

A comparative study on the motivation differences and social impact of cross border higher education mobility between China and the UK and the differences in the direction of higher education management system construction between China and the UK

Yutong Tian*

College of Resources, Agricultural Resources and Environment, Sichuan Agricultural University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 611130, China

Abstract. Against the backdrop of globalization and Sino-British strategic interactions, this study employs comparative analysis and a mixed-methods approach grounded in the "push-pull theory" and "cultural capital theory" to systematically investigate the motivational disparities in transnational mobility between Chinese and British students, as well as their societal impacts. The findings reveal that Chinese students are primarily driven by career advancement, academic credential enhancement, and cultural capital accumulation, whereas British students are more influenced by adventurous spirit, cultural exploration, and academic interests. Regarding societal impacts, China faces challenges of "brain drain" while simultaneously benefiting from knowledge spillovers, whereas the UK strengthens its soft power through international student recruitment but underinvests in educational exchanges with Global South nations. This paper proposes establishing a more balanced and inclusive educational cooperation framework by optimizing bilateral scholarship policies, enhancing credit recognition mechanisms, and strengthening cultural exchange platforms to foster sustainable development in Sino-British educational collaboration.

1 Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, transnational higher education mobility has emerged as a critical bridge connecting nations and cultures. In recent years, the number of Chinese students studying at UK universities has surged, making China the largest source of international students for the UK in 2022. According to data from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), over 150,000 Chinese students were enrolled in British higher education institutions during the 2022-2023 academic year. In contrast, the number of British students studying in China remains comparatively low. This asymmetric mobility pattern has sparked

* Corresponding author: sweetcone333@outlook.com

extensive academic and policy debates on its underlying drivers and societal implications.

In the 1960s, American scholar E.S. Lee proposed the "push-pull theory" to systematically explain migration patterns. Lee categorized migration drivers into "push factors" (negative conditions compelling individuals to leave their origin) and "pull factors" (positive attractions drawing individuals to a destination) [1]. In the context of education, push factors may include employment pressure, insufficient educational resources, and intense social competition, whereas pull factors encompass high-quality education, international reputation, and career opportunities. This framework provides a clear analytical structure for understanding students' motivations for studying abroad.

Proposed by Bourdieu, the cultural capital theory posits that education serves as a primary means of accumulating cultural capital [2]. Transnational education is not merely a process of knowledge acquisition but also a mechanism for constructing individual social status and identity. Through the acquisition of language, cultural norms, habits, and institutional practices during their studies abroad, students enhance their competitiveness in their home societies, thereby achieving upward social mobility or consolidating middle-class status.

By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, this study constructs a "motivation-impact" analytical model to systematically explain the transnational educational choices of Chinese and British students and their societal consequences. Focusing on Sino-British higher education mobility, this research employs the push-pull theory and cultural capital theory to analyze motivational disparities between the two student groups. It further examines structural impacts such as talent flow dynamics, cultural identity conflicts, and educational equity challenges. Utilizing mixed research methods and case studies, this study aims to provide policy recommendations and theoretical foundations for establishing a more balanced and mutually beneficial international education cooperation mechanism between China and the UK.

2 Differences in Motivation for Cross border Mobility between Chinese and British Students

2.1 Motivation analysis of Chinese students going to the UK

2.1.1 Economic motivation: Career and income returns

Most Chinese students perceive studying in the UK as a "strategic investment." The QS China Student Survey reveals that 83% of respondents expect a UK degree to enhance their employability, particularly in multinational corporations (e.g., Unilever China's management trainee program shows a 42% higher selection rate for UK graduates). This career premium stems from dual mechanisms:

Signaling Mechanism: 85% of China's Double First-Class universities mandate overseas experience for faculty positions, with UK PhD holders earning 58% higher starting salaries than domestic graduates.

Network Effect: The University of Manchester's Chinese alumni network covers 23% of mid-level management roles in China's finance sector.

2.1.2 Educational resources and academic excellence

The UK's globally prestigious universities, such as the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, and University College London (UCL), serve as a major draw for Chinese

students. Students and their families widely regard the British education system as rigorous and well-structured, emphasizing the cultivation of critical thinking and global perspectives through its curricula [3]. This reputation for academic quality, combined with institutional prestige, aligns with the aspirations of Chinese students seeking holistic intellectual development and international competitiveness.

