

# *Review on the Latest 20 Years' Research of International Students in China*

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**Abstract**—This paper tries to summarize the focuses of the study on international students and help others to follow what the scholars and educators are doing in this field. By referring to a large number of research papers and documents through CKNI and other searching engines, the authors finds that the research topics mainly focus on the students' management, the factors affecting them coming to China, the individual development and studying the international students in China under the perspective of the One Belt and Road Initiative. Domestic scholars basically cover the whole process of the international students in China. However, the impact of foreign students on Chinese economic growth, the relationship between the international education and economy, the pattern of cognition and interaction between the international students and native students, and the personal development after completing their studies of the international students should also be paid more attention to.

**Keywords**—*international students in China; international student management; impact factors; Belt and Road*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, the first batch of international students from Eastern European countries came to China which was seen as the prelude to the Chinese education of international students after the founding of China (Fuzeng YU, 2009). Since receiving the first students, education of international students in China has experienced the development of more than half a century and it has undergone earth-shaking changes and become an important part of the higher education. The acceleration of economic globalization and integration made "internationalization" gradually become the core issue in the development of higher education at the end of the last century (Linlin ZHANG, 2018). With the increasing number of international students in China, China has become the largest destination country for international students in Asia and the third largest destination country in the world after the United Kingdom and the United States. Many scholars and educators working on the front line in China have also carried out a lot of theoretical and empirical research on it. Influenced by the internal political, economic and cultural factors, the study of foreign students coming to China after the founding of the People's Republic of China can be roughly divided into five periods: start-up and stagnation (1949-1978), restart (1979-1989), initial development (1990-1999), rapid development (2000-2009) and double rapid development (2010- 2016)

(Hangmin LI& Lei ZHOU, 2017). Research literature is an important window for observing things. This paper intends to analyze the past 20 years' research literature on international students in China, trying to comb the research topics and expound the relevant viewpoints of scholars. The study is helpful to fully understand the development of education of foreign students in China and provide a relatively complete visual reference for future research.

## II. RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA OF THE PAST 20 YEARS

Through the accurate inquiry of CNKI China Information Network, the author conducted a search for "international students in China" with the "title" and found that there were 1,545 research documents between 1999 and 2018, including 171 doctoral theses and 8 doctoral papers. By studying these research literatures, it can be seen that domestic scholars focus their research topics on the following aspects:

### A. Foreign Students' Management in China

In recent years, countries around the world have started the global competition for foreign students based on the needs of diplomacy, talent reserves and economic interest. Many enrollment policies for foreign students have been introduced. With the improvement of the internationalization level of Chinese universities, the number of international students in China has increased dramatically. In view of the hysteresis of data statistics, the latest data that can be found when the author collates the literature is the one of 2017. "In 2017, a total of 489,200 foreign students were studying in institutions of higher learning in China, and the total number growth rate remained more than 10 % for two consecutive years." These students from 204 countries and regions were studying in 935 institutions of higher learning in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government ([http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/gzdt\\_gzdt/s5987/201803/t20180329\\_331772.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201803/t20180329_331772.html)). The diversity and dispersion of international student groups in China makes the management more difficult. At the same time, international students' management in Chinese universities is quite different in the ways and at different developing stages. Facing this reality, it is very important to strengthen the management of international students.

The Key Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Jiangsu Province: Research on the Current Situation of Structure and the Developing Path of Foreign Students in Jiangsu Universities under the Belt and Road Initiative

