

Crisis Management in Chinese Higher Education Institutions: International Comparisons, Digital Transformation, and Organizational Resilience

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of crisis management in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on strategic innovations, structural challenges, and evolving stakeholder roles in the context of increasing global integration and digital transformation. Drawing on empirical studies, government reports, and international comparative research, this study examines Chinese universities' unique dual-governance structures and crisis management models, highlighting emerging trends such as the adoption of AI-powered emergency platforms, the development of organizational resilience frameworks, and the integration of big data analytics into early warning systems. Through international comparisons, especially with American and European HEIs, this article demonstrates both the strengths and shortcomings of Chinese approaches—such as legal ambiguities, resource disparities, and information transparency issues. It further discusses the impact of digital activism and multi-channel stakeholder engagement on crisis outcomes. Finally, the paper proposes policy recommendations for legal harmonization, resource redistribution, and the advancement of campus resilience through evidence-based and participatory approaches. The findings underscore the necessity of balancing social stability and agile crisis response in building robust higher education systems in China.

Keywords

Crisis management; Chinese higher education; digital governance; organizational resilience; stakeholder engagement.

1. Introduction

Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing an unprecedentedly complex risk environment. Recent years have seen a surge in diverse crises, including public health emergencies (e.g., COVID-19 outbreaks), academic integrity scandals, student safety incidents, governance failures, and natural disasters, all of which pose significant threats to institutional stability and reputation. The unique social and historical context of China—characterized by a dual-governance structure where university administration is tightly integrated with Communist Party oversight through university party committees that control decision-making hierarchies during emergencies [1].

Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese HEIs must navigate a delicate balance between regulatory compliance and the rising demand for transparency and stakeholder participation. Crises in Chinese universities frequently exhibit characteristics of group impact, unpredictability, rapid social media dissemination, and high public sensitivity [2]. According to recent research, over 70% of major campus crises in China simultaneously involve at least three of these features, making effective management increasingly challenging [2].

In response, leading Chinese universities have begun to adopt advanced crisis management strategies, such as AI-assisted monitoring systems, integrated emergency operation centers,

and digital stakeholder engagement platforms [3,4]. However, significant systemic issues persist, including legal ambiguities in emergency authority, wide resource disparities between elite and regional institutions, bureaucratic delays, and cultural tendencies towards information suppression [1,5]. Moreover, the rapid evolution of digital activism has empowered students and external stakeholders to play a more active role in crisis response, further complicating traditional top-down management approaches [6].

This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive and comparative analysis of crisis management in Chinese higher education. Drawing on empirical case studies, international literature, and cross-country comparisons, this study aims to (1) delineate the theoretical foundations and practical frameworks of crisis management in Chinese HEIs; (2) analyze the role of digital transformation and organizational resilience; (3) compare Chinese and Western practices; (4) evaluate stakeholder engagement dynamics; and (5) offer policy recommendations for enhancing crisis preparedness and institutional resilience in the evolving global context.

2. Theoretical Foundations and International Perspectives on Crisis Management in Higher Education

2.1. Theoretical Approaches to Crisis Management

Crisis management in higher education is deeply rooted in a range of theoretical frameworks that guide both research and practice. Traditionally, Western literature views crisis management as a dynamic, iterative process that unfolds in four interconnected stages: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery [1]. This phase-based model was initially articulated in the context of American emergency management during the 20th century, and it continues to serve as the foundational paradigm for many universities globally [1,7].

In this model, each phase is seen as a distinct yet cyclical process, where institutions learn from each crisis to improve future preparedness and resilience. The importance of regular simulation exercises, transparent communication, and the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in the planning process is repeatedly emphasized in literature as essential to developing organizational resilience [8]. In particular, crisis preparedness is considered incomplete without active engagement from staff, faculty, students, and even the surrounding community, fostering a more holistic and coordinated response to crises.

