

The Gaokao and Chinese Students' Overseas Study: A 20-Year Longitudinal Analysis of Push Dynamics, Mobility Trends, and Educational Inequality (2005–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the Gaokao system in shaping Chinese students' decisions to study abroad and its implications for educational inequality over the period 2005–2025. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates longitudinal secondary data with semi-structured interviews to provide both macro-level trend analysis and micro-level insights. Grounded in Push–Pull Theory, the Gaokao is conceptualized as a dynamic institutional push factor interacting with broader socioeconomic and global contexts.

The findings indicate that the influence of the Gaokao evolves across three distinct phases: a reactive “fallback” mechanism in the early stage (2005–2009), a more proactive “parallel pathway” during the expansion phase (2010–2017), and a moderated, diversified influence within increasingly strategic decision-making in the recent period (2018–2025). Qualitative evidence further suggests a shift from exam avoidance toward long-term educational planning among students and families.

Regarding inequality, the study finds that while the Gaokao maintains a meritocratic logic within the domestic system, its interaction with unequal access to international education contributes to a stratified dual-track structure. Although recent reforms and diversification trends have partially mitigated disparities, structural inequalities remain evident.

By integrating longitudinal and qualitative perspectives, this study extends Push–Pull Theory and offers a more dynamic understanding of high-stakes examinations in global student mobility.

Keywords: Gaokao system, Chinese students, study abroad, international student mobility, educational inequality, student decision-making, mixed-methods approach

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the internationalization of higher education has accelerated rapidly, with cross-border student mobility emerging as a defining feature of the global education landscape. China, in particular, has consistently remained the world's largest source of international students, with millions pursuing higher education abroad. This sustained outflow reflects not only the expansion of global education opportunities but also the complex interplay between domestic institutional structures and individual decision-making processes.

At the center of China's education system lies the Gaokao, a highly competitive, high-stakes examination that serves as the primary gateway to higher education. As a standardized selection mechanism, the Gaokao plays a critical role in shaping students' academic trajectories and life chances. Its intense competition, score-based allocation, and limited access to elite institutions have long been associated with significant academic pressure and constrained educational pathways for many students.

Against this backdrop, studying abroad has increasingly been viewed as an alternative—or complementary—route to higher education. Over the past two decades, a growing number of Chinese students have chosen to bypass or strategically combine the Gaokao with overseas applications. Existing research has frequently interpreted this trend through the lens of Push–Pull Theory, identifying the Gaokao as a major “push factor” and the perceived advantages of foreign education systems as key “pull factors.” However, much of the literature remains fragmented in three important respects.

First, most studies adopt a cross-sectional perspective, focusing on specific time periods rather than examining how the relationship between the Gaokao and overseas study has evolved over time. Second, while the Gaokao is widely recognized as a source of pressure, relatively limited attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which this pressure translates into actual decision-making. Third, existing research is dominated by macro-level quantitative analyses, with comparatively little micro-level evidence capturing how students and families interpret, negotiate, and respond to the constraints of the Gaokao system in practice.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a longitudinal and mixed-methods approach to investigate how the Gaokao system has influenced Chinese students' study-abroad decisions between 2005 and 2025. Specifically, the study combines (1) a systematic literature review, (2) secondary data analysis of national and international datasets, and (3) primary qualitative evidence derived from semi-structured interviews with Chinese students and parents. This explanatory sequential design enables the study to first identify macro-level trends and relationships, and then examine the underlying decision-making processes that give rise to these patterns.

The findings contribute to the literature in three key ways. First, by providing a 20-year longitudinal perspective, the study demonstrates that the Gaokao's role as a push factor is dynamic rather than static, evolving from a reactive “fallback” mechanism to a proactive “parallel pathway,” and ultimately to a more integrated and strategic model of educational choice. Second, by incorporating qualitative evidence, the study uncovers the micro-level logics—such as risk management, strategic diversification, and resource-dependent decision-making—that mediate the relationship between institutional pressure and student mobility. Third, the study advances the concept of an “equity paradox,” highlighting how a merit-based examination system may inadvertently reinforce inequality when combined with unequal access to alternative educational pathways.

By integrating macro-level trends with micro-level experiences, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how high-stakes examination systems interact with global student mobility. The findings have important implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and families navigating the increasingly complex and interconnected landscape of higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gaokao System: Institutional Features, High-Stakes Nature, and Selection Logic

The National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) constitutes the central mechanism governing access to higher education in mainland China. As a quintessential high-stakes standardized testing system, it exerts a profound influence on students' educational opportunities, patterns of social stratification, and long-term life

trajectories (Chen, 2024). Historically rooted in the imperial civil examination system (Keju), the Gaokao was formally established in 1952, suspended during the Cultural Revolution, and reinstated in 1977. Since then, it has evolved into a defining pillar of modern Chinese education (Mayans, 2018).

Existing scholarship generally highlights three core institutional characteristics of the Gaokao. First, it operates as a single, score-based selection mechanism, in which final examination results largely determine university placement. Even marginal differences in scores can translate into markedly unequal access to elite institutions, reinforcing the exam's high-stakes nature (Gu & Magaziner, 2016). Second, the system fosters an exam-oriented pedagogical environment that prioritizes rote memorization and intensive drill practice (*shuati*). This emphasis often sidelines creative thinking, interdisciplinary engagement, and broader forms of holistic development (Wu, 2016; Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Third, despite its meritocratic framing, the Gaokao is embedded within structural inequalities, including provincial admission quotas, disparities in urban–rural educational resources, and socioeconomic divides, all of which tend to advantage students from more affluent urban backgrounds (Chen, 2024; Hamnett et al., 2019).

At the same time, the Gaokao possesses notable institutional strengths. It offers a unified and standardized metric for evaluating academic performance across a vast and regionally diverse country, thereby minimizing subjective bias in university admissions and preserving a baseline sense of procedural fairness. For students from rural or low-income families, it remains one of the most important channels for upward social mobility. In addition, the system demonstrates remarkable efficiency and predictability, enabling the large-scale assessment and allocation of millions of candidates each year. While its exam-driven nature may constrain creativity, it can also contribute to the development of strong foundational knowledge, as well as resilience, discipline, and the capacity to perform under pressure.

Ethnographic studies further reveal the intense “involutionary” pressures embedded within the Gaokao system. Students often engage in 12 to 14 hours of daily study, navigate highly competitive peer environments, and carry substantial familial expectations. In this sense, the Gaokao functions simultaneously as a vehicle for social mobility and a source of considerable psychological strain (Chen, 2024; Xiang, 2021). Critics argue that the knowledge acquired in preparation for the Gaokao is frequently detached from real-world application, with excessive emphasis placed on test-taking strategies (Mayans, 2018). Supporters, however, contend that, given China's current socio-educational conditions, the Gaokao remains the most viable and comparatively equitable large-scale selection mechanism. Although reforms since 2014 have introduced greater flexibility in subject choice and multiple testing opportunities, the fundamental logic of the Gaokao as a decisive sorting mechanism for talent remains largely intact (Zhao, 2017).

Ultimately, the Gaokao system continues to face the enduring challenge of balancing efficiency with equity, standardization with diversity, and examination performance with holistic educational development.

Study Abroad Trends in China (2005–2025): Scale, Destinations, and Structural Changes

Over the past two decades, China has consistently remained one of the world's largest sources of internationally mobile students. Existing statistical reports from the Ministry of Education, UNESCO, and related agencies indicate substantial long-term growth in outbound mobility, although the pace and direction of expansion have varied across different periods.