Starting from the management mechanism of international students, Ying BAI analyzed the existing problems in the process of enrollment, teaching and logistics and proposed that we should do a good job in humanized and convergent management guided by cultural identity, and put the emphasis on the employment guidance and alumni work of international students to improve the efficiency and quality of international students' management in China (Ying BAI, 2015). At present, the education and management of international students in China is mainly concentrated in universities. Compared with the universities directly attached to the central departments (units) of PRC, local comprehensive colleges and universities have small number of foreign students and unreasonable structure affected by the unfavorable factors such as geographical location, economic development and educational resources. Lin XIAO analyzed the enrollment strategy from the perspective of local comprehensive colleges and universities, and proposed that local universities should explore the regional ecological environment, form enrollment alliances with sister universities in the region, improve the level of non-academic services in universities, and introduce professional enrollment talents to strengthen and implement the recruitment of overseas students to China (Lin XIAO, 2016). On the other hand, Chenghua FENG and Weijian YAN carried out an analysis from the perspective of individual universities to analyze the relevant managing policies of international students and they regard the double identity system of the international cooperation and exchange office who serves as both referees and athletes as negative (Chenghua FENG, 2011; Weijian YAN, 2018). At the same time, the educational function of international students in China also presents a diversified feature. In addition to its function of educating and disseminating culture, it also has political and market functions. With the sharp rise of economics of scale brought by the international students (Chenghai YU & Jinkuan CHENG, 2011), more and more people are calling for the industrialization of the international students education. Weijian YAN and others discussed the development trend of the educating and managing model from three different levels: society, government, and universities. They believe that socialization of management and Chinese government increasing support is the only way to develop the education of the international students under the new situation and (Weijian YAN & Xian ZHANG, 2002). Rongming CHEN suggested that the Ministry of Education should introduce the national standards for all the universities to follow. At the same time, it is necessary to narrow the regional training standards and perfect the management system for international students in China (Rongming CHEN, 2017). The new era sets new demands for international student education. Wei HA mentioned in his article that China's foreign student education is facing a bottleneck in the structure and quality of students. It is urgent to establish a positive talent selection mechanism and follow the connotative development. At the same time, it is necessary to establish a convergent management system between foreign students and domestic students and explore ways to establish a development model based on shared policy dividends (Wei HA & Dongyang CHEN, 2018). Improving the quantity and quality of foreign students in China is of great significance to the International development of education in

local universities. Nowadays, it is the individual university that is responsible for the enrollment, education and management of its own foreign students. The current situation not only brings many hidden obstacles to the International degree-education development of colleges and universities, but also is not conducive to the development of the non-degree education due to diversified needs. In view of this phenomenon, Jinpo ZHAO believes that a new kind of educational platform should be established for international degree students and non-degree students. It is proposed that the educating of degree students in China is still the responsibility of institutions of higher education, while non-degree students can be fully promoted to the market and establish a market-oriented education and management platform for non-degree students in the region (Jinpo ZHAO, 2011).

The development and evolution of China's education policy for international students has undergone three stages: the period of assistance (1950-1977), the period of opening up (1978-1989), and the period of standardization (after 1990) (Lu ZHANG, 2005). Forty years of reform and opening up is a process of gradual development and improvement in the formulation of relevant policies for international students. China's policy on foreign students has been transformed from a political and diplomatic orientation to the educational standard, and the management system has been transformed from centralization to decentralization. The educating subjects of Chinese international students have changed from government to universities and the managing model from differentiation from the native students to assimilation into the natives. Although the improvement of the education policy has effectively promoted the development of education for international students in China, Baocun LIU and Jiqiao ZHANG (2018) pointed out that China's education policy for international students still has some problems such as low policy level, lagging behind the time, lack of policy support, and different policy implementation. Yongxiu WANG and Shaohua XIE (2017) believe that China's current policy is still lacking of coordination and supervision, sufficient effectiveness and guidance, clear strategic positioning, and strong quality monitoring system. As an important content of the people's hearts and minds connection, developing education for international students in China is a long-term and basic task for building national relations. In view of the existing problems raised by the above scholars, in the future, we should advance the education legislation, improve the efficiency of policy formulation and strengthen the implementation. We will improve strategic planning at the provincial level, explore the motive of provincial governments, and monitor the quality of education through information technology.

#### *B. Analysis of Factors Affecting Foreign Students Coming into China*

High-level talent is often seen as a key driver of national economic and social development. Attracting international talents is our new national strategy. Among all kinds of international talents, attracting international students to China has been highly valued by the Chinese government. With the increasing intensity of reform and opening up and the steady increase in overall national strength, the number of

