

# *Comparison of Higher Education in China and the U.S*

Xiaoqing Gong<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Utahloy International School Guangzhou, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

a. 25xgong@student.uisgz.org

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** With stabilizing societies worldwide, the differences in higher education have been widely discussed. Yet, the fundamental causes remained to be studied. In this paper, influences of history and culture, admission process system, and design of curriculum in different regions have been comparatively analyzed. The paper concluded that China advocates an exam-driven system such as Gaokao as a highly effective tool for meritocracy but limits flexibility, while the U.S. adopts a decentralized and holistic approach and emphasizes diversity. These factors significantly impact students and even the whole society, including social mobility, values of collectivism and individualism, and so on. Ultimately, the paper reveals broader implications of higher education on Chinese and American students respectively, assessing from a few perspectives, including learning efficiency, formation of personality, individual future pathways, and even the nation itself. Yet, there are potential challenges in both higher education in China and the U.S., mental health issues, and a narrow view of the admission process are some examples taken into account for China, while fairness, over-flexibility, and class differentiation occurred in America.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Differences, China, U.S., Educational System.

## 1. Introduction

Education systems have varied from different cultures, beliefs, political systems, and even religions throughout history in China and America, which ultimately leads to a somewhat different logic of thinking and mindset, impacting people's macro perspectives. Respectively, China's education system aims to raise uniform standards and patriotism, targeting making the country a national unity, while in West, including the U.S.A., tends to believe their educational system fosters personalized growth and makes preparation for citizens. Above all, are the most typical ideas that humanity thinks of the education of two countries. Narrow down to higher education, the differences become more obvious due to the purposes and meaning of education to societies.

Nowadays, with increasing interaction globally, diversity of cultures and mindsets clash with one another, and the world becomes more and more globalized. Globalization increases interaction and ideological exchanges of higher education in Western and Eastern. The fact is that higher education systems in Western and Eastern countries are still distinct from each other in combination even though globalization spread worldwide. The typical representatives of Western and Eastern countries, China and the United States are chosen as the representatives for this paper, mainly to make comparisons and contrast, discovering factors that make higher education systems extremely distinctive from each other significantly.

Examining the fundament of differences in higher education systems helps access potential informed decision-making, adopting or modifying the best practices, and identifying educational inequalities by assessing essential perspectives that are fundamentally attributed to a huge gap in higher education between China and the United States.

## **2. Differences in Admission Process in China and the U.S.**

The admission process within higher education generally indicates procedures that senior students follow to apply to university while helping universities evaluate students' abilities. Plus, curriculum structure in China and the U.S. varies from one another, Gaokao and SAT/GPA are several representatives respectively from the two regions.

### **2.1. China's Education Philosophy: Highly Centralized and Exam-Driven**

Within China's higher education, Gaokao is one of the most classical symbols due to its importance to seniors, as a national college entrance exam. It is known worldwide because it is a rigid, competitive, high-stakes test that significantly determines students' future educational and career opportunities in China. Candidates need to take three compulsory subjects, Chinese, math, and English, and two optional subjects from six subjects, which is the "3+X" structure, and the "X" is determined by the provinces themselves [1]. In the whole application process, the only component the admissions officer entirely considers is the score on Gaokao and the subjects students take.

Implementing such a meritocratic admission system, students have 3 full years to prepare, making them put in lots of effort and focus on academic excellence. The pursuit of excellence and productivity occurs under the close management of the world's longest-governing Communist Party. During this preparation period, students are usually required to maintain strong study habits, discipline, and resilience, which practice their psychological endurance in a high-pressure environment. Yet, this admission system is limiting the flexibility of applying to universities since admissions officers can barely learn a student just based on the score rather than a full-scale person. Although it makes the process relatively straightforward, fair, and objective, it lacks students' possibilities and potential to show themselves.

### **2.2. U.S. Education Philosophy: Centralized and Holistic**

Like China's admission process, the U.S.A. implements a similar test-based orientation such as the SAT. According to Westrick, Paul A., et al., SAT scores are strongly predictive of college performance [2]. At the same time, HSGPA can be paired with SAT to effectively identify enrolling students who may benefit from monitoring to ensure that they are academically successful. Nevertheless, SAT and HSGPA are not solely to be considered as entry requirements of universities.