Building upon these traditional frameworks, the concept of organizational resilience has emerged as a meta-capability that extends beyond the ability to simply “bounce back” from crises. According to Ducheck’s process-based conceptualization, resilience involves the capacity to anticipate, cope with, and adapt to challenges in ways that lead to long-term growth and success, even in the face of adversity [8]. This understanding has become increasingly influential in global higher education, with resilience now recognized as a key component of an institution’s ability to navigate complex and unpredictable crises [8]. In this context, resilience is not just about maintaining operational continuity but also about evolving in response to the crises that test an institution’s systems and values.

2.2. China’s Institutional Context: Dual Governance and Policy Drivers

Crisis management in Chinese higher education is profoundly shaped by the country’s unique dual-governance system. This system, which places significant authority in the hands of university party committees, has both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, the centralized nature of governance ensures that crisis management policies can be mobilized swiftly and effectively, often at the national level, during widespread crises. On the other hand, this centralization can introduce bureaucratic inertia and hinder local autonomy during fast-moving or localized crises [2,5].

The regulatory framework for crisis management in China is built on the Emergency Response Law, which was enacted in 2007 to establish a nationwide system of emergency preparedness and response. Under this law, all public institutions, including universities, are mandated to develop emergency management offices, establish contingency plans, and ensure that their staff are trained to handle a wide range of crisis scenarios [2]. However, while the law lays the groundwork for emergency response, it has significant limitations. Research indicates that more than 60% of Chinese universities' crisis management plans are legally ambiguous or fail to meet compliance standards, particularly regarding the delegation of emergency powers during crises [5].

Furthermore, the financial and resource disparities between elite and regional institutions further exacerbate the challenges in crisis preparedness. Leading universities, such as Tsinghua University and Peking University, have access to substantial resources and can invest in cutting-edge crisis management technologies. In contrast, smaller, less-resourced institutions may struggle to implement even basic emergency management plans [5,9]. This resource divide highlights the need for systemic reforms that can ensure more equitable crisis management capabilities across all tiers of higher education in China.

2.3. International Comparisons: Lessons from the United States and Europe

Internationally, crisis management in higher education demonstrates both convergences and divergences with the Chinese approach. In the United States, crisis management in universities is largely decentralized, with significant autonomy given to individual institutions to develop, test, and refine their emergency response protocols. This decentralization allows for more tailored and context-specific solutions, with universities often collaborating with local governments, emergency services, and community organizations [1,7]. In addition, American universities typically value the integration of campus police, mental health services, and student organizations into the crisis management process, which strengthens the overall response and ensures that the diverse needs of the campus community are addressed [7].

The emphasis on stakeholder participation—especially students, faculty, and staff—is a key characteristic of American and European models. These models prioritize transparent communication and actively involve the community in decision-making during crises, reflecting a broader commitment to inclusivity and trust-building. In contrast, the Chinese system tends to be more top-down, with limited student or faculty involvement in crisis planning and management, which may hinder the development of a fully resilient response to crises [10].

Furthermore, resilience-building in Western universities is typically focused on recovery and post-crisis adaptation. American and European institutions have well-established systems for supporting psychological well-being, ensuring continuity in teaching and research, and conducting systematic reviews of their crisis management strategies post-crisis [8,11]. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the integration of digital tools into emergency management systems, with universities worldwide adopting AI, big data, and online communication platforms to improve crisis responses. While these technological advancements have provided new opportunities for enhancing crisis management, they also highlight significant digital divides, with less-resourced institutions struggling to implement such innovations [12].

2.4. Trends and Gaps in Chinese Higher Education Crisis Management

Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) have made significant strides in adopting international best practices in crisis management. Many universities have implemented digital early warning systems and simulation-based training programs to improve crisis preparedness and response [3,4,9]. These advancements have been particularly evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where universities that had already developed strong digital

infrastructures were able to transition to remote learning and implement public health measures more effectively than their peers [12].