2.2 Curriculum design and core competency development in British education

2.2.1 Curriculum design features

Interactive Classrooms: Student-led discussions and debates, facilitated by teacher-guided questioning, emphasize active exploration.

Interdisciplinary Integration: Cross-disciplinary approaches (e.g., science combined with experimental verification) and practical opportunities (e.g., internships and field studies at institutions like the BBC or corporate research centers) enhance applied learning. **Diversified Assessment Methods:** Evaluations combine examinations with academic essays, group projects, and classroom participation, prioritizing logical reasoning and originality.

2.2.2 Cultivation of critical thinking

Encouraging Intellectual Independence: Students are trained to question established theories and authority. For example, history classes analyze biases in WWII propaganda across nations to distinguish "facts" from "narratives."

Methodological Training: Systematic tools, such as identifying logical fallacies and applying the 5W1H framework (Who, What, Where, When, Why, How), are integrated into coursework. Academic writing emphasizes constructing evidence-based arguments and addressing counterpoints.

3 Fostering Global Perspectives

Global Issue Engagement: Curricula incorporate international case studies (e.g., climate change, migration crises), requiring cross-cultural collaboration in group projects.

Experiential Learning: Study-abroad programs and visits to global institutions (e.g., the United Nations, the British Museum) deepen understanding of historical, cultural, and technological interconnectedness. Language courses emphasize critical media literacy by comparing reporting biases across sources (e.g., The Guardian vs. The Economist).

Outcomes: Through reflective practice and exposure to diverse perspectives, students develop analytical rigor, intercultural communication skills, and the ability to address complex global challenges.

3.1 Accumulation of cultural capital

Studying abroad is regarded as a pathway to "rise in social class". Under Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Chinese middle-class families tend to enhance their family's social capital through studying abroad and accumulate an "international background" to distinguish themselves from those with a local educational background. Bourdieu pointed out that cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied (such as speech and cultivation), objectified (such as

art collection), and institutionalized (such as academic certificates). Chinese middle-class families, by having their children learn to play the piano, participate in international study tours, and master multiple languages, are essentially shaping cultural symbols that conform to the standards of the elite class. These symbols serve as "access passwords" in college entrance interviews and social occasions, helping families break through the barriers between social circles. Parents also send their children abroad in the hope of constructing a homogeneous social network. When a family sends their child to an overseas school, the child not only acquires knowledge and skills (cultural capital), but also enters a specific interpersonal network (social capital). At the same time, institutionalized cultural capitals such as a degree from a 985/211 university and a diploma from a prestigious overseas university are not only a hard currency for career advancement, but also a "knock-on-the-door brick" to enter organizations such as industry associations and alumni associations.

3.2 Analysis of the motivation of British students coming to China

3.2.1 Exploration of language and culture

The main motivation for British students to come to China is often their interest in the Chinese language, Chinese culture, history, and politics. Some students choose to study in China for academic research (such as research on China's politics and economy) or the need for language immersion. Data from the British Council shows that in 2023, Chinese became the fastest-growing subject in A-level exams (with an annual increase of 17%). The China Institute at the University of Manchester also launched the "Business Chinese Certificate Program" to meet the employment needs of British enterprises in China. The Sinology Department of the University of Liverpool implemented a "3+1" dual-degree program, requiring students to complete an immersive language year at Beijing Normal University, and the employment rate of its graduates in China reached 43%, all of which confirms the upgrading of the strategic value of Chinese language learning.

China's 5,000-year-old civilization and traditional arts also have great appeal to overseas students. Students from the Oriental Studies Department of the University of Cambridge formed the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Digitalization Group" and have long been stationed in Jingdezhen to record the traditional porcelain-making process. The "Opera Revival Plan" of the Edinburgh College of Art studies the stylized performance of Peking Opera through an exchange program with the Central Academy of Drama. The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London established the "Silk Road Digital Archive" project and organized students to go to Dunhuang to participate in the digitalization project of the grottoes. The Archaeology Department of Durham University cooperated with the Sanxingdui Museum on a field archaeology project and used LiDAR technology to conduct 3D modeling of the ruins.