Apart from scores within the admission process, the U.S. is more flexible compared to China in terms of the admission process. America follows a holistic approach in that admissions officers would like to learn about a full-scale student and learn further about an individual's personality, potential growth, ideology, areas of interest, and so on. In higher education, students are encouraged to be involved in different extracurriculars such as arts, sports, and community service, because they believe that it can help scoop up talent and think ahead about the major and industry students want to pursue in college or beyond.

In addition, the personal essay is one of the priorities in the admission process. Students need to show their "self" from their experience and personal thoughts rather than the people around them. Representation of the self is the explicit purpose of these essays and affects students' chances of being admitted to a college [3]. In this case, seniors need to re-examine their inner self and ask what kind

of person they are, leading to re-understanding oneself. American students emphasize their individuality and well-roundedness while having a clear logic to showcase themselves in short words.

### 3. The Impact on Students and Societies

The Gaokao system plays a vital role in Chinese society. For instance, the result of widening educational inequalities. The admission system reduces the schools to the mere competition of grades and unfairly benefits the students in the urban areas rather than those in the rural areas [1]. More specifically, students from rural areas generally approach fewer resources than those in urban areas, which leads to a wide gap between rural and urban areas in terms of access to higher education and, ultimately, economic opportunities.

Due to its one-take exam, students might have a high level of anxiety, as all their hopes are on only one exam. Under such high pressure of an expanded period of preparation and long-hour study every day, it might easily lead to sleep deprivation, emotional exhaustion, and social isolation due to a lack of work-life balance. Dull curriculum and admission processes own potential mental issues for students.

On the other hand, the Gaokao system exhibits its symbol of meritocracy since it selects the winners in such a competitive environment and gives them more abundant resources to continue to study in a particular field. Perhaps one day in the future, they can make a certain contribution in this field. This method effectively screens out outstanding students. Plus, from another perspective, this admission process provides a precious opportunity for students from all backgrounds to enter top universities based on their academic performance, regardless of their socioeconomic status, and upward social mobility.

The holistic admission process in America fundamentally shapes diversity in U.S. communities.

Since every individual has an equivalent chance to get into top universities regardless of financial condition or classes, it stimulated social mobility by creating multiple pathways for students to show their excellence besides academic performance. The admission process gathers a diversity of students from different backgrounds and experiences.

Additionally, the enrollment process promotes cross-cultural understanding. Since admissions officers consider race and the minority of students, it pushes students' inclusivity representation of historically marginalized groups in higher education.

Yet, over-consideration of the race of minorities creates conflicts that people might express their concerns about affirmative action since it might have reverse discrimination. It is difficult to examine the effectiveness of a subjective admissions system that contains too much flexibility. Additionally, due to its high flexibility, students cannot be selected for university fairly. To be more specific, the admission process in the U.S. contains potential biases such as wealth and access to resources. Students in higher class might be able to gain plentiful resources and experience, while lower class students, with limited available sources, cannot. As a result, wealthier students could get advantages from the whole process.

The design of higher education plays a critical role in impacting student-professor relationships. The U.S. educational system emphasizes class discussions, students' participation, group work, and so on, while China advocates a lecture-based mode, which only teachers or professors are outputting.

Different student-professor relationships can somewhat influence the overall atmosphere and students' learning efficiency. As Chinese students serve teachers as the primary sources of knowledge, that creates authority figures, which leads to students' reluctance to challenge their viewpoints, while in the U.S., the student-professor relationship is relatively flexible and provides an egalitarian approach to education, therefore, this kind of active learning mode incentives students' critical thinking skills and allows students' challenging professors' viewpoints.

## 4. Historical and Cultural Influences

Modernized teaching methods depend on numerous factors. China and the U.S.A. have shaped their ideology throughout their historical process, which significantly influences the fundamental system of higher education. Teaching methods indicate strategies, principles, and techniques that aim to convey academic content and knowledge, enabling students to study.

### 4.1. China: Confucian and Inherited Traditions

Throughout the history of China, the form of education can be traced back down to the period of Chun Qiu, which approximately thrived from 530 BCE. Confucianism highlighted meritocracy which told students education was the best way for stabilizing societies. In decades, a unique tendency of competitiveness has developed in the East as a result of the cultural traditions and social values influenced by Confucianism and extends this hypothesis by exploring a critical missing link: the role of discipline [4].