international students studying in China has increased dramatically. Although choosing to come to China as the study destination is usually a complex process, it is possible to find out the same laws through complex phenomena. Therefore, the research on the influence factors affecting foreign students to come to China has also become a hot topic for domestic scholars. As early as 1999, Yiwen YU and Zhengzhong LU (1999) analyzed the scale and affecting factors of foreign students choosing to study in China from the perspective of colleges and universities. It is believed that the government and universities should change their ideas and expand the scale of self-financed students. At the same time, we must improve facilities and optimize learning and living conditions. Taking local universities as the object of study, Xing HUANG (2000) discussed the countermeasures for local universities to expand the scale of international students in China. He believed that local universities should raise awareness, formulate development plans, and do a good job in recruiting students. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation with foreign universities and establish stable sources for international students. Ligu LI, Chenlan LI and Wenjing HE (2015) found that when foreign students chose a university to study, the score of "the university has cooperation with the motherland" was significantly higher than the overall average score of the factors that influence the students' choice. This means that setting up student sources base abroad and carrying out various forms of cooperation with foreign universities will help attract more international students to study in China. After further exploring the student sources and influencing factors of foreign students coming to China, Ligu LI found that the dominant factor for foreign students choosing to study in China is the attractiveness of the country rather than the university itself. He believes that the country should fully play its role to build a cooperation platform. From the national level, HaoWEI and others (Hao WEI, Ran YUAN & Desheng LAI, 2018) used bilateral data from China and 172 countries around the world as a basis to conduct an empirical comparative analysis from four aspects: economic factors, educational factors, socio-cultural factors and national educational policy factors. It is believed that the above are the four most influential factors that affect foreign students coming to China. In particular, the economic development level, the quality of higher education, and the scholarship policy have played a huge role in attracting foreign students to China. Ruxiao QU, Jing LI and Xiu YANG (2016) used the data of the export quota of China's core cultural products as an indicator to measure the degree of cultural identity, and made an empirical study on the factors affecting the size of international students in China to conclude that cultural identity also has a significant role in promoting the size of international students. For each percentage point increasing in cultural identity, the number of international students in China will increase by approximately 0.116 %. Although the number of international students in China is on the rise, the regional distribution in China is particularly significant. Among them, major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are far ahead in the number of international students. Ruxiao QU and Quan JIANG (2011) analyzed the influencing factors of international students' choice on the Chinese special region. They pointed out that the degree of opening up, the ratio of teachers and students, the average annual education

expenditure, and the per capita GDP of the region have a significant positive impact on the choice. The effects of the number of higher education institutions and the total population of the region were not significant.

### C. *Research on the Individual Development of International Students*

The individual adaptation and self-development in the destination countries is an important factor that affects whether the students can successfully complete their studies and reach the expected goal of studying abroad. Many scholars in China put their focus on the cross-cultural adaptability, Chinese cultural identity, Chinese learning, mental health, educational needs and motivation for studying abroad. Through the analysis of the environment, language, interpersonal communication, religious belief, school management and so on, the researchers try to explore the existing problems and put forward some relevant countermeasures. Cross-cultural adaptation is the primary problem that foreign students face in the foreign culture and is an important topic in the study of foreign students. According to the multicultural personality questionnaire, Scale and Ward concluded that cultural identity, ideological inclusion, emotional stability, social initiative and flexibility are five important factors that affect cross-cultural adaptation (Searle W, Ward C. 1990). On the basis of Ward's research, Longyun LEI and Yiqun GAN (2004) analyzed the relationship between cultural adapting difficulties and depression of the international students according to the Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale. However, foreign students who come to China are a special group with more mental diseases and this phenomenon should be paid more attention to. Guohui ZHU etc. use psychological, social and academic adjustment scales to explore the cross-cultural adaptation and find out that the above three dimensions are not only related to each other but also independent of each other. It is believed that optimizing the cross-cultural adaptation of the foreign students can start with improving the social support (Guohui ZHU, Anbang XIE, Meide XU, 2013). The change of social situation brought about by the destination country brings difficulties to adaptation of foreign students. Due to the diversity and complexity of the socio-cultural adaptation of the internal structure, there is currently no unified structural content. Wen WEN and others believe that the social-cultural adaptability of international students in China can be divided into communicative adaptability, environmental adaptability and cognitive adaptability. The level of adaptability is mainly affected by the interaction with Chinese teachers and students. In addition, level of mastering a language, staying time, cultural distance and satisfaction about the destination country are also factors that have a great influence on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students (Wen WEN, Jinqing LIU, Die HU, Qiang CHEN, 2014). Hong MA and Wei LIU studied the unique advantages of new media in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students and pointed out that new media, as a new technology to change the communication mode, has a positive effect on the cross-cultural psychological adaptation (Hong MA, Wei LIU, 2018). Paying attention to the education of Chinese cultural identity is one of the important ways to enhance the soft power of a nation's culture with the goal of allowing them to accept the Chinese culture carried by



the language while they study Chinese. Li SHEN and Xianzhou HAN (2018) put forward that at present, there are still problems existing in the international students, such as insufficient recognition, and single way of understanding Chinese culture. They believe that universities should actively open up the second and third classes and promote Chinese culture in many ways. Cultivating the cultural identity of international students in China has far-reaching strategic significance for enhancing our country's national image and influence, and is good for cultivating people who know China and like to make friends with China.

