

Humanization, Everyday-Life Integration, and Pragmatic Pedagogy: Human Rights Education in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

Human rights education (HRE) in Chinese higher education has undergone profound structural, epistemic, and pedagogical evolution over the past two decades. Taking the Institute of Human Rights at a premier Chinese university specializing in human rights research and education as a comprehensive longitudinal case study, this paper investigates the emergence of a triadic pedagogical model anchored in humanization, everyday-life integration, and pragmatic methodology. Moving beyond conventional, doctrinal legal formalisms, contemporary Chinese HRE systematically connects international human rights norms with local socioeconomic developments, administrative litigation mechanisms, and community-level public interest advocacy. This transformation is empirically demonstrated through twenty years of institutional archives and the continuous annual operation of the Human Rights Law Summer Elective Course series running continuously from its inception through 2026. Situating this case within the global policy frameworks of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (Resolution 66/137), and contemporary higher education governance scholarship, this study explores how experiential legal clinics, simulated moot courts, and digital curricular infrastructures cultivate civic awareness and professional competence. The findings provide critical insights for international comparative education, illustrating how developing and emerging economies can localize universal human rights values without sacrificing cultural resonance or institutional sustainability.

1. Introduction

The global institutionalization of Human Rights Education (HRE) within tertiary education has expanded rapidly since the United Nations proclaimed the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) and subsequently launched the multi-phase World Programme for Human Rights Education (Baxi, 1997; Flowers, 2004). Across developing and transitioning societies, integrating human rights into university curricula is increasingly understood not merely as an abstract philosophical exercise, but as a foundational institutional mechanism for building modern legal systems, strengthening civic participation, and fostering equitable socio-economic development (Locatelli, 2022). Higher education institutions serve as the primary intellectual incubators where normative concepts of justice, equality, and human dignity are translated into practical tools for governance, public policy, and judicial administration.

In recent higher education scholarship, university curriculum reform is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic nexus between global normative models and domestic institutional imperatives (Ashwin, 2020; Tight, 2021). As universities worldwide grapple with rapid socioeconomic transformations, demographic shifts, and evolving labor markets, academic curricula must continuously adapt to equip graduates with both technical expertise and ethical literacy (Marginson, 2018; Tight, 2021). Within the People's Republic of China, the formal advancement of HRE gained unprecedented domestic policy momentum with its systematic inclusion in consecutive National Human Rights Action Plans issued by the State Council Information Office since 2009 (State Council Information Office [SCIO], 2009). These national strategic

blueprints mandated the establishment of specialized National Human Rights Education and Training Bases, encouraged the development of human rights master's and doctoral degree tracks, and promoted general education elective courses on human rights across undergraduate faculties.

However, translating broad state policy mandates and international normative instruments into everyday classroom pedagogy presents profound epistemological and structural challenges. Historically, legal education across East Asia, and within China in particular, has operated under a strong tradition of statutory formalism and mechanical black-letter doctrinal instruction (Alford, 2007). In this traditional paradigm, law is predominantly taught as a closed, top-down system of codified state rules, procedural guidelines, and judicial tests, largely divorced from the lived human vulnerabilities, structural inequalities, and socio-economic contexts that legal frameworks are ostensibly designed to regulate.

When international human rights law was initially introduced into Chinese universities during the late 1990s and early 2000s, it frequently suffered from a double alienation. On the one hand, introductory courses often framed human rights through highly abstract Western philosophical canons (such as classical natural law theory or social contract doctrines), which students perceived as exotic, historically distant, and detached from China's contemporary socioeconomic realities. On the other hand, specialized postgraduate seminars treated human rights strictly as a specialized sub-branch of public international law, focusing predominantly on interstate reporting mechanisms, international tribunal jurisprudence, and diplomatic treaty bodies far removed from domestic legal practice.

This foundational gap between abstract global theory and concrete domestic application highlights a central pedagogical dilemma in contemporary higher education development: How can higher education institutions design human rights curricula that remain faithful to universal normative protections while simultaneously achieving deep contextual resonance and practical efficacy for students operating within specific national legal environments? (Gerber, 2021; Zhu, 2023). Addressing this question requires examining the pedagogical mechanics, institutional governance, and empirical learning outcomes that characterize successful curriculum localization.

