

Exam-Oriented Education and Mobility Aspirations of Chinese First-Year Undergraduates in the UK

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Abstract: This qualitative interpretivist study explores how China's Gaokao-centred exam-oriented schooling shapes the academic experience, mobility choices and early adaptation of advantaged first-year Chinese undergraduates in the UK. Five students participated in Mandarin semi-structured interviews, with themes inductively derived from their narratives. Findings reveal early mismatches between exam-conditioned habits (cautious discussion, narrow reading, discomfort with open-ended tasks) and UK inquiry-led pedagogy, with language exacerbating (but not causing) these issues. Clear teaching expectations, structured group work, guided reading and formative feedback facilitated adaptation, leading to gains in confidence, self-directed inquiry and cross-cultural openness. Mobility decisions stemmed from lost academic agency in domestic schooling, enabled by family resources. Over the first year, student aims shifted from credential-focused to capability-focused (critical reasoning, collaboration, employability). The study identifies micro-level transition mechanisms, with future research needing longitudinal cohort follow-up and mixed methods.

Keywords: Exam-oriented education; Mobility aspiration; First-year undergraduates

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1. Introduction

Chinese undergraduate outbound mobility to the UK is relatively large and socially selective: UCAS recorded 33,870 Chinese applicants in 2025 (up from 30,860 in 2024), and China and India make up 48% of non-EU UK undergraduates (2023/24). UK study costs (£20k–30k/year fees, £900–1400/month living costs) mean high-income Chinese families are 1.9 times more likely to pursue this route, with UK study a mainstream choice for resourced families, shaped by China's exam-oriented education.

The Gaokao (13 million test-takers in 2025) is China's core higher education gatekeeper, a single-examination system where scores determine university tier, institution and major. Its dynamic admission thresholds create fierce competition, and the exam-oriented ecosystem prioritises speed/certainty via high-stakes selection, public ranking and repetitive training. This causes backwash: teaching aligns with syllabi, learning is risk-averse, and anxiety rises as grades overshadow exploration, contrasting with UK pedagogy's focus on inquiry, independence, formative guidance and holistic learning.

2. Research problem, aims and questions

The research addresses transitional challenges for advantaged Chinese UK undergraduates: exam-ingrained habits (risk-averse learning, performance anxiety) clash with UK inquiry-based pedagogy, risking academic mismatch and suboptimal aspirations. Gaps exist in understanding micro-level links between exam experiences and early UK study, and interpretive work on advantaged first-years who chose the UK over domestic exam-oriented education.

The study's primary question: How does China's exam-oriented education shape the academic experiences, mobility decisions and future aspirations of first-year Chinese undergraduates in the UK? Three sub-questions guide analysis as follows:

- (1) How do students perceive exam-oriented education's impact on their learning habits, motivation and self-concept?
- (2) To what extent did exam-oriented experiences influence their UK study decision?
- (3) How do UK experiences align with initial expectations, and shape future aspirations?

2.1. Contributions and significance

The study contributes as follows:

- (1) Linking exam routines, mobility choice and first-term participation (beyond push-pull models);
- (2) Centring first-year students' lived transition narratives;
- (3) Addressing advantaged cohorts directly, deriving practice implications for UK admissions and early academic support.

Practically, it illuminates talent flow for global education strategies, enables education system comparison to foster intercultural skills, and informs Chinese university pedagogy improvements (dialogic activities, formative feedback). For policy, it contextualizes Chinese outbound mobility for UK providers, highlighting the need to communicate pedagogical substance over just institutional status, and establish induction/ support benchmarks.

2.2. Methodology overview

By adopting a comparative interpretivist qualitative design, the study avoids pre-set grand theories, prioritising data-led inductive analysis. Semi-structured Mandarin interviews (5 first-year students) were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated to English, with thematic analysis used to derive themes^[1]. Purposive sampling focused on Chinese first-years with Gaokao experience, an advantaged cohort with financial/familial support for UK study. Ethical approval was granted by Durham University, with measures for informed consent, confidentiality, power imbalance minimisation and cultural sensitivity.

2.3. Lasting impacts of exam-oriented education

China's exam-oriented education is an ecosystem of high-stakes selection, curriculum narrowing and repetitive training, optimising exam performance but limiting critical thinking/creativity. It causes backwash: strategic test-taking, anxiety, and suppressed active learning, with high-stakes testing reinforcing grade focus over exploratory learning. Psychological costs include passive behaviour, impaired autonomy (Self-Determination Theory) and a stress-executive function vicious cycle. Achievement Goal Theory links the system to performance-avoidant goals, hindering creativity. Socially, the Gaokao perpetuates inequality: social class/regional background shape access to preparatory resources, with cultural capital (English proficiency, extracurriculars) translating to academic success (Bourdieu's social reproduction), even as the exam is framed as fair^[2].

