

# The Evolutionary Path and Frontier Trends of Research on International Students in China from 2000 to 2025: A Visual Analysis Based on CNKI and CiteSpace

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## Abstract

With the deepening internationalization of higher education, China has become a prominent destination for international students in the past decades, and more and more academic research are concerning the international students in China. This study employs bibliometric and visual analysis techniques, utilizing data from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and CiteSpace, to explore the evolution and emerging trends in research on international students in China between 2000 and 2025. By examining keyword co-occurrence patterns, institutional collaboration networks, and thematic clusters, we map the field's key research areas, developmental stages, and major contributors. The analysis indicates a gradual shift from descriptive studies toward policy-focused and cross-cultural investigations, alongside increasing interdisciplinary engagement and institutional cooperation. These findings provide meaningful insights for future scholarship and educational policy development.

**Keywords:** International Students in China, Higher Education Internationalization, CNKI, CiteSpace, Visual Analysis, Bibliometrics

## Introduction

With the continuous improvement of China's overall national strength and the rapid advancement of the internationalization of higher education, the number of international students in China has been increasing year by year. China has now become the third-largest destination for international students in the world and the leading destination in Asia. In terms of international student preferences, China has also entered the global top ten for the first time, ranking eighth among the world's best study-abroad destinations (Keystone Team, 2025).

As a vital part of China's education system, international student education significantly contributes to cultural exchange and enhances the country's global image. Given its

importance, scholarly interest in this field has grown substantially in recent years. Against this backdrop, our study employs CNKI and CiteSpace to perform a visual analysis of research trends, key themes, major contributing institutions, and collaborative networks in Chinese international student studies.

## **Research Methodology**

### *Data Sources and Selection Criteria*

Since the majority of research on international students in China is published in Chinese, CNKI was selected as the primary source of research literature for this study. The CNKI database has a high proportion of core journals, a complete range of literature types, and a long period, making it a highly representative and authoritative database for Chinese-language research on international students in China.

In this study, literature related to the theme of “international students in China” (来华留学) was retrieved from CNKI. The retrieval period covered 2000 to 2025, and the source categories were limited to CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) and Peking University Core Journals, which are the two most authoritative databases for Chinese-language academic research. The document types were primarily journal articles. After removing duplicate and invalid records, a total of 997 valid literature records were retained for analysis.

### *Analysis Tools*

This study analyzed literature on international students in China from the CNKI database. First, we used CNKI’s built-in analytical tools to visualize key trends, including publication volume, subject distribution, and institutional contributions. Next, we exported the data via CNKI’s Refword function and processed it in CiteSpace 6.1R6 for deeper analysis. This included keyword co-occurrence, citation bursts, institutional collaboration networks, and temporal distribution patterns. The time span was divided into yearly intervals, and for each year, we selected the top 25% most-cited articles for visualization and further examination.

## **Overall Research Development Trends**

### ***Annual Publication Trend Analysis: The Evolution of Growth and Fluctuations***

#### *Overall Trend*

According to the annual publication trend chart (Figure 1) generated by CNKI based on the theme “international students in China” from 2000 to 2025, the overall number of related publications has shown a significant upward trend. The chart reveals a clear upward trajectory in research output, with a particularly sharp rise after 2010. This surge reflects increasing scholarly attention to the topic, likely driven by China’s rapid higher education internationalization, expanding international student enrollment, and supportive government policies.

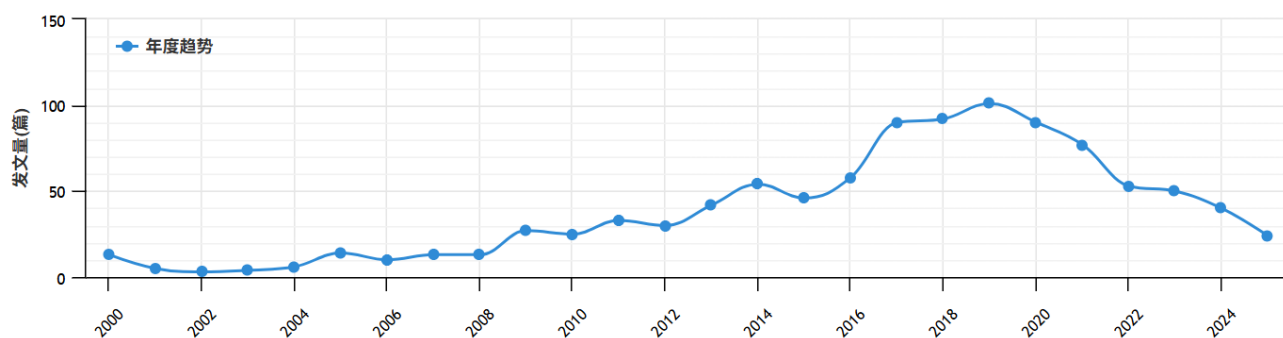


Figure 1 Annual Publication Trend

### Phased Development Characteristics

The publication trend also reveals three distinct developmental phases:

- Initial Development (2000-2010):** Publications remained limited with gradual growth, reflecting the early stages of international student education in China. During this decade, research in this field had yet to gain substantial academic momentum.
- Rapid Expansion (2010-2020):** A dramatic surge in publications coincided with China's growing international student population. This growth was fueled by two key factors: the Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路倡议) and Chinese universities' intensified internationalization efforts. Research during this phase increasingly focused on cross-cultural adaptation, education management, and policy analysis.
- Mature Stabilization (2020-2025):** Despite pandemic-related mobility restrictions, publication volumes maintained consistently high levels. This stability suggests the field has evolved into an established area of sustained academic inquiry.

### Disciplinary Distribution Characteristics

**Figure 2** presents the disciplinary distribution of publications on international students in China from the CNKI database. The horizontal axis represents different academic disciplines, and the vertical axis shows the number of publications in the according discipline.

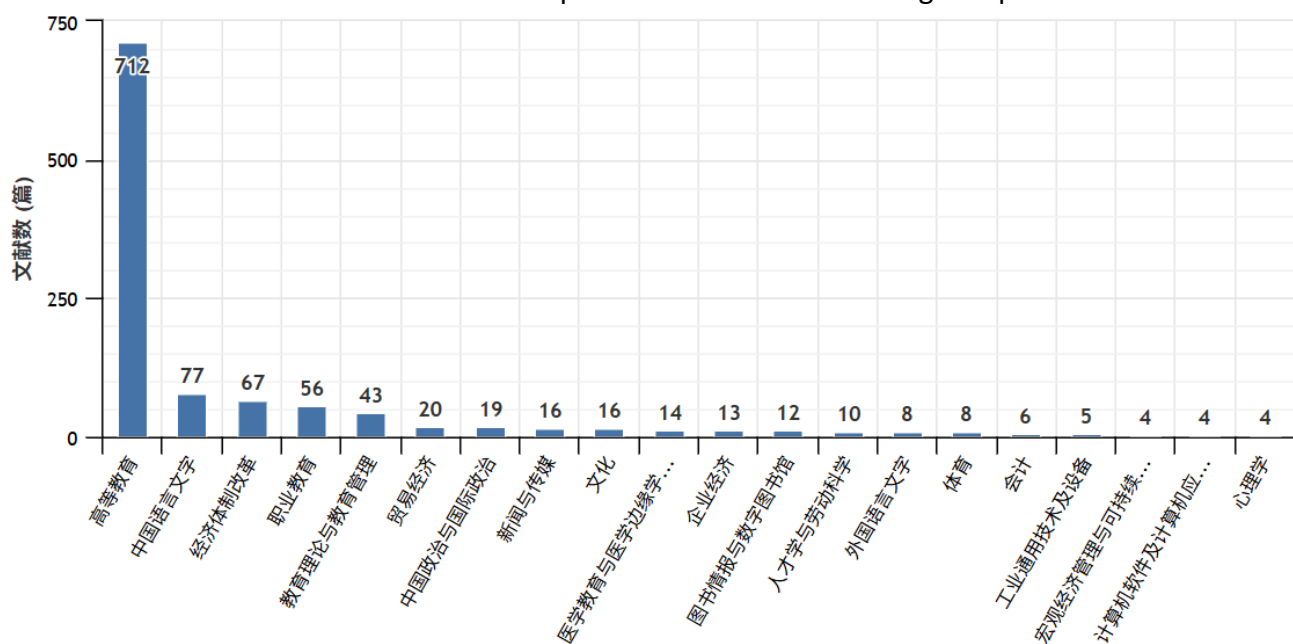


Figure 2 Disciplinary Distribution Chart

- a) Core Discipline with Absolute Dominance: As expected, Higher Education (高等教育) emerges as the undisputed leader with 712 publications. This heavy concentration aligns perfectly with China's position as a major higher education destination, where scholars primarily examine institutional internationalization strategies and cross-cultural learning experiences. The numbers tell a clear story: when Chinese researchers study international students, they're predominantly looking through an educational lens.
- b) Supporting Disciplines with Specialized Perspectives: Several fields have carved out meaningful niches, such as Chinese Language & Literature (中国语言文学, 77 studies) tackles the linguistic challenges faced by international learners, Economic System Reform (经济体制改革, 67 studies) analyzes the financial implications of China's growing education sector, and Vocational Education (职业教育, 56 studies) addresses the unique needs of skill-based training programs.
- c) Long-Tail Disciplines with Minimal Engagement: Disciplines like Trade Economics (贸易经济, 20 publications), Chinese & International Politics (中国政治与国际政治, 19 publications), and Journalism & Communication (新闻与传播, 16 publications) show limited but meaningful research on topics like consumption patterns and soft power.