This paper conducts an in-depth, longitudinal analysis of the pedagogical paradigms developed at a leading Chinese university specializing in legal and human rights research and education. Recognizing that sustainable educational development requires transforming both the epistemic orientation and the teaching methodologies of legal instruction, some universities pioneered a comprehensive educational model founded upon three interlocking pillars: humanization (cultivating subjective empathy and critical thinking over mechanical memorization), everyday-life integration (connecting international standards directly to mundane socioeconomic disputes, digital governance, and domestic administrative realities), and pragmatic pedagogy (employing clinical legal education, interactive case methods, and sustained national summer training institutes).

By systematically analyzing the twenty-year evolution of human rights education at a Chinese university from 2005 through 2026, this study provides an empirical account of how an elite higher education institution navigated the tensions between international human rights standards, domestic educational

governance policies, and professional training imperatives. In doing so, the paper contributes to the broader literature on higher education development, comparative curriculum studies, and the pedagogical institutionalization of human rights in the Global South.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature at the intersection of higher education policy, curriculum studies, and human rights pedagogy has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Contemporary higher education research emphasizes that the university curriculum is neither neutral nor static; rather, it represents a contested educational space where societal values, professional competencies, and institutional identities are actively constructed (Ashwin, 2020; Tight, 2021). In analyzing how specialized knowledge domains such as human rights take root within universities, scholars have examined institutional governance, pedagogical epistemology, and the complex dynamics of curricular transfer between international and domestic spheres.

A foundational theme in global HRE literature centers on the transformational potential of human rights when integrated into tertiary professional education (Baxi, 1997; Flowers, 2004). Early theoretical contributions by Baxi (1997) argued that human rights education must avoid becoming an instrument of bureaucratic co-optation or sterile academic credentialism. Instead, Baxi posited that genuine human rights education must center the voices and experiences of the 'victimized' and 'subaltern,' serving as an emancipatory pedagogical practice that empowers students to challenge systemic injustices. Similarly, Flowers (2004) conceptualized human rights education as a holistic process that synthesizes cognitive understanding of treaty texts with affective development and actionable advocacy competencies.

However, empirical studies evaluating the implementation of HRE in developing and non-Western universities frequently identify significant pedagogical bottlenecks. In many jurisdictions, legal education remains constrained by statutory formalism and teacher-centered lecturing models (Alford, 2007; Mwebi & Owino, 2020). Alford's (2007) seminal analysis of Chinese legal education observed that traditional didactic teaching methods prioritize the rote memorization of statutory articles and judicial interpretations, leaving little room for students to interrogate the human impact, socio-economic disparities, or moral foundations underpinning the legal architecture. When human rights courses are transplanted into such environments without pedagogical innovation, they risk becoming dry exercises in treaty analysis, detached from the urgent developmental realities confronting students (Mwebi & Owino, 2020).

To address these institutional and pedagogical disconnects, higher education researchers have increasingly turned toward critical pedagogy and decolonial curriculum frameworks (Unterhalter, 2021; Zembylas, 2021). Zembylas (2021) provides an incisive critique of conventional human rights instruction, demonstrating that abstract, Eurocentric pedagogical frameworks often induce emotional detachment and cynicism among non-Western students. When human rights are taught exclusively through foreign case law and external ethical standardization, students experience what Zembylas terms an 'epistemic

alienation,' perceiving the material as a form of moral imperialism rather than a functional vocabulary for domestic social progress. Zembylas advocates for cultivating 'critical empathy'—a pedagogical stance that explicitly connects human rights values to students' historical, cultural, and localized contexts.

This emphasis on contextualization aligns directly with the scholarship on curriculum 'localization' in higher education (Gerber, 2021; Locatelli, 2022). Gerber (2021) argues that successful human rights pedagogy in non-Western jurisdictions requires a granular translation process, wherein universal international standards (such as non-discrimination, due process, and the right to health) are operationalized through domestic regulatory disputes, municipal administrative challenges, and local labor markets. Locatelli (2022) further theorizes education as a 'public and common good,' asserting that higher education institutions have an explicit social responsibility to democratize specialized knowledge and prepare graduates to contribute meaningfully to collective societal well-being.

