ISSN (E): ***2959-0272***

ISSN (P): ***2710-0502***

Special Edition Year **2026**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59111/JPD.007.01.0294

A Historical Study of Pakistani Students Studying in China

Zhengda Shao

Professor, Pakistan Studies Center of Jiangsu Normal University, Xuzhou, Jiangsu, China

Fengjie Li

Graduate, Pakistan Research Center, Jiangsu Normal University, Xuzhou, Jiangsu, China

3511407750@qq.com

Corresponding author e-mail: [1]* prc@jsnu.edu.cn

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Abstract

China and Pakistan are friendly neighboring countries that have maintained close educational and cultural exchanges. In recent years, the number of Pakistani students studying in China has continued to increase, with Pakistan rising from the seventeenth-largest source country of international students in China in 2003 to the third-largest since 2017. The educational composition of these students has gradually evolved from being predominantly undergraduate-based to a more balanced structure encompassing undergraduate, master's, and doctoral education. This change has been achieved under the combined influence of “push” and “pull” factors. The primary “push” forces include the scarcity of higher education resources in Pakistan, policy changes in popular Western study destinations, and the positive perception among Pakistani students and parents regarding studying in China; while the main “pull” forces consist of the deepening economic and educational cooperation between China and Pakistan, the improvement in the quality of higher education in China, the comprehensive cost advantages of studying in China, and cultural affinity between the two countries.

Keywords: China–Pakistan Educational Cooperation, International Students in China, Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

As China and Pakistan commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, reviewing educational and cultural exchanges from the perspective of the history of international student mobility provides an important lens through which to observe the enduring friendship between the two countries. Overseas study has long been an important pathway for Pakistani youth to enhance their educational attainment and employment competitiveness. Among the various destinations available to Pakistani students, China possesses a number of distinct advantages. Since the formal launch of official educational cooperation between China and Pakistan in 1964, the scale of Pakistani students studying in China has steadily expanded, their educational levels have gradually improved, and the range of academic disciplines has continuously broadened. These developments have been closely associated with bilateral relations, educational policies, and regional cooperation initiatives, and have become an important indicator of China–Pakistan educational cooperation and the broader "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership."

Despite the growing significance of this phenomenon, systematic academic research on Pakistani students studying in China remains relatively limited. This article examines the historical development of Pakistani students studying in China since 1964 from the perspectives of policy evolution, changes in student numbers, motivations for studying in China, and the broader impacts of educational mobility. Through this analysis, the study seeks to identify the major developmental trajectories and characteristics of China–Pakistan educational cooperation.

The Evolution of Policies Governing Pakistani Students Studying in China

The policy evolution concerning Pakistani students studying in China has been closely linked to China's international education policies and Pakistan's foreign policy orientation. Its historical development can be broadly divided into four stages.

Policy Foundation and Initial Exploration (1964–1977)

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, large numbers of Chinese students were sent to study in the Soviet Union, while China simultaneously accepted students from several friendly countries, including Pakistan. Beginning in 1964, China formally started to receive Pakistani students for study and training.[1] In 1965, China and Pakistan signed "The Cultural Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan". The agreement stipulated that, in order to promote personnel exchanges between the two countries, each side would establish scholarship quotas enabling students from the other country to pursue studies within its educational system.[2] Subsequently, both governments gradually implemented the provisions of the agreement, while bilateral friendship continued to deepen.

During this period, Pakistani students in China were primarily concentrated in Chinese-language studies, science and engineering, and medical disciplines. The principal objectives were to cultivate urgently needed professional personnel for Pakistan while simultaneously promoting cultural exchanges between the two countries. Educational exchanges were temporarily interrupted

[1] https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676308/sbgx_676312/, 2026-01-02.

[2] https://treaty.mfa.gov.cn/tykfiles/20180718/1531876433784.pdf, 2026-04-14.

between 1966 and 1973 but resumed in 1973. In both 1974 and 1975, China admitted seven Pakistani students annually.[3]

The defining characteristic of this stage was that educational cooperation remained in an exploratory phase, and the number of students involved was relatively small. Diplomatic relations constituted the principal driving force behind educational exchanges, while government scholarships represented the only institutional support mechanism available. Most students were government-sponsored, and the overall scale of educational cooperation remained limited.

Educational Opening and the Initial Expansion of Student Mobility (1978–2012)

With the deepening of China's reform and opening-up policies, cooperation between China and Pakistan expanded across political, economic, and cultural domains. At the same time, the internationalization of Chinese higher education accelerated, enabling Pakistani student mobility to enter a stage of gradual expansion.