However, despite these improvements, the implementation of crisis management systems remains uneven across Chinese HEIs. Legal ambiguity, bureaucratic delays, and persistent issues with information suppression continue to undermine the effectiveness of crisis management strategies [6,13]. Chinese universities' reluctance to fully embrace transparency and public accountability has led to criticisms that their crisis responses often lack credibility, particularly in relation to high-stakes crises such as student safety incidents or public health emergencies [6,13].

Additionally, digital activism and the increasing importance of social media are reshaping the crisis management landscape. While digital tools have empowered students and faculty to voice concerns and challenge official narratives, they have also introduced new challenges for traditional crisis management systems, which are accustomed to a more centralized flow of information [13]. The ability to integrate digital activism into institutional crisis response strategies is becoming a critical component of organizational resilience in the modern context. In brief, crisis management in Chinese HEIs is evolving in response to both internal pressures and external global trends. While progress has been made in adopting international practices, significant gaps remain in terms of legal clarity, resource distribution, and participatory governance. Moving forward, Chinese universities must address these gaps and develop more inclusive, transparent, and adaptive crisis management systems that reflect both the complexities of modern crises and the changing expectations of students, faculty, and the broader society.

Table 1. Comparative Crisis Management Frameworks in Higher Education

Feature Dimension	Chinese Model	U.S./European Models
Governance Structure	Dual-governance system, with highly centralized decision-making power.	Decentralized, with significant institutional autonomy; strong collaboration with local governments and community organizations.
Key Drivers	Emphasis on social stability and compliance with national laws (e.g., Emergency Response Law).	Emphasis on institutional autonomy, stakeholder trust, legal compliance, transparency, and accountability.
Stakeholder Engagement	Traditionally a top-down model with limited student and faculty involvement. New forms of participation are emerging with the rise of digital platforms like WeChat and Weibo.	Highly inclusive, actively involving students, faculty, mental health services, and student organizations in the entire crisis management process.
Communication Style	Focuses on protecting institutional reputation and social stability.	Prioritizes rapid and transparent communication to build and maintain community trust.
Focus of Resilience-Building	Focuses on using technological platforms (e.g., AI warning systems) for risk prediction and response, as well as post-crisis psychological intervention.	Focuses on post-crisis recovery and adaptation, including robust psychological support systems and systematic post-crisis reviews.

To systematically summarize the major similarities and differences in crisis management approaches between Chinese and Western (represented by the USA and Europe) universities, the table below (Table 1) provides a detailed comparison across several dimensions such as

governance structure, main drivers, stakeholder involvement, and communication methods. This will offer readers a clear macro framework for understanding the specific challenges and innovative practices faced by Chinese universities in the subsequent sections.

3. Innovations in Crisis Management: Digital Transformation and Organizational Resilience in Chinese Universities

3.1. Digital Platforms and AI-Powered Emergency Management

In recent years, Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) have embraced digital transformation as a critical part of their crisis management frameworks. Leading universities have developed Integrated Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs), also referred to as smart crisis management platforms, which combine multiple technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and the Internet of Things (IoT)—to enable real-time monitoring, data-driven decision-making, and seamless communication during emergencies [3,4]. For instance, Tsinghua University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University have implemented AI-powered systems that track potential risks, including campus safety issues, environmental hazards, and even social unrest. These systems utilize predictive analytics to anticipate threats and provide early warnings, allowing for faster intervention and more effective resource allocation during crises [12].

As mentioned earlier, Chinese top-tier universities have made significant progress in the digital transformation of crisis management in recent years. To specifically illustrate how these technological innovations are applied, their core functions, and representative cases, the table below (Table 2) provides a systematic summary of the digital applications across multiple areas, ranging from integrated emergency platforms to psychological interventions.

