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An Overview of Study of Foreigners in China During the 40 Years of Reforms Period (1978–2018)

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Abstract

This article examines the processes of Study of foreigners in China during the period from 1978 to 2018 historically and comparatively. The achievements of Study of foreigners in China during this time mainly manifested in four aspects, with four weaknesses present. The major characteristics of Study of foreigners in China are shown in the overall scale, degree education and the number of self-funded students. The review of the policy documents related to Study of foreigners in China during the 40 years especially help to better understand the development of Study of foreigners in China. The resulting conclusion of this study shows that it is necessary to upgrade the quality and efficiency of Study of foreigners in China for better competitiveness of Chinese education in the world.

Keywords

study in China, reform and opening up, internationalization of education, education quality, education competitiveness

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Обзор обучения иностранцев в Китае в период 40 лет реформ (1978–2018)

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Аннотация

Рассматриваются процессы обучения иностранцев в Китае в течение 40 лет (с 1978 по 2018 г.) в историческом и сравнительном плане. Было обнаружено, что достижения в области обучения иностранцев в Китае в указанный период в основном проявлялись в четырех аспектах. Основные характеристики обучения иностранцев в Китае отражены в общем его масштабе, ученой степени образования и количестве студентов, которые учатся за свой счет. В частности обзор документов, касающихся обучения иностранцев в Китае за последние 40 лет, помогает иностранцам лучше понять тенденцию развития образования в Китае. Автор статьи считает необходимым повышение качества и эффективности обучения иностранцев в Китае для улучшения конкурентоспособности китайского образования в мире.

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Ключевые слова

обучение в Китае, политика «реформ и открытости», интернационализация образования, качество образования, конкурентоспособность образования

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Introduction

The year 1978 was a very special moment in the history of New China when the great “reform and opening up” began. “Reform and opening up is a great revolution in the history of the development of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation”¹. Through this great reform and opening up, China has achieved three great transformations: from a highly centralized planned economic system to the socialist market economic system full of vigor and vitality, from a closed and semi-closed society to a fully open one, and from a society experiencing lack of food and clothing to one that is well-off. China's two general national policies are: one is to adhere to economic construction as the centre, the other is to adhere to reform and opening up; “reform and opening up has become the most prominent feature and the most magnificent atmosphere in contemporary China”². With the historical reform and opening up in the background, ‘Study in China’ has been vigorously developed: it has scaled from small to large, majors from few to many, students from underdeveloped countries to developed countries, and from scholarship students to self-funded students, management from differentiation to convergence.

In the 21st century, Chinese scholars carried out careful research on China’s education within the Study in China concept. These studies mainly focused on two aspects: to research the history of Study in China, and study its policies and regulations. In terms of its history, scholars studied the development of educational modernization in China during four time periods: the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, the late Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China in the order of historical development [Tian Zhengping, 2004], focusing mainly on sorting out and examining important documents, policies, and regulations of Study in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China, and on historical research [Li Tao, 2000; Yu Fuzeng, Jiang Bo, Zhu Xiaoyu, 2001; Yu Fuzeng 2009; Cheng Jiafu, Huang Meixu, 2008; Cheng Jiafu, Chen Songlin, Zhao Jinpo, 2012; Li Peng, Tang Jing, 2015; Li Peng, 2016; Jia Zhaoyi, Wei Liqing, 2019; Wei Qiang, Fu Yihui, Dong Haijun, 2020; Wei Liqing, Chang Cuiming, 2021]. Systematic studies were conducted on the educational policies and systems of Study in China [Guo Xiujing, Wang Jixia, 2008; Chen Yu, Qu Tiehua, 2016; Wang Yongxiu, Xie Shaohua, 2017], which raised issues that should be paid attention to when formulating policies. However, there are not many achievements in the field of Study in China in the past 40 years since the reform and opening up. What is the overall situation of Study in China in the past 40 years? What are the main achievements? What are the weaknesses? What are the major characteristics? The research on these issues is beneficial to the advancement of China's education internationalization.

