant on the regulative legitimacy afforded by state policies. With institutional dependence, the discipline of Chinese higher education is outwardly strong but inwardly weak. On the one hand, policy promotion gives the impression of prosperity in the discipline in terms of disciplinary institutionalization; on the other hand, the accumulation of academic knowledge and the theoretical development of the discipline (including the philosophies underlying higher education as important sources of support for disciplinary theory) are relatively weak, leading to a noticeable lack of theoretical depth. The false prosperity mentioned above renders the discipline particularly vulnerable to legitimacy-related crises.

Insufficient theoretical innovation

During the initial development of the discipline, strong national power guaranteed its regulative legitimacy and the foundation of its survival. However, constrained by traditional disciplinary standards and insufficient theoretical innovation, the normative and cognitive legitimacy of the discipline has been inadequately recognized for a long time. The key constraint currently lies not in its disciplinary category or status but in the quality of its theoretical underpinnings and the depth of its academic knowledge. The lag in the theoretical evolution of the discipline is in stark contrast to its aspirations for disciplinary standing given the dual dependence confronting this discipline: Reliance on the theories of ordinary

pedagogy and on Western perspectives. The former makes it difficult for the Chinese higher education discipline to move beyond the theoretical framework of basic education, unable to comprehensively address the specificity and complexity of higher education. The latter has long confined the discipline to Western discourse systems, thereby hindering the effective explanation of problems in Chinese higher education practices. This dual dependence leads to ambiguity in core concepts, the imperfection of theoretical foundations, and a lack of unique research methods, severely constraining the acquisition of normative legitimacy. Insufficient theoretical innovation not only erodes the academic dignity of the discipline but also restricts its ability to serve national strategies, thus affecting its derivation of cognitive legitimacy.

Marginalization in global discourse
A discipline that fails to express its educational ideas and theories in the international arena inevitably suffers from tenuous cognitive legitimacy. When participating in global dialogue, Chinese higher education faces the dilemma of discursive marginalization, which does not stem from a scarcity of higher education practices. Rather, China's practices are highly distinctive, typified by innovations such as quality-oriented education, the fostering of virtue and cultivation of talents, and the establishment of new liberal arts disciplines. However, these achievements have not been widely known in the global higher education community, substantially limiting the cultural universal significance of these accomplishments (Wu & Li, 2024). Furthermore, in pursuing narrow dissemination, Chinese higher education often falls into the trap of passive acceptance or the simple application of Western discourse systems, failing to truly demonstrate the originality and theoretical depth of its practices. The upshot of all these is the obscuring of local experiences and the dilution of academic discursive power. This inequality in discursive output not only weakens the global influence of China's higher education discipline but also exacerbates domestic academic skepticism regarding its own disciplinary legitimacy.

Maintaining the legitimacy of Chinese higher education as a discipline
Strengthening theoretical innovation and autonomy to overcome institutional dependence
The development of Chinese higher education as a discipline should deviate from the inertial thinking of relying solely on institutional pathways and turn toward connotative development centered on theoretical innovation. The true maturity of the discipline does not hinge simply on elevating institutionalization or advantages in resource allocation but on building a sound autonomous knowledge system. Scholars should

focus on basic theoretical research; deeply explore meta issues such as research objects, logical starting points, and methodologies; strive to enhance the theoretical quality of the disciplinary initiatives; ground scholarship in the tremendous capacity of the discipline to pinpoint real problems; and design original conceptual systems and theoretical frameworks in response to practical needs. Only through these strategies can a fundamental leap from external institutional legitimacy to internal academic vitality be achieved, truly forming a knowledge system that is both Chinese in character and universal in significance.

Promoting interdisciplinary integration and closely aligning with national strategic needs
Since its inception, Chinese higher education has been closely related to the needs of national economic and social development, and its developmental trajectory has always echoed the strategic requirements arising at different stages. In the current context of continuous change in higher education practices, the development of the discipline should be entrenched in the frontline of national higher education reform and advancement. Accordingly, focus should be directed toward major practical matters, such as the "Double First-Class" initiative, the cultivation of top-notch innovative talents, and the reform of educational evaluation. These issues are often highly comprehensive and complex and therefore difficult to address exhaustively from a single disciplinary perspective. Solving intricate real-world problems is the soul and vitality of interdisciplinary research (Jin, 1997). In this sense, promoting multidisciplinary integration is not only a methodological choice for Chinese higher education but also an inevitable path for it to respond to practical challenges.

