

Reform Pathways for the Examination and Admission System of International Graduate Students in China: A Sino-American Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Over the seven decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's education for international students has passed through five developmental stages, entering a phase of rapid expansion after the launch of reform and opening up. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the share of international students enrolled in degree programmes—especially postgraduate programmes—has risen continuously, while their disciplinary distribution has extended from language-related fields towards non-language fields. Drawing on lessons from a comparison with the United States and on China's own conditions, the examination and admission system for international students should be adjusted and refined. At the macro level, the reform principle of separating admission from examination functions should be upheld; at the micro level, the language proficiency examination system should be further standardised and a corresponding academic aptitude examination system established, so as to raise the overall quality of the selection and training of international graduate students in China.

Keywords: international graduate students in China, examination and admission system, selection quality, talent strategy

1. Introduction

According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, 489,200 international students were studying at Chinese higher education institutions in 2017, with the rate of growth remaining at 10 per cent for two consecutive years. Of these, 241,500 were students in degree programmes, accounting for 49.38 per cent of the total and representing a year-on-year increase of 15.04 per cent. The scale of China's international student population has thus continued to expand. In October 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the *Quality Standards for Higher Education for International Students in China (Trial)* (hereafter the *Standards*). The *Standards* were the first quality assurance document formulated specifically for education for international students in China, and they set out explicit provisions on admission criteria, institutional recruitment policies, and admission procedures. Their promulgation elevated the improvement of selection quality for international students to the level of institutional design. Compared with major exporters of education, however, China still faces numerous problems in its examination and admission system for international graduate students, with the result that the system for selecting and evaluating these students cannot meet the increasingly pressing needs of domestic universities and other educational institutions (Xia, Q., 2011), nor can it satisfy the requirements for raising the quality of higher education for international students in China.

2. An Overview of the Development of Education for International Students in China Since 1949

2.1 Analysis of Development Stages

Overall, the development of education for international students in China has been closely bound up with the country's political, economic, and cultural development, and it displays distinct characteristics in the periods before and after reform and opening up. From the founding of the People's Republic to the beginning of reform and opening up, this development can be divided into three stages. The first was the initial stage (1949–1965), during which a cumulative total of 7,259 international students came to China from 70 countries, an annual average of only 454. The second was the stagnation stage (1966–1972), when higher education and education for international students in China were largely suspended under the impact of the Cultural Revolution. The third was the recovery stage (1973–1977): following the thaw in Sino-American relations in 1972, the scale of international student enrolment in China returned to the level of the period before 1966.

Reform and opening up created favourable conditions for the development of education for international students in China. Measured by the pace of development, this period can in turn be divided into two stages. The first was the stage of steady development (1978–2004), in which a cumulative total of 731,678 international students came to China from 170 countries, an annual average of 27,099. The second was the stage of rapid growth (2005–2018), in which an annual average of 300,000 international students came to China over thirteen years, a markedly faster rate of expansion than before 2005.

2.2 Analysis of Characteristics

Since 2000, in addition to pronounced changes in scale, countries of origin, the number and types of host institutions, regional distribution, and the number of scholarships, education for international students in China has displayed new trends in its disciplinary and degree-level composition.

First, the disciplinary structure has become increasingly diversified. According to scholars' statistics on the disciplinary distribution of international students in China between 1995 and 1998 (Cheng, J., 2012), students in the humanities accounted for 83.60 per cent, while all other fields (medicine, engineering, art, science, physical education, and agriculture) together accounted for only 16.40 per cent; within these, science accounted for just 1.14 per cent. After 2000, as China's comprehensive national strength grew, the proportion of international students studying management, medicine, and science and engineering rose steadily. Among international students in China, the share studying science was 11.67 per cent in 2002 and 22.8 per cent in 2008, a twenty-fold increase over 1998. On the whole, Chinese language and literature remains the principal choice of international students in China, but the trend towards extending the disciplinary structure into non-language fields has become increasingly clear.

Second, the degree-level structure displays two features. On the one hand, the proportion of international students in China pursuing degree programmes has risen continuously, from 31.67 per cent in 2003 to 49.38 per cent by 2017, so that students in degree programmes now account for roughly half of the total. On the other hand, within degree education the proportion of students at master's and doctoral levels has climbed steadily. In 2003, master's and doctoral students accounted for 13.80 per cent and 6.65 per cent of degree students respectively, a combined 20.45 per cent; by 2017 the corresponding shares had risen to 21.86 per cent and 9.52 per cent, a combined 31.38 per cent.

These marked changes in both the disciplinary and the degree-level composition of international students in China place new demands on the corresponding examination and admission evaluation system. In the past, when Chinese-language majors and non-degree education predominated, administering only the Chinese Proficiency Test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, HSK) was sufficient to establish whether students possessed the basic ability to undertake study in China. Today, however, an increasing proportion of international students in China choose non-language majors, and a growing share pursue formal degree education at master's and doctoral levels. Against these new trends, establishing a scientifically grounded examination and admission system for international graduate students in China is both necessary and urgent.

