

# Comparison of Internationalization of Higher Education in China and the United States

Kaiqi Song

College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, University of California, Berkeley, United States

kechysong@gmail.com

**Abstract.** This article focuses on comparing the internationalization of higher education in China and the United States by taking admission, curriculum design, academic cooperation and students' mobility as case studies, especially different methods in the United States "Admissions system" versus the comprehensive admission process of China's "Gaokao", thus revealing different patterns of higher education globalization strategy. While America emphasizes mutual access and collaboration to attract international research talents in their academic communities and enhance academic independence of research results at all levels to maintain their advantage; China still mainly recruits incoming students and cooperates with countries through government agencies, thereby gaining support for national policies at home and abroad. Based on these analyses, this paper puts forward different perspectives on the shortcomings and challenges of Chinese universities in higher education development, such as rigid teaching content (China), while America increasingly expensive fees are a serious obstacle to more fully achieving universal participation in globalization, which is beneficial for policymakers around the world to find ways out. China and the US both need more realistic and specific measures to further improve their internationalization level under different circumstances of educational policy and respect for institutional traditional. As an alternative option, hybrid education has gained popularity in order to establish sustainable and inclusive model international exchanges. It can be anticipated that future research will lead to stronger learning experiences between countries, promoting more cross-learning and integration of academic systems and cultures.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Internationalization, China-U.S. comparison, Student Mobility.

## 1. Introduction

With the fast development of global competition of higher education, countries are required to provide better policies for internationalization. China pays more attention on governmental management, strategic deployment and recruitment of international students and encouraging state-to-state partnerships, and the United States focuses on institutional autonomy, self-regulation, attracting worldwide talent and encouraging international student mobility. Understanding both models is helpful to know how a country handles the challenges and advantages of the globalization of higher education in different ways.

This study aimed to examine the differences in the internationalization model of China and the US in the admission system, curriculum, cooperation, and student movement and find out the pros and cons through comparing the characteristics between two systems in structure and operation, so as to present constructive opinions on the development of these systems and explore reasonable suggestions for all walks of life who wish to improve their national policy of internationalization accordingly.

The current research employed the case study approach through comparing the actual data and the official materials in China and the US with references collected from China and the US. The text was split into four parts according to logical development order. The first section provides a brief overview of each national higher education system and admission methods in this country. The second section compares the policy of internationalization strategies in both countries respectively from admission enrollment methods, curriculum design, academic research partnership and student mobility status. The third part discusses the actual results and effect on employment and research outcomes of international students from China and the U.S. The final fourth part aims to discuss the

adjustment and advice on the system based on actual comparison data and make some valuable suggestions for two national higher education internationalization. The detailed analysis can enable readers to have more comprehensive understanding about the way that the major higher education systems develop differently in the face of international environment.

## **2. Current Status of Higher Education in China and the U.S. and Admission Methods**

### **2.1. Overview of China's Higher Education System**

Since the late 1990s, China's higher education has been transformed and experienced rapid development with various programs, such as “Project 211,” “Project 985” and the new proposal for “Double First-Class University Plan.” These projects aim to cultivate world-class universities and disciplines with heavy investments from governments [1]. China's higher education system remains under tight control by its government, especially under the Ministry of Education, in the form of curriculum contents, budgets, etc. The basis for an undergraduate admission is high school degrees from a successful score on the gaokao, the entrance exams for Chinese college and university applicants (called gaokao). In essence, the gaokao serves as an exam which all Chinese students take as they attempt to enter colleges or universities. This national, standardized examination (sometimes considered as the single criterion) which students need to pass in order to continue on to university education. For the most part, if not all focuses on rigorous memorization of knowledge and test-taking, rather than individual talents in evaluation or other criteria. However, some universities can give up minority spots to some independent talent and evaluate students individually. The gaokao is still the most important guidance for millions of Chinese students’ future academic life.