In addition, disciplines such as Medicine, Sports, Accounting, Industrial Technology, Software Engineering, and Psychology, while having only a small number of publications, also suggest that research on international students has a certain interdisciplinary nature, gradually extending beyond the field of education.

#### *Distribution of Research Institutions and Regions*

Using CiteSpace, we analyzed institutional collaboration patterns in the literature and generated a network visualization (see Figure 3). In this network, circular nodes represent institutions, the size of the nodes indicates the number of papers published or the citation frequency, the color shade of the nodes reflects the time period in which the institution was active (as shown by the time scale from 2003 to 2023 at the lower left of the color bar), and the connecting lines denote collaborative ties between institutions. The network comprises 487 nodes and 162 connections, but with a low density of 0.0014. This sparse collaboration pattern suggests either this field remains in an early developmental phase or the cross-institutional cooperation is currently limited.

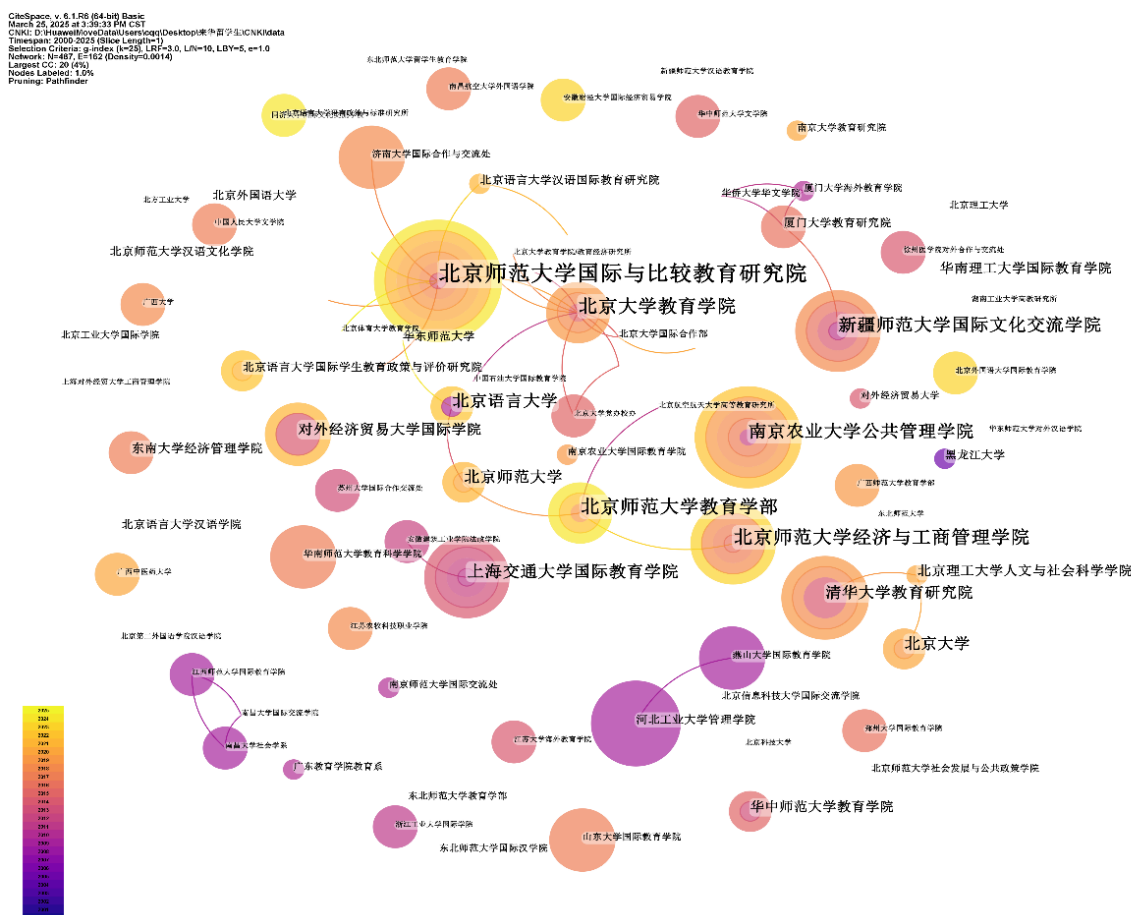


Figure 3 Institutional Collaboration Network in Publications

### Core Research Institutions

Figure 3 reveals several key institutions dominating research on international students in China, as indicated by their large node sizes and recent activity (orange-red to red-purple hues):

- Beijing Normal University, Institute of International and Comparative Education (北京师范大学国际与比较教育研究院)
- Peking University, School of Education (北京大学教育学院)
- Beijing Normal University, Faculty of Education (北京师范大学教育学部)
- Shanghai Jiao Tong University, School of International Education (上海交通大学国际教育学院)
- Nanjing Agricultural University, School of Public Administration, (南京农业大学公共管理学院)
- Beijing Language and Culture University (北京语言大学)
- Beijing Normal University, School of Economics and Business Administration (北京师范大学经济与工商管理学院)

These institutions form the core of current research, with their concentrated output in recent years reflecting sustained scholarly engagement in the field of international student research.