As shown in Figure 1, Chinese outbound student mobility increased substantially between 2005 and 2019, declined temporarily during the COVID-19 disruption in 2020, and recovered strongly thereafter. Over the same period, the number of Gaokao candidates remained consistently high and rose further after 2018. The parallel long-term expansion of both series suggests that increasing domestic competition and growing demand for higher

education coexisted with rising international mobility. At the same time, the post-2018 moderation in their statistical relationship, examined later in the Findings section, indicates that study abroad decisions became influenced by a broader range of strategic and global factors.

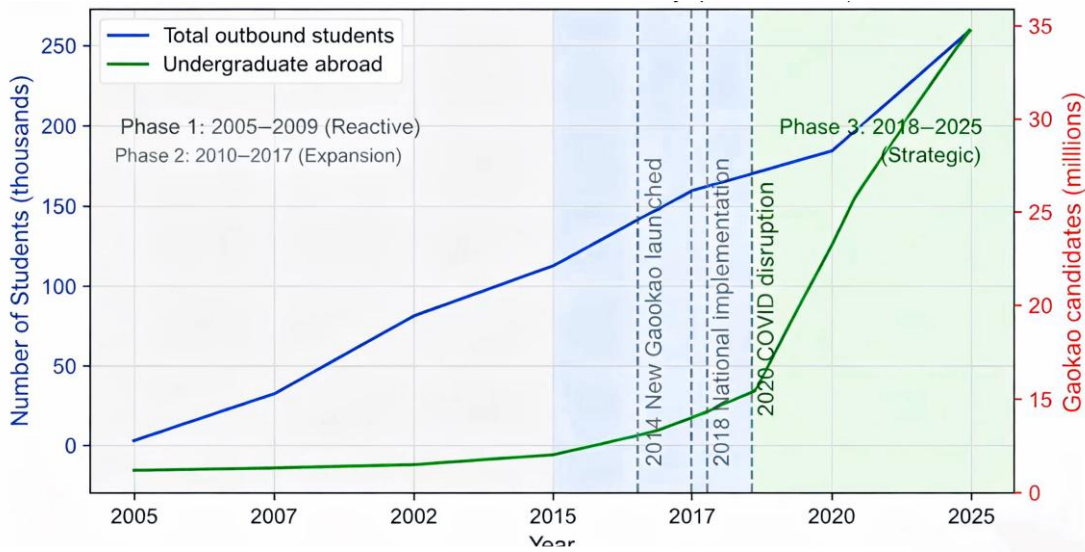


Figure 1: Trends in Chinese Outbound Students and Gaokao Candidates (2005–

Note. Outbound student figures refer to the annual number of Chinese students studying abroad. Gaokao candidates refer to registered National College Entrance Examination applicants. Shaded areas indicate the three analytical phases: Phase 1 (2005–2009), Phase 2 (2010–2017), and Phase 3 (2018–2025). Vertical markers denote major reform milestones (2014 New Gaokao launch; 2018 broader implementation).

As shown in Table 1, the total number of Chinese students studying abroad increased from approximately 118,500 in 2005 to 1.12 million in 2025, reflecting the growing internationalisation of Chinese families’ educational aspirations and the expansion of global higher education opportunities.

Table 1: Trends in Chinese Outbound Student Mobility, Undergraduate Participation, and Gaokao Candidates (2005–2025)

Year	Total Outbound	Undergraduate outbound	Gaokao Candidates	Top Destination Country	Key Context
2005	118,500	24,000	8,770,000	USA	Early growth; graduate-dominated
2006	134,000	28,000	9,500,000	USA	Middle-class expansion begins
2007	144,000	32,000	10,100,000	USA	Undergraduate numbers rise
2008	179,800	41,000	10,500,000	USA	Financial crisis limited growth
2009	229,300	57,000	10,200,000	USA	Rapid recovery; policy liberalization
2010	284,700	74,000	9,460,000	USA	30% annual growth
2011	339,700	92,000	9,330,000	USA	Undergraduates surpass graduates
2012	399,600	112,000	9,150,000	USA	Near 400,000 milestone
2013	413,900	120,000	9,120,000	USA	Stable high growth
2014	459,800	138,000	9,390,000	USA	UK/Australia gain share
2015	523,700	157,000	9,420,000	USA	500,000 milestone
2016	544,500	166,000	9,400,000	USA	Peak U.S. enrollment
2017	608,400	189,000	9,400,000	USA	350,547 in U.S. alone

2018	662,100	205,000	9,750,000	USA	Pre-pandemic peak
2019	703,500(peak)	218,000	10,310,000	USA	All-time high before pandemic
2020	548,000	135,000	10,710,000	UK	COVID-19 sharp decline
2021	605,100	157,000	10,780,000	UK	Returnees exceed outbound
2022	1,052,300	198,000	11,930,000	UK	Post-pandemic full recovery
2023	1,074,900	205,000	12,910,000	UK	Moderate growth
2024	1,090,000	210,000	13,420,000	UK	Stable diversification
2025	1,120,000	171,000	13,350,000	UK	Asia destinations rise rapidly

Sources: CCG (2025a, 2025b); Institute of International Education [IIE], 2017; UNESCO, 2025; Zhong, 2017

A notable trend identified in prior studies is the increasing participation of undergraduate students in outbound mobility. Earlier forms of overseas study were more strongly associated with postgraduate education, language training, or short-term academic advancement. However, from the late 2000s onward, undergraduate enrolment abroad rose steadily, increasing from around 24,000 in 2005 to more than 200,000 by the early 2020s. Scholars have linked this shift to changing family strategies, stronger demand for overseas credentials, and the growing tendency to consider international education at an earlier stage of the educational trajectory (Fong, 2011; Mayans, 2018).

At the same time, domestic demand for higher education remained intense. Publicly available statistics show that the number of Gaokao candidates remained consistently high throughout the period, fluctuating between approximately 8.7 million and 13.4 million annually. Although candidate numbers declined temporarily during parts of the early 2010s, they rose again after 2018. Existing literature often interprets these patterns as evidence of continuing pressure within China’s highly competitive tertiary admission system.

Research has also documented significant changes in destination preferences. Between 2005 and 2019, the United States was widely recognised as the dominant destination for Chinese students, supported by the global prestige of U.S. universities, strong STEM programs, and extensive postgraduate opportunities. During this period, the United States often accounted for the largest share of Chinese outbound enrollment, while the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Japan remained major secondary destinations.

From the mid-2010s onward, studies began to note a gradual diversification of destinations. The United Kingdom gained increasing popularity, particularly through one-year master’s degrees and expanding undergraduate pathways. Australia remained attractive for both undergraduate and vocational programs, while Canada drew students interested in education-to-migration pathways. Japan continued to serve as a major regional destination, especially in language, vocational, and undergraduate education.

Following 2020, the literature increasingly reports a more fragmented and risk-sensitive mobility landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic, shifting visa regimes, geopolitical tensions, and cost considerations appear to have reduced dependence on any single destination country. During this period, the relative prominence of the United States declined, while the United Kingdom strengthened its position. At the same time, regional destinations such as Hong Kong SAR, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea gained visibility due to geographic proximity, lower living costs, cultural familiarity, and improving institutional reputation.