Table 2. Applications of Digital Innovation in Chinese HEI Crisis Management

Technology/Platform	Key Functions	Application Examples
Integrated Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs)	Combine AI, big data analytics, and the Internet of Things (IoT) to enable real-time monitoring, data-driven decision-making, and seamless communication.	“Smart crisis management platforms” deployed in leading universities.
AI-Powered Predictive Systems	Use predictive analytics to identify potential risks (e.g., campus safety, public opinion) and provide early warnings.	Tsinghua University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University use these systems to track potential threats.
Big Data Analytics	Analyze massive datasets to identify crisis patterns, optimize resource allocation, and evaluate the effectiveness of crisis responses.	Used during the COVID-19 pandemic to track health status and individual movements on campus.
Digital Psychological Intervention Platforms	Provide confidential counseling, mental health resources, and stress-reduction workshops via mobile apps or online portals.	Peking University and Fudan University have established comprehensive psychological support networks.
Multi-Channel Stakeholder Engagement Platforms	Use social media (WeChat, Weibo) for real-time updates, live-streamed town halls, and online feedback channels to enhance transparency and trust.	Fudan University created a platform allowing anonymous student feedback on crisis management responses.

These digital platforms allow for more agile responses compared to traditional manual processes. In case of incidents such as public health outbreaks, natural disasters, or security breaches, these systems can instantly activate emergency protocols, communicate with relevant stakeholders, and coordinate the university's response efforts. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities that had already integrated smart health monitoring systems were able to conduct real-time health checks, manage quarantine protocols, and track the movement of individuals across campuses with minimal delay [12].

However, the adoption of such advanced digital tools is not without its challenges. Many regional universities in China lack the resources to implement these sophisticated technologies. Even for elite universities, there are concerns about data privacy, cybersecurity risks, and the ethical implications of AI and surveillance technologies. These concerns highlight the need for more comprehensive regulatory frameworks to guide the responsible deployment of digital crisis management systems across the higher education sector.

3.2. Organizational Resilience and Psychological Crisis Intervention

Building organizational resilience is another area where Chinese universities are making significant strides. As the global understanding of crisis management has shifted from simply managing immediate responses to focusing on long-term recovery and adaptation, the concept of resilience has become central to crisis planning in Chinese HEIs [8]. Organizational resilience involves not only a university's ability to recover from a crisis but also its capacity to adapt, learn, and improve systems in the aftermath of disruptions.

Several Chinese universities have developed comprehensive psychological crisis intervention systems aimed at mitigating the mental health impacts of crises, particularly on students. For example, Peking University and Fudan University have established integrated psychological support networks that offer immediate counseling services, long-term mental health programs, and stress-reduction workshops to students and staff. These programs are often facilitated through digital platforms, where students can access confidential counseling sessions and mental health resources via mobile apps or online portals. These measures have been particularly valuable during periods of prolonged stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when students faced academic pressure and social isolation [3,14].

Additionally, many universities have created resilience-building programs that train students and staff on how to respond to crises and develop coping strategies. These programs aim to create a culture of preparedness, where individuals within the university community are equipped to manage stress, make informed decisions during emergencies, and contribute to the recovery process. This approach aligns with the growing global recognition that resilience-building is a long-term, continuous process that requires the active involvement of all stakeholders [8].

However, while there has been progress in developing psychological and resilience support systems, these programs are not uniformly available across all universities in China. Smaller institutions, particularly in rural or underfunded areas, often struggle to provide adequate psychological services, and the stigma surrounding mental health issues remains a barrier to full engagement with available resources [9]. Therefore, there is a need for more consistent and accessible mental health services throughout China's higher education system, especially in the wake of long-term crises like the pandemic.

3.3. Multi-Channel Stakeholder Engagement and Social Participation

The increasing importance of social media and digital activism has significantly reshaped crisis management in Chinese universities. In recent years, universities have had to navigate a rapidly changing landscape in which students, faculty, and even the general public are using digital platforms—such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin—to discuss, document, and sometimes

criticize the university's handling of crises [6,15]. This shift has led to a fundamental change in how universities manage crisis communication and stakeholder engagement.

Unlike the traditional top-down communication model, where university administrators dictate the flow of information, multi-channel communication strategies are now being adopted to engage a wider audience. These strategies include real-time updates via official social media accounts, live-streamed town halls with university leadership, and online feedback platforms that allow students and faculty to voice their concerns and suggestions during a crisis. This inclusive approach helps to foster trust, increase transparency, and reduce the spread of rumors and misinformation [6,14].