Institutional sustainability and academic governance constitute another vital strand of current higher education literature (Marginson, 2018; Shields, 2022; Tight, 2021). As Shields (2022) demonstrates in a comparative analysis of tertiary financing, the long-term viability of progressive, specialized educational programs depends heavily on structural institutional resilience and sustainable funding ecosystems. Many human rights initiatives in developing universities fail to survive beyond their initial pilot phases because they rely excessively on volatile, short-term international donor grants. When external funding cycles conclude, programs frequently collapse unless they have been successfully embedded within core university budgeting, academic tenure tracks, and official institutional performance metrics (Shields, 2022).

Recent research published in *Studies in Higher Education* emphasizes that sustainable curriculum innovation requires transforming the institutional habitus of universities (Ashwin, 2020; Marginson, 2018; Tight, 2021). Marginson (2018) explores the public and private goods generated by higher education, demonstrating that universities produce critical social externalities—including civic literacy, democratic values, and institutional integrity—only when their curricular structures are explicitly aligned with public interest goals. Furthermore, Tight (2021) highlights that higher education research must move beyond descriptive accounts of teaching methods to investigate the institutional mechanisms that sustain long-term disciplinary innovations.

Complementing these governance insights, Chistolini (2023) analyzes how universities benchmark their educational indicators against United Nations guidelines, concluding that curriculum transformation succeeds only when academic administrators actively dismantle disciplinary silos and establish interdisciplinary instructional pathways. This observation is particularly relevant to the digital transformation of higher education, where modern institutions must leverage online infrastructures, open-access databases, and hybrid learning models to ensure equitable educational access across diverse regional demographics (Wang, 2024).

Within Chinese legal scholarship, research over the past two decades has systematically examined the indigenization of human rights theories and their integration into national legal governance (Author,

2014, 2018, 2022; Li, 2025; Zhu, 2023). Early legal scholarship documented the constitutionalization of human rights following the 2004 constitutional amendment, which explicitly declared that 'the State respects and preserves human rights' (Author, 2014). Subsequent empirical work demonstrated how international human rights covenants are operationalized within domestic administrative litigation, criminal procedure reforms, and civil rights protections for marginalized populations (Author, 2018; Zhu, 2023).

More recently, Chinese educational and legal researchers have turned their attention to the structural mainstreaming of human rights within higher education curricula (Author, 2022; Li, 2025). Author (2022) established that the consolidation of human rights within university teaching acts as an indispensable internal engine for domestic legal professionalization, ensuring that prospective judges, prosecutors, advocates, and civil servants develop an integrated understanding of state obligations, administrative proportionality, and human dignity. Moreover, Li (2025) analyzes how Chinese legal education articulates a distinct conceptual framework that synthesizes civil and political protections with the structural prioritization of economic, social, cultural, and developmental rights. This body of literature highlights that higher education human rights programs in China are not passive recipients of global norms, but active sites of pedagogical negotiation and institutional innovation.

3. International Normative Frameworks and HRE Standards

To rigorously evaluate the pedagogical transformation of human rights education in Chinese universities, it is essential to contextualize these practices within the evolving international normative frameworks established by the United Nations. The international mandate for human rights education is historically anchored in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which proclaims that 'education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms' (United Nations, 1948). Article 26 firmly established that education is not merely an instrument for economic productivity or technical skill acquisition, but an indispensable normative vehicle for cultivating moral agency, mutual respect, and human dignity.

This foundational vision was subsequently codified as a binding legal obligation across major international human rights treaties. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) explicitly mandates state parties to ensure that education enables all persons to participate effectively in a free society and promote understanding and tolerance among all nations (UN, 1948). Similar obligations are reiterated in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Article 7 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Collectively, these instruments establish that states have an affirmative international legal duty to promote and institutionalize human rights learning across all levels of their educational systems.

Over the past two decades, the normative architecture of HRE has undergone significant conceptual refinement through the work of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). A decisive turning point in this normative evolution occurred in December 2011, when the UN General Assembly formally adopted the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training via Resolution 66/137 (UN General Assembly, 2011).