### **2.2. Overview of the U.S. Higher Education System**

The U.S. higher education system is highly decentralized and diverse, comprising public state universities, private non-profit institutions (including the elite Ivy League), and community colleges. There is no federal ministry of education controlling standards; instead, accreditation is managed by independent regional bodies, and institutions enjoy considerable autonomy [2]. This autonomy is reflected in the admissions process. U.S. universities employ a holistic review system that considers a combination of factors: grades from high school (GPA), scores on standardized tests like the SAT or ACT, personal essays, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, and evidence of leadership. This approach seeks to assess a student's overall potential, character, and fit for the institution beyond mere academic scores [3]. Yet the diversity of criteria also results in unconventional requirements—such as essays, interviews, or demonstrated interest—that may appear unusual or confusing to applicants unfamiliar with the system. This system aligns with the broader liberal arts philosophy that values well-rounded, critical thinkers.

## **3. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Internationalization and Analysis of Problems**

### **3.1. Employment and Income Performance**

U.S. universities consistently dominate global graduate employability rankings. Degrees from top U.S. institutions are highly valued by employers worldwide, and graduates typically command higher starting salaries, a phenomenon known as the “wage premium”. The U.S. model of holistic education, which emphasizes critical thinking, communication, and teamwork, is often cited as aligning well with employer needs. For “Chinese returnees”, the employment advantage has diminished in recent years. While a foreign degree was once a major differentiator, the sheer increase in returnees and the strong development of China's domestic higher education sector have led to a

phenomenon of “devaluation of returnee degrees” in the competitive domestic job market, though those with genuine skills and experience from top universities remain competitive.

### **3.2. Comparison of Academic Impact**

The U.S. maintains a dominant position in terms of academic impact, as measured by global university rankings (e.g., THE, QS), number of Nobel prizes, volume of high-impact publications, and citation rates. Its research ecosystem, characterized by ample funding, academic freedom, and intense competition, continues to drive global innovation [4]. However, China is the world's most rapid riser. Its investment in R&D and focus on key research areas has led to a dramatic increase in its output of scientific publications, now surpassing the U.S. in total volume in some fields. Chinese universities like Tsinghua and Peking University are climbing the global rankings at a remarkable pace. Yet, challenges remain in achieving the same level of research influence and groundbreaking originality, partly due to a cultural and political environment that can sometimes constrain free academic inquiry and risk-taking [5].

## **4. Comparison of Differences in Internationalization of Higher Education between China and the United States**

### **4.1. Differences in the Internationalization of Curricula and Teaching**

The internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) in China often takes the form of offering English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses and establishing joint-venture universities (e.g., NYU Shanghai, Duke Kunshan) to import Western pedagogical models. However, the core curriculum for the vast majority of domestic students remains heavily focused on national content and is taught in Chinese, with limited integration of global perspectives or critical pedagogy, particularly in social sciences and humanities [6]. The U.S. curriculum is inherently more internationalized due to its diverse faculty and student body. The liberal arts model requires students to take a wide range of courses, often including those focused on world cultures, languages, and global issues. Furthermore, the case-based learning and classroom discussions common in U.S. universities naturally incorporate diverse viewpoints from a multinational student population [7]. In contrast to China's emphasis on importing selected Western models without deeply transforming the mainstream curriculum, the U.S. approach embeds international perspectives as a structural requirement, making the difference not only one of degree but also of integration and intent.

### **4.2. Differences in Internationalization of Enrolment**

China's strategy for internationalization of enrollment has been predominantly inbound-focused. The government has set ambitious targets to attract international students, largely through generous scholarship programs such as the Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The goal is to enhance its soft power and global influence. While the number of international students in China has grown significantly, the majority come from other Asian countries and are often enrolled in short-term language or cultural programs rather than full-degree programs. In contrast, the U.S. has a long-established tradition of being the world's top destination for inbound international students seeking high-quality degree programs, particularly at the graduate level. More importantly, its enrollment internationalization is also outbound-focused. Many American universities have robust study abroad offices that actively encourage and facilitate for their domestic students to spend a semester or a year overseas, viewing it as an essential component of a modern education [8]. Thus, while China's enrollment internationalization strengthens inbound flows but remains regionally concentrated and programmatically limited, the U.S. demonstrates a dual orientation—attracting global talent at scale while simultaneously sending its own students abroad—which highlights a sharper contrast in breadth and reciprocity.