Overview of Study in China from 1978 to 2018

The development of Study in China is closely related to the improvement of China’s international political environment, economic development and the progress of higher education since the reform and opening up. On 18 March 1978, Deng Xiaoping clearly pointed out in his speech at the opening ceremony of the China National Science and Technology Conference that “any nation or country

¹ *Xi Jinping*. Zai qingzhu gaige kaifang 40 zhounian dahuishang de jianghua [习近平。在庆祝改革开放 40 周年大会上的讲话(N)]. Speech at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of reform and opening up (N). (in Chin.) URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-12/18/c_1123872025.html (accessed: 24.09.2023).

² *Ibid.*

needs to learn from the strengths of other nations and countries and learn from other people's advanced science and technology" [Deng Xiaoping, 1993, p. 91]. Following this, China began to expand the scale of sending Chinese students to study abroad, especially to countries with relatively advanced science and technology, and also began to accept international students from developed countries. At that time, there were only 42 majors and 23 schools open for international students [Li Tao, 2000, p. 884]. The development of Study in China from 1978 to 2018 can be clearly seen from the changes in the number of students enrolled, the number of schools, and the number of countries and regions of the international student sources (see Table 1).

Table 1

International students coming to China (1978–2018)

Таблица 1

Иностранные студенты, приехавшие в Китай (1978–2018)

Year	Students in total	Scholarship students	Self-supporting students	Universities & colleges	Countries and regions
1978	1236	1207	29	23	72
1979	1593	1278	315	35	72
1980	2097	1389	708	35	72
1981	3440	1631	1809	35	72
1982	4535	1759	2776	35	72
1983	5461	2066	3395	35	72
1984	6144	2593	3551	55	72
1985	7727	3251	4476	55	72
1986	8754	4091	4663	55	72
1987	5646	4593	1053	55	72
1988	5835	4596	1239	55	111
1989	6379	3871	2508	120	124
1990	7494	3684	3810	120	112
1991	11972	3630	8342	120	112
1992	14024	3389	10635	120	112
1993	16871	3053	13818	120	112
1994	25586	2969	22617	120	112
1995	35759	3001	32758	283	154
1996	41211	4307	36904	283	154
1997	43712	4677	39035	335	160
1998	43084	5088	37996	339	164
1999	44711	5211	39511	356	164
2000	52150	5362	46788	344	166
2001	61869	5841	56028	363	169
2002	85829	6074	79755	395	175
2003	77715	6153	71562	352	175
2004	110844	6715	104129	420	178
2005	141087	7218	133869	464	179
2006	162695	8484	154211	519	184
2007	195503	10151	185352	544	188
2008	223499	13516	209983	592	189
2009	238184	18245	219939	610	190
2010	265090	22390	242700	620	194

End of the Table 1

Year	Students in total	Scholarship students	Self-supporting students	Universities & colleges	Countries and regions
2011	292611	25687	266924	660	194
2012	328330	28768	299562	690	200
2013	356499	33322	323177	746	200
2014	377054	36943	340111	775	203
2015	397635	40600	357035	811	202
2016	442773	49022	393751	829	205
2017	489200	58600	430600	935	204
2018	492185	63041	429144	1004	196

Note: The data for 1978–1997 comes from [Yu Fuzeng, 2009], the data for 1998–2015 comes from the Ministry of Education's official website “China Education Yearbook” 1999–2015, the data for 2016, 2017, 2018 comes from the official website of the Ministry of Education.

From 1978 to 2018, Study in China could be generally divided into four stages: the recovery stage (1978–1988), the standardized management stage (1989–1998), the rapid growth stage (1999–2008), the quality and efficiency improvement stage (2009–2018). Even now, Study in China is still in the quality and efficiency improvement stage.

The recovery stage means that Study in China almost returned to the level before 1966. At this stage, the number of international students, the number of universities and colleges which accepted international students, the number of countries and regions where students came from, and the majors open to international students were relatively low. Most of the international students were scholarship students, and few came at their own expense. The management experience of international students was insufficient, and the system related to the management of international students was very behind and not complete.