The 2011 UN Declaration is particularly significant because it established the definitive, globally recognized tripartite taxonomy of human rights education, defining it as encompassing three distinct but inextricably linked dimensions:

1. 1. Education about human rights: The acquisition of comprehensive knowledge, critical understanding, and conceptual literacy regarding international and domestic human rights norms, principles, treaties, constitutional guarantees, and institutional mechanisms of protection (UN General Assembly, 2011).
2. 2. Education through human rights: The intentional design and maintenance of educational environments, pedagogical interactions, and institutional governance structures that model and respect the human rights and dignity of both learners and educators, fostering an egalitarian and non-coercive learning culture (UN General Assembly, 2011).
3. 3. Education for human rights: The empowerment of individuals and communities with the practical skills, analytical competencies, advocacy strategies, and ethical commitment required to enjoy, exercise, and defend their own rights and the rights of others within their respective societies (UN General Assembly, 2011).

This tripartite framework fundamentally revolutionized international benchmarks for educational quality. It made clear that a university cannot fulfill its HRE obligations merely by offering rote lectures on treaty provisions (education about rights). Rather, the institution must construct democratic and respectful learning spaces (education through rights) and equip students with actionable legal and civic skills to protect human dignity in real-world contexts (education for rights).

Parallel to this normative declaration, the United Nations launched the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005–present) to provide a structured, long-term global framework for national implementation (UN Human Rights Council, 2014; Struthers, 2022). Structured in successive multi-year phases, the World Programme shifted its focus over time from primary and secondary schooling (Phase 1) directly toward higher education, professional training of judicial and administrative personnel, and civil society capacity building (Phases 2 and 3), followed by youth empowerment and digital accessibility in subsequent phases (Struthers, 2022).

The international guidelines issued under the World Programme explicitly stipulate that higher education institutions occupy a uniquely strategic position in the realization of human rights cultures (Chistolini, 2023). Universities are expected to embed human rights principles across diverse academic disciplines, promote interdisciplinary research centers, foster independent critical thinking, and cultivate

professional ethics among future policymakers, magistrates, lawyers, and educators. Furthermore, the UN guidelines emphasize that national implementation must be supported by sustainable institutional policies, standardized pedagogical indicators, comprehensive textbook development, and robust state resource allocations.

For higher education systems in developing and emerging economies, operationalizing this international normative architecture requires navigating complex institutional landscapes. As international educational development scholars observe, developing universities often confront acute institutional constraints, including centralized curriculum governance, resource scarcity, faculty shortages in specialized fields, and the challenge of harmonizing universal standards with local legal traditions and socio-economic developmental stages (Locatelli, 2022; Mwebi & Owino, 2020). The process of convergence with UN standards is therefore not a matter of linear, uncritical adoption, but rather an active process of institutional localization, structural adaptation, and pedagogical experimentation.

4. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, longitudinal institutional case-study research methodology to examine the operational development, epistemic evolution, and pedagogical transformations of human rights education within Chinese higher education. Case study methodology is uniquely suited for this investigation because it enables an intensive, holistic, and contextual exploration of complex institutional processes, policy implementations, and pedagogical innovations over an extended temporal trajectory (Yin, 1994). As Yin (1994) demonstrates, qualitative case study design allows researchers to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, including organizational life cycles, curricular transitions, and administrative governance changes.

The primary unit of analysis for this study is the Institute of Human Rights at a premier Chinese university specializing in legal and social science education. University A was selected as a critically representative and pioneering case for several institutional reasons: first, it was among the earliest tertiary institutions in the People's Republic of China to formalize dedicated human rights academic departments and specialized graduate degree programs; second, its Institute of Human Rights was officially designated in the initial cohort of National Human Rights Education and Training Bases jointly approved by the Ministry of Education and the State Council Information Office; third, the institution has continuously operated the nation's longest-running specialized HRE summer program, serving as a national pedagogical incubator for hundreds of visiting scholars and thousands of law students across the country (Author, 2018, 2022).