### 4.3. Differences in the Direction of Student Mobility

Student mobility patterns highlight the asymmetry between the two systems. China has become one of the world's largest sources of outbound students: between 2010 and 2019, the number of Chinese students studying abroad grew at an average annual rate of nearly 9.5%, before plunging about 36% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there has been a rebound, the numbers remain below the projected trend line as if the pandemic had not occurred (see Fig. 1).

In contrast, the U.S. has seen a strong and recovering inflow of international students: in the 2023-24 academic year, over 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. higher education, representing a growth of about 7% compared with the previous year — a clear recovery from pandemic-related drops (see Fig. 2).

While China's mobility is overwhelmingly outbound, focused on sending students abroad, the U.S. exhibits a more balanced pattern: not only as a receiving hub but also supporting outbound mobility via study abroad and exchange programs. This dual nature underlines a structural difference—China more as a “sending country,” the U.S. as both sender and host — which reflects deeper contrasts in resources, global influence, and educational attractiveness.

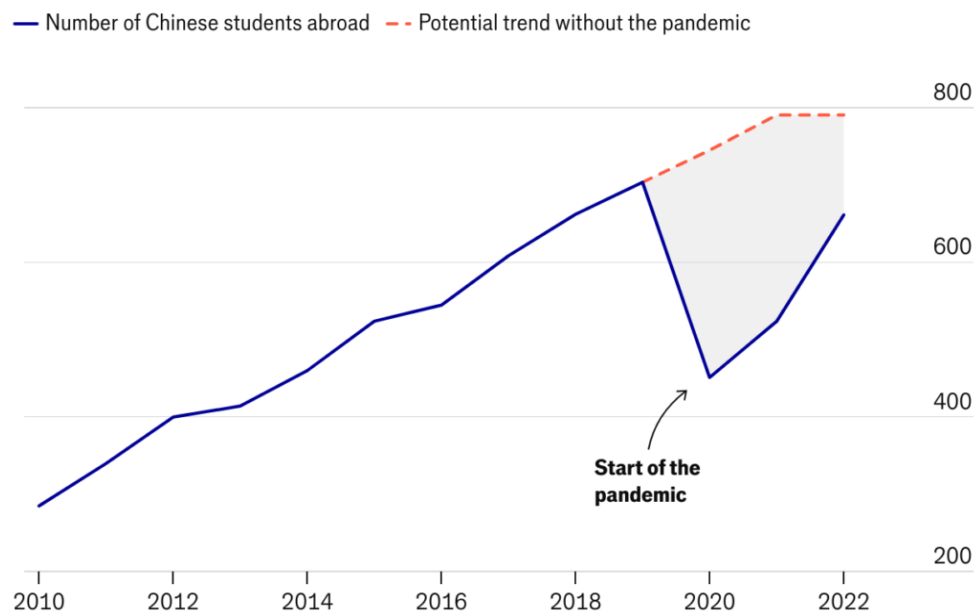


**Figure 1.** China's outbound students plummeted during the pandemic

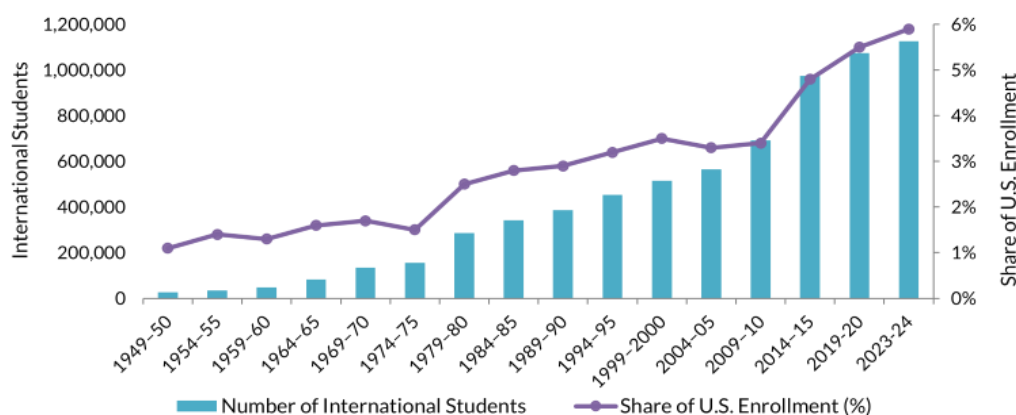


**Figure 2.** Comparison between international students and share of US enrollment

### 4.4. Academic Cooperation and Internationalization of Research

China excels in government-to-government and institution-to-institution partnership frameworks. Initiatives like the Sino-Foreign Joint University Partnerships and the Belt and Road Educational Action promote structured collaboration, often with a strong focus on science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and technology transfer [9]. The U.S. model is more bottom-up and faculty-driven. International research collaboration is primarily initiated by individual researchers or university departments based on shared interests, facilitated by their extensive networks and supported by grants from private foundations (e.g., Rockefeller Foundation) and federal agencies (e.g., National Science Foundation). This model has made the U.S. a central hub in global knowledge production networks [10].

## **5. Suggestions for the Future Adjustment and Development of China's Education System**

Based on the comparative analysis of the Sino-U.S. models of higher education internationalization, the future development of China's education system should leverage its existing strengths while introducing reforms tailored to its unique context. Rather than replicating the U.S. system, China should pursue a path of innovative adaptation.

First, there should be a strategic shift from quantitative expansion to qualitative enhancement in international student programs. While inbound recruitment remains important, more effort should be directed toward improving the academic rigor, support services, and intercultural engagement for international students. This will elevate China's appeal as a destination for serious degree-seeking students rather than primarily short-term visitors.