2.4. Overseas study motivations

Traditional push-pull models oversimplify Chinese students' mobility motivations. Push factors include exam pressure, lost academic agency and limited domestic opportunities; pull factors include UK education quality, institutional prestige,

pedagogical flexibility and post-graduation opportunities. Institutional prestige is the strongest UK university choice driver, with families viewing it as social capital. Social networks (peer advice, alumni, agencies) shape decision-making (Social Network Theory), with advantaged students having better access to information. Motivations blend learning-focused (alternative pedagogy) and status-oriented (global credentials) goals, with overseas study also seen as identity-building (autonomy, intercultural engagement) and a class-reproductive tool for affluent families^[3].

2.5. Gaokao meritocracy and neoliberalism

China's higher education is a state-led hybrid neoliberal model: market mechanisms (competition, rankings) coexist with centralised control, serving national competitiveness. The Double First-Class initiative concentrates resources in elite universities, deepening stratification. This creates a credential-driven culture where students act as "academic entrepreneurs", building portfolios for global labour markets. The Gaokao produces disciplined, outcome-focused learners but limits creativity, and overseas study is seen as a safeguard against domestic limitations, a bet on mobility and social status, and a way to build soft skills valued by global employers. Research gaps remain in linking concrete Gaokao experiences to UK classroom adaptation, and understanding how students negotiate prestige vs pedagogic fit.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Rooted in interpretivism, the study views reality as socially constructed, prioritising students' subjective narratives to capture the nuance of educational transition, which is unsuited to positivist quantitative methods. An inductive approach allows themes emerge from data (no pre-set categories), fitting the lack of existing qualitative work on this cohort. Semi-structured interviews balance comparability and flexibility, ideal for exploring identity, motivation and classroom practice with rich narrative detail.

3.2. Research methods

3.2.1. Data collection

45–90 minute semi-structured interviews (face-to-face/online) in Mandarin, covering exam-oriented education experiences, UK study motivations, UK academic/social experiences and future aspirations. Transcripts were translated to English for analysis, with strict semantic/contextual accuracy^[4].

3.2.2. Data analysis

Braun & Clarke's 6-phase thematic analysis, familiarisation, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining/naming, report production. Manual line-by-line coding preserved participant voices, with themes including Institutionalised Academic Competition (China), Parental Influence on Study Abroad Decisions and Academic Autonomy and Identity Reconstruction (UK). Neoliberalism was used as a sensitising lens for cross-system comparison.

3.2.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling of 5 advantaged Chinese first-years (UK universities, Gaokao experience), recruited via social platforms and academic networks. The cohort's privilege (financial/familial support, English preparation) shapes motivations/adaptation, with findings for analytic (not statistical) generalisation.

4. Ethical considerations & boundaries

Ethical measures included informed consent, anonymisation, secure data storage, indirect recruitment (minimising power imbalances) and cultural/emotional safeguarding (optional question skipping, debriefing, counselling signposting).

Research boundaries include a small sample (depth over breadth), self-report bias (mitigated by concrete episode prompts), translation nuance risks (mitigated by cross-referencing Mandarin transcripts) and the researcher's dual insider-outsider position (managed via reflexive practice, analytic memos and peer discussion).

4.1. Reflection on exam-oriented education

All participants described a hyper-competitive high school environment centred on the Gaokao: rigid schedules, public rankings, exam-driven curricula and repetitive memorisation over critical/creative thinking. "Standard answers" were prioritised, with divergent ideas discouraged. Emotional/psychological impacts included anxiety, insomnia, burnout and physical stress symptoms (headaches, nausea), linked to the relentless competition culture. Family expectations (framing academic success as social mobility) and societal peer comparison added pressure, with intergenerational friction between traditional Gaokao-focused views and students' desire for exploration. Overseas study was sometimes viewed as "avoiding competition" by relatives, adding invisible pressure ^[1].

4.2. Motivation for studying abroad

Mobility decisions stemmed from lost academic agency in China (inability to explore interests, rigid curricula) and attraction to UK pedagogical flexibility (module choice, critical thinking, interactive learning). Family support (full financial coverage, educated parents valuing global experience) framed UK study as an investment in employability and personal growth, aligning students' desire for academic freedom with familial career aspirations. UK institutional prestige and global degree recognition were also key, with students viewing a UK degree as a strategic asset for domestic/global labour markets.

4.3. Initial UK adaptation

Early adaptation challenges included discomfort with UK inquiry-based pedagogy: inexperience with critical argument/independent research, hesitation in class discussions (rooted in risk-averse exam habits) and language barriers amplifying academic/social disengagement. Structured UK pedagogical features (small-group seminars, representative presentations) accelerated adaptation, helping students build social networks via study groups/course societies. Exam-conditioned habits (seeking "correct answers", avoiding visible error) directly clashed with UK expectations of tentative idea-sharing and open-ended work, defining early adaptation hurdles.