The standardized management stage meant that with the increase in the number of international students (43,084 by 1998, 34.86 times the number in 1978, and the number of self-funded students in 1998 was 7.47 times that of the scholarship students), the admission institutes increased (339) and the number of countries and regions increased too (164). As a result of this however, Study in China headed for various problems and challenges in management, and it was more and more necessary to regulate the system in order to achieve better sustainable development. In terms of enrollment, in 1989, the State Education Commission of China promulgated the “*Regulations on Enrolling Self-funded International Students*”, which carried out corresponding regulations on the management of Study in China in colleges and universities. Since 1989, the “*Approval and Registration Form for Foreign Students to Study in China*” (JW202 for short) was renamed as “*Application Form for Foreign Students to Study in China*”, and in 1993, it was further renamed as “*Visa Application Form for Foreign Students to Study in China*” in both Chinese and English to make the name of the form more standardized and consistent with its function. In terms of degree conferring, in 1991, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council issued a notice on the “*Trial Measures for Conferring Chinese Degrees by Institutions of Higher Education to International Students*” which made degree awarding work more formalized and standardized. In terms of international Chinese teaching, the State Education Commission successively issued a series of management measures. The “*Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) Outline*” was promulgated in 1989, the “*Measures for the Qualification of Teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language*” was promulgated in 1990, and the “*Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) Measures*” was promulgated in 1992. In this way, the international Chinese proficiency grading standards and examination system were established, and China's international Chinese education entered a new period of standardized development.

From 1999 to 2008, with the gradual improvement of management and systems, Study in China entered a stage of rapid growth, which was mainly manifested in four aspects. First, the number of international students increased significantly (see Table 2–4). Second, the number of self-financed international students grew substantially. In 2008, the number of self-funded students exceeded 200,000 for the first time, also doubling that in 2004 of the first year over 100,000, indicating that China had become an important destination for international students wanting to study abroad. Third, the number of colleges and universities accepting international students increased significantly, almost 26 times the number of colleges and universities that accepted international students in 1978, indicating that Chinese colleges and universities attached great importance to the internationalization of education and the international education ability was promoted. Fourth, the number of source countries and regions grew substantially. By 2008, the number of countries and regions of Study in China reached 189, nearly covering all the member states of the United Nations.

Table 2

Changes in the number of international students
(1999–2008)

Таблица 2

Изменение количества иностранных студентов
(1999–2008)

Year	Total	Growth rate over the previous year (%)
1999	44711	/
2000	52150	16.6
2001	61869	18.6
2002	85829	38.7
2003	77715	-9.5
2004	110844	42.6
2005	141087	27.3
2006	162695	15.3
2007	195503	20.2
2008	223499	14.3

Note: In the past 10 years, due to the impact of the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the number of students enrolled decreased compared with the previous year, however 2004 ushered in a retaliatory growth and the growth rates in other years reached double digits, obviously fast growing.

Table 3

Changes in the number of degree international students (1999–2008)

Таблица 3

Изменение количества иностранных студентов,
получивших дипломы (1999–2008)

Year	Degree Students	Growth rate over the previous year (%)	Percentage of total (%)
1999	11479	/	25.6
2000	13703	19.3	26.2
2001	16650	21.5	26.9
2002	21055	37.0	24.5

End of the Table 3

Year	Degree Students	Growth rate over the previous year (%)	Percentage of total (%)
2003	24616	26.4	31.6
2004	31166	26.6	28.1
2005	44851	43.9	31.7
2006	54859	22.3	33.7
2007	68213	24.3	34.8
2008	80005	17.29	35.8

Table 4

Changes in the number of graduate students (1999–2008)

Таблица 4

Изменения в количестве выпускников (1999–2008)

Year	Graduates		Proportion of the total number of degree students (%)
	No.	Proportion of self-supporting (%)	
1999	2896	61.2	25.2
2000	3251	60.0	23.7
2001	3571	57.8	21.4
2002	4247	59.1	20.1
2003	5034	61.1	20.4
2004	5815	61.2	18.6
2005	7111	65.2	15.8
2006	8643	64.8	15.7
2007	10846	64.9	15.9
2008	14281	60.3	17.9

During the ten years from 1999 to 2008, Study in China showed rapid growth. However, compared with the major countries for international students in the world (such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Russia), Study in China was still at the “primary stage of development, mainly due to three reasons: first, the majority of international students who were taught alone, second, an effective knowledge assessment system was not established, third, a practical Chinese language training and assessment system was not yet built [Yu Fuzeng, 2009, pp. 271–275].