Confucianism, then, has been passed down to generations and others, playing a crucial role in shaping Chinese people's ideology. A brand new form of standardized exam, Ke Ju, did not come into people's minds until the Sui dynasty (581-618 AD), which was known as the earliest form of merit-based Gaokao. Until now, Ke Ju has passed down and has been improved to a more mature, precise, and refined national college entrance exam.

Every component might change over such an extended period except for the values of meritocracy in education. Knowledge and ability assessment is always essential, and emphasis is placed on selecting talents through testing students' knowledge, skills, and abilities [5]. China aims to evaluate how much knowledge an individual student has in their mind through testing them by Ke Ju or Gaokao, assessing students that are capable of approaching higher education and then making them contribute to society.

According to China's values of higher education, which highlight values of academic knowledge, it largely impacts the formation of the higher education system that standardizes assessing criteria, emphasizes exam-oriented ability which is known as a life-defining event, and expects students to rote memorization [5]. Efficiency is fully utilized by Chinese students in this case, while limiting chances for them to put into practice.

### 4.2. United States: Enlightenment and the Morrill Land-Grant Acts

Enlightenment spanned the 17th and 18th centuries in America the value of knowledge in specific fields thrived. As a process of rationalization, technification, secularization, or democratization, which have had profound influences on setting fundamental higher education [6]. Specifically, the event highlighted reason, scientific inquiry, and individualism. Students are required to go deep into empirical knowledge, focus on scientific methods, and practice critical thinking skills.

In addition, in 1862-1890, the Morrill land-grant acts contributed to the fundamental education system by making it possible for states to establish public colleges funded by the development or sale of associated federal land grants [7]. The act promoted practical knowledge and reduced education inequality since it made higher education accessible for people, which led America has form a decentralized system of higher education, both private and public schools. The University of Florida, Cornell University, and the University of California, Berkeley are several representatives that were all land-grant in different states. Similarly, these universities were excellent in science, technology, agriculture, and so on, reflecting that the Morrill land-grant acts successfully pushed U.S.-led research, agriculture, engineering, and technology, assimilating the higher education system in similar ways.

Historical events, including the Enlightenment and the Morrill land-grant acts, underlay personal development, and freedom for critical thinking and expression. Nowadays in America, diversity,

inclusion, and cosmopolitanism are attributed to the tendency of higher education. The students, therefore, are the result of this educational environment and the education system, being independent thinkers and inquirers, and exhibiting outstanding personalities.

### 4.3. Individualism and Collectivism

Regarding different historical and cultural processes in China and America, the biggest fundamental difference between the two higher education systems is value systems which impact people's views on their relationship within societies.

China's communities exhibit a sense of collectivism, it helps maintain consistency and establishes a positive image within the group [8]. Horizontal collectivist values prioritize group interests over individual interests, promoting individuals to establish close social connections and a sense of community belonging, thus having a wider social network influence [9]. As a result, Chinese students, as a unity, have a shared identity that indirectly encourages cooperation within student groups.

On the other hand, individualism might be more common in U.S. societies. Individual teaching accrues enormously in the economy of time. Through it, every pupil is uninterrupted in continuous advanced work. Beyond this, to the teacher individualism is rich in objective psychology and this is the great need of schools and colleges today. Students who receive higher education there celebrate creativity and uniqueness all the time. Individualism explores individual student's potential talent and growth and builds sufficient self-confidence. It emphasizes personal rights and freedom as well since this awareness makes students think independently, rather than standardizing the answers.

## 5. Conclusion

Different ways of educating students can shape them into different personalities, views of societal relationships, and even values of the world. While they feature in a variety of cultural orientations, both collectivism and individualism are not flawless.

Higher education in China, nowadays, is in the process of evolution and innovation, tending to emerge with Western styles, which start considering involving extracurricular activities such as arts, sports, and music.

China also could concentrate on students' mental health, especially during high school and university, including providing counseling services to ensure students have mental support when they feel depressed. Besides, mental health education is essential as well and it should be involved in courses for not only students but also parents and teachers.

For the U.S., universities now place students in contextualized admissions, such as inquiring whether students are first-generation, which improves equity and fairness. This could prevent wealthier students from disproportionately benefiting from opportunities.

Overall, higher education still requires development, tailored to different circumstances in different regions or areas.

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