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# Higher education in China

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**Higher education in China** centers on a system of 2,000 universities and colleges, with more than six million students.<sup>[1]</sup> The system includes Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degrees, as well as non-degree programs, and is also open to foreign students.

The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) is the government authority for all matters pertaining to education and language. The MOE notes that higher education in China has played a significant part in economic growth, scientific progress and social development in the country "by bringing up large scale of advanced talents and experts for the construction of socialist modernization."<sup>[2]</sup>

China is also a major destination for international students,<sup>[3]</sup> being the most popular country in Asia for international students, and the third most popular in the world.<sup>[3]</sup> China is on track to overtake the United Kingdom as the second most popular country for international students by 2020.<sup>[4]</sup>

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## History

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The traditional Chinese education system is based on legalist and Confucian ideals. The teaching of Confucius has shaped the overall Chinese mindset for the past 2500 years.<sup>[5]</sup> But, other outside forces have played a large role in the nation's educational development. The First Opium War of 1840, for

example, opened China to the rest of the world. As a result, Chinese intellectuals discovered the numerous western advances in science and technology. This new information greatly impacted the higher education system and curriculum.

A number of institutions lay claim to being the first university in China. Peking University is the first formally established modern national university of China. It was founded as **Imperial Peking University** (Chinese: 京師大學堂) in 1898 in Beijing as a replacement of the ancient **Guozijian** (Chinese: 國子監), the national central institute of learning in China's traditional educational system. Meanwhile, Wuhan University also claimed that its predecessor **Ziqiang Institute** (自強學堂) was the first modern higher education institution in China. On November 29, 1893, Zhang Zhidong submitted his memorial to Guangxu Emperor to request for approval to set up an institution designed for training students specializing in foreign languages, mathematics, science and business. After Ziqiang was founded in Wuchang, not only courses in foreign languages was taught, courses in science (chemical and mining courses starting from 1896) and business (business course starting from the very beginning) were also developed at the school.<sup>[6]</sup> Later, although the school officially changed its name to **Foreign Languages Institute** (方言學堂) in 1902, the school still offered courses in science and business.<sup>[6]</sup> In China, there had been some earlier schools specializing in foreign languages learning, such as **Schools of Combined Learning** in Beijing (京師同文館, founded in 1862<sup>[remark 1]</sup>), in Shanghai (上海同文館/上海廣方言館, founded in 1863), and in Guangzhou (廣州同文館), founded in 1864, but few provided courses in other fields, which hardly qualified as modern education institutions. Some argued that Wuhan University can only traced its history back to 1913, when the **National Wuchang Higher Normal College** (國立武昌高等師範學校) was established, but Wuhan University officially recognized its establishment as in 1893, relying on the abundance of historical documentation and the experts' endorsement.<sup>[7]</sup> In 1895, Sheng Xuanhuai (Chinese: 盛宣懷) submitted a memorial to Guangxu Emperor to request for approval to set up a modern higher education institution in Tianjin. After approval on October 2, 1895, **Peiyang Western Study School** (Chinese: 天津北洋西學學堂) was founded by him and American educator Charles Daniel Tenney (Chinese: 丁家立) and later developed to **Peiyang University** (Chinese: 北洋大學堂). In 1896, Sheng Xuanhuai (Chinese: 盛宣懷) delivered his new memorials to Guangxu Emperor to make suggestion that two official modern higher education institutions should be established in Beijing and Shanghai. In the same year, he founded **Nanyang Public School** (Chinese: 南洋公學) in Shanghai by an imperial edict issued by Guangxu Emperor. The institution initially included elementary school, secondary school, college, and a normal school. Later the institution changed its name to **Jiao Tong University** (also known as **Chiao Tung University**, Chinese: 交通大學). In the 1930s, the university was well known in the world as the "Eastern MIT"<sup>[8][9][10]</sup> due to its reputation of nurturing top engineers and scientists. In the 1950s, part of this university was moved to Xi'an, an ancient capital city in northwest China, and was established as Xi'an Jiaotong University; the part of the university remaining in Shanghai was renamed Shanghai Jiao Tong University. These two universities have developed independently since then. Tianjin University celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1995, followed by Jiao Tong University (both in Shanghai and Xi'an) in 1996. Other leading universities, such as Zhejiang University (1897), Peking University (1898), Nanjing University (1902), Central China Normal University (1903), Fudan University (1905), Tongji University (1907) and Tsinghua University (1911) also recently celebrated their hundredth anniversaries, one after another.