One notable example is Fudan University, which in response to protests and social unrest, created a platform that allowed students to submit anonymous feedback on the university's crisis management responses. This approach not only addressed student concerns but also demonstrated the university's commitment to transparency and responsiveness [15]. However, these new channels for public participation have also introduced challenges. Social media activism can sometimes escalate a crisis, especially when misinformation spreads quickly, or when university officials struggle to manage the narrative effectively. In these situations, universities must balance the need for transparency with the need to maintain order and avoid further exacerbating the crisis [6,15].

Moreover, there is an ongoing tension between the university's desire to monitor information flow and the demand for openness and accountability from students and other stakeholders. Chinese universities have historically been more cautious in sharing sensitive information, particularly when it involves institutional failures. The rise of digital activism has forced universities to reconsider their approach to information dissemination, as failure to engage with these platforms can lead to reputational damage and loss of trust [15,16].

3.4. Bridging the Digital Divide: Resource and Capacity Disparities

Despite the significant progress made in adopting digital crisis management solutions, the digital divide between elite and regional Chinese universities remains a major challenge. While top-tier institutions like Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University are able to invest heavily in cutting-edge technologies—such as AI systems for predictive crisis management, real-time data analytics, and smart surveillance systems—many regional universities struggle to develop even basic crisis management infrastructures due to limited funding and resources [5,9].

This disparity has become particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where universities with advanced digital systems were able to transition seamlessly to online learning, implement contact tracing, and monitor the health status of students and staff. In contrast, universities with less technological capability faced significant challenges in maintaining academic continuity and managing public health risks [12,14,15].

To bridge this gap, there is a need for national-level initiatives that facilitate resource-sharing, provide funding for technological upgrades, and ensure that all institutions, regardless of their size or location, have access to the tools necessary to manage crises effectively. Establishing shared crisis management platforms that allow universities to pool resources and collaborate on crisis response can also help level the playing field. This approach would not only improve overall preparedness but also foster a sense of community and solidarity among universities across China.

4. Legal, Administrative, and Cultural Challenges in Crisis Management: toward Future Reforms

4.1. Legal and Regulatory Ambiguities

Despite the adoption of the Emergency Response Law and other regulations, the legal framework surrounding crisis management in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) remains fragmented and unclear in several important aspects. The Emergency Response Law, enacted in 2007, mandates that universities develop crisis management plans, establish emergency management offices, and ensure their staff are trained to handle a wide range of crisis situations. However, the implementation of this law is inconsistent across different institutions, and many universities still struggle to fully comply with its provisions [5].

A major issue is the lack of clarity regarding the delegation of authority during a crisis. Studies have shown that more than 60% of university crisis management plans contain provisions that are either legally ambiguous or fail to meet compliance standards, particularly with regard to the allocation of emergency powers to different stakeholders [5]. This leads to confusion during actual crises, as university administrators and staff are often unsure of their legal responsibilities and authority. In some cases, this uncertainty has delayed decision-making, hindering the ability of universities to respond swiftly to emergencies.

In addition to the fragmentation of laws governing crisis management in universities, there is also a lack of comprehensive legal standards for digital crisis management tools, such as AI-based surveillance and big data analytics. As universities increasingly rely on digital technologies for crisis response, including monitoring social media and implementing predictive analytics, the legal and ethical implications of using such technologies need to be addressed. For example, issues around data privacy, student consent, and cybersecurity are not sufficiently covered by existing laws. This creates a regulatory gap that could lead to legal challenges and potential violations of individual rights during crisis situations [16].

To address these legal challenges, there is an urgent need for a national crisis management law specifically tailored to the higher education sector. This law should establish clear guidelines on the delegation of emergency powers, data privacy, and the responsibilities of various stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, it should provide a framework for the ethical use of digital technologies in crisis management, ensuring that their deployment is both effective and respectful of individual rights.