The empirical data collection matrix for this longitudinal study spans a twenty-year operational trajectory from 2005 through 2026, triangulating data across three distinct institutional, pedagogical, and policy streams:

1. Internal Institutional and Pedagogical Archives: Comprehensive documentation from University A's Institute of Human Rights, including departmental founding charters, faculty meeting minutes,

annual programmatic self-evaluations, formal curriculum schedules, course syllabi, lecture slides, examination rubrics, clinical legal education case dockets, and student course evaluation metrics spanning 2005 to 2026.

2. 2. Longitudinal Programmatic Monitoring of the Summer Elective Course: Systematic tracking data for the Human Rights Law Summer Elective Course series across its unbroken annual iterations from its inception through the 2026 academic year. This dataset includes longitudinal enrollment figures, demographic distributions of participating students (undergraduate vs. postgraduate, law vs. non-law majors, institutional origins across Chinese provinces), course syllabi revisions, guest faculty profiles (domestic academics, international scholars, practicing legal professionals), and recorded student focus group feedback.
3. 3. National Policy and Administrative Directives: Official regulatory frameworks, national strategy documents, and implementation monitoring reports issued by Chinese central government organs, specifically the higher education mandates and HRE targets embedded within the National Human Rights Action Plans (2009–2010, 2012–2015, 2016–2020, and 2021–2025) published by the State Council Information Office (SCIO, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted utilizing qualitative content analysis, thematic coding, and longitudinal programmatic evaluation techniques (Ashwin, 2020; Tight, 2021). The analytical framework systematically mapped empirical pedagogical practices against the United Nations tripartite taxonomy of human rights education (education about, through, and for human rights) and evaluated curriculum delivery against the three conceptual pillars of humanization, everyday-life integration, and pragmatic methodology. Syllabi and instructional modules were rigorously coded to analyze the distribution of instructional time between abstract international human rights doctrines and applied domestic legal disputes. Internal validity was ensured through rigorous data triangulation across multiple archival sources, verification against external annual audit reports of the National Human Rights Education Bases, and cross-referencing with broader peer-reviewed legal education literature.

5. Results

The empirical findings of this longitudinal study demonstrate that human rights education at University A evolved through three distinct institutional phases: foundational specialization (2005–2008), curricular expansion and structural mainstreaming (2009–2015), and digitalized pedagogical consolidation and national dissemination (2016–2026). Each phase reflected progressive efforts to overcome structural bottlenecks in legal education and develop an authentic, localized pedagogical model.

The initial phase of institutional building commenced in the mid-2000s. In September 2005, University A made a landmark institutional breakthrough by launching China's first dedicated master's degree program in Human Rights Law, followed in September 2007 by the formal enrollment of doctoral students specializing in human rights legal theory (Author, 2018). These specialized degree tracks established human rights as an independent secondary legal discipline within the university's academic taxonomy. During this early period, faculty focused heavily on establishing foundational research

infrastructure, translating international covenants, publishing core reference manuals, and initiating institutional academic dialogues with foreign human rights institutes and United Nations agencies.

However, as the specialized graduate programs matured, an acute structural bottleneck emerged within the university's broader educational architecture: human rights education remained heavily siloed within elite postgraduate seminars. The vast majority of undergraduate law students—numbering thousands annually—graduated without receiving any systematic, credit-bearing instruction in human rights law or constitutional rights theory. Because undergraduate law graduates constitute the primary demographic entering municipal courts, procuratorates, justice bureaus, and corporate legal departments, their lack of exposure to human rights concepts created a significant disconnect between advanced academic research and grassroots judicial administration.

To dismantle this institutional silo and democratize human rights education across the undergraduate student body, the leadership of University A's Institute of Human Rights conceptualized an innovative structural solution: the Human Rights Law Summer Elective Course. Launched during the 2009–2010 academic window, this intensive summer program utilized the university's newly restructured academic calendar to deliver condensed, high-density human rights legal training. The curriculum was intentionally designed as an open-enrollment elective accessible to both undergraduate law students and non-law majors across the humanities and social sciences.