In 1980, the Chinese government issued “The Notice on Establishing Short-Term Chinese Language Programs for Foreign Students in Higher Education Institutions”. The document specified that short-term Chinese language programs constituted an important form of receiving international students and represented a significant component of inter-university exchanges. It also gradually delegated greater enrollment autonomy to universities. This reform broke the previous model that relied exclusively on government-sponsored student exchanges.

In June 1989, the former State Education Commission promulgated “The Regulations on the Admission of Self-Financed International Students in China”, formally establishing a dual-track

[3] Li Tao, “History of Chinese Overseas Education: After 1949”, Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2000, pp. 817-820.

system combining government-sponsored and self-financed international education. These policy initiatives opened new channels for Pakistani students seeking educational opportunities in China and facilitated a transition from exclusively government-sponsored mobility to participation by multiple stakeholders. Between 1978 and 1992, China admitted a total of 170 Pakistani students under state educational plans.[4]

A further milestone occurred in 1991 when China and Pakistan signed the "Implementation Plan of the Cultural Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for 1992–1993". Under this arrangement, Pakistan agreed to provide six scholarship positions annually to Chinese students, including two places for senior visiting scholars. China, in turn, offered twenty scholarship positions and dispatched two to three Chinese-language instructors to teach at the National Institute of Modern Languages (Islamabad).[5]

In 2003, during the visit of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to China, the two governments signed the "Joint Declaration between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on Directions of Bilateral Cooperation". The declaration emphasized the further strengthening of cultural exchanges through student exchanges and academic visits.[6]

In 2004, the China Scholarship Council and related institutions organized educational exhibitions in Pakistan and other countries to promote Chinese higher education.[7] These activities

[4] Yang Wei, "Research on the Dispatch and Reception of International Students by China and the Five Countries Along the Belt and Road (1978-2018)", Doctoral Dissertation, Tianjin Normal University, 2020, p. 60.

[5] https://www.110.com/fagui/law_10442.html, 2026-05-05.

[6] https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/200403/t20040306_280464.shtml, 2026-04-15.

[7] http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/moe_850/200502/t20050206_77817.html, 2026-01-03.

significantly enhanced the visibility and attractiveness of Chinese universities among Pakistani students.

On 5 April 2005, Zhang Xiuqin, Secretary-General of the China Scholarship Council, and Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman, Chairman of Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC), signed the "Memorandum of Understanding between the China Scholarship Council and the Pakistan Higher Education Commission on the Pakistani Government Scholarship Programme for Postgraduate Students in China". The agreement stipulated the selection of one thousand young Pakistani university faculty members and researchers to pursue doctoral studies in China between 2005 and 2009.[8] This specialized program contributed substantially to the growth of Pakistani student enrollment in China and facilitated a shift from a predominantly undergraduate student population to a more diversified structure encompassing undergraduate, master's, and doctoral education.

In September 2010, the Chinese government launched the "Study in China Plan". The plan proposed that by 2020, the total number of international students enrolled in Chinese educational institutions would reach 500,000, including 150,000 degree-seeking students, while government scholarship opportunities would continue to expand.[9] This initiative provided a long-term policy framework benefiting students from developing countries, including Pakistan. Subsequently, the Chinese Government Scholarship system underwent continuous improvement. Local governments and universities also expanded scholarship quotas and diversified scholarship categories, attracting increasing numbers of Pakistani students to pursue advanced studies in China.

[8] http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/moe_1485/tnull_6690.html, 2026-01-03.

[9] http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/moe_850/201009/t20100921_108815.html, 2026-01-03.

This stage witnessed three important transformations. First, the student mobility model evolved from a solely government-sponsored system to a dual structure combining government-sponsored and self-financed study. Second, educational opportunities expanded from predominantly undergraduate education to encompass undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. Third, the funding system developed from a centrally administered scholarship framework into a multi-level support mechanism involving the central government, local authorities, and higher education institutions.

Strategic Alignment and Rapid Growth (2013–2019)

With the introduction of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China–Pakistan relations were further consolidated and deepened, ushering in a new phase of rapid development in bilateral educational cooperation.