Soviet influence in the early 1950s brought all higher education under government leadership. Research was separated from teaching. The government also introduced a central plan for a nationally unified instruction system, i.e. texts, syllabi, etc. The impact of this shift can still be seen today. Chinese higher education continues its struggle with excessive departmentalisation, segmentation, and overspecialisation in particular.

From 1967 to 1976, China's Cultural Revolution took another toll on higher education, which was devastated more than any other sector of the country. The enrollment of postsecondary students can be used as example to illustrate the impacts. The number dropped from 674,400 to 47,800. This has had a major impact on education in the 21st century. The decline in educational quality was profound.

In 1977, Deng Xiaoping made the decision of resuming the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gao Kao), having profound impact on Chinese higher education in history. From the 1980s on, Chinese higher education has undergone a series of reforms that have slowly brought improvement. The government found that schools lacked the flexibility and autonomy to provide education according to the needs of the society. Structural reform of higher education consists of five parts:

- reforms of education provision
- management
- investment
- recruitment and job-placement
- inner-institute management—the most difficult.<sup>[2]</sup>

The reforms aim to provide higher education institutions more autonomy and the ability to better meet the needs of students. Instead of micromanagement, the state aims to provide general planning.

The Provisional Regulations Concerning the Management of Institutions of Higher Learning, promulgated by the State Council in 1986, led to a number of changes in administration and adjusted educational opportunity, direction and content. Reform allowed universities and colleges to:

- choose their own teaching plans and curricula
- to accept projects from or cooperate with other socialist establishments for scientific research and technical development in setting up "combines" involving teaching, scientific research, and production
- to suggest appointments and removals of vice presidents and other staff members;
- to take charge of the distribution of capital construction investment and funds allocated by the state
- to be responsible for the development of international exchanges by using their own funds.

Reforms picked up the pace in 2000, with the state aiming to complete the reform of 200 universities operating under China's ministries and start 15 university-based scientific technology parks.<sup>[11]</sup>

## **Present day**

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In 2002, there were slightly over 2000 higher education institutions in PRC. Close to 1400 were regular higher education institutions (HEIs). A little more than 600 were higher education institutions for adults. Combined enrollment in 2002 was 11,256,800. Of this close to 40 percent were

new recruits. Total graduate student enrollment was 501,000.<sup>[2]</sup> The number of graduates from Chinese higher educational institutions increased from 1 million per year in 2000 to 7 million per year in 2010.<sup>[12]</sup>

In 2005, there were about 4,000 Chinese institutions. Student enrollment increased to 15 million, with rapid growth that was expected to peak in 2008. However, the higher education system does not meet the needs of 85 percent of the college-age population.<sup>[13]</sup>

Since 1998, 10 universities have been targeted by the Chinese government to become “world-class” — including Peking and Tsinghua universities. To achieve that goal, the government promised to increase the education allocation in the national budget by 1 percent a year for each of the five years following 1998. When CPC General secretary Chinese president Jiang Zemin attended the 100th anniversary ceremony at Peking University (Beida) in 1998 and the 90th anniversary ceremony at Tsinghua University in 2001, he emphasized this ambitious goal of advancing several of China's higher education institutions into the top tier of universities worldwide in the next several decades.

In the meantime, China has received education aid from UNESCO and many other international organizations and sources, including the World Bank, which loaned China \$14.7 billion for educational development.

Since 2007, China has become the sixth largest country in hosting international students. The top ten countries with students studying in China include South Korea, Japan, USA, Vietnam, Thailand, Russia, India, Indonesia, France and Pakistan.<sup>[14][15][16]</sup> The number of international students studying in China often ranges around 200,000.