Moreover, Chinese higher education as a discipline is a typical open social science domain, thus requiring multidisciplinary integration as its inherent mission and significant advantage. Incorporating interdisciplinarity into the structure of the discipline would not only improve its external institutionalization but also stimulate its potential for theoretical innovation and enhance its capacity to serve scientific research as well as economic and social development (Pan & Chen, 2021). That is, interdisciplinary integration can help Chinese higher education effectively break through the limitations of a single paradigm, more effectively respond to major national strategic needs, demonstrate its irreplaceable practical value, and ultimately win recognition from universities, the government, and the public.

Strengthening international cooperation and enhancing global discursive power
The cognitive legitimacy of a discipline is rooted not only in recognition by the local academic community but

also in whether its theoretical paradigms, core concepts, and value propositions can be understood and respected by the international academic field. Chinese higher education as a discipline is rooted in millennia of Chinese cultural practices, forming unique educational approaches, such as teaching that benefits teachers and students alike, the unity of knowledge and action, and fostering virtue and cultivating talents. In the process of globalization, how these cultural resources and contemporary experiences can be transformed into academic discourse that exhibits both Chinese characteristics and universal significance is not only an important task for the development of Chinese higher education as a discipline but also an effective way to enhance the disciplinary recognition in the international arena. Furthermore, Chinese scholars should actively participate in research on global higher education governance, refine higher education discourse typified by Chinese qualities, and enhance the national influence of higher education discourse.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of organizational legitimacy theory and the triangle of coordination, this study systematically analyzed the developmental trajectory of the Chinese higher education as a discipline. The research shows that the developmental trajectory of the discipline is essentially a dynamic process in which regulative, normative, and cognitive legitimacy are continuously constructed, challenged, and renewed within the triangular domain formed by the interaction between the state, the academe, and the market. The legitimacy-related structure of Chinese higher education as a discipline has always been unbalanced. Regulative legitimacy, derived from state empowerment, has consistently dominated the advancement of the discipline, providing crucial institutional guarantees and resource support for disciplinary institutionalization. However, overreliance on this form of legitimization may have led to a considerable dependence on policy dividends during disciplinary development, thus weakening academic autonomy and innovative vitality. Conversely, the disciplinary normative legitimacy has long been underdeveloped. Its theoretical transplantation from pedagogy during its initial development, coupled with its subsequent dependence on Western theories, has cast doubt on the disciplinary theoretical autonomy. Although the academic community has engaged in continuous debate and reflection, the immaturity of the disciplinary theo-retical systems fundamentally constrains the consoli-dation of its cognitive legitimacy. Such legitimacy is substantially affected by the interactive influence of the former two. On the one hand, the policy-driven expansion of the discipline once enhanced its public visibility; on the other hand, the lag in theor-

etical inno-vation and its insufficient capacity to respond to major practical issues, coupled with the structural difficulties faced by graduates in the job market, have undermined the sustained societal recognition of its value in terms of knowledge, engendering difficulties in firmly establishing cognitive legitimacy.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the enhancement of demands for academic autonomy and the involvement of market forces, the reliance of legitimization efforts on policy as a driver has gradually confronted the discipline with challenges. Adjustments to the disciplinary catalogue and changes in disciplinary development policies have rendered the regulative legitimacy long relied upon by the discipline vulnerable to the risk of deterioration or even reconstruction, forcing academia to actively seek endogenous support via normative and cognitive legitimacy. Chinese higher education as a discipline, developing to this day, faces the compounded effect of a triple legitimacy crisis.

Resolving this predicament cannot hinge only on administrative recognition but requires promoting the synergistic development and dynamic balance of the three forms of legitimacy to truly construct a discipline that wields global influence and promotes Chinese qualities. China's higher education as a discipline should strengthen theoretical innovation to break free of institutional dependence; advance the substantive integration of the discipline with sociology, economics, data science, and so on to transcend the boundaries of a single discipline and more effectively respond to complex problems related to educational practice; and actively participate in the global governance of higher education, refine higher education discourse with Chinese characteristics, and enhance the international influence of the discipline.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of large language models, AI and machine learning tools

None.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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