In 2013, China and Pakistan formally established an "All-Weather Strategic Partnership of Cooperation," providing a new political foundation for educational collaboration between the two countries. During his visit to Pakistan in the same year, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced that China would train 1,000 Chinese-language teachers for Pakistan over the following five years.[10] This initiative significantly promoted Chinese-language education in Pakistan and laid an important linguistic foundation for Pakistani students pursuing higher education in China. In 2014, Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform introduced "Pakistan Vision 2025", which encouraged universities and research institutions to establish international partnerships with overseas educational institutions, develop a knowledge-based economy, and enhance the

[10] https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676308/1209_676318/201305/t2013- 0524_7971452.shtml, 2026-01-04.

international competitiveness of Pakistani universities. The integration of the Belt and Road Initiative with "Pakistan Vision 2025" provided substantial policy support for the further expansion of educational cooperation between the two countries.

On 28 March 2015, China's National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce jointly issued the document "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road". The document explicitly proposed expanding the scale of international student exchanges with countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, promoting cooperative educational programs, and providing 10,000 Chinese government scholarships annually to students from participating countries. These policy measures directly contributed to the growth of Pakistani student enrollment in China. In 2015 alone, the number of Pakistani students studying in China increased by more than 10 percent compared with the previous year.[11]

In 2016, China's Ministry of Education issued the "Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative", which established the "Silk Road Scholarship" under the Chinese Government Scholarship scheme. The initiative aimed to cultivate future industry leaders and highly skilled professionals from participating countries. The plan further proposed the establishment of ten overseas science and education cooperation bases and the annual sponsorship of 10,000 new students from Belt and Road countries to study or conduct research in China over the following five years.[12] Pakistani students constituted one of the principal beneficiary groups of these policies.

[11] http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201604/t20160415_238378.html, 2026-01-04.

[12] http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811_274679.html, 2026-01-04.

University partnerships and academic alliances became another important dimension of educational cooperation during this period. In 2015, the "University Alliance of the Silk Road", led by Xi'an Jiaotong University, admitted Pakistan's National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) as a member institution. This alliance facilitated regular scientific cooperation and faculty–student exchanges between universities from participating countries. On 28 August 2017, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor Consortium of Business Schools was jointly established by the China Association of Higher Education and Pakistan's Higher Education Commission at NUST.[13] The consortium was later renamed the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor Consortium of Universities (CPEC Consortium of Universities). It eventually expanded to include eighty-three prominent universities from both countries. The consortium sought to cultivate professionals in finance, energy, infrastructure development, and other fields urgently needed for the construction of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. Its establishment marked a new stage of institutionalized and sustainable university cooperation and created additional opportunities for Pakistani students seeking higher education in China.

Driven by the continuous implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and the rapid development of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, educational exchanges between China and Pakistan entered a period of unprecedented growth. The number of Pakistani students studying in China exceeded 10,000 in 2013, surpassed 20,000 in 2017, and reached 28,023 in 2018, making Pakistan the third-largest source country of international students in China. Over a decade, the number of Pakistani students increased by approximately 388 percent.[14] The geographical

[13] Jun Tang, "A Review of Higher Education Exchanges under Belt and Road Initiative: China and Pakistan", *Pacific International Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2022), p. 17.

[14] http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201904/t20190412_377692.html, 2026-04-17.

distribution of Pakistani students also expanded beyond traditional educational centers to a broader range of Chinese provinces and municipalities, resulting in a comprehensive and multi-level pattern of educational exchange. Upon graduation, many students entered sectors directly associated with China–Pakistan Economic Corridor projects, thereby becoming an important source of human capital supporting bilateral cooperation.

Quality-Oriented Development in the Post-2020 Period

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 severely disrupted international mobility and created significant challenges for international education worldwide. Despite these difficulties, China adopted a series of innovative policy measures that helped maintain the enrollment of Pakistani students and gradually shifted educational cooperation from quantitative expansion toward quality-oriented development.

During the pandemic, Chinese universities rapidly introduced online recruitment and admission procedures to mitigate the effects of travel restrictions. Xi'an Jiaotong University, for example, extended application deadlines, eliminated requirements for hard-copy documents, and implemented online interviews. By 31 March 2020, the university had received more than 1,600 applications from students in Pakistan and other countries, representing a year-on-year increase of 27 percent.[15] This growth reflected the strong willingness of Pakistani students to pursue education in China and demonstrated the effectiveness of policy adjustments during a period of global uncertainty.

The year 2022 represented a crucial milestone in the institutionalization of China–Pakistan educational cooperation. On 21 March 2022, Pang Chunxue, Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese

[15] https://sie.xjtu.edu.cn/info/1020/1362.htm, 2026-01-05.