In spring 2007 China planned to conduct a national evaluation of its universities. The results of this evaluation would be used to support the next major planned policy initiative. The last substantial national evaluation of universities was in 1994. That evaluation resulted in the 'massification' of higher education with a renewed emphasis on elite institutions and education through initiatives like Project 985 in the late 1990s and the Thousand Talents Program which was launched in 2008.<sup>[17]</sup> Since 2010, in some of the elite institutions, there has been an attempt at introducing some aspects of an American-style liberal arts curriculum for selected students.<sup>[18]</sup>

According to data from 2015 of the People's Republic of China Ministry of Education, there were 2,845 Chinese National Higher Institutions, including 2,553 National General Colleges and Universities and 292 Adult Higher Institutions.<sup>[19]</sup> The number of enrolled college students including undergraduate students, master and PhD students was 23.91 million in 2012.<sup>[20]</sup> From 2010 to 2015, the Chinese graduates continued to increase dramatically with almost 7.5 million new graduates entering the job market in 2015.<sup>[21]</sup> Investment in education accounted for about 4% of total GDP in China in 2015.<sup>[22]</sup> The Chinese government has been more concerned about education, particularly higher education, in the last decades.

International students have enrolled in over 775 higher education institutions in China.<sup>[22]</sup> Until 2014, there were more than 377,000 foreign students from 203 countries or regions study in China.<sup>[23]</sup>

Although numbers of students have been increasing there are some serious concerns about the quality of education they are receiving and the skills they have at graduation. One study estimates that only 1.2 million of 15.7 million university graduates (or 7.6%) have skills that are valued by international markets for human capital.<sup>[24]</sup> In other words, the vast majority of students educated in Chinese universities do not have adequate skills to compete in anything but the most local Chinese industries.

## Admission process

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A student's score in the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gaokao) is the primary consideration used for admission into universities in China. Regional education development imbalance leads to the different treatment of students from different regions. Enrollment rules in China are based on the scores on the Gaokao, but a given university's minimum score threshold varies depending on the province an applicant is from and the degree of competition in applicants from the province. The more you have more top universities in a region, the better chances its students will be enrolled into a top university. The university admission quotes are not based on the area's population but the university's enrollment plan. In some populous provinces, the competition is extremely fierce, while, in some areas with more institutions, such as Beijing or Shanghai, access to a prestigious university is more attainable.

## Types of colleges and universities

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In China, according to ownership-based categories of HEIs, the higher education can be divided into two categories---State-owned or government-owned HEIs, including Regular HEIs, Independent Institutions, Higher Vocational Colleges, Adult HEIs, and non-government or private universities<sup>[25]</sup> Due to the long-time influence by Soviet Union and late development of private universities, it has deeply rooted in Chinese heart that government-owned is much better than private ones.<sup>[26]</sup> Regular HEIs is the cornerstone in China's higher education, while private universities development could not be ignored.<sup>[27]</sup>

According to the latest data(2015) of People's Republic of China Ministry of Education, total number of Chinese National Higher Institutions is 2845, including 2,553 National General Colleges and Universities and 292 Adult Higher Institutions.<sup>[19]</sup> Government-owned HEIs are likely to receive more policy and finance support from official level.

Compared with state-owned universities, private universities' development is in an awkward position. Different with private universities in Western world, China's private education is a complement to public universities to meet the needs for those who failed in their college entrance examination and who could not afford the tuition fees to study abroad. Due to the large population, Chinese public universities are impossible to satisfy everyone's needs. Under this condition, private universities of China come into being. The advantages of their professional setting that more in line with market requirements could not make up for the lack of financial funds and students. Actually, these two factors are equal. The source of funds for them depends largely on students' tuition fees<sup>[28]</sup>

Except of competition from public universities and other sino-foreign cooperative private institution, the most deadly weakness is that Chinese officials deny acknowledging their degree. In Private Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China, it clearly indicates that "Private

university degree is that national recognition of the non national education series, belonging to private colleges awarded diplomas”.[29]

Though followed by “The educated in Private colleges enjoy the same level and rights in further education, employment, social welfare, and participation in advanced selection with the educated public schools” ,<sup>[29]</sup> it can hardly compensate the flaw that the degree belonging to only private colleges awarded diplomas, but no acknowledgement by officials.

## C9 League

The C9 League (simplified Chinese: 九校联盟; traditional Chinese: 九校聯盟) is an official alliance of nine elite and prestigious universities in mainland China, initiated by the Chinese Central Government through Project 985 to promote the development and reputation of Higher education in China. Together they account for 3% of the country's researchers but receive 10% of national research expenditures.<sup>[30]</sup> People's Daily, an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, refers to the C9 League as *China's Ivy League*.<sup>[31]</sup>

This group of 9 elite universities includes Fudan University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Nanjing University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Tsinghua University, University of Science and Technology of China, Xi'an Jiaotong University, and Zhejiang University.