### Collaboration Patterns

By analyzing figure 3, the collaboration patterns could be classified into three types:

- Intra-University Networks:** Beijing Normal University exhibits strong internal collaboration, with frequent joint research among its Institute of International and Comparative Education, Faculty of Education, and School of Economics and Business Administration (evidenced by dense connecting lines).
- Inter-University Partnerships:** A solid foundation of collaboration among some universities in this field, such as Peking University's School of Education, Nanjing Agricultural University's School of Public Administration, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University's School of International Education.
- Interdisciplinary Reach:** Institutions like Beijing Language and Culture University and the University of International Business and Economics (School of International Education) highlight the field's interdisciplinary nature, bridging language, economics, and education studies.

### Research Hotspots and Thematic Evolution

#### Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence map (see Figure 4) primarily reflects the distribution of research hotspots, the connections within the knowledge structure, clustering patterns, and the time-evolution trends of the research field in the past 25 years. In figure 4, the size of the nodes represents the frequency of keyword occurrence, the higher the frequency, the larger the node. The lines between nodes indicate co-occurrence relationships, with the thickness of the lines reflecting the strength of these relationships. The color rings represent the time dimension, making it possible to track the evolution of research hotspots.

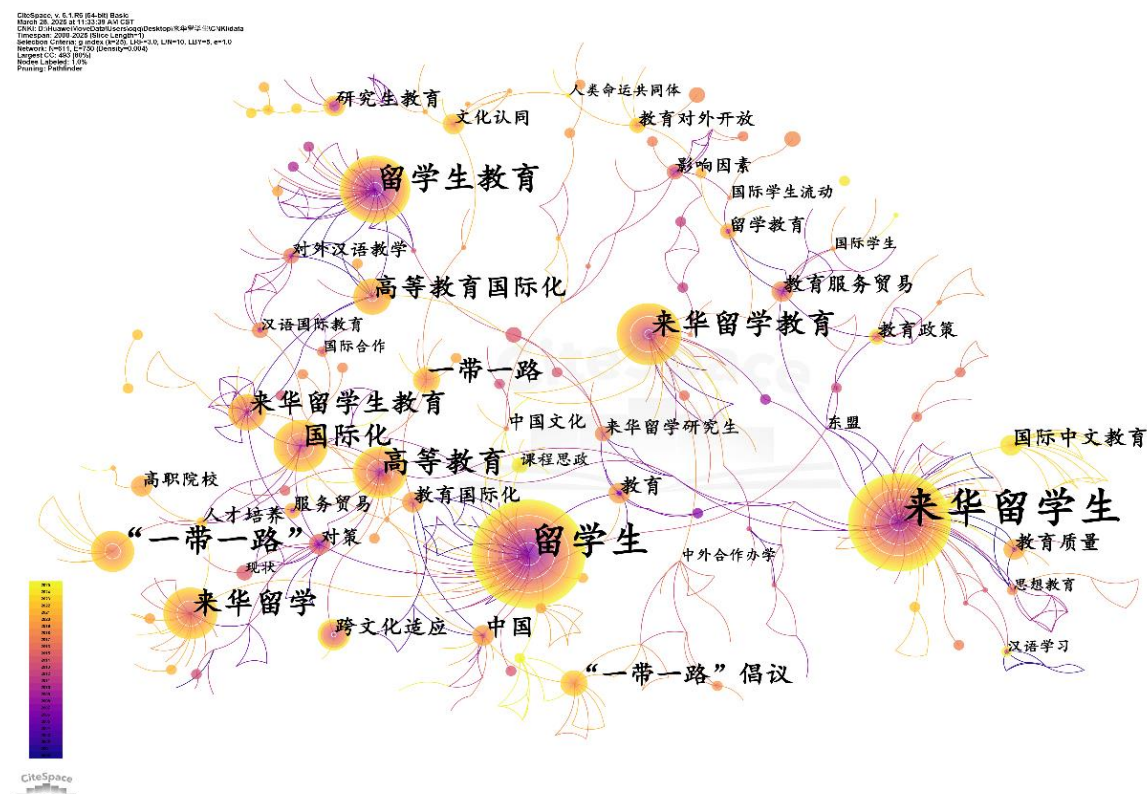


Figure 4 Keyword Co-occurrence Map



*Core High-frequency Keywords*

As shown in the figure, several keywords stand out due to their large node sizes and central positions, including:

- a) International students (留学生)
- b) International students in China (来华留学生)
- c) International student education (来华留学生教育)
- d) Higher education (高等教育)
- e) Internationalization of higher education (高等教育国际化)
- f) Internationalization (国际化)
- g) Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路)

These form the core high-frequency themes of current research on international students in China, essentially constituting the fundamental framework of this research field.