The so-called improvement of quality and efficiency meant that a key goal was to improve the quality of talent training for international students, and to cultivate more knowledgeable and friendly Chinese talents. During the stage of improving quality and efficiency, the Ministry of Education of China, as the competent education department, did a lot of work at the national level, which had a relatively large impact in the following three aspects³. First, a complete policy chain to protect the rights and interests of international students was set up. In 2017, the “*Regulations on the Management of School Enrollment and Cultivation of International Students*” and the “*Notice on Matters Related to Allowing Outstanding Foreign College Graduates to Work in China*” were successively issued. The second was to pay close attention to quality and create an upgraded version of “Study in China”. In 2018, the “*Quality Specification for Higher Education for International Students (Trial)*”

³ Liu Limin. Duocuo bingju tisheng laihualiuxue zhiliang (N)[刘利民. 多措并举提升来华留学质量]. Taking multiple measures to improve the quality of study in China. (in Chin.) URL: http://www.jyb.cn/rmtzgjyb/201907/t20190726_250414.html (accessed: 24.09.2023).

was issued, which required the realization of a unified standard teaching management and examination system across the country, the establishment of quality certification for Study in China organized by a third-party, gradually improving the construction of the quality assurance system of Study in China. The third was to elevate the service level and enhance the sense of integration of international students into Chinese society. Since 2013, the Ministry of Education of China held a series of branded activities such as “Sports and Culture Competition for Overseas Students in China” and “Experience China”, allowing international students to have in-depth natural, cultural and social experiences in China.

The main achievements of Study in China from 1978 to 2018

From 1978 to 2018, Study in China progressed step by step. Over the course of forty years, the cause has been undertaken from generation to generation, and great achievements have been made. It is mainly manifested in the following four aspects.

First, an open education system for Study in China has been established. First of all, the autonomy of the enrollment of international students has been delegated by the Ministry of Education to individual colleges and universities. Secondly, the number of colleges and universities that can accept international students has greatly increased, from 23 in 1978 to 1,004 in 2018, covering all parts of mainland China. Thirdly, almost all disciplines and all majors are open to international students. Finally, the idea of running schools internationally is deeply rooted in the minds of the people, and the internationalization of education has been widely recognized by the Chinese educational community.

Second, the scale of international students is expanding rapidly. In 1978, there were only 1,236 international students enrolled in Chinese universities, but in 2018 it reached 492,185; an increase of almost 400 times. In 1978, there were only 23 colleges and universities allowed to enroll international students in China, but in 2018, there were 1,004 colleges and universities that enrolled international students; nearly 44 times growth.

Third, the management of international students is standardized and orderly. By 2018, the management of international students had been undertaken by each university in accordance with Chinese laws and school regulations, the management from preferential treatment to convergence meaning that the international students are treated almost the same as Chinese students. The admitted were mainly either scholarship students or those studying at their own expense. The management experience of international students is now quite mature, and a responsible, devoted and kind international student management team has been established.

Fourth, the talent training system and mechanism are sound. Various universities, disciplines, and majors have formulated mature talent training programs that conform to international practices and can meet the learning needs of international students. Academic degrees obtained in China are widely recognized by the international community.

Weaknesses of Study in China from 1978 to 2018

Although Study in China has boosted rapidly and achieved great results in the 40 years of reform and opening up, there are still some areas that need to be improved. Especially in the following aspects:

First, the number of international students is not large. Although the number of international students reached nearly 500,000 by 2018, there were not many degree students, and a considerable number of them were short-term language students. This scale is not proportional to the volume of more than 3,000 colleges and universities in China, let alone the scale of international students in popular countries for international students such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia or Russia.

Second, convergence management is not enough. Many colleges and universities in China implement the “service package system” [Zhong Zi, 2016, p. 418] for international students. Most of the basic necessities of life for international students are fully in the hands of the management department of international students, and there is no convergence management with Chinese students.