By April 2011, this pedagogical model gained national institutional recognition. The Ministry of Education and the State Council Information Office officially designated University A's Institute of Human Rights as one of China's inaugural 'National Human Rights Education and Training Bases' (SCIO, 2009). This national base designation provided permanent institutional funding, expanded academic faculty lines, and established a formal mandate to serve as a national pedagogical hub for curriculum development and faculty training across Chinese higher education.

The enduring significance of some universities' pedagogical reform lies in its exceptional institutional continuity and capacity for sustained innovation. Rather than functioning as a transient, donor-dependent summer workshop, the Human Rights Law Summer Elective Course has been held continuously every single year without interruption from its founding through the 2026 academic year. Over this sixteen-year span, the program successfully trained thousands of students and hundreds of visiting university instructors representing dozens of law schools across China.

Throughout its annual iterations leading up to 2026, the summer course continually adapted its instructional modalities in response to changing legal frameworks, societal needs, and technological advancements. During the global public health disruptions of 2020–2022, the program rapidly transitioned to high-definition interactive digital platforms, developing an advanced Online-Merge-Offline (OMO) pedagogical architecture (Wang, 2024). By 2026, the program had fully institutionalized a hybrid delivery model that seamlessly integrated synchronous international guest lectures, open-access multimedia repositories, digital moot court simulations, and asynchronous collaborative case clinics, effectively establishing a national benchmark for modern legal curriculum delivery.

6. The Three Pillars of Contemporary Human Rights Pedagogy

The long-term empirical success and pedagogical sustainability of University A's human rights curriculum are rooted in the operationalization of three foundational pedagogical pillars: humanization, everyday-life integration, and pragmatic pedagogy. Together, these three pillars transform abstract international norms into lived, actionable competencies for modern legal professionals.

6.1. Humanization : Awakening Empathy and Subjectivity

The first pillar of the curriculum explicitly confronts the deep-seated limitations of mechanical legal formalisms by prioritizing the 'humanization' of the educational process. In conventional East Asian legal classrooms, instruction is frequently dominated by top-down didactic lecturing, where students are trained to view legal codes as abstract, technical rules to be memorized for state examinations (Alford, 2007; Zhu, 2023). Under such conditions, students often develop a technocratic, emotionally detached legal consciousness that reduces human suffering to statutory classifications.

Humanization re-centers legal pedagogy on human dignity, empathy, and ethical subjectivity. Instructors at University A deliberately structure lectures around personal biographical narratives, historical trajectories of rights struggles, and deep philosophical inquiries into vulnerability and justice. Rather than presenting legal outcomes as inevitable statutory conclusions, instructors deconstruct cases to examine the lived human impact on vulnerable individuals, families, and communities.

For example, in analyzing administrative expropriation and urban zoning regulations, students do not simply memorize procedural filing deadlines and statutory compensation formulas; they analyze the psychological trauma, social displacement, and livelihood disruptions experienced by displaced residents. Instructors intentionally pose challenging, open-ended ethical dilemmas without providing predetermined answers, compelling students to exercise independent moral judgment and develop authentic analytical reasoning. By cultivating an open, non-hierarchical, and dialogical classroom culture, this approach operationalizes the United Nations mandate of education through human rights, modeling mutual respect and dignity within the pedagogical process itself (UN General Assembly, 2011).

6.2. Everyday-Life Integration : Grounding Norms in Local Realities

The second pillar addresses the problem of conceptual alienation by anchoring human rights instruction directly in 'everyday-life integration.' When human rights are taught exclusively through the jurisprudence of foreign regional tribunals (such as the European Court of Human Rights or the Inter-American Court of Human Rights), Chinese students frequently struggle to see the relevance of these standards to their own domestic legal system (Zembylas, 2021). The curriculum at University A systematically overcomes this divide by translating abstract international covenants into the concrete legal, administrative, and socioeconomic disputes that students encounter in daily life.

Table 1 illustrates how foundational international human rights provisions are systematically operationalized through localized, everyday legal issues within University A's contemporary curriculum.