Embassy in Pakistan, and Dr. Shaista Sohail, Executive Director of Pakistan's Higher Education Commission, signed the Agreement between the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and the Higher Education Commission of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Certificates and Degrees. The agreement significantly facilitated academic exchanges and strengthened cooperation in education, culture, and scientific research between the two countries.[16] More importantly, it marked the beginning of a new stage characterized by institutionalization and high-quality development in educational cooperation. By providing official recognition of academic qualifications, the agreement removed a major obstacle affecting degree recognition and professional development for graduates.

On 24 August 2022, China officially resumed the entry of international students, including those from Pakistan, and introduced new visa policies that facilitated both the return of continuing students and the enrollment of newly admitted students. Numerous Pakistani students successfully returned to China to resume their studies under these new arrangements.

Another significant development occurred in June 2024, when Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited China. During the visit, the leaders of both countries reached a consensus on further deepening educational cooperation. One of the most important initiatives in the agricultural sector was the launch of the "One Thousand Pakistani Agricultural Graduates Program."[17] Under this scheme, the Pakistani government planned to send 1,000 agricultural graduates to China for advanced training in modern agricultural technologies at institutions such

[16] https://pk.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zbgx/202203/t20220329_10657088.htm, 2026-01-05.

[17] https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6956372.htm, 2026-05-12.

as the Yangling Agricultural High-Tech Industries Demonstration Zone and Northwest A&F University. The first training cohort officially commenced in Yangling on 18 April 2025.[18]

The defining feature of this stage has been the emphasis on improving quality, enhancing efficiency, and promoting standardized development. Supported by continuous improvements in the quality of Chinese higher education and the refinement of educational policies, educational cooperation between China and Pakistan has entered a phase of high-quality development. Policy priorities have shifted toward degree recognition, educational quality assurance, talent cultivation, scientific collaboration, and closer alignment between education and labor-market demands.

In summary, the development of policies governing Pakistani students studying in China since 1964 has evolved from initial exploration, through gradual expansion and strategic acceleration, to a contemporary stage characterized by institutionalization and quality enhancement. This process not only reflects the evolution of China's international education policies but also demonstrates the increasingly important role of educational cooperation within the broader framework of China–Pakistan relations.

Changes in the Scale of International Students from Pakistan and Their Characteristics

Statistical data on international students in China constitute an important empirical basis for understanding educational exchanges between China and Pakistan. Since 1964, the data on Pakistani students studying in China clearly reflects the trajectory of their development. Overall, the scale of Pakistani students in China has continued to expand. From the initial stage in the 1960s and 1970s, when only a handful of students were admitted, the number reached 28,023 in 2018. Pakistan's ranking among source countries of international students in China rose from 17th place

[18] https://yangling.gov.cn/xwzx/gjdt/1914215594704252929.html, 2026-05-12.

in 2003 to 3rd place since 2017. At the same time, the educational structure has gradually shifted from being dominated by undergraduate students to a more balanced composition of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. Moreover, Pakistani students demonstrate a relatively high dependence on scholarship policies, and policy support has played a decisive role in attracting students. These developments exhibit several key characteristics.

Firstly, From the perspective of numerical change, Pakistani student mobility to China exhibits a staged pattern of accelerated growth.

In 1964, when official educational exchanges between China and Pakistan began, there were only 7 Pakistani students in China. In 1974 and 1975, China admitted 7 Pakistani students annually. Between 1978 and 1992, a total of 170 Pakistani students were admitted under state education plans, with annual intake fluctuating between 5 and 23 students. Although the scale expanded compared with the previous period, it remained relatively small (see Table 1).

Significant expansion began in the early twenty-first century. In 2000, there were 314 Pakistani students in China. By 2006, the number had increased to 3,308, representing nearly a tenfold increase over six years, with a relatively high average annual growth rate. In 2004, following the organization of Chinese educational exhibitions in Pakistan and the expansion of self-financed study channels, the number of students increased by 49.5 percent year-on-year. In 2005, after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the China Scholarship Council and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan on postgraduate training programs, the number of Pakistani students in China surged to 1,900, representing a growth rate of 112.53 percent.