3. The Graduate Examination and Admission System in the United States

The United States was the earliest country to admit international students to graduate degree programmes, and it remains one of the largest recipients of international graduate students (Johnson, P., 1988). It has established a graduate examination and admission system with sound governance structures and relatively fair and effective procedures and content. The most notable feature of this system is that essentially the same examination and admission model is applied to domestic and international applicants alike; the only difference is that applicants whose first language is not English must take an English proficiency examination (Spolsky, B., 1995). To understand the structure and functions of the American graduate examination and admission system in full, it is necessary to analyse both its macro structure (governance arrangements) and its micro structure (the components of examination and admission).

3.1 Macro Structure

The governance of graduate education in the United States is typically decentralised: the federal government

generally influences graduate admission and training only through funding and legislation. Consequently, at the four stages of examination and admission—planning, application, examination, and admission—the market and higher education institutions exercise considerable control. Shaped by this governance arrangement and by the tradition of academic self-governance, American universities enjoy substantial admissions autonomy. Admission plans are determined by individual schools and colleges, generally on the basis of the number and quality of applicants, the research projects for which supervisors apply, and research funding. The application stage is led by the applicants themselves, who prepare the required materials according to the requirements of their target institutions and submit them within the specified period. Two parties take part in the examination stage—examination bodies and candidates. American graduate entrance examination bodies are non-governmental organisations responsible for designing and scoring examination content. The admission stage is led by higher education institutions, which evaluate applicants comprehensively through application materials and other assessment methods and then decide the list of admitted students on the basis of the results of that comprehensive evaluation.

3.2 Micro Structure

If the actors and their functions within the governance system constitute the macro structure of the examination and admission system, with its emphasis on administration, then the assessment components, standards, and specific content involved in student selection constitute its micro structure. The American admission and examination system takes four forms: individual selection, certificate-based admission, comprehensive selection, and open admission, of which comprehensive selection is widely applied across all levels of American higher education (Tang, Y., & Liu, H., 2007). Comprehensive selection is based on the application materials submitted by applicants, uses diversified assessment instruments to evaluate them comprehensively, and admits students according to the resulting composite assessment results. At the graduate level, comprehensive selection in the United States comprises two assessment systems, namely an examination system and a selection system. The function of the examination system centres on objective measurement and evaluation that is free of value judgements, whereas the function of the selection system centres on evaluation and admission.

(1) The examination system

Graduate examinations in the United States cover two areas: language proficiency and academic aptitude. American universities set minimum language proficiency score requirements for applicants whose first language is not English. Generally, applicants must take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and obtain a corresponding score before their application requirements are met. In recent years, as the influence and reliability of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) have continued to grow, American universities have also taken applicants' IELTS scores into account when admitting graduate students.

Beyond language proficiency requirements for applicants whose first language is not English, institutions also require all graduate applicants to provide evidence of academic aptitude, and the evidence that institutions weigh most heavily is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The GRE comprises the General Test and the Subject Tests. Most institutions in the United States require applicants to submit only General Test scores, although a considerable number of highly selective institutions also require Subject Test scores. The General Test focuses on the measurement of general academic aptitude and covers three dimensions: verbal reasoning, analytical writing, and quantitative reasoning. The Subject Tests assess subject-specific attainment in a number of fields, including literature, biology, chemistry, computer science, physics, mathematics, and psychology, with a focus on applicants' domain-specific academic aptitude. Beyond the GRE, which has a wide reach, there are also examinations in particular specialised fields—for example, the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) for law programmes, the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) for medical programmes, and the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) for business and management programmes.

(2) The selection system

The instruments by which American universities evaluate applicants comprehensively include the assessment of application materials and interviews. Institutions generally require applicants to submit the following materials: first, transcripts covering their undergraduate studies; second, two or three letters of recommendation from professors, which offer an objective assessment of the applicant's academic level, professional competence, and capacity for research; third, evidence of academic aptitude scores; fourth, research or academic achievements; and fifth, language proficiency scores for applicants whose first language is not English. Institutions impose further requirements on these materials according to their own circumstances in order to select the best candidates; highly selective institutions, for example, set corresponding requirements for undergraduate grade point average, language scores, academic aptitude scores, and research or academic achievements. On the basis of a rigorous assessment of the submitted materials, graduate supervisors interview applicants. The interview serves not only to verify the authenticity of the materials that applicants have provided but, more importantly, to

assess applicants' cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge directly, authentically, and specifically (Schmitt, N. & Keeney, J., 2009).

It can thus be seen that, at the macro level, the American graduate examination and admission system adopts a model of decentralised governance shared among government, universities, and society, in which the participating actors each perform their own functions. This embodies the principle of separating examination from admission and forms a pattern of multi-party coordination and multi-linkage in which professional bodies organise examinations, universities admit students independently in accordance with the law, government exercises macro-level management, and society participates in oversight (Zhou, H., & Jing, A., 2014). Separating examination from admission helps examination bodies to enhance the professionalism of tests and their operational capacity. At the micro level, the American examination system assesses international students' language proficiency and academic aptitude comprehensively, while the selection system emphasises comprehensive and multi-dimensional evaluation, seeking to appraise applicants truthfully and objectively so as to admit the best candidates. These features offer useful insights and lessons for reforming the examination and admission system for international graduate students in China.