Taken together, the literature suggests that Chinese outbound mobility between 2005 and 2025 was characterised by three broad structural shifts: substantial expansion in overall scale, growing undergraduate participation, and increasing diversification of destination choices. However, while these trends are well documented descriptively, less attention has been paid to how they relate systematically to changes within the Gaokao system and to evolving perceptions of domestic educational competition. This gap provides an important rationale for the present study.

Push–Pull Theory: Explaining the Motivations for Chinese Students to Study Abroad

The push–pull framework (Boyle & Halfacree, 1995; Lee, 1966), originally developed in migration studies, is now widely applied to explain patterns of international student mobility. It conceptualizes cross-border educational decisions as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between constraining conditions in the country of origin (push factors) and attractive opportunities in destination countries (pull factors). In the Chinese context, the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) system constitutes a central domestic pressure, while the perceived advantages of overseas higher education—particularly in Western countries—serve as key sources of attraction (Ma & Wang, 2017; Ke et al., 2022).

While the push–pull framework provides a useful macro-level explanation of student mobility, it tends to treat decision-making as a relatively linear response to structural factors. In practice, students' choices are often shaped by subjective interpretations, risk perceptions, and family strategies. However, existing research has rarely empirically captured these subjective interpretations through qualitative inquiry, resulting in a limited understanding of how students actively make sense of Gaokao-related pressures in real decision-making contexts. As such, there remains a need for micro-level evidence to understand how individuals interpret and negotiate the pressures associated with the Gaokao, and how these interpretations translate into actual decisions to study abroad.

Push Factors: Domestic Pressures Associated with the Gaokao

A substantial body of research identifies the Gaokao as the most influential domestic push factor shaping students' decisions to study abroad. Its impact can be understood through three interrelated mechanisms.

First, intense competition combined with limited access to elite institutions compels many students to seek alternative pathways. Given the highly selective nature of top-tier universities in China, students who fall short of the required scores often turn to overseas education as a second, yet viable, route to high-quality higher education (Chen, 2024; Chen, 2024).

Second, dissatisfaction with exam-oriented pedagogical practices plays a significant role. The dominance of rote memorization, repetitive drilling, and teacher-centered instruction has led some students to reject the domestic system in favor of educational models—such as Western liberal arts traditions—that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, and student autonomy (Zhao, 2015; Mayans, 2018).

Third, structural inequalities embedded within the Gaokao system further reinforce outward mobility. Disparities in educational resources between urban and rural areas, alongside broader socioeconomic inequalities, shape unequal admission outcomes and contribute to perceptions of systemic unfairness (Chen, 2024; Hamnett et al., 2019).

For students from more affluent backgrounds, studying abroad may also function as a deliberate strategy to bypass the pressures of the Gaokao altogether, effectively serving as a form of “exit option” within a stratified education system (Mayans, 2018). Additional push factors include restricted choices of academic majors, relatively rigid curriculum structures, and perceived disadvantages faced by graduates of domestic universities in securing positions within multinational corporations (Zhao, 2015; QS, 2024).

Pull Factors: Attractions of Global Higher Education

On the other side of the equation, host countries draw Chinese students through a combination of academic, institutional, and socio-economic advantages. The literature consistently highlights four key dimensions.

First, the perceived quality of education remains a primary attraction. Prestigious universities, well-developed research infrastructures, and flexible, student-centered curricula make overseas institutions appealing to those seeking broader intellectual and personal development (Center for China and Globalization [CCG], 2025a; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2017).

Second, more flexible admission systems offer alternative entry routes. Universities in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia increasingly recognize Gaokao scores or provide multiple assessment pathways, allowing students to access higher education without relying solely on a single high-stakes examination (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [Moe.gov.cn], 2021; Tang, 2023).

Third, career prospects and migration opportunities play a crucial role in shaping decision-making. Overseas qualifications are often perceived to enhance employability, particularly within multinational corporations. In addition, countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom provide post-study work visas and, in some cases, pathways to long-term residence, further increasing their attractiveness (Qi, 2025; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2022).

Finally, cultural exposure and personal development constitute important, though sometimes less explicitly articulated, motivations. Opportunities to experience diverse cultural environments, improve English proficiency, and develop independence align closely with the aspirations of many middle-class Chinese families for their children's holistic growth (Fong, 2011; Mayans, 2018).

Recent post-pandemic research suggests that students' decision-making criteria are becoming more nuanced. Beyond academic quality, considerations such as public health safety, geopolitical stability, and the cost of living have gained increasing prominence in shaping destination choices (QS, 2024).

Taken together, the existing literature provides valuable insights into the institutional features of the Gaokao, the evolving patterns of Chinese student mobility, and the explanatory power of the push–pull framework. However, these strands of research remain largely disconnected. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how the Gaokao, as a high-stakes institutional structure, interacts dynamically with shifting global mobility trends to shape students' educational choices over time.

Research Gap

Despite a substantial body of literature on the Gaokao system, Chinese outbound student mobility, and the push–pull framework, several important gaps remain in understanding how these dimensions interact over time, particularly in the period from 2005 to 2025. This limitation is particularly significant given the profound transformations in both China's domestic education system and the global higher education landscape over the past two decades.

First, there is a notable lack of longitudinal integration. Existing studies tend to focus on specific phases—either the rapid expansion before 2010 or the post-pandemic shifts after 2020—without offering a sustained, 20-year perspective on how successive Gaokao reforms and broader policy changes have shaped patterns of studying abroad.

Second, the causal mechanisms underlying student mobility decisions remain under-specified. While the Gaokao is widely acknowledged as a major push factor, relatively few studies move beyond descriptive accounts to examine how variables such as reform intensity, competitive pressure, and evolving notions of equity concretely influence students' choices of destination and timing.

Third, current research often exhibits contextual fragmentation. Analyses frequently treat educational,

socioeconomic, and geopolitical factors in isolation, rather than considering how they intersect. Factors such as the expansion of China's middle class, shifting global labor market demands, and geopolitical tensions—particularly between China and major destination countries—are rarely integrated into a unified explanatory framework.

Fourth, there is a relative scarcity of micro-level evidence. The literature is dominated by macro-level quantitative analyses, with comparatively limited qualitative research that captures students' lived experiences. As a result, the ways in which individual encounters with the Gaokao system translate into motivations for studying abroad remain insufficiently understood.

Fifth, there is a methodological imbalance in the literature. Existing studies are predominantly based on macro-level quantitative data, with limited integration of qualitative evidence. As a result, the micro-level mechanisms through which Gaokao-related pressures influence individual decision-making remain insufficiently explored. A mixed-methods approach is therefore needed to bridge macro-level patterns and individual experiences.

Finally, the literature tends to overlook reverse or feedback effects. Few studies consider how the growing prevalence of overseas education may, in turn, reshape domestic perceptions of the Gaokao, influence family decision-making strategies, or even contribute to ongoing educational reforms within China.

In response to these gaps, the present study adopts a longitudinal, integrative, and mixed-methods approach, systematically linking the institutional evolution of the Gaokao to two decades of study abroad trends. Grounded in the push-pull framework, this study combines longitudinal quantitative analysis with semi-structured interviews: quantitative data capture macro-level trends and structural relationships, while qualitative evidence offers insights into how students interpret, negotiate, and respond to Gaokao-related pressures. This integrated design enables a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how structural pressures, individual decision-making, and global dynamics interact to shape both the patterns and underlying mechanisms of Chinese students' international educational mobility.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated conceptual framework to explain how the Gaokao system shapes Chinese students' decisions to study abroad between 2005 and 2025. Building on Push-Pull Theory, the framework conceptualizes study abroad decision-making as the result of an interaction between domestic institutional pressures, external educational attractions, and broader contextual conditions.