Second, although the Gaokao system provides a fair and efficient mechanism for mass selection, universities could be granted greater autonomy to admit a limited percentage of students based on special talents, leadership potential, or international experience. This would help diversify the student body and foster a more dynamic learning environment.

Third, curriculum internationalization should go beyond offering English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses. A deeper integration of global perspectives, critical thinking, and cross-cultural competencies into the core curriculum—even for programs taught in Chinese—is essential. This can be achieved through pedagogical training for faculty, redesigned course materials, and strengthened partnerships with high-quality international institutions.

Lastly, while government steering has accelerated progress, encouraging more institutional initiative and bottom-up innovation—particularly in research collaboration and curricular design—would make the system more agile and globally competitive. These adjustments would help China develop a more balanced, influential, and sustainable model of internationalized higher education.

## **6. Conclusion**

This comparison reveals the Chinese and American models of globalization in higher education are neither "perfect." The former is exciting as America enjoys a very ranked and influential world system, facing challenges associated with climbing to enroll more international students to pursue higher education, socio-political pressure, ensuring all students can have the same opportunity and chance for attending overseas universities or participating in rich, meaningful, high quality, challenging study abroad programs, etc. As the latter, however, has tremendous scale and ambition, but issues about academic freedom come up, questioning the extent, quality, or depth of its successful globalization as well; what's considered overreliance on state's drive, policies. This piece mostly contains policy analysis at macro level, using literature and articles in support of statements, views already been noted to be established points, therefore, does not include direct evidence from which data would emerge from firsthand. So, no attention will be given to experience or viewpoint of key persons, stakeholders, participants as professors or students involved. Additionally, although some comparisons between two nations were included, no nation's policy differences accounted to how each policy performs at different levels will be conducted through further detailed research, so an opportunity may not be realized by way of finer granularity and application about findings. Next steps could involve mapping students' career paths long-term from these two systems against each other so

as to further quantify, measure how much value they received based upon each differing strategy and pathway of globalization. Equally, if deep qualitative investigation could be done into students' educational experiences, one might gain vital insights on their successes, stumbling blocks, setbacks, barriers, and nuances encountered or arose with regard to learning and skills acquired in such divergent internationalization paradigm systems - Sino-foreign cooperation colleges. Further studies could be made of how combining the benefits of the systems reviewed here might help create innovative and progressive steps toward globalization.

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