*Major Thematic Clusters*

Based on the analysis of node density and relational strength, the keywords can be clustered into the four thematic categories, including educational internationalization and policy, management and adaptation of international student education, belt and road international student strategy, and language education and cultural communication.

- a) **Educational Internationalization and Policy:** This thematic cluster includes keywords such as Internationalization of higher education (高等教育国际化), Internationalization (国际化), International cooperation (国际合作), Education policy (教育政策), Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路), and Chinese-foreign cooperative education (中外合作办学). These keywords reflect the research focus on national strategies, policy-making under the background of education internationalization, cooperation mechanisms, and quality assurance in international student education.
- b) **Management and Adaptation of International Student Education:** This cluster involves keywords like International student education (留学生教育), Cross-cultural adaptation (跨文化适应), Service trade (服务贸易), Education quality (教育质量), Cultural identity (文化认同), Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (对外汉语教学), and Ideological education (思想教育). These keywords highlight research concerns such as international students' academic experiences in China, cross-cultural adaptation, management services, and language and cultural education, covering specific areas like psychological adjustment, curriculum design, and political-ideological education.
- c) **Belt and Road International Student Strategy:** This thematic cluster contains keywords such as Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路), Vocational colleges (高职院校), Talent cultivation (人才培养), and Chinese culture (中国文化). These keywords reflect how, under the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese universities actively recruit students from countries along the BRI routes, focusing on training models for vocational and undergraduate international students, and issues of cultural exchange and dissemination.
- d) **Language Education and Cultural Communication:** This cluster includes keywords such as: International Chinese education (国际中文教育), Chinese language learning (汉语学习), and Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (对外汉语教学). These topics reflect the fact that language education is a fundamental support for international student education in China. Research in this area emphasizes Chinese language teaching, Chinese curriculum design, and the impact of language adaptation on academic and cultural integration.

### Thematic Evolutionary Pathways

Figure 5 presents a timeline view generated through keyword co-occurrence clustering and temporal evolution analysis. It reveals the developmental trajectory and shifting research hotspots concerning international students in China in the past 25 years.

The cluster numbers (Cluster #0 to #9) are assigned in order of importance, the smaller the number, the higher the significance. Each node represents the initial appearance of a keyword, with larger nodes indicating higher frequency and centrality. Links between nodes reflect co-occurrence relationships and the development paths of keywords across different years. Colors indicate time periods, with the color bar shown in the lower left (red for recent years and purple/blue for earlier years).