At the core of the model, the Gaokao functions as the principal push factor. Its influence is expressed through three interrelated dimensions: (1) intense competition for admission to elite universities, (2) dissatisfaction with exam-oriented pedagogy, and (3) perceptions of structural inequality within the domestic education system. These factors increase students' willingness to seek alternatives outside China.

At the same time, overseas higher education exerts a corresponding pull effect. Students are attracted by the perceived quality of foreign universities, more flexible admission pathways, stronger employment and migration opportunities, and the promise of personal development through international experience.

However, the relationship between push and pull factors is not static. It is mediated by wider contextual conditions that changed substantially between 2005 and 2025. These include the expansion of China's middle class, changing family expectations, the internationalization of higher education, geopolitical tensions, visa policies, post-pandemic concerns, and the increasing affordability of regional study destinations in Asia.

Accordingly, this study proposes that students' study abroad decisions are shaped not by a single factor, but by

the dynamic interaction between:

- Gaokao-related domestic pressures;
- Overseas educational attractions;
- Socioeconomic and geopolitical contexts; and
- Individual student and family aspirations.

The outcome of this interaction is reflected in changing patterns of Chinese student mobility, including shifts in destination choice, timing of departure, level of study, and return migration.

Figure 2. Integrated Conceptual Framework of Gaokao-Driven Study Abroad Decision-Making (2005–2025)

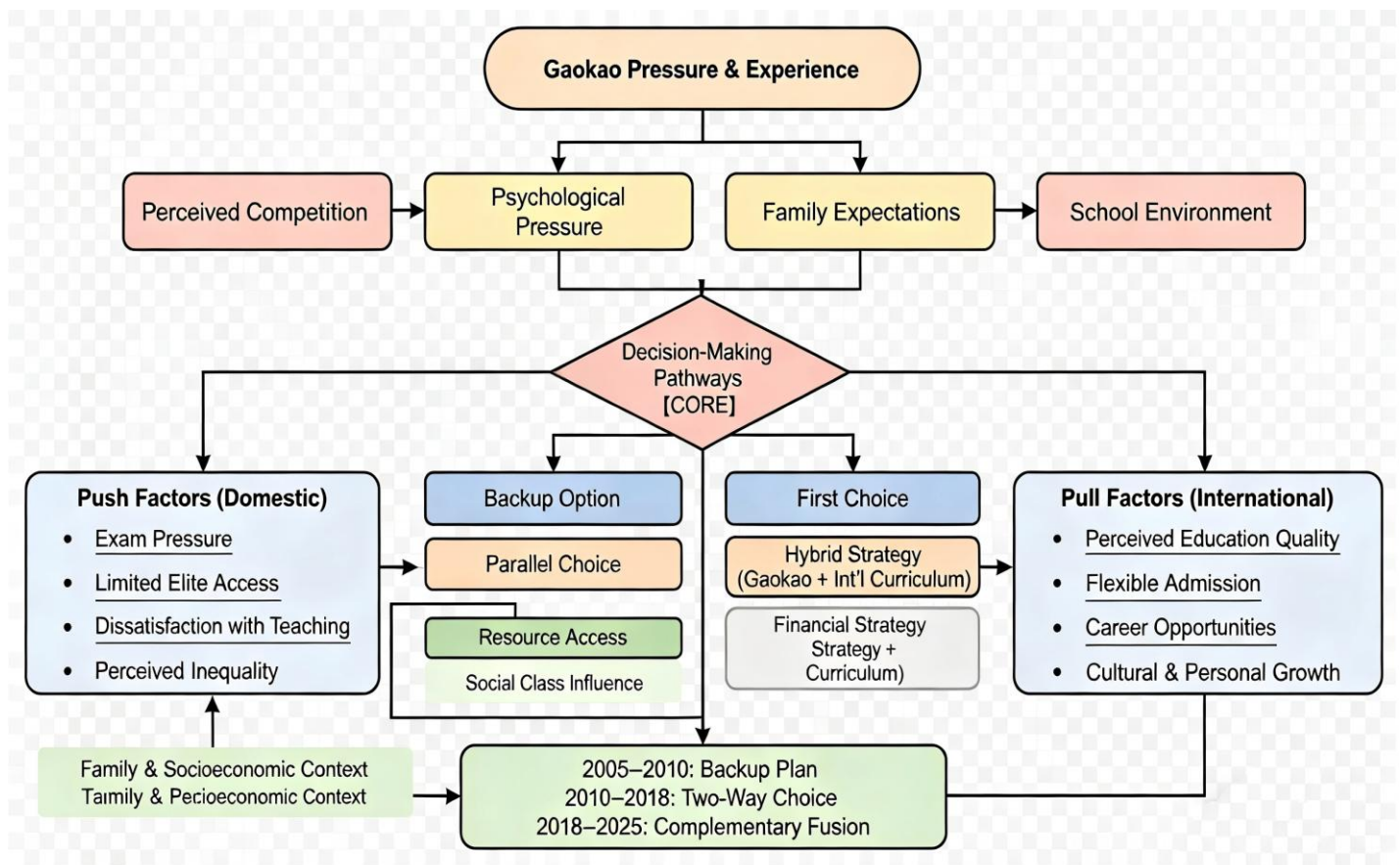


Figure 2 illustrates that the Gaokao does not operate in isolation. Rather, its push effect is filtered through changing domestic and global contexts, while students’ responses depend on the resources, aspirations, and strategic calculations of their families. In this sense, study abroad is understood not simply as an educational choice, but as a socially situated response to the opportunities and constraints embedded within China’s high-stakes examination system.

Importantly, this framework explicitly incorporates individual agency and subjective interpretation as a critical mediating layer between structural factors and educational decision-making outcomes. Rather than being passive recipients of structural pressures, students are viewed as active decision-makers who strategically navigate between the Gaokao system and global educational opportunities; qualitative interviews further capture how students and families subjectively experience, interpret, and respond to Gaokao-related pressures in practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating longitudinal quantitative trend analysis with qualitative interview evidence to examine how the Gaokao system influenced Chinese students' decisions to study abroad between 2005 and 2025. This design was selected because the relationship between the Gaokao and outbound mobility is both structural and experiential: macro-level statistical patterns reveal broad trends, while qualitative data help explain how students and families interpreted these pressures in practice.

The study was guided by two research questions:

- To What Extent Does the Gaokao Drive Education Outflow?
- Has the Gaokao system exacerbated educational inequality through differential access to overseas pathways?

To address these questions, the analysis combined (a) secondary statistical data covering a 20-year period and (b) semi-structured interviews with participants who had direct experience of Gaokao-related decision-making.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

Data Sources

Secondary data were compiled from publicly available and authoritative sources, including:

- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics
- Institute of International Education (IIE)
- Center for China and Globalization (CCG)
- National educational statistical yearbooks and policy reports

Three annual indicators were used:

- Number of Gaokao candidates
- Estimated Gaokao competition intensity (candidate-to-high-quality-place pressure proxy)
- Number of Chinese outbound students studying abroad

Where direct annual measures were unavailable, proxy indicators were constructed from consistent official datasets and prior literature. Because this study focuses on structural association rather than causal inference, these indicators are interpreted conservatively.