Following the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, Pakistani student mobility entered a new phase of accelerated growth. The number of Pakistani students in China exceeded 13,000 in 2014, surpassed 22,000 in 2017, and reached 28,023 in 2018. Compared with 9,639 students in 2012, this represented nearly a threefold increase. This rapid expansion was primarily driven by the policy dividends associated with the Belt and Road Initiative and the development of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Year	Number of Students	Annual Growth Rate
1978	7	-
1979	7	0.0%
1980	5	-28.6%
1981	11	120.0%
1982	10	-9.1%
1983	13	30.0%
1984	13	0.0%
1985	8	-38.5%
1986	15	87.5%
1987	9	-40.0%
1988	9	0.0%
1989	23	155.6%
1990	18	-21.7%
1991	7	-61.1%
1992	15	114.3%
Total	170	

Table 1: Number of Pakistani Students in China under State Education Planning (1978–1992)[19]

Year	Total Students in China	Chinese Government Scholarship Students	Scholarship Ratio (%)	Annual Growth Rate
2000	314	38	12.10%	-
2001	344	39	11.34%	9.55%
2002	439	58	13.21%	27.62%
2003	598	70	11.71%	36.22%
2004	894	78	8.72%	49.50%

[19] 李滔：《中华留学教育史录：1949 年以后》，北京：高等教育出版社，2000 年，第 872 页。

2005	1900	89	4.68%	112.53%
2006	3308	119	3.60%	74.11%
2007	4450	148	3.33%	34.53%
2008	5199	253	4.87%	16.83%
2009	5738	473	8.24%	10.37%
2010	7406	711	9.60%	29.06%
2011	8516	957	11.24%	15.00%
2012	9639	1301	13.50%	13.19%
2013	10941	1780	16.27%	13.51%
2014	13360	2673	20.01%	22.12%
2015	15654	3635	23.22%	17.17%
2016	18626	5081	27.28%	18.99%
2017	22000	——	——	18.12%
2018	28023	——	——	27.38%

Table 2: Pakistani Students in China (2000–2018)[20]

Secondly, the ranking of Pakistan among source countries of international students in China has steadily improved. In 2003, Pakistan ranked 17th; in 2006, it entered the top ten for the first time; and by 2017 it had risen to 3rd place, surpassing traditional sending countries such as the United States, Japan, Russia, and India.

This improvement reflects not only the quantitative increase in Pakistani students but also the growing attractiveness of Chinese higher education. In 2018, Pakistani students in China accounted for 28,023 out of 492,185 total international students in China, representing 5.69 percent. Pakistan thus became the third-largest source country of international students in Asia, after South Korea and Thailand. In South Asia, Pakistan also ranked higher than India (23,198 students) and Bangladesh (10,735 students), becoming a major contributor to regional educational exchanges with China.

[20] https://so.moe.gov.cn/s?qt=来华留学统计&siteCode=bm05000001&tab=all&toolsStatus=1, 2026-04-16.

Year	Rank	Top Three Sending Countries
2003	17	South Korea, Japan, United States
2004	18	South Korea, Japan, United States
2005	14	South Korea, Japan, United States
2006	10	South Korea, Japan, United States
2007	10	South Korea, Japan, United States
2008	10	South Korea, United States, Japan
2009	10	South Korea, United States, Japan
2010	No public data available	No public data available
2011	9	South Korea, United States, Japan
2012	10	South Korea, United States, Japan
2013	No public data available	No public data available
2014	8	South Korea, United States, Thailand
2015	6	South Korea, United States, Thailand
2016	4	South Korea, United States, Thailand
2017	3	South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan
2018	3	South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan

Table 3: Ranking of Pakistani Students in China (2003–2018)[21]

Thirdly, the improvement of educational structure represents another key characteristic beyond numerical growth. In the early stage, Pakistani students in China were mainly enrolled in Chinese language training programs and undergraduate degrees. In recent years, however, the proportion of postgraduate students has increased significantly.

By 2025, among Pakistani students in China, there were 6,156 doctoral students, 3,600 master's students, 11,100 undergraduate students, and approximately 3,000 short-term exchange students. Although undergraduates still constituted the largest group, the combined number of master's and doctoral students (9,756) was approaching that of undergraduates. This indicates a shift from studying Chinese language and obtaining general exposure to China toward pursuing degree-based, specialized academic training.

[21] https://so.moe.gov.cn/s?qt=来华留学统计&siteCode=bm05000001&tab=all&toolsStatus=1, 2026-04-16.

In terms of disciplinary distribution, Pakistani students demonstrate a strong preference for applied fields. Popular majors include medicine, computer science, information technology, artificial intelligence, business administration, finance, economics and trade, international relations, agricultural sciences, and Chinese language. Among these, medical disciplines are particularly favored.