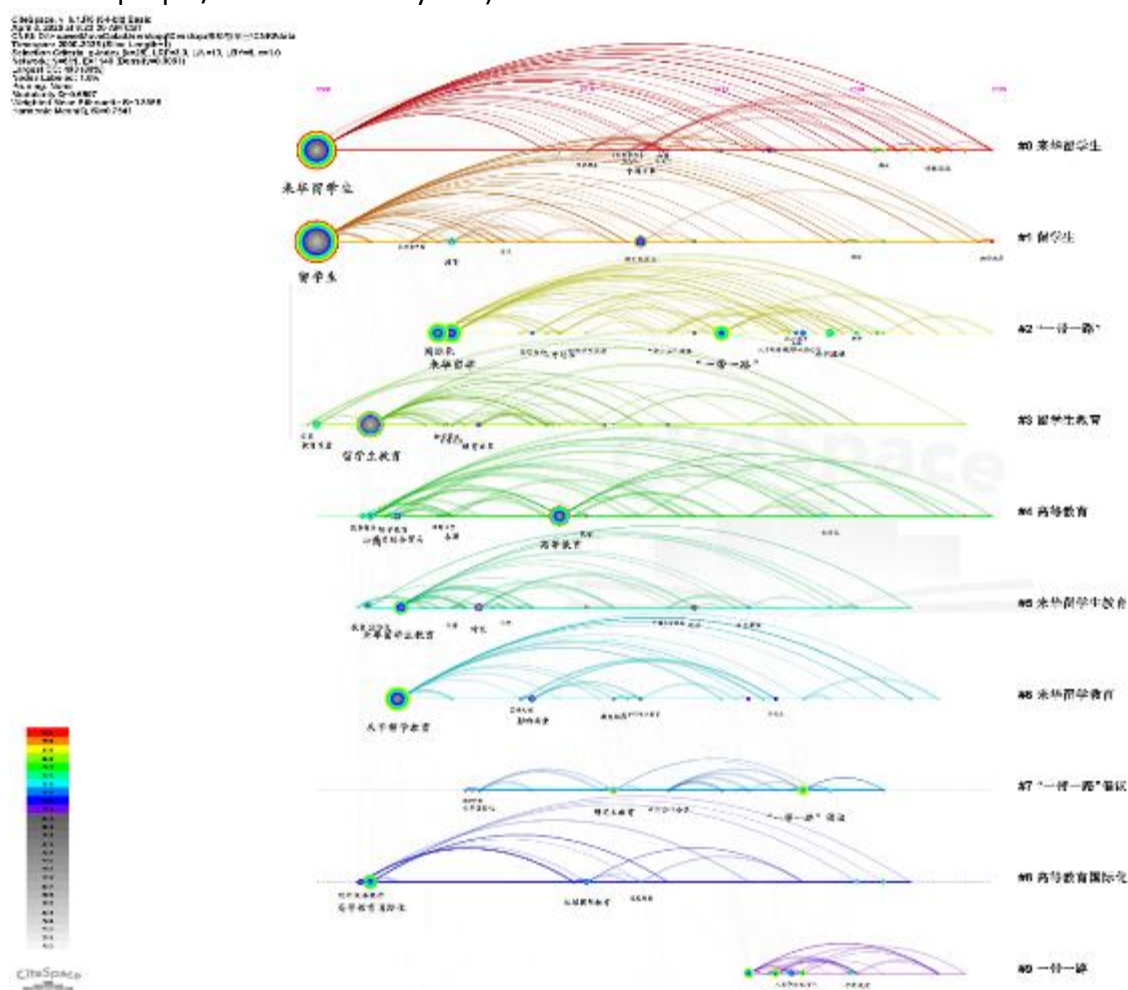


Figure 5 Keyword Timeline View

From figure 5, the keyword evolution trends in the past 25 years could be divided into three periods:

- Foundational Phase (2000-2010):** Research themes were concentrated around “international students in China (来华留学生)” and “international students (留学生)”, focusing primarily on basic descriptive studies such as student numbers, countries of origin, and management issues.
- Systematic Exploration (2011-2015):** Keywords like “higher education (高等教育)” and “international student education (留学生教育)” emerged, indicating a growing attention to education systems, academic support, and teaching models.



- c) **Strategic Integration Era (2015-2025):** Clusters related to the “Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路)” became increasingly active, establishing themselves as significant research hotspots. Concurrently, clusters such as “internationalization of higher education (高等教育国际化)”, “international student education in China (来华留学生教育)”, and “study abroad education (留学教育)” experienced notable growth. In recent years, attention has shifted towards topics like internationalization governance, improvement of educational service capacity, Sino-foreign cooperative education, and structural adjustments in academic disciplines and programs.

This trend demonstrates China’s growing discourse power and influence within the global educational cooperation system.

#### *Analysis of Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts*

To further identify the short-term academic hotspots and research trends in the field of international student education in China, this study conducted a burst detection analysis of keywords using CiteSpace. The results are presented in Figure 6.

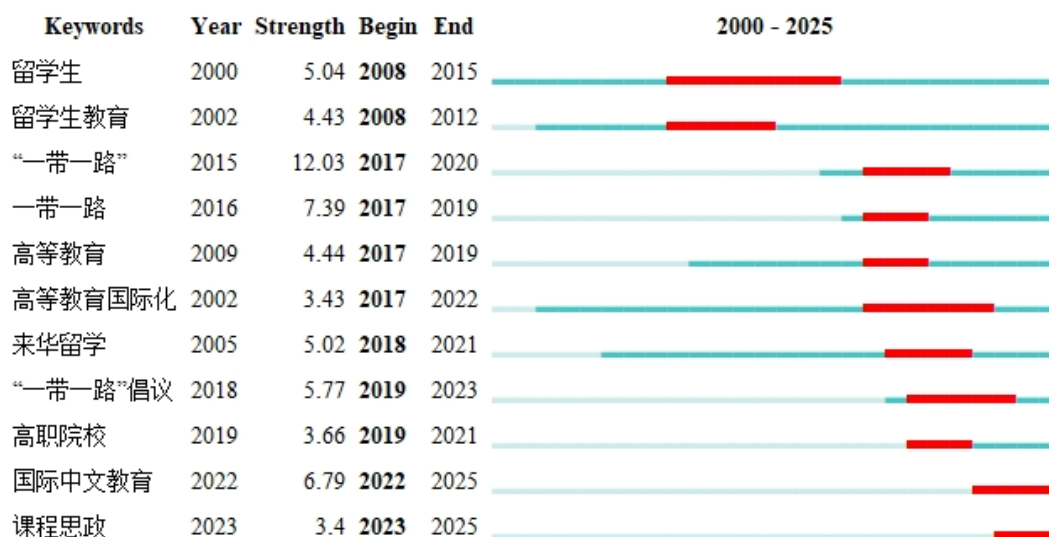


Figure 6 Top 11 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts

Our analysis of keyword citation bursts reveals fascinating shifts in scholarly attention within China's international education research (see Figure 6). These bursts tell a compelling story about how policy and practice have shaped research priorities over time.