Analytical Strategy

The quantitative analysis is structured around a three-phase longitudinal framework:

Phase 1 (2005–2009): Early expansion and reactive mobility

Phase 2 (2010–2017): Rapid growth and proactive decision-making

Phase 3 (2018–2025): Post-pandemic diversification and strategic mobility

Descriptive trend analysis is used to identify changes in scale, destination patterns, and student composition over time. In addition, correlational analysis is employed to examine the association between Gaokao-related pressures (e.g., competition intensity, admission constraints) and outbound mobility. It should be noted that the quantitative analysis does not seek to establish causal relationships. Rather, it aims to identify structural patterns and associations, which are subsequently interpreted in light of qualitative findings.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

Participant Selection

To complement the macro-level analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who had either:

- pursued overseas education, or
- seriously considered studying abroad during the Gaokao decision period.
- A purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture variation in: academic performance (e.g., high-achieving vs. marginal Gaokao outcomes), socioeconomic background, study destinations

This approach ensures that the data reflect a range of perspectives on decision-making processes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency and flexibility. The interview protocol covered four main areas:

- Experiences of Gaokao pressure and competition
- Perceptions of fairness and limitations within the system
- Motivations and considerations for studying abroad
- The role of family resources and strategic planning

Interviews were conducted in a conversational format, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences and interpretations.

Analytical Approach

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by a structured coding process inspired by NVivo-based qualitative research practices.

The analysis followed three stages:

- Open coding: identifying key concepts from raw data
- Axial coding: grouping codes into broader themes
- Selective coding: integrating themes into a coherent explanatory framework

Four core themes were identified:

- Gaokao pressure as a push factor
- Dissatisfaction with exam-oriented education
- Strategic and proactive decision-making
- Inequality in access to overseas opportunities

These themes directly correspond to the conceptual framework and are used to interpret quantitative findings. Interview transcripts were coded in NVivo using a hybrid deductive–inductive framework. Initial parent nodes were derived from the conceptual framework and research questions, while child nodes emerged interactively during coding. The coding structure is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic Coding Framework for Semi-Structured Interview Analysis

Level 1: Parent Nodes	Level 2: Child Nodes	Core Role in This Study
1. Gaokao Pressure and Experience	Perceived Competition Intensity Psychological Pressure Family Expectations School Environment (exam-oriented teaching) Gaokao as Opportunity (meritocracy / fairness)	Captures student subjective experience of Gaokao
2. Decision-Making Pathways	Study Abroad as Backup Option Study Abroad as Parallel Choice Study Abroad as First Choice Hybrid Strategy (Gaokao + International Curriculum) Timing of Decision (before / after Gaokao)	Core construct → supports key conclusion
3. Push Factors (Domestic)	Exam Pressure Limited Access to Elite Universities Dissatisfaction with Teaching Style Limited Major Choices Perceived Inequality in Gaokao System	Explains domestic drivers of study abroad
4. Pull Factors (International)	Perceived Education Quality Flexible Admission Systems Career Opportunities Migration Opportunities Cultural Exposure / Personal Development	Explains international attractors
5. Family and Socioeconomic Context	Financial Capacity Parental Expectations Access to Resources (agents, international schools) Risk Perception and Risk Management Social Class Influence	Supports inequality analysis
6. Temporal Perceptions and Strategy Evolution	Changes in Study Abroad Trends Generational Differences Post-2014 Reform Perceptions Post-pandemic Considerations Strategic Decision-Making Shift	Enables 20-year phase comparison

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Components

A key strength of this study lies in the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Rather than treating the two components independently, the study adopts a complementary explanatory strategy:

- Quantitative analysis identifies macro-level trends and structural relationships
- Qualitative analysis explains how and why these patterns emerge at the individual level

For example, while statistical trends suggest a shift from reactive to proactive mobility, interview data reveal that this shift is driven by changing perceptions, family strategies, and increased access to global education.

This integrative approach allows the study to move beyond description toward a more nuanced explanation of the mechanisms linking the Gaokao system to student mobility.

Reliability, Validity, and Limitations

Several measures were taken to enhance the reliability and validity of the study. First, data triangulation was employed by drawing on multiple quantitative sources and combining them with qualitative evidence. Second, the use of a structured coding framework improves the transparency and consistency of qualitative analysis. Third, the alignment between conceptual framework, data collection, and analysis strengthens internal validity. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary quantitative data may introduce inconsistencies across sources. Correlational analysis limits causal inference. The qualitative sample size is relatively small and may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design provides a robust and balanced approach to understanding both structural patterns and individual decision-making processes.

FINDINGS / RESULTS

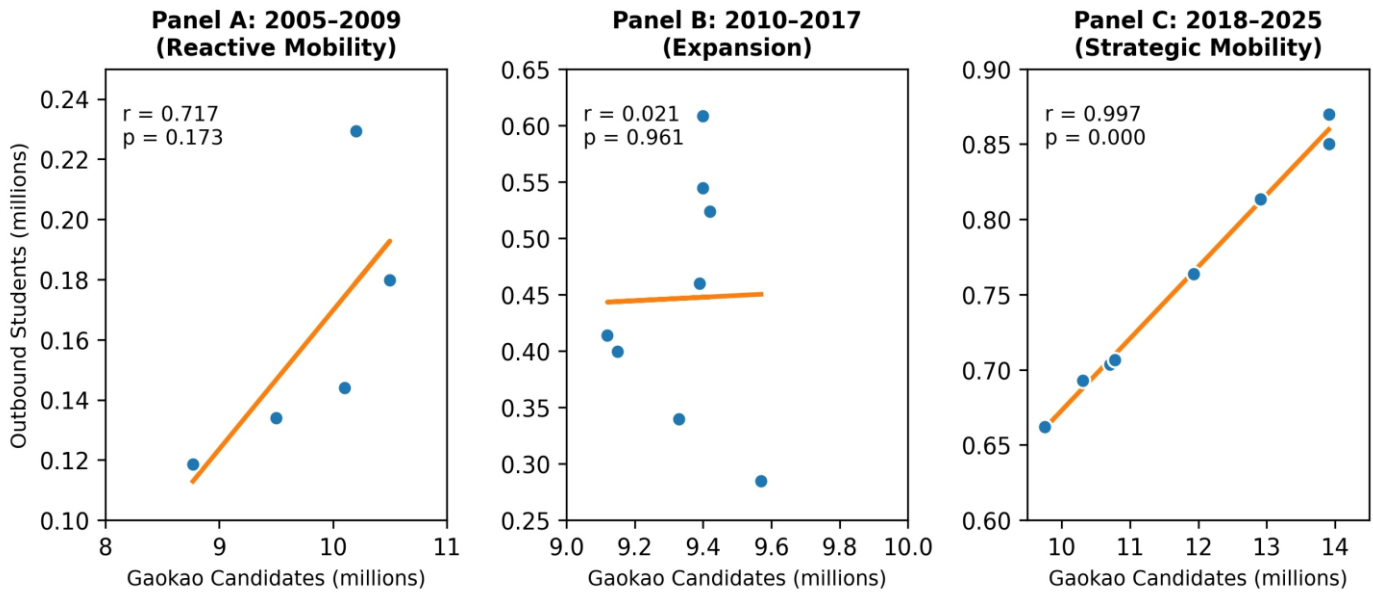
Overview of Integrated Findings

This section presents the integrated findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses. A three-phase longitudinal framework (2005–2009; 2010–2017; 2018–2025) is adopted to examine how the relationship between the Gaokao and study abroad decisions has evolved over time. These phase divisions are informed by both empirical patterns and policy developments, particularly the introduction of the “New Gaokao” reform in 2014 and its broader implementation around 2018.