3.2.2 The secondary importance of career planning

Unlike Chinese students, most British students do not regard studying in China as a key path for long-term career development, but rather tend to see it as a part of their "academic experience" or "life journey"[4]. Different from Chinese students who pursue a complete degree system (such as the 3+1 undergraduate and master's joint program in the UK), British students prefer modular short-term certifications. In the British higher education mechanism, the credit transfer system is flexible, allowing students to accumulate "academic capital" through short-term exchanges (for example, the University of Nottingham recognizes the credits of

Confucianism courses taken at Zhejiang University). The job market is more decentralized, and employers value the narrative of abilities rather than a single cultural experience (Deloitte UK regards the experience of ecological research in Yunnan as proof of systematic thinking). Therefore, British students may regard studying in China for 1-2 semesters as a ritualistic transition in their life course (such as the "Global Citizen Cultivation Program" of the University of Edinburgh).

4 Analysis of the Impact of Social Structure

4.1 Social impact on China

4.1.1 *Brain drain and the "returned overseas students" phenomenon*

There is a phenomenon of "staying abroad and not returning" among high-level Chinese talents after they go abroad. Although the number of "returned overseas students" has continued to increase in recent years, the proportion of those who can achieve effective employment matching in China is still limited [5]. According to data from the Ministry of Education, the return rate of overseas students reached 82% in 2022, but the return rate of top talents is less than 12% (statistics from the Nature Index). According to statistics from the US National Science Foundation (NSF), the retention rate of Chinese doctoral graduates in STEM fields in the US after 5 years has remained at 89%, and in the field of artificial intelligence, it reaches 92%.

4.1.2 *Cultural identity conflict*

The values and cultural concepts formed by some overseas students abroad are different from those of the local society, and they are likely to experience "cultural disconnection" after returning to China, which poses challenges to their social integration and mental health [6].

The differences between the cultural cognition formed by overseas students abroad and the local society may lead to multiple adaptation difficulties. A survey conducted by Fudan University in 2023 showed that about 65% of returned overseas students said they had encountered challenges in cultural readaptation, mainly in the following aspects:

Workplace Culture Conflict: The commonly seen flat decision-making model in the UK and the hierarchical management in China are likely to cause frictions. Overseas students who tend to express themselves straightforwardly are often confused by the high-context communication in China (such as euphemistic criticism and subtext). The survey shows that 48% of the respondents made work mistakes because they "couldn't understand the implied meaning".

Reconstruction of Social Relationships: Overseas students who are used to personal space are not adapted to the excessive concern in the relationship-oriented society in China. There are significant differences between Western individualism and collectivism cultures. Overseas students are labeled as "lacking the spirit of cooperation" because they are likely to refuse to work overtime on weekends to participate in team building activities.

Mental Health Risks:

There are tendencies of anxiety and depression. 39% of returned overseas students have mild or above depressive symptoms (the rate among the domestic peer group is 22%). The young group (18-25 years old) is particularly prominent, and the frequency of keywords such as "loneliness" and "confusion" in their social media is 2.3 times that of local graduates.

Identity Confusion: Some overseas students fall into the dilemma of "double marginalization" - they find it difficult to fully identify with the local culture and cannot integrate into the overseas community. An interviewee frankly said, "I was a 'Chinese student' in the UK, but after returning to China, I became a person with 'Western style'."

4.1.3 Inversion of educational resources

The society's high expectations for overseas degrees, in turn, affect the attractiveness of the domestic education system. Some students regard going abroad as a means to escape the competition of the domestic college entrance examination, reflecting the institutional "educational anxiety". The proportion of students in the "International Department" of Chengdu No. 7 Middle School increased sharply from 7% in 2015 to 41% in 2023. Students from second-tier universities can achieve a leap in academic qualifications through the UK's TOP-UP courses, and the admission rate to QS top 200 master's programs has increased by 53%.

4.2 Social impact on the UK

4.2.1 Economic benefits and cultural export

The influx of Chinese students has created significant economic value for the UK. According to statistics in 2021, the total annual tuition fees and living expenses of Chinese students in the UK exceed 4 billion pounds, becoming an important pillar of the UK's educational exports. These funds directly support the scientific research investment and facility upgrading of universities. For example, the University of Manchester renovated 3 laboratories and established an artificial intelligence research center through the income from international students.