4.4. Further adaptation and growth

After nearly a year, participants reported significant growth: increased confidence in articulating arguments, using formative feedback to improve study strategies, and engaging in independent reading. Cross-culturally, sustained interaction with international peers normalised imperfect English, reducing performance anxiety and fostering open-mindedness to diverse perspectives. Students actively unlearned exam-oriented routines, replacing them with autonomy, dialogue and reflective risk-taking, framing this growth as a corrective to Gaokao-era constraints, validating their UK study decision.

4.5. Future aspirations

Participants reframed "competitiveness" from score-based to capability-based, prioritising critical reasoning, collaboration, intercultural communication and self-directed learning. Plans included returning to China for work (leveraging UK degrees and capabilities for employment), pursuing UK postgraduate study (time-efficient capability-building) and working in international education/cultural exchange (valuing dialogic and cross-cultural skills). Educational success was redefined beyond academic achievement, to include intellectual independence and personal growth, with Gaokao-era strengths (discipline, persistence) reframed as foundations for UK-developed capabilities.

5. Discussion

5.1. Core results interpretation

Three key findings emerged: (1) Exam-oriented routines (public ranking, risk-averse learning) shaped students' UK study aspirations, driven by lost academic agency in the Gaokao year; (2) Early UK friction (discussion/ open-ended work struggles) mapped directly to exam-rewarded habits, with structured pedagogy (formative feedback, small groups) enabling adaptation and confidence gains; (3) Students reframed competitiveness to centre capabilities (argumentation, collaboration), supplementing (not discarding) credential and prestige focus.

5.2. Alignment with existing research

Findings align with research on exam-oriented education's backwash effects, controlled student motivation and social inequality. Mobility motivations extend push-pull models by specifying pedagogic push/pull (lost agency vs UK seminar/ feedback culture), and family influence aligns with evidence linking socio-economic advantage to overseas study. Early adaptation challenges (dialogic participation, language stress) and progressive adjustment mirror existing UK Chinese student research, with the study adding nuance on how adaptation tasks directly counter exam habits.

5.3. Scholarly and practical significance

Scholarly, the study specifies micro-level transition mechanisms (beyond push-pull) and foregrounds first-year narratives for immediate adaptation insights. Practically, UK universities should: signal pedagogic substance (not just status) in admissions/pre-arrival communications; design early-semester low-stakes discussion scaffolds, argument modelling and formative feedback cycles; recognise exam-derived strengths (time management, persistence) in transition pedagogy. For Chinese schools/intermediaries, pre-departure preparation should include authentic small-group discussions and argumentative writing to build UK-ready routines.

5.4. Limitations and innovation

Limitations include a small advantaged sample (analytic only generalisation), self-report/recall bias, translation nuance and first-year-only focus (excluding later degree challenges). Innovation lies in: (1) specifying pedagogic content of push-pull factors; (2) mapping exam habit-UK pedagogy collisions for actionable teaching design; (3) documenting the score-to-capability competitiveness shift; (4) centering advantaged cohorts to clarify resource-enabled pedagogic fit as a decision criterion.

5.5. Future research

Future work should include: (1) longitudinal qualitative follow-up (cohort from pre-departure to third year) to track capability confidence over time; (2) mixed-methods studies (reflective journals + assignment rubrics) to test transition mechanisms across contexts; (3) cross-programme comparative research to identify transferable early-term teaching practices. Practice-proximate trials (week 1/4 argument clinics, pre-departure preparation packages) would translate findings into actionable interventions.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that China's exam-oriented education shapes every stage of advantaged Chinese first-years' UK study journey: exam-conditioned habits drive mobility decisions, clash with UK pedagogy in early adaptation, and are reworked into capability-focused learning via structured UK teaching. The Gaokao produces disciplined learners with strong time management/persistence, strengths that can be recoded for UK independent inquiry, rather than abandoned. UK study is not merely an escape from exam pressure, but a repair of academic agency, with students reframing success

from score compliance to capability demonstration. For UK providers, teaching designed for this transition (explicit argument modelling, formative feedback, low-stakes discussion) accelerates adaptation and widens participation without lowering academic standards. Framing admissions around pedagogic practice (not just prestige) improves student-programme matching and fairness. For Chinese stakeholders, pre-departure preparation for UK classroom norms builds student confidence and reduces early disengagement. The study's core contribution is identifying micro-level transition mechanisms and actionable pedagogic levers for the first year. Future research should test these levers longitudinally and across cohorts, refining a capability-centred narrative that lets students articulate their UK-developed skills, not just their institutional attendance. Ultimately, international undergraduate education is a pedagogic project: when providers teach to the transition, they unlock the full potential of Chinese students, turning exam-era discipline into independent, inquiry-driven learning.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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