While the quantitative analysis identifies macro-level trends and structural associations, the qualitative findings provide insight into the underlying mechanisms and subjective interpretations that shape these patterns. Taken together, the results reveal a clear transition from reactive to increasingly strategic forms of student mobility.

To assess the relationship between Gaokao-related factors and outbound student mobility, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted for each phase.

Figure 3. Correlation Between Gaokao Competition and Outbound Student Mobility (2005-2025)



Supplementary analysis using undergraduate outbound mobility produced similar phase-based patterns (see Appendix Figure A1).

Phase 1 (2005–2009): Reactive Mobility and Exam-Driven Decisions

Quantitative Findings

As shown in Figure 3, Panel A, the relationship between Gaokao competition intensity and outbound mobility was moderately positive ($r = 0.717$), although statistically non-significant ($p = .173$) due to the small number of observations. This indicates that years of stronger competition were generally associated with higher outbound numbers during the early phase. During this period, outbound mobility expanded steadily, with the United States as the dominant destination. The data suggest that studying abroad was closely associated with limited access to elite domestic universities, particularly for students who did not achieve sufficiently high Gaokao scores. In this context, the high-stakes nature of the Gaokao created strong incentives to seek alternative educational pathways.

Qualitative Insights

Interview data reinforce this pattern, indicating that studying abroad was largely perceived as a reactive response to Gaokao pressure: “If I couldn’t get into a top university in China, studying abroad was the only other good option.” Participants frequently described the Gaokao as a single event shaping their future: “The Gaokao felt like a one-shot decision that would determine everything.” These accounts suggest that, in this phase, international education primarily functioned as a fallback option rather than a proactively chosen pathway.

Phase 2 (2010–2017): Expansion and Proactive Decision-Making

Quantitative Findings

In Figure 3, Panel B, the relationship between Gaokao competition and outbound mobility became negligible ($r = 0.021$, $p = .961$). This suggests that Gaokao pressure alone no longer explained annual variation in study abroad numbers during this period. This period is characterized by rapid growth in outbound mobility, coinciding with the expansion of China’s middle class and increased accessibility of overseas education. A notable shift toward undergraduate-level mobility suggests earlier engagement with international education pathways. While Gaokao

pressure remained relevant, its role appears to have evolved from a direct trigger to one component within a broader decision-making framework.

Qualitative Insights

Interview data reveal a shift toward more proactive and planned decision-making: “We started preparing for studying abroad long before the Gaokao results came out.” Studying abroad was increasingly framed as a parallel pathway rather than a last resort: “It wasn’t just a backup plan—it was another option we considered seriously.” At the same time, dissatisfaction with exam-oriented education became more salient: “I didn’t want to spend years just memorizing for one exam. I wanted a more flexible system.” These findings indicate that decision-making in this phase became more strategic, preference-driven, and forward-looking.

Phase 3 (2018–2025): Diversification and Strategic Mobility

Quantitative Findings

As shown in Figure 3, Panel C, the relationship became extremely strong and statistically significant ($r = 0.997$, $p < .001$). This indicates a near-linear association between higher Gaokao competition pressure and greater outbound mobility during the most recent phase. Outbound mobility in this phase shows signs of diversification and stabilization. While the relative dominance of traditional destinations such as the United States has declined, alternative destinations—including the United Kingdom and regional Asian hubs—have gained prominence. The relationship between Gaokao competition and outbound mobility persists, but decision-making is increasingly shaped by a broader set of factors, including global opportunities and policy changes.

Qualitative Insights

Qualitative evidence highlights a further shift toward strategic and multidimensional decision-making “Studying abroad was part of a long-term plan, not something decided after the Gaokao.” Students and families increasingly consider multiple factors, including educational quality, career prospects, global mobility, and financial feasibility. Importantly, the Gaokao is no longer viewed solely as a source of pressure, but as one element within a broader strategic framework.

Unlike the reactive pattern of Phase 1, the recent phase reflects strategic mobility. Families increasingly respond to competition pressure through planned diversification, including: UK one-year master’s routes, Asian regional hubs, hybrid Gaokao + international curriculum pathways, cost-benefit comparisons across destinations. Thus, Gaokao pressure remains influential, but now operates within sophisticated family planning strategies.

Cross-Cutting Theme: Inequality in Access and Opportunity

Across all three phases, qualitative evidence indicates persistent inequality in access to overseas alternatives. “If your family can afford it, you have more choices. Otherwise, you rely only on the Gaokao.” Students from wealthier families had greater access to:

- private tutoring
- overseas application counselling
- international schools
- multiple admission routes

This suggests that overseas education may reduce pressure for some groups while reproducing unequal opportunity structures overall.

Integrated Synthesis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate a clear evolution in the role of the Gaokao across the three phases:

Phase 1: A direct push factor driving reactive mobility

Phase 2: A significant but increasingly mediated influence

Phase 3: A Strong contextual catalyst

Crucially, qualitative evidence shows that this transformation is driven not only by structural changes, but also by shifts in perception, family strategy, and individual agency.

Overall, the Gaokao therefore should not be understood as a static or deterministic force. Its influence changes according to broader economic conditions, family resources, policy reforms, and international opportunity structures.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the key findings of the study in relation to two central research questions: (1) To what extent does the Gaokao system drive education outflow? and (2) Does the Gaokao system exacerbate educational inequality? Drawing on 20 years of longitudinal evidence, the discussion integrates insights from Push–Pull Theory with broader contextual factors—including socioeconomic development, policy reforms, and global higher education dynamics. It also incorporates qualitative evidence to capture how macro-level patterns are experienced at the individual level, thereby strengthening the explanatory depth of the analysis.

To What Extent Does the Gaokao Drive Education Outflow?

The findings suggest that the Gaokao functions as a significant push factor in shaping Chinese students' decisions to study abroad. However, its role is neither linear nor deterministic. Rather than acting as a sole driver, the Gaokao interacts with a range of structural and contextual factors, jointly influencing both the scale and direction of education outflow over time.

In Phase 1 (2005–2009), the Gaokao's influence appears to have been predominantly direct and reactive. High levels of competition—reflected in elite university admission rates of only 2.8–3.2%—combined with a rigid assessment structure, led many students to view overseas study as a fallback option. The fact that a majority of outbound students in this period were Gaokao underachievers supports earlier observations (e.g., Fong, 2011) that study abroad initially functioned as a mechanism for bypassing high-stakes domestic selection. The strong statistical association between Gaokao participation and outbound mobility further reinforces this interpretation, although it should be understood as indicative rather than causal.

This pattern is further substantiated by qualitative evidence. Interview participants frequently described overseas education as a form of risk management under uncertainty: *“I wasn't confident about getting into a top university through the Gaokao, so studying abroad felt like a safer option”* (S07). This illustrates how macro-level competition pressure is translated into individual-level decision-making strategies.

In Phase 2 (2010–2017), the Gaokao’s push effect appears to have intensified while also becoming more proactive. As China’s middle class expanded and access to international education improved, studying abroad increasingly shifted from a reactive strategy to a deliberate choice. Students began to consider overseas education not merely as a response to potential failure, but as a parallel pathway offering broader academic and career opportunities. This transition is consistent with prior research (Mayans, 2018), which highlights growing dissatisfaction with exam-oriented learning and a rising preference for more flexible and holistic educational models.