4. Adjusting and Refining the Examination and Admission System for International Graduate Students in China

Reforming the examination and admission system for international graduate students in China is a systemic undertaking. Building on the experience of developed countries while taking account of China's actual conditions, the macro and micro structures of this system should be adjusted and refined in a planned, step-by-step, and appropriately prioritised manner.

4.1 Adjusting the Macro Structure

The adjustment of the macro structure should uphold the reform principle of separating admission from examination functions (also referred to as the "separation of admission and examination"). Unlike admission units, whose functions centre on teaching, research, and service to society, examination bodies are the vehicles that develop and operate examination systems. Separating examination from admission functions not only helps to relieve admission units of their workload, allowing universities to focus their efforts on talent development, knowledge creation, and service to society, but also makes the functions of examination bodies clearer, more specific, and more professional. In China, since Hanban (the Office of Chinese Language Council International; renamed the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, CLEC, in July 2020) formally implemented the HSK in 1990 and began promoting it overseas, it has accumulated rich experience in independently developing, administering, and operating language tests, thereby providing a useful practical foundation for separating examination from admission in the system for international graduate students in China. In upholding this principle, it is also necessary to further clarify and adjust the functions of the examination body.

In light of China's actual conditions, expanding and strengthening the following two functions should be the current focus of reform. On the one hand, Hanban's functions should extend beyond language proficiency testing services to include academic aptitude testing services. There are two possible operational pathways: first, without creating a new functional department, to expand the functions of the Division of Examinations and Scholarships under Hanban so that it can develop a standardised item bank for an academic aptitude examination for international graduate students in China (provisionally designated LHYK); or, second, to establish a new Division of Examination Services for International Graduate Students under Hanban and assign responsibility for developing the LHYK examination to it. On the other hand, Hanban also needs to strengthen its capacity for overseas examination services and operations, drawing on the operational experience of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and cooperating with overseas universities to provide localised examination services to candidates worldwide.

4.2 Refining the Micro Structure

(1) Standardising the language proficiency examination system

Language proficiency differs from language knowledge. Language knowledge refers to grammatical and lexical knowledge, whereas language proficiency (or language skills) refers to the listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities that people possess on the basis of language knowledge (Wang, W., 2012). For international students, language is the basic instrument of communication and classroom instruction, and the requisite language proficiency is a precondition for the successful completion of degree education. Language proficiency testing is therefore one of the important guarantees of the quality of student selection (Foster, G., 2012). In the current HSK system, the test covers only listening, reading, and writing, while the speaking test—which is best able to measure candidates' overall ability to use the language in practice—is placed in a separate examination, the HSK Speaking Test (HSKK). Conducting the written and spoken tests separately and issuing separate score certificates reduces the validity of the language proficiency examination and fragments the integrity of language

learning. To address this problem, the Division of Examinations and Scholarships under Hanban needs to reform the current Chinese proficiency examination as soon as possible. A feasible approach would be for the Division, drawing on well-established language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL and taking account of the characteristics of Chinese, to conduct systematic research on the assessment components, grading standards, content, and format of the Chinese proficiency examination, and to accelerate the development of a new HSK that integrates the four assessment components of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

(2) Establishing an academic aptitude examination system

As the degree-level and disciplinary composition of students entering graduate programmes in China changes, accelerating the establishment of a standardised academic aptitude examination system for international graduate students in China has become the foremost task in raising the quality of their selection and training. The development of this system should follow the principle of phased development. By “phased” is meant that the order in which each academic aptitude examination project is developed and implemented should be determined according to urgency and to the scale of students in each disciplinary field. Under current conditions, the specific development path is as follows. In the first phase, given the continuously rising proportion of international students in China pursuing degree education, and in order to ensure that applicants possess the general academic aptitude required for graduate degree education, a general academic aptitude examination should be developed, provisionally designated LHYK (General Test) and abbreviated LHYK(g). This is the most urgent task and should be placed at the top of the development agenda. In the second phase, subject-specific academic aptitude examinations should be developed in sequence according to the disciplinary composition of international students in China, provisionally designated LHYK (Subject Test) and abbreviated LHYK(s). On the basis of the scale of international graduate students in China in each field between 2001 and 2016, examinations could be developed in the following order: economics and management, provisionally LHYK(s1); science and engineering, provisionally LHYK(s2); the humanities, provisionally LHYK(s3); medicine, provisionally LHYK(s4); and law, provisionally LHYK(s5).

Following such adjustment and refinement, the examination and admission system for international graduate students in China would, at the macro level, essentially achieve the separation of admission and examination, with Hanban acting as the unified examination body responsible for the language proficiency examination (the HSK) and the academic aptitude examination (the LHYK) for international graduate students in China, and with universities responsible for admission. At the micro level, the HSK would have better assessment validity and would be able to measure applicants' Chinese listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities more objectively and truthfully; and the establishment of the LHYK system would ensure that universities can select international graduate students with stronger academic aptitude, thereby raising the quality of the selection and training of international graduate students in China.

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