Many other lists of elite Chinese universities exists. The C9 League dominates in terms of faculty recruitment, with disproportionate numbers of faculty who receive China's top two academic awards: the Changjiang (Yangtze River) Scholar award and the Thousand Talents Professorship.

## Challenges

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China exhibits a great need for better regulation as well as more academic qualifications, teaching experience, and understanding of social changes and technology. To achieve success, the state realizes that the impacts of the Cultural Revolution on education must be reversed. To this end, top universities now function as centers of excellence that serve as a model for all other institutes. A helpful model involved "twinning" of poorer institutes with model institutes to provide equipment, curricula, and faculty development.

There is also an issue of funding and equity. Although academic praise reforms for moving the higher education sector from a unified, centralized and closed system to one that allows openness and diversification, they understand that decentralization and semi-privatization has led to further inequity in educational opportunity. Graduate unemployment rates are also a growing concern.

There is growing concern about the mindset of students produced by Chinese institutions, where cheating is widespread and tolerated.<sup>[32]</sup> Many corporations feel the quality of rote memorization instilled in Chinese students serves as a detriment to creative thinking and the lack of real-world experience during the formative years negatively impacts students' ability to adapt to the global business environment easily. These issues will need to be addressed in the coming years if China aims to continue its drive for excellence.<sup>[33]</sup>

Unemployment rates are quite high among Chinese graduates. Because of expansion of universities in China last decades, more students had access to receive higher education. With continuous graduates' entry into employment market, graduate unemployment is highlighted. China's recent upsurge in graduate unemployment has specific causes relating to economic development, education policy-making, and reforms in the economy as well as in higher education.<sup>[34]</sup> As a result of the predicament of unemployment, educators, students, and the Ministry of Education is promoting training in skills for the market economy that would complement the more traditional classroom learning and the focus on "hard" credentials. In Chinese universities, students clubs and special training activities aim to cultivate "soft" skills in students, assisting in promoting resilient personalities and life skills as preparation for the uncertainties in the job market.<sup>[35]</sup>

## International students

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With China's rising national strength and popularity of Chinese in the world, China as a study destination attracts thousands of foreign students abroad and the number of foreign students continues to grow rapidly in recent years. According to 2014 data from Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, there are more than 377,054 foreign students studies in all the 31 provinces in China, with an increase of 5.77% over the same period last year.<sup>[36]</sup> In 2015, a record breaking 397,635 international students went to China, solidifying its position as the third most popular destination country for overseas students.<sup>[37]</sup> While US and the UK attracted nearly one-third of all globally mobile students, their leadership is under threat in the "Third Wave" of political turbulence and intense competition from English-medium Instruction or English-taught Programs in countries like China and Continental Europe.<sup>[38]</sup>

The largest source of foreign students comes from Asia, accounting almost 60% of the total, followed by Europe 18%, Africa 11% respectively.<sup>[36]</sup> For individual country, the top three countries of origins are South Korea (62,923), United States (24,203) and Thailand (21,296).<sup>[36]</sup> Only 10% of foreign students receive Chinese Government Scholarship and the rest 90% are self-funded.<sup>[36]</sup>

On the other side, more Chinese wealthy families are more likely to send their kids abroad to receive higher education. Free academic atmosphere, high-quality teaching quality and new way to cultivate talents---all these advantages contribute to the flood of Chinese students arriving in United States, United Kingdom, Germany and other developed countries. Chinese students have been the largest foreign group in USA since 2010, with 157,588 arriving between 2010 and 2011.<sup>[36]</sup> The same situation happened in United Kingdom and Germany. Western education will likely remain the leading choice for Chinese students due to its cross-disciplinary fields and development of critical thinking.<sup>[39]</sup>

China has a strong demand for postsecondary education, to the extent that its university system currently cannot keep pace with demand. Consequently, universities in the United States, Europe and Australia play a significant role by partnering with Chinese universities, aggressively recruiting Chinese students for study in their host countries, increasing the number of students they send to study in China, and adding to their presence on the mainland, either through official foreign campuses or extensions. Australia, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries are already making strides into this market.