- a) **Early Foundations:** The field initially coalesced around core concepts: The keyword “international students (留学生)” exhibited a strong citation burst from 2008 to 2015, with a burst strength of 5.04, indicating that issues surrounding the international student population attracted extensive academic attention during this period. Similarly, “international student education (留学生教育)” experienced a burst from 2008 to 2012, reflecting a growing scholarly interest in topics related to international student education.
- b) **Policy-Driven Shifts:** China's “Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路)” appeared frequently in the burst keyword list: “一带一路” experienced two notable bursts, from 2017 to 2020 (strength 12.03) and 2017 to 2019 (strength 7.39), demonstrating that the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative significantly boosted research on

international student education in China. The keyword “‘Belt and Road’ Initiative (一带一路倡议)” also showed a burst from 2019 to 2023 with a strength of 5.77, suggesting that policy-driven international educational cooperation has become a persistent hotspot in academic research.

- c) **Institutional Transformation:** Parallel trends emerged in higher education research, such as “Higher education (高等教育)” and “internationalization of higher education (高等教育国际化)” exhibited bursts during 2017–2019 and 2017–2022 respectively, indicating the accelerating internationalization process of China’s higher education system and the continuous rise in research interest in related topics. “Study in China (来华留学)” experienced a burst from 2018 to 2021 (strength 5.02), further confirming its status as a major research focus in the new era.
- d) **Contemporary Priorities:** Recent bursts reveal new frontiers, like “International Chinese language education (国际中文教育)” has shown a significant citation burst from 2022 to 2025 (strength 6.79), highlighting the growing academic focus on language education in international education contexts. “Curriculum-based ideological and political education (课程思政)” emerged as a new keyword with a burst from 2023 to 2025 (strength 3.4), indicating rising interest in integrating values education and ideological-political elements into international student curricula.

What emerges is a clear pattern: research has evolved from documenting basic phenomena to engaging with China's strategic vision for international education. The bursts don't just show what scholars studied - they reveal when and why certain topics became urgent. This analysis suggests we're now seeing research catch up with practice, as academics examine how to implement policy visions in classrooms and campuses across China.

## Cooperation Networks and Research Strength

### *Analysis of Collaborative Institutions*

The institutional collaboration network (Figure 7) reveals fascinating patterns about how knowledge is produced and shared in China's international education research. This isn't just a static map - it shows the dynamic relationships that have shaped the field over 25 years. In Figure 7, the nodes represent institutions, with the size of the node reflecting the volume of publications. The lines between nodes represent collaborative relationships, and the colors indicate the time evolution (as shown in the role legend at the bottom left).



From the graph, it is clear that universities and research institutions centered around Beijing (北京) dominate the field of international student research in China:

- The collaboration network exhibits a characteristic of "multi-center radiation, with prominent regional cooperation":

- a) East China Cluster : Centered around the International Education College of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (上海交通大学国际教育学院), this cluster connects universities in Jiangsu (江苏), Shandong (山东), and Zhejiang (浙江), forming a research group focused on "international education and management."
- b) Western Cluster: Represented by the International Cultural Exchange College of Xinjiang Normal University (新疆师范大学国际文化交流学院), this cluster highlights the rise of western China in the study of international students, driven by the Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路).
- c) Nanjing-South China Area: Institutions like Nanjing Agricultural University (南京农业大学), Nanjing Normal University (南京师范大学), and South China University of Technology (华南理工大学) have formed close collaborations in higher education management and international student training.

#### *Institutions of Special Interest*

- a) International Cultural Exchange College of Xinjiang Normal University (新疆师范大学国际文化交流学院): Although located in the West, it remains active in the core network, highlighting its geographical advantage in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路).
- b) School of Management, Hebei University of Technology (河北工业大学管理学院); School of Education, Hebei Normal University (河北师范大学教育学院): These institutions are gradually gaining prominence in research on international student management and education in northern China.
- c) Institute of Education, Tsinghua University (清华大学教育研究院), Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学): Both have accumulated experience in international education policy and cultural communication but have relatively focused collaboration areas.

This visualization does more than show who's publishing - it reveals how China's international education research ecosystem has organized itself, with Beijing at the center but with important nodes developing across the country. The patterns we see here will likely continue evolving as new policies and student flows emerge.

#### *Author Collaboration Network and Academic Influence*

The co-authorship network (Figure 8) paints a vivid picture of how individual scholars have shaped China's international education research landscape. These connections tell a story of intellectual partnerships, institutional cultures, and the gradual maturation of a research field.