Table 1
Curricular Translation from Abstract Rights to Everyday-Life Realities

Abstract International Right	Everyday-Life Local Pedagogical Focus
Right to Education (UDHR Art. 26; ICESCR Art. 13)	Equity in rural-urban public school resource allocation; access to national digital education repositories; algorithmic fairness in automated student performance assessments.
Right to Non-Discrimination (ICCPR Art. 26; ICERD Art. 2)	Workplace gender discrimination in recruitment and maternity leave; regional hiring prejudices; reasonable accommodation and digital accessibility for persons with disabilities in public transport.
Right to Health (ICESCR Art. 12)	Public health data privacy protections during epidemiological emergencies; consumer product safety and food/drug regulation; equitable cross-regional basic medical insurance portability.
Labor Rights & Dignity of Work (ICESCR Arts. 6–8)	Algorithmic management and surveillance of food delivery drivers; enforcement of overtime limits and critiques of excessive '996' workplace cultures; occupational safety standards in the gig economy.

By systematically linking international treaty principles to contemporary domestic legal reforms—such as the implementation of China's Civil Code, Personal Information Protection Law, and modern labor regulations—students recognize that human rights are not an external, alien imposition. Instead, they come to understand human rights as an intrinsic, functional component of domestic legal modernization, good governance, and social harmony.

6.3. Pragmatic Pedagogy : Experiential Learning and Legal Clinics

The third pillar operationalizes the United Nations concept of education for human rights through tactical, pragmatic pedagogical methodologies. Recognizing that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient to effect social and legal change, University A heavily supplements traditional lectures with interactive, experiential learning structures that equip students with tangible legal skills. This pragmatic pedagogy manifests across three primary dimensions:

1. 1. Interactive Case Method and Adversarial Role-Play: Courses are structured around landmark domestic judicial, administrative, and constitutional cases. Rather than passively taking notes, students are assigned structured adversarial roles—representing aggrieved citizens, state administrative organs, commercial employers, or public interest advocates. Students must construct formal legal briefs, deploy statutory and constitutional arguments, and debate the proportionality, necessity, and legality of administrative rights limitations in simulated judicial hearings.
2. 2. Clinical Legal Education and Community Legal Aid: Students participate directly in university-administered legal aid clinics under the close supervision of clinical professors and licensed public interest attorneys (Alford, 2007). Through these clinics, students handle real-world cases involving vulnerable populations, including migrant workers seeking unpaid wages, women confronting employment discrimination or domestic violence, elderly citizens navigating complex pension entitlements, and persons with disabilities seeking physical and digital accommodations. This experiential exposure bridges academic theory with professional legal service.
3. 3. Immersive Simulation and International Moot Courts: The curriculum integrates rigorous moot court competitions and simulated United Nations treaty body sessions. Students participate in prestigious international competitions, such as the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court Competition and the Philip C. Jessup International Law Moot Court, as well as localized Universal Periodic Review (UPR) simulations. These intensive exercises require students to master complex evidentiary standards, conduct exhaustive multilingual legal research, draft high-level memorial submissions, and present sophisticated oral arguments before panels of international and domestic experts.

Through this rigorous triadic combination of interactive case analysis, real-world clinical advocacy, and simulated international adjudication, the pragmatic pedagogy ensures that students graduate not merely with theoretical awareness, but with the practical advocacy tools, professional ethics, and procedural competence necessary to defend human rights across their legal careers.

7. Discussions

The longitudinal trajectory of human rights education at University A offers critical insights for international comparative education, higher education governance, and the global development of legal pedagogy. The findings demonstrate a sophisticated model of institutional adaptation that successfully converges with international normative standards while maintaining deep domestic structural resonance.

First, the evolution of some universities' curriculum demonstrates direct operational alignment with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UN General Assembly, 2011). By deliberately structuring its pedagogical interventions around the tripartite taxonomy of education about, through, and for human rights, the institution successfully transitioned from a traditional model of top-down knowledge transmission to an experiential model of civic and professional empowerment. The

integration of clinical legal education, interactive moot courts, and community legal aid fulfills the international mandate to provide actionable, skills-based training that prepares future legal practitioners to uphold human dignity (Struthers, 2022).