Partnering can be economically salubrious, either if the scholars choose to stay in the host country or return to the mainland. Most Chinese students who go abroad are among the best and brightest from their home country. Thus, if they choose to stay, they can benefit the economy of their host country when they gain employment and become members of their new communities. If they leave, they may maintain the contacts and connections they may have established, and also leave a positive impression on their hosts.<sup>[40]</sup>

## Funding

Compared with commonwealth countries' tuition, tuition of China's higher education is relatively inexpensive. Nevertheless, the Chinese per capita income is much lower than western countries, so there are still some students from rural and mountainous areas facing funding problems. Chinese government has taken some measures to ensure the smooth enrollment of this group, like students loans, part-time jobs within campus, etc. It seldom has the news that some college students discontinue studies because of lacking of tuition or living cost.

Considering institution funding, it varies dramatically among different universities. In order to adapt to the fierce global competition in education, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China initiated Project 211 in the 1990s aimed at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century.<sup>[41]</sup> On May 4, 1998, President Jiang Zemin declared that "China must have a number of first-rate universities of international advanced level", so Project 985 was launched.<sup>[41]</sup> The total number of Project 985 is 39 and all of them belong to 211 project at the same time.<sup>[41]</sup> The initial aim is to promote China's educational competitiveness and establishment of a number of leading disciplines in the world.

Meanwhile, it is also the beginning to widen the gap and cause the imbalanced distribution of scientific research funds between 211 project universities and common public universities. Within the project, it is not only a glory but also hints numerous tangible benefits. The majority of public universities' development lies to all levels of government funds. Entry in this project means you will gain more research funds. According to another data from Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, from 2009 to 2013, the total government research funding for 39 985-Project institutions is 13.9 billion RMB, with 73 211-Project Institutions approximately 5.1 billion RMB and rest of 670 common undergraduate colleges only 7.9 billion RMB. .<sup>[41]</sup>

The majority of Chinese universities are state-owned universities. The financial support from government level, in most circumstances, decides one university's development. The imbalanced distribution of scientific research funds will deepen the gap among universities.

### **Remark:**

1. In 1902, School of Combined Learning in Beijing was merged with Imperial Capital University, now Peking University. However, Peking University never claims 1862 as its year founded. Neither does Peking University claim the year of establishing the Guozijian, which can date back more than one thousand years. Hunan University, with a similar history with Peking, often traced its history back to a school established in 976 A.D, thus giving this university a thousand years of history. See "Archived copy" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20150307204933/http://www.hnu.edu.c>

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## See also

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- [Academic ranks in China](#)
- [Project 985](#)
- [Project 211](#)
- [C9 League](#)
- [Academic Ranking of World Universities](#) compiled by [Shanghai Jiao Tong University](#)
- [Ant Tribes, college graduates challenges launching their career](#)
- [CERNET](#)
- [College and university rankings](#)
- [Education in China](#)
- [History of science and technology in China](#)
- [List of universities in China](#)
- [THES - QS World University Rankings](#) compiled by [Times Higher Education/Quacquarelli Symonds](#) between 2004 and 2009
- [Thousand Talents Program](#)
- [Changjiang \(Yangtze River\) Scholar award](#)
- [QS World University Rankings](#) published by [U.S. News & World Report](#) since 2010

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- Higher Education in China: The Next Super Power is Coming of Age (<http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Insights&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=11822>)
- Higher Education in China - A Growth Paradox? (<https://ideas.repec.org/p/eab/develo/185.html>)
- Higher Education in China in light of massification and demographic change ([http://www.che.de/downloads/Higher\\_Education\\_in\\_China\\_AP97.pdf](http://www.che.de/downloads/Higher_Education_in_China_AP97.pdf))
- China's impressive strides in higher education (<http://www.higher-edge.com/docs/APR2003.China.pdf>)
- China's bid for world domination (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7098561.stm>)
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## External links

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  - [University in Turmoil: The Political Economy of Shenzhen University \(http://www.agelastos.com/turmoil/\)](http://www.agelastos.com/turmoil/) by Michael Agelasto (1998) ISBN 962-86141-1-8
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