4.2. Bureaucratic Inertia and Resource Disparities

The dual-governance model in Chinese universities, which places significant power in the hands of Party committees. On the one hand, the centralized governance structure allows for the rapid mobilization of policies and resources during large-scale crises. However, this same centralized model can create significant bureaucratic inertia, where decision-making is slowed down due to the need for multiple layers of approval, especially in the case of decentralized crises that require swift local responses [2,5].

During fast-moving crises, such as a student safety incident, health emergency, or social unrest, the hierarchical decision-making process can introduce delays in the approval of emergency measures. The lengthy approval process for implementing emergency protocols, allocating resources, and communicating with stakeholders can exacerbate the crisis and escalate the potential harm to the university community. Moreover, in some cases, local campus administrators may not have the autonomy to make critical decisions, as they are bound by directives from higher authorities [5].

In addition to bureaucratic delays, there is also a significant resource disparity between elite and regional universities. Top-tier institutions like Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University have the financial resources and institutional infrastructure to

implement advanced crisis management systems, including AI-powered surveillance, predictive analytics, and smart emergency response platforms [9,12]. In contrast, regional and less-resourced universities struggle to develop even basic crisis management systems, let alone integrate cutting-edge technologies. The lack of funding, technological expertise, and trained personnel in smaller universities severely limits their ability to respond effectively to crises.

This resource gap highlights the need for policy interventions that promote resource redistribution and collaborative crisis management across universities. One potential solution could be the establishment of regional crisis management hubs, where universities can share resources, training, and expertise. Additionally, the government could provide targeted funding and grants to smaller universities to help them develop digital crisis management capabilities and ensure that all universities are equipped to handle crises effectively.

4.3. Cultural Barriers: Information Monitoring and Social Media Activism

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping crisis management in Chinese universities. Historically, there has been a strong tendency towards information monitoring within Chinese institutions. During crises, university administrators often prioritize the maintenance of social stability and the protection of the institution's reputation over the transparency of communication with students, faculty, and the public. This approach is rooted in a broader cultural context where the exposure of negative news or institutional failures is often seen as a threat to the university's credibility and legitimacy [6].

However, the rise of digital activism and the widespread use of social media have fundamentally altered the crisis communication landscape. Platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin provide students and faculty with the tools to document, discuss, and even criticize the university's handling of crises. In many cases, social media has become a powerful tool for mobilizing protests and demanding accountability, especially in cases of perceived institutional failure, such as poor responses to public health emergencies, student safety incidents, or unfair administrative decisions [6,13].

While social media activism can foster greater public accountability and engagement, it also poses significant challenges to traditional top-down crisis management strategies. The rapid spread of information (and misinformation) on social media can escalate crises, causing reputational damage and potentially leading to social unrest. University administrators often face difficult decisions when responding to social media criticism—whether to engage directly, remain silent, or issue a more formal response. Additionally, the anonymity provided by social media platforms can lead to the spread of rumors and false information, further complicating crisis management efforts [6,13].

To navigate these challenges, Chinese universities must adapt their crisis communication strategies to incorporate digital engagement and social media management. Universities should develop social media protocols that allow for timely and transparent communication during crises while ensuring that information is accurate and reliable. It is also crucial to establish partnerships with student organizations and faculty members to foster more inclusive decision-making and ensure that all voices are heard during a crisis. Engaging with social media in a proactive and constructive way can help to build trust and prevent the spread of misinformation.

4.4. Policy Recommendations and Reform Directions

Given the complex challenges outlined above, several policy reforms are essential to improving crisis management in Chinese higher education:

First of all, the Chinese government should enact a comprehensive crisis management law that addresses the unique needs of universities. This law should provide clear guidelines on crisis response, delegation of authority, and the use of digital technologies in emergency situations.

It should also address issues related to data privacy, cybersecurity, and the ethical use of AI in crisis management. Moreover, to address bureaucratic inertia, universities should be granted greater autonomy in making crisis management decisions. At the same time, regional crisis management networks should be established to facilitate resource-sharing and collaboration between universities, especially between elite and less-resourced institutions.