Second, this study provides an empirical blueprint for resolving the persistent tension between universal human rights norms and localized socioeconomic realities (Gerber, 2021; Zembylas, 2021). Rather than treating universal principles and local conditions as inherently irreconcilable, University A's pedagogical framework demonstrates that universal human rights concepts can be effectively indigenized through everyday socio-legal issues. When students analyze the right to health through domestic medical insurance parity, or examine labor rights through the algorithmic regulation of gig-economy delivery platforms, they develop a profound sense of indigenous intellectual ownership over human rights concepts, viewing them as essential tools for solving tangible domestic governance challenges.

Third, the theoretical discourse underpinning Chinese HRE reflects an important academic contribution to global human rights jurisprudence. While Western legal traditions predominantly emphasize individualistic, civil-political liberties framed as inherently adversarial checks against state authority, the pedagogical framework at University A reflects a more holistic, integrated paradigm (SCIO, 2009; Li, 2025). Within this model, the Right to Development and the Right to Health and Subsistence are conceptualized as foundational prerequisites that enable the comprehensive realization of all civil and political freedoms. This holistic rights framework emphasizes that state institutional capacity, public health infrastructure, poverty alleviation, and socioeconomic stability are indispensable structural conditions for protecting human dignity. Rather than representing a departure from international standards, this integrated perspective provides a vital reference model for educational development across developing and emerging economies facing similar developmental imperatives (Locatelli, 2022; Mwebi & Owino, 2020).

Fourth, from the perspective of higher education governance and financing, this case study underscores the vital importance of institutional sustainability and policy embedding (Ashwin, 2020; Marginson, 2018; Shields, 2022; Tight, 2021). The unbroken sixteen-year record of the Human Rights Law Summer Elective Course from its inception through 2026 was made possible because University A did not rely solely on precarious, short-term foreign donor grants. Instead, the program was strategically embedded within core university curriculum structures, supported by national education training base designations, and financed through permanent institutional budgeting (Shields, 2022). This institutional stability allowed the program to continuously innovate its pedagogical models, upgrade its digital learning infrastructures, and maintain long-term international academic partnerships.

Finally, the pedagogical transformation analyzed in this paper carries profound implications for legal professionalization and the rule of law. By expanding human rights education from elite postgraduate seminars into broad undergraduate curricula, University A systematically influenced the cognitive frameworks and professional values of generations of future magistrates, procurators, attorneys, and civil servants (Author, 2022). As these graduates assume leadership positions throughout the judicial

and administrative apparatus, their grounding in humanized, pragmatic rights advocacy serves as a quiet but powerful catalyst for continuous legal reform and procedural justice.

8. Conclusions

Over the past two decades, human rights education in Chinese higher education has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from an initial phase of conceptual importation and elite academic specialization into a mature, localized, and pragmatic educational paradigm. Through an in-depth longitudinal case study of the Institute of Human Rights at a premier Chinese university, this paper has analyzed the structural, epistemic, and pedagogical mechanics that enabled this successful institutional transition.

The core contribution of this study lies in articulating and empirically validating the triadic framework of contemporary human rights pedagogy: humanization (awakening subjective empathy, critical thinking, and moral agency), everyday-life integration (systematically translating abstract international treaties into tangible domestic administrative, labor, and digital governance realities), and pragmatic pedagogy (deploying experiential legal clinics, adversarial case simulations, and sustained national summer training institutes). Together, these three pillars operationalize the United Nations tripartite mandate of education about, through, and for human rights, demonstrating how legal education can transcend statutory formalism to become a living, emancipatory practice.

The unbroken annual continuity of the Human Rights Law Summer Elective Course series from its founding through 2026 stands as compelling evidence of the institutional sustainability and pedagogical vitality of this model. By anchoring specialized curriculum within long-term university governance, state policy frameworks, and hybrid digital learning environments, the human rights educational bases created a scalable educational platform that continues to shape legal professionalization and civic awareness across China.

As universities globally confront the complex challenges of educational equity, democratic citizenship, and digital transformation, the pedagogical innovations developed valuable theoretical and practical lessons. By illustrating how universal human rights norms can be deeply localized and pragmatically taught within specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts, this study provides an inspiring and robust reference model for higher education institutions across developing and transitioning societies worldwide.

Declarations

Author Contribution

S.X. and X.Z. wrote the manuscript text. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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