Third, the internationalization level of teaching management is not high. China’s traditional education model focuses on the imparting of knowledge, with low student participation and low interaction. The curriculum system for international students is not perfect. Except for majors such as traditional Chinese medicine and the Chinese language, there are not many majors with international competitiveness. The international standard of academic evaluation for international students needs to be improved.

Fourth, the degree level of international students is not high. The year 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, and was also a year of relatively balanced development of Study in China. In this year, there were 234,063 non-degree students and 258,122 degree students (MOE, 2019), accounting for 52.44% of the total number of international students in China; an increase of 16,579 compared with 2017 and a year-on-year increase of 6.86%. Among them, there were 25,618 Doctoral students, accounting only for 9.93% of the total number of degree students that year, and 59,444 Masters students, accounting for 23.03%. However, as far as China's internationally renowned universities are concerned, the general situation is that the number of Chinese Doctoral students is greater than the number of Masters students, and the number of Masters students is greater than the number of undergraduate students.

Main characteristics of Study in China from 1978 to 2018

In the past 40 years, the development of Study in China has mainly shown the following characteristics:

First, the overall scale of international students has continued to expand, and the number of institutions receiving international students has increased rapidly. As mentioned above, the scale of international students has grown exponentially. The number of language students, general students, advanced students, and exchange students has continued to rise. In particular, the number of degree students has grown rapidly. “Since 2008, the growth rate has been higher than that of students coming to China” [Wang Huiyao, Miao Lu, 2016, p. 104], and as time goes by, more and more people come to China to study for Masters and Doctorates.

Second, the degree education has been steadily improved, and the level and professional structure have been gradually optimized. During the 27 years from 1978 to 2004, the students who came to study in China were mainly language students and short-term students. Taking 2004 as an example, the total number of international students was 110,844, including 6,715 scholarship students and 104,129 self-funded students. In fact, only degree students were eligible for scholarships and they could almost win scholarships at that time. It can be inferred that the ratio of degree students to non-degree students was about 0.06:1; in 2018, the ratio was 1:0.9, hence the staggering change. Changes in level and professional structure were also remarkable. “The types of majors that students could take increased, and the distribution of majors at each educational level was more diverse: among undergraduates, Western medicine, the Chinese language, economics, and engineering have the highest proportions; among Masters students, the highest proportions are management, engineering, economics, and the Chinese language; among the Doctoral students, the highest proportions are engineering, management, science and literature” [Wen Wen, Chen Qiang, Wu Shengnan, 2018, pp. 178–179].

Third, the total number of Chinese government scholarships has increased, and the number of self-funded international students has grown rapidly. According to incomplete statistics, “Asian students receive the largest number of Chinese government scholarships, while African students cover the highest proportion who rely on Chinese government scholarships to support their study in China” [Wen Wen, Chen Qiang, Wu Shengnan, 2018, p. 180]. The number of self-funded interna-

tional students varies greatly every ten years (see Table 5). Even after the global financial crisis in 2008, the number of self-funded international students reached a high proportion.

Table 5

Scholarship changes for international students every ten years (1978–2018)

Таблица 5

Изменение количества стипендий на обучение для иностранных студентов
через каждые десять лет (1978–2018)

Year	Scholarship students	Self-funded students	Proportion (%)
1978	1207	29	4162.07
1988	4596	1239	370.94
1998	5088	37996	13.39
2008	13516	209983	6.44
2018	63041	429144	14.69

Main Policy Documents on Study in China from 1978 to 2018

In order to promote the stable, healthy and orderly development of Study in China, the departments of the Chinese government have formulated some policies and regulations from 1978 to 2018, mainly involving the management of international Chinese learning, the collection of tuition and accommodation fees for international students, and the enrollment of international students. A review of these policy documents will help better understand the development of Study in China.

In terms of international Chinese learning, on 1 March 1980, the Ministry of Education issued the “*Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Opening of Summer Chinese Language Classes in 1980*”, and on 31 December 1980, the Ministry of Education issued the “*Notice on the Opening of Short-term Chinese Classes for Foreigners in China by Institutions of Higher Learning*”, in April 1983 the Ministry of Education issued the “*Relevant Regulations of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China on Opening Short-term Classes for Foreigners*”.