Qualitative findings reinforce this shift. Several high-achieving participants reported actively choosing overseas education despite strong Gaokao prospects: *“Even if I did well, I still preferred the flexibility of studying abroad”* (S12). This suggests that the Gaokao’s push effect increasingly operates in conjunction with pull motivations, rather than as a standalone driver.

By Phase 3 (2018–2025), the Gaokao’s push effect appears to have moderated and diversified. Although the relationship between Gaokao competition and outbound mobility remains statistically significant, decision-making is no longer dominated by exam pressure alone. Instead, students and families appear to weigh a broader set of considerations, including global education quality, employability, and long-term mobility. Importantly, policy developments—such as the New Gaokao reform and the increasing international recognition of Gaokao scores—have reshaped the system’s role. In this context, the Gaokao can be understood not only as a source of pressure but also, increasingly, as a bridging mechanism that connects domestic and international pathways.

This transformation is clearly reflected in interview data, where many participants described adopting hybrid strategies: *“I prepared for both—the Gaokao and overseas universities—to keep my options open”* (S03). Such accounts illustrate a shift toward strategic diversification, consistent with the “integrated pathway” model identified in the longitudinal analysis.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Gaokao operates less as a deterministic force and more as a catalytic factor within a wider decision-making ecosystem. Its influence lies in shaping the timing, strategy, and perceived risks of studying abroad, rather than directly determining overall mobility trends.

Does the Gaokao Exacerbate Educational Inequality?

The findings indicate that the relationship between the Gaokao and educational inequality is complex and context-dependent. While the Gaokao itself was originally designed to promote merit-based access to higher education, its interaction with unequal access to overseas study opportunities appears to reproduce—and in some cases amplify—existing socioeconomic disparities.

In Phase 1 (2005–2009), inequality was particularly pronounced. Overseas study functioned as a form of “insurance” available primarily to middle- and upper-class families, who could afford the costs associated with international education. In contrast, students from lower-income backgrounds remained fully dependent on the Gaokao as their sole pathway to higher education. This created a dual-track system in which access to alternative opportunities was unevenly distributed, reinforcing patterns identified in earlier studies (e.g., Hamnett et al., 2019).

In Phase 2 (2010–2017), this disparity appears to have widened further, despite the overall expansion of overseas education. Although more families gained access to study abroad, participation remained heavily skewed toward higher-income groups. At the same time, the persistence of intense Gaokao competition disproportionately disadvantaged students with fewer educational resources, contributing to what may be described as a self-reinforcing cycle of inequality.

Qualitative evidence provides particularly strong support for this pattern. While some participants emphasized the accessibility of overseas pathways, others highlighted clear financial constraints: “*Studying abroad was never really an option for me because of the cost*” (S19). These contrasting accounts reveal how structural inequality is experienced at the individual level, reinforcing the notion of unequal access to alternative educational routes.

In Phase 3 (2018–2025), there are indications of partial mitigation, driven by policy reforms and the expansion of international curricula. Increased flexibility within the Gaokao system, along with the wider availability of international programs, has enabled more students—particularly from middle-income backgrounds—to pursue hybrid pathways. However, structural inequalities remain evident. Access to international education continues to depend on financial resources, and regional disparities in Gaokao scoring systems persist.

A key insight emerging from these findings is that the Gaokao does not inherently produce inequality. Rather, inequality arises from the interaction between a standardized selection system and unequal access to alternative pathways. In this sense, the Gaokao may simultaneously function as both an equalizing mechanism (within the domestic system) and a stratifying force (when viewed in a global education context).

Comparative Perspective

The relationship between high-stakes examinations and outbound student mobility is not unique to China. Similar patterns can be observed in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and India, where national examinations (e.g., the Suneung, Center Test, and JEE) play a decisive role in shaping educational trajectories.

However, the Chinese case exhibits several distinctive features. First, the scale of outbound mobility is significantly larger, reflecting both population size and rapid middle-class expansion. Second, the increasing international recognition of Gaokao scores creates a unique “bridging mechanism” between domestic and global education systems, which is less evident in other contexts. Third, the coexistence of Gaokao and international curricula (e.g., A-Level, IB) has produced a hybrid decision-making model that differs from the more exam-dependent systems observed in Japan or South Korea.

These comparisons suggest that while the push effect of high-stakes testing may be generalizable, the pathways through which it translates into international mobility are highly context-specific.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

This study conducted a 20-year longitudinal analysis (2005–2025) to explore the impact of the Gaokao system on Chinese students’ overseas study trends, focusing on two core research questions: whether the Gaokao drives education outflow and whether it exacerbates educational inequality. By integrating systematic literature review and secondary data analysis, the study reveals the dynamic, phase-dependent relationship between the Gaokao and overseas study, while highlighting the mediating role of socioeconomic development, policy changes, and global education trends. This section synthesizes the core findings, clarifies the theoretical and practical implications, and reinforces the study’s contributions to the field of international education and high-stakes testing research.

Conclusion

This study arrives at three main conclusions that address the research questions and respond to the gaps identified in the literature.

First, the Gaokao system functions as a significant—yet non-deterministic—push factor in shaping Chinese students' education outflow. Its influence has evolved across three distinct phases. In Phase 1 (2005–2010), the combination of intense competition and institutional rigidity led many students to treat overseas study as a “backup option” in the face of potential Gaokao underperformance. In Phase 2 (2010–2018), this dynamic shifted toward a more proactive “two-way choice,” as students increasingly viewed domestic and international pathways as parallel options. By Phase 3 (2018–2025), the push effect of the Gaokao had moderated, with decision-making becoming more diversified and strategic. In this later stage, the Gaokao has begun to function not only as a source of pressure but also as a bridging mechanism, facilitated in part by its growing international recognition. While the strong positive association between Gaokao competition and outbound mobility underscores its catalytic role, broader contextual factors—such as middle-class expansion and the diffusion of international curricula—are equally important in shaping overall trends.

Second, the Gaokao does not inherently exacerbate educational inequality; rather, inequality emerges through its interaction with unequal access to overseas education and broader socioeconomic disparities. In the earlier phases, a “dual-track” pattern became evident, whereby more privileged students could bypass domestic competition through overseas study, while lower-income students remained dependent on the Gaokao as their primary pathway. Although reforms and the expansion of international programs in Phase 3 have partially mitigated this divide—particularly for middle-income families—substantial inequalities persist. Financial barriers, uneven access to educational resources, and regional disparities continue to shape differential opportunities. Importantly, the Gaokao's original meritocratic function has been complicated by the emergence of alternative pathways, highlighting the need for policy approaches that balance accessibility with equity.

Third, the relationship between the Gaokao and overseas study has undergone a clear structural transformation—from “backup option” to “parallel choice,” and ultimately to a form of complementary integration. This evolution reflects broader shifts within Chinese education, including a gradual move away from purely exam-centered models toward more diversified and globally oriented pathways. The increasing recognition of Gaokao scores by international universities further reinforces this trend, enabling students to navigate multiple educational systems simultaneously.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways.

First, it extends Push–Pull Theory by demonstrating that push factors are not static but evolve over time in response to institutional reform, socioeconomic change, and global education dynamics. The Gaokao's role as a push factor shifts across contexts, suggesting the need for more temporally sensitive models of international student mobility.