Additionally, universities must embrace transparency and social media engagement as integral parts of their crisis management strategies. Developing effective communication channels, including digital platforms and social media protocols, will allow universities to engage with stakeholders in a more inclusive and participatory way. This will enhance trust, reduce uncertainty, and facilitate quicker resolution of crises. Also, a cultural shift toward openness and transparency is crucial for building organizational resilience. Universities must embrace digital activism as a force for accountability and positive change.

By fostering an environment of openness, universities can enhance their ability to respond to crises while maintaining their credibility and trustworthiness. By implementing these reforms, Chinese universities can build more resilient, adaptive, and transparent crisis management systems that not only address the immediate challenges of crisis situations but also position them to thrive in the face of future disruptions.

In summary, there is a close correspondence between the multiple challenges identified in this paper, such as legal, administrative, cultural, and resource issues, and the policy recommendations proposed. To clearly illustrate this “problem-solution” logic chain, the table below (Table 3) summarizes and matches the core challenges analyzed earlier with the specific reform directions aimed at overcoming them, providing a clear reference for future reform pathways.

Table 3. Core Challenges and Corresponding Reform Recommendations

Core Challenge	Corresponding Policy Reform Recommendation
Legal & Regulatory Ambiguity	Enact a comprehensive national crisis management law tailored for the higher education sector, clarifying authority delegation, data privacy, and stakeholder responsibilities.
Bureaucratic Inertia & Resource Disparities	Grant universities greater autonomy in crisis decision-making. Establish regional crisis management networks to promote resource-sharing and collaboration between elite and less-resourced institutions.
Cultural Barrier: Information Control	Promote a cultural shift toward openness and transparency. Make transparent communication a core component of building organizational resilience.
The Digital Divide	Implement national-level initiatives for resource redistribution, providing funding and technical support to less-resourced regional universities to upgrade their crisis management infrastructure.
Rise of Digital Activism	Develop official social media protocols to engage proactively and constructively with digital platforms, using them as tools for building trust and gathering feedback rather than viewing them solely as threats.

5. Conclusion

Crisis management in Chinese higher education institutions is an evolving field, driven by both domestic needs and international trends. While universities in China have made significant strides in integrating advanced technologies such as AI, big data, and social media analytics into their crisis management frameworks, they continue to face substantial challenges. These challenges are rooted not only in the legal and bureaucratic structures that govern Chinese universities but also in resource disparities and institutional inertia. The combination of these

factors has created a complex crisis management environment, where the need for more comprehensive, adaptive, and transparent systems is increasingly evident.

The comparative analysis with international models, particularly those from the United States and Europe, underscores the importance of decentralized governance, participatory decision-making, and transparent communication during crises. In contrast, Chinese universities' centralized governance structure, while beneficial for rapid decision-making in some cases, often leads to delays and inefficiencies in crisis response. Moreover, the lack of a clear and unified legal framework for crisis management in higher education institutions further complicates efforts to establish cohesive emergency protocols across the sector. The resource gap between elite and regional institutions further exacerbates these challenges, limiting the overall resilience of the sector.

Looking forward, there is a clear need for a more robust legal and regulatory framework that clarifies the responsibilities and powers of university administrators during emergencies. Policy reforms should focus on fostering inter-institutional collaboration, facilitating resource-sharing, and developing more inclusive crisis management training programs for university staff. Additionally, integrating digital tools that facilitate real-time data-sharing and multi-channel communication can strengthen institutional preparedness and response. Universities must also embrace a culture of transparency and proactive engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, including students, faculty, and the broader community, to ensure that their crisis management strategies are both effective and trusted.

In conclusion, as Chinese universities continue to expand and globalize, their ability to manage crises effectively will become an increasingly critical factor in their success. By adopting a more integrated, flexible, and technology-driven approach to crisis management, Chinese higher education institutions can build greater resilience and better navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century.

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