Several scholars emerge as central figures through their consistent contributions:

- a) **High-output Author Group:** Authors like Liu Baocun(刘宝存), Liu Zhimin(刘志民), Liu Jin (刘进), Han Weichu(韩维春), Wang Sheng(王升) An Ran(安然), and Yi Liman(伊莉曼) are prominently positioned in the graph. These authors are likely core researchers in this field, having published a significant number of studies on international students in China.
- b) **Institution-Linked Authors:** Cui Xiliang (崔希亮) (Beijing Language and Culture University, 北京语言大学); An Ran (安然) (South China University of Technology, 华南理工大学); Cheng Weihua (程伟华), Dong Weichun (董维春) (Nanjing Agricultural university, 南京农业大学); These authors often represent the research characteristics of their respective institutions in the field.
- c) **Interdisciplinary Authors:** Authors like Huang Xing (黄兴) and Xia Qing (夏青) might come from disciplines other than education. This reflects the interdisciplinary nature of international student research.

The landscape of international student research in China reveals distinct intellectual communities clustered around key thematic areas. These groupings reflect both the practical demands of hosting international students and the evolving priorities of Chinese academia:



- a) Language Education: Authors like Cui Xiliang (崔希亮), Ding Anqi (丁安琪), and others focus on research in international Chinese language education.
- b) Management and Policy Research: Authors like Liu Baocun (刘宝存), Zheng Xiangrong (郑向荣), and others focus on research related to international student education policies and management.
- c) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Research: Authors like An Ran (安然) and Yang Junhong (杨军红) may specialize in cultural adaptation and psychological research.
- d) Belt and Road Initiative Research: Authors like Cheng Weihua (程伟华) and Dong Weichun (董维春) focus on research related to specific countries and regions under the Belt and Road Initiative.

This author collaboration network analysis reflects the talent distribution in the field of international students in China, indicating that several research clusters have formed. However, the overall collaboration network still has room for further development. Future efforts can focus on strengthening cross-institutional and interdisciplinary collaborative research.

## **Conclusions, Contribution and Future Research Directions**

### *Conclusions of the Research*

This study provides a comprehensive overview of research trends on international students in China from 2000 to 2025. The findings demonstrate that scholarly focus has shifted from basic descriptive analyses to multifaceted discussions on internationalization, quality assurance, and cultural adaptation. Institutional and author networks reveal an evolving pattern of collaboration, with Beijing-based universities remaining at the core, while other regions increasingly contribute to knowledge production.

### *Contribution of the Research*

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by systematically mapping the evolution of research on international students in China, providing a comprehensive bibliometric analysis that identifies key themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. By employing CNKI and CiteSpace, the research offers a data-driven framework for understanding how scholarly focus has shifted over time, from descriptive studies to policy-driven and interdisciplinary investigations. This enriches the existing knowledge by highlighting the dynamic interplay between China's higher education policies (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative) and academic research, offering a model for future studies in other national contexts. Contextually, the study underscores China's growing role in global higher education, demonstrating how its unique socio-political and cultural landscape shapes international student research. The findings also provide practical insights for policymakers and educators, emphasizing the need for enhanced institutional collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches to address emerging challenges in international student education. By bridging theory and practice, this research not only advances academic discourse but also informs strategies to strengthen China's position as a leading destination for global education.

*Future Research Priorities*

Future research on international students in China should adopt a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach to address existing gaps and emerging challenges. Several key directions warrant particular attention.

- a) First, there is an urgent need to expand the disciplinary scope beyond the current heavy focus on higher education studies. Social science perspectives, particularly from sociology and economics, could provide valuable insights into the urban economic impacts and social integration patterns of international students.
- b) Second, methodological innovation should become a priority for scholars in this field. Researchers would benefit from employing mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative analysis of student mobility data with qualitative ethnographic studies of campus life. Longitudinal research designs are particularly needed to track the long-term outcomes of international students, including their career trajectories and the evolution of cultural identity after graduation. Such studies could provide valuable feedback for policy improvements.
- c) Third, the field would also benefit from more policy-relevant studies that bridge the gap between academic research and practical applications. Impact evaluations could assess how international student programs actually affect institutional rankings and discipline development, moving beyond simple enrollment statistics. Comparative analyses contrasting China's approaches with EU and US policies would help identify best practices and areas for improvement in international student management.
- d) Fourth, collaboration models present another important avenue for future research. There is growing interest in studying tri-sector partnerships involving government, universities and enterprises, such as the Huawei Class and Luban Workshop initiatives. Simultaneously, building stronger global scholar networks with researchers from BRI partner countries in Southeast Asia and Africa could foster more balanced and mutually beneficial research partnerships.
- e) Last, emerging frontiers in digital education and values education require careful examination. The post-pandemic landscape demands research into how online learning experiences affect international student satisfaction and outcomes. Equally important are studies on balancing "curriculum ideology" with intercultural sensitivities, particularly in light of China's emphasis on values education.

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