Second, This study conceptualizes this phenomenon as an “equity paradox,” extending existing discussions on meritocracy and inequality (e.g., Hamnett et al., 2019; Chen, 2024): a system designed to promote merit-based fairness can, under conditions of unequal access to alternative opportunities, contribute to new forms of inequality. This highlights the importance of analyzing domestic education systems and global mobility structures as interconnected rather than separate domains.

Third, the findings contribute to understanding how high-stakes testing systems adapt in a globalized context. The transformation of the Gaokao—from a rigid, nationally bounded examination to a more flexible and internationally recognized credential—illustrates how education systems can evolve in response to changing societal expectations and global pressures.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several implications for key stakeholders.

Policymakers

Policymakers should continue to deepen the reform of the Gaokao system, particularly by enhancing flexibility and reducing over-reliance on single high-stakes assessments. Expanding multiple evaluation pathways and promoting more holistic forms of assessment may help mitigate the system's push effect. At the same time, policies aimed at improving access to international education—such as financial aid, scholarships, and support for international programs—are essential for reducing inequality. Efforts to curb excessive score-oriented practices should also be strengthened to reorient education toward broader developmental goals.

Educational Institutions

Domestic universities and schools may benefit from incorporating more flexible, student-centered pedagogies, including interdisciplinary learning and the development of critical thinking skills. Expanding access to international curricula within domestic institutions could also provide more inclusive pathways. In addition, stronger career guidance systems are needed to support students in making informed and context-sensitive decisions about studying abroad.

Families

For families, the findings underscore the importance of approaching study-abroad decisions more strategically, rather than viewing them solely as an alternative to Gaokao pressure. The emergence of dual pathways offers opportunities for more balanced choices, but these should be aligned with students' individual interests, capabilities, and long-term goals. Greater emphasis on holistic skill development—such as intercultural competence and independent learning—may also better prepare students for diverse educational environments.

Final Remarks

Over the past two decades, the relationship between the Gaokao system and Chinese students' overseas study has undergone profound transformation. Rather than functioning as a simple driver or constraint, the Gaokao operates within a complex and evolving ecosystem shaped by policy reforms, socioeconomic change, and global education dynamics.

Looking ahead, the role of the Gaokao is likely to continue shifting—from a predominantly domestic selection mechanism toward a more globally connected platform that enables multiple educational pathways. Ensuring that this transformation supports both efficiency and equity will remain a key challenge. By continuing to refine the Gaokao system, expanding access to diverse opportunities, and promoting more inclusive forms of education, it may be possible to better align national education systems with the demands of an increasingly interconnected world.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Intro:

Could you briefly introduce your educational background and your experience related to studying abroad?

Q1. Gaokao Experience

How would you describe your experience with the Gaokao (or preparation for it)?

Probes:

Did you feel pressure? From whom (self, family, school)?

How competitive did you perceive it to be?

Q2. Role of Gaokao in Decision-Making

To what extent did the Gaokao influence your decision to study abroad?

Probes:

Was studying abroad a backup plan, a parallel option, or your first choice?

Did your expected or actual Gaokao results affect your decision?

Q3. Alternative Pathways

Did you consider multiple pathways (e.g., Gaokao, international curriculum, overseas applications)? How did you choose among them?

Probes:

Did you prepare for both Gaokao and overseas applications at the same time?

What factors influenced your final decision?

Q4. Push Factors

What aspects of the Chinese education system influenced your decision to study abroad?

Probes:

Exam pressure?

Teaching style (e.g., memorization vs. critical thinking)?

Limited university or major options?

Q5. Pull Factors

What factors made studying abroad attractive to you?

Probes:

Education quality?

Career opportunities?

Flexibility of admission systems?

Cultural experience?

Q6. Family and Socioeconomic Factors

How did your family influence your decision to study abroad?

Probes:

Financial considerations?

Parents' expectations?

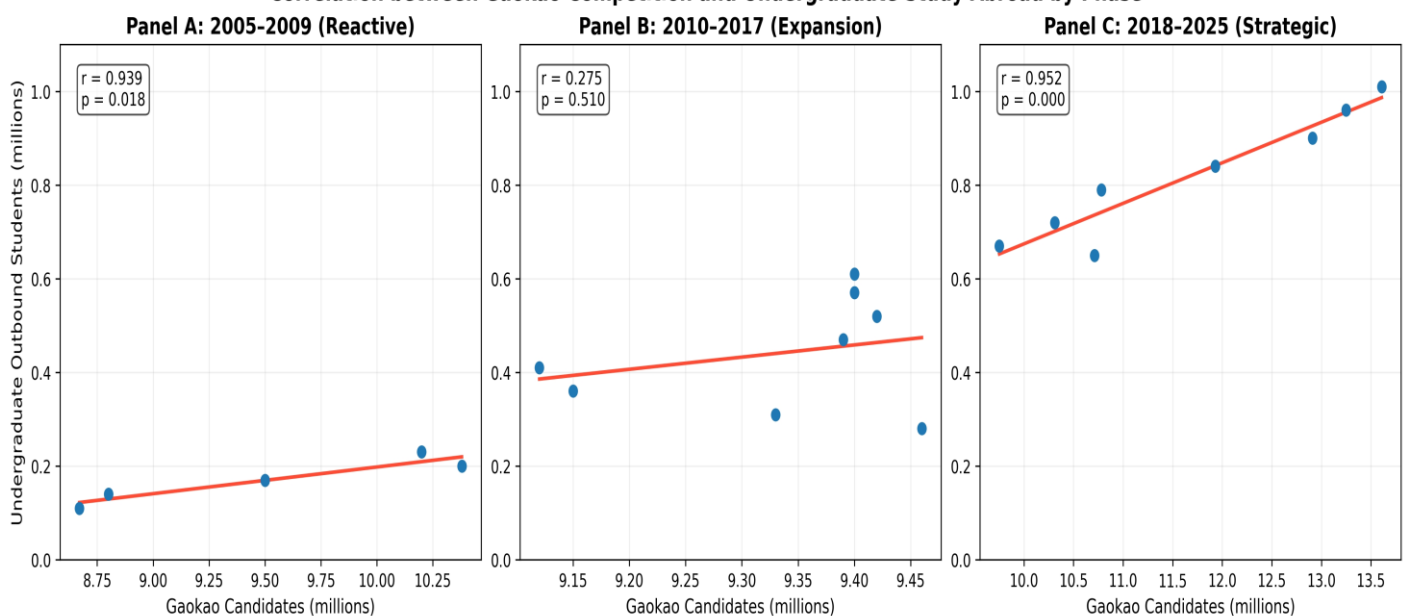
Access to resources (e.g., international schools, consultants)?

Q7. Reflection

Looking back, do you think studying abroad was mainly a response to Gaokao pressure, or a strategic life choice?

Appendix Figure A1

Correlation between Gaokao Competition and Undergraduate Study Abroad by Phase



Panel A (2005–2009, Reactive Mobility) shows a relatively strong positive correlation between Gaokao candidate numbers and undergraduate outbound mobility; in Panel B (2010–2017, Expansion), this correlation

weakens substantially, with the growth in overseas study driven more by globalization rather than Gaokao competition; and in Panel C (2018–2025, Strategic Mobility), Gaokao competition intensity demonstrates an extremely strong and statistically significant positive correlation with undergraduate outbound mobility, which is highly consistent with the proposed strategic mobility framework.