In terms of tuition and accommodation fees, the charging standards for short-term international students were formulated by the Ministry of Education in consultation with relevant central ministries and commissions [Yu Fuzeng, 2009, p. 74]. In 1980, the Ministry of Education stipulated the tuition fees, accommodation fees and meals for short-term international students. In 1983, the Ministry of Education, together with other ministries and commissions, issued the “*Notice on Reprinting the Regulations on the Fees for Short-term Classes for Foreigners*”, in 1985 it issued the “*Notice on the Regulations of Adjusting Tuition and Accommodation Fees for Short-term Classes for Foreigners*”, on 26 April 2000, the Ministry of Education issued the “*Notice on the Implementation of the Annual Review System for Chinese Government Scholarships*”, on 30 July 2001, “*Regulations of the Ministry of Education on the Management of Chinese Government Scholarships*”, on 14 January 2015, “*Notice of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education on Improving the Chinese Government Scholarship Funding System and Raising Funding Standards*”.

In terms of enrollment and admission of international students, in 1985 the State Education Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the “*Related Regulations of the State Education Commission of the People’s Republic of China on Accepting Foreign Research Scholars into Chinese Institutions of Higher Learning for Scientific Research*”, in 1989 the State Education Commission issued the “*Regulations on Enrolling Self-funded International Students*”, on 21 September 2010, “*Notice of the Ministry of Education on Printing the ‘Study in China Plan’*”, on 2 June 2017, “*Measures on the Management of School Enrollment and Cultivation of International Students*” jointly announced by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security, on 12 September 2017, “*Notice of the General*

Office of the Ministry of Education and the General Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Strictly Regulating the Management of Admissions for International Students", on 30 September 2018, "Notice the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Further Strengthening the Management of International Students", on 9 October 2018, "Notice of the Ministry of Education on Printing the "Quality Specification for Higher Education for International Students (Trial)".

In terms of the daily management of international students, in April 1979 there was the "Report on the Work Conference on Foreign Students", in 1979 the Ministry of Education promulgated the "Regulations on Foreign Students (Trial) (Revised)", in 1985 the State Education Commission and other relevant central departments formulated the "Regulations on Foreign Students (Trial) (Revised)", in 1987 the State Education Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security issued the "Notice on Strengthening and Improving the Management of International Students", on 8 April 2008, China Scholarship Council promulgated the "Emergency Handling Procedures for All Kinds of Scholarship Students".

In terms of degree awarding, on 12 February 1980, the 13th plenary meeting of the Standing Committee of the Fifth National People's Congress passed the "Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Degrees", in October 1991 the Degree Committee of the State Council issued a notice on the "Trial Measures for Conferring Chinese Degrees by Institutions of Higher Education to International Students".

In terms of international Chinese teaching, in 1988, Hanban promulgated the "Chinese Proficiency Grading Standard and Grading Syllabus", in 1989 the State Education Commission promulgated the "Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) Syllabus", in 1990 the State Education Commission promulgated the "Measures for the Qualification of Teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language", in 1992 the State Education Commission issued the "Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) Measures".

Conclusion

For forty years since the reform and opening up, the management system of Study in China has undergone profound changes. Its core is the transfer of the management functions of Study in China from the government to universities, hence the return to the educational attribute from diplomatic and political attributes. Improving the quality of Study in China is the foundation to ensure its sustainable development, and it is necessary to implement four major strategies including "brand strategy, discipline strategy, market strategy, and environmental strategy" [Luan Fengchi, 2013, pp. 58–59]. "To improve the construction of the cultivating system for international students at three levels of individuals, universities and society" [Wang Yuping, Luan Fengchi, 2020, p. 38]. It is necessary to upgrade quality and efficiency, promote the connotative development, revise and improve the measures for the quality supervision of international students, design and establish a work system for the quality certification and evaluation of international student education in China, in this way, colleges and universities can have regulations and rules to follow, self-discipline, improve and develop themselves, and effectively boost their internationalization and the competitiveness of international education.

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