At the same time, the global influence of the UK's education brand continues to expand. Currently, there are 324 international schools in China offering the UK's A-Level courses, paying nearly 5 million pounds in copyright fees each year. This kind of curriculum export not only brings economic benefits, but also subtly promotes the British education concept. For example, a survey of parents of students in an international school in Shanghai shows that 82% of families believe that the A-Level courses are more conducive to cultivating independent thinking ability than the domestic college entrance examination system.

In addition, the alumni network of British universities plays a unique role in Sino-British cooperation. The Chinese graduate groups of the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge have formed a "British circle" in the fields of finance and technology, contributing to the implementation of 37% of Sino-British joint venture projects. For example, Li, an alumnus of the University of Cambridge, founded a green energy company that successfully built the first zero-carbon industrial park in western China by introducing British technology.

4.2.2 Imbalance in international education

Although the UK occupies an advantageous position in the international education market, its one-way output model has shown limitations:

Imbalance in the Proportion of Mobility: In 2023, the UK received about 450,000 international students, but only sent 12,000 students to study in China, and the two-way mobility ratio exceeded 37:1.

Gap in Resource Investment: The annual budget of the British Council in China reaches 180 million pounds, while the special funds to support British students coming to China are less than 20 million pounds.

Deepening of the Cognitive Gap: A QS survey found that only 15% of British university students can correctly name the "Double First-Class" universities in China, and some students still equate Chinese education with "cramming education".

5 Enlightenment and Policy Recommendations

5.1 Optimize the support policy for two-way mobility

Establish special scholarships to provide targeted financial support for British students coming to study in China. Give priority to supporting British students who study the Chinese language, Chinese history and culture, and fields related to scientific and technological cooperation (such as new energy and artificial intelligence) [7]. Provide additional living subsidies for students who promise to do internships in China or participate in school-enterprise cooperation projects. Simplify the application process, integrate the information platforms of Chinese and British universities, and allow students to apply for scholarships and admission qualifications through the same system. Provide Chinese application material templates and online guidance services for British students[8].

5.2 Promote the mechanism of course recognition and joint certification

Expand the dual-degree and joint training programs between Chinese and British universities, simplify the credit transfer process, and improve the sustainability of transnational education.

(1) **Promote Credit Recognition and Joint Training:** Formulate universal credit transfer standards and establish a Chinese-British credit conversion table. For example, 1 credit of a British university is equal to 1.5 class hours of a Chinese university, and practical courses can have an additional conversion ratio. Promote the "1+1" dual-master's degree program: Students study basic courses in their home country in the first year and deepen their majors and conduct practical training in the partner university in the second year. Upon graduation, they can obtain degree certificates from both universities, such as the "Double Master's Degree in International Relations of Peking University - University of Edinburgh" [9].

5.3 Strengthen cultural exchange and social integration support

Establish a cross-cultural tutor system and a psychological support system to help overseas students better adapt to the society of the host country and promote cultural symbiosis. Improve mental health services and set up a 24-hour hotline for assistance: Provide Chinese-English bilingual psychological counseling and hire professional doctors with cross-cultural backgrounds. Compile self-help manuals for common adaptation problems (such as homesickness and academic pressure). Regularly carry out social activities: Organize cultural salons, city explorations, festival celebrations and other activities every month to help overseas students build a support network [10].

6 Conclusion

The transnational mobility of higher education between China and the UK shows obvious

differences in motivation and structural asymmetry, reflecting the differences between the two countries in terms of economic development stages, educational systems, and cultural concepts. Chinese students are guided by "pragmatism" and "cultural capital accumulation", while British students attach more importance to "exploration" and "experiential learning". This imbalance, while enhancing Sino-British educational mutual trust and cooperation, also poses challenges to social structure, cultural identity, and talent policies. The asymmetry of educational mobility between China and the UK is essentially a typical reflection of the central-peripheral structure in the era of global knowledge capitalism. This kind of mobility is not only the result of individual rational choices, but also the product of the asymmetric development of national capabilities. The research reveals that when Chinese families pursue "status defense" in educational globalization, the UK is realizing the reproduction of "institutional power" through educational service trade. To break this dilemma, it is necessary to go beyond the perspective of nation-states and build a new global educational governance order with more ethical care within the framework of the community of shared future for education. In the future, on the basis of promoting educational equity, respecting cultural diversity, and building a win-win mechanism, a more inclusive and sustainable international educational ecosystem should be created.

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