#### *D. Study from the Perspective of the One Belt and Road Initiative*

In 2016, the Ministry of Education issued a notice on "Promoting the Belt and Road Education Initiative", proposing that countries along the Belt and Road should unite their efforts to build a Belt and Road education community. The Belt and Road Initiative has a profound impact on the opening up of education in China and provides a new perspective for studying the international students in China. Shengbing LI (2017) studied the current situation of higher education cooperation between China and the Belt and Road countries from a bilateral perspective, analyzed the different characteristics of cooperation between China and the regions of South Asia, ASEAN, CEE and LAS from a regional perspective, and put forward suggestions for further strengthening cooperation. Yuanhao ZHENG and Jin LI used the security situation, economy, scientific research, foreign policy and the development of higher education in the 22 member states of the League of Arab States as the basis for analysis, and classified the member states into the following types: internationalized, traditional, slow development, poor and war-torn. They put forward the different strategies of Chinese cooperation in higher education with various types of these countries (Yuanhao ZHENG, Jin LI, 2017). Big Power Balancing Strategy proposed by the ASEAN and the Asia Rebalancing Strategy launched by the United States challenge the development of the One Belt and Road plan in many different aspects. Based on the current situation of ASEAN, Zaoming MA (2017) puts forward the China-ASEAN higher education cooperation strategy, and believes that China and ASEAN can coordinate the training of higher vocational skilled personnel, the training of ASEAN industry elites and setting the professional standards for teachers' education. Li CHEN and others summarized the development and changes of education of international students from the countries along the Belt and Road in the past 10 years and suggested that attracting students from these countries coming to China should be considered as a part of the One Belt and Road strategy not isolated from it. At the same time, we need to change the "fragmented" development strategy of education in China along the routes to build a "cluster" strategy of economic orientation, and form regional synergies (Li CHEN, Aizimaiti YILIMAN, 2016). Qiang CHEN and Wen WEN (2018) discussed the education of international students in China under the Belt and Road Initiative from the perspective of mission, challenge and countermeasures. They point out that there are still many problems: the cultivation structure is not reasonable; the source of students is scarce; the ability to cultivate talents is

insufficient; the social support environment is immature and the security pressure is increasing. International students' education is an important way to deepen the open up policy, and it is also an inevitable choice to adapt to the development of the times. Jiani MA and Zuoyu ZHOU (2018) believe that China is still facing some challenges such as the geopolitical environment, the quality of teaching, and the single type of funding for international students. It is necessary to do a good job in top-level design at the national level, formulate national strategies, improve the level of running schools, give priority to quality, broaden professional categories, and improve relevant management regulations.

### III. CONCLUSION AND THINKING

The flow of international students has been regarded as one of the important indicators to measure the diversity and internationalization of university. Promoting economic growth and improving academic ability are the main reasons for the internationalization of higher education. To do a good job in the education of international students in China is conducive to China's further opening up and helps to promote exchanges with other countries in the political, economic, diplomatic, cultural and educational fields, and effectively support the realization of the Chinese Dream and the Belt and Road Initiative. The flow of international students can promote the communication of ideas and it is more conducive to realizing the common interests across national borders. In the new era, we should actively create the new forms of internationalization of higher education, adhere to the road of connotation development, pay attention to top-level design and sustainable development, strengthen social, cultural and political motivation, and actively participate in global higher education governance. While improving the educational quality guarantee system for overseas students in China, we should optimize the legal environment to ensure the smooth progress of education.

The domestic scholars have basically covered the entire process and field of the international students. However, the impact of foreign students' education on economic growth and the relationship between the two has received extensive attention abroad. Chinese scholars relatively paid less attention to this module. Since the 1970s, the theory of social capital has been jointly concerned by many disciplines such as sociology, economics, and pedagogy. There are also many scholars in foreign countries that use this theory as a framework to analyze the group of international students. Therefore, the cognition and interaction mode between native students and foreign students should also be one of the research topics concerned by the educators. The personal and career development of foreign students in China after completing their studies should be followed and studied to provide practical support for the later policy formulation and the design or adjustment of education modules.

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