Level of Study	Number of Students
Doctoral students:	6156
Master's students	3600
Undergraduate students	11100
Short-term exchange students	3000

Table 4: Educational Structure of Pakistani Students in China (as of 2025)[22]

Finally, Pakistani students demonstrate a relatively high dependence on scholarship support policies. According to historical data, the number of Pakistani students receiving Chinese Government Scholarships increased from 38 in 2000 to 3,635 in 2015. The proportion of scholarship recipients fluctuated between 4.68 percent and 27.28 percent during this period. By 2017, more than 5,000 Pakistani students in China received various forms of scholarships, accounting for approximately 23 percent of the total Pakistani student population (about 22,000). [23] According to data from the Embassy of Pakistan in Beijing, by the end of 2025 approximately 6,000 Pakistani students in China were receiving scholarships, including Chinese Government

[22] "Pakistan ranks third in number of int'l students studying in China", *The Nation*, 2025-04-16. https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Apr-2025/pakistan-ranks-third-in-number-of-int-l-students-studying-in-china?version=amp, 2026-04-13.

[23] Ding Xuezhen, "Over 22,000 Pakistani Students Study in China, Sparking a 'China Study Abroad Fever' ", People's Daily, May 23, 2018, p. 9.

Scholarships, provincial scholarships, university scholarships, and other bilateral or sponsored programs.[24]

In summary, the changing patterns of Pakistani students studying in China can be summarized in four aspects. First, there has been a significant increase in scale, from a small number of government-sponsored students to large-scale mobility, closely linked to bilateral relations and policy adjustments. Second, Pakistan's ranking among source countries has risen substantially, reflecting growing attractiveness of Chinese higher education. Third, educational structure has become increasingly diversified, with a shift toward higher degree levels and broader disciplinary coverage. Fourth, scholarship support has remained a key driving force behind student mobility. Together, these characteristics outline a trajectory from small-scale exchange to large-scale expansion and quality enhancement.

An Analysis of the Motivations for Studying in China from the Perspective of Push–Pull Theory

The decision of Pakistani students to pursue higher education in China is the result of both individual agency and the combined influence of bilateral educational and cultural policies between China and Pakistan. The push–pull theory, as a classical framework for explaining migration motivations, has been widely applied to the study of international student mobility.[25] According to this theory, student migration is shaped by "push factors" in the country of origin

[24] "Education Cooperation", https://pakbj.org/educationcooperation/index.htm, 2026-04-06.

[25] Liu Yang, "The Cultural Bridge and the Reproduction of Regional Imagination: An Analysis of the Motivations for Overseas Study Among Western Students in China", Cross-Cultural Communication Studies, No.1, 2003, p. 156.

and "pull factors" in the destination country.[26] This analytical framework encompasses political, educational, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions. The decision of Pakistani students to study in China is therefore the outcome of multiple interacting push and pull forces.

Push Factors: Drivers from Within Pakistan

From an objective perspective, the first major push factor is the relatively limited capacity of higher education resources in Pakistan. According to the "Pakistan Economic Survey 2023–24", public expenditure on education in Pakistan accounted for only 1.5% of GDP in 2023, significantly lower than the global average of 3.6%.[27] According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Pakistan's gross tertiary enrollment rate was estimated at 10.8% in 2024.[28] In highly competitive fields such as medicine and engineering, domestic admission rates remain extremely low, leading many students and families to seek overseas educational opportunities.

In the field of medical education, for example, there is a severe imbalance between supply and demand. According to official data from the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC), the total number of available seats in medical and dental colleges is 22,322, while the Medical and Dental College Admission Test (MDCAT) receives approximately 144,000 applicants.[29] This

[26] Ma Jianyi, "Studying in China: A Qualitative Study on the Educational Experience of International Students", Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2020, p. 102.

[27] Finance Division, "Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24", (2023-06-27), p. 161. https://finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_24/Economic_Survey_2023_24.pdf, 2026-05-22; WORD BANK GROP, "Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)", https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS, 2026-05-22.

[28] UNESCO, "Financial for Equity in Higher Education", https://education-profiles.org/central- and-southern-asia/pakistan/~ financing-for-equity-in-higher-education, 2026-05-14.

[29] "MDCAT within a week of FSc results", *The News*, 2026-04-01, https://www.thenews.pk/print/1407558-mdcat-within-a-week-of-fsc-results, 2026-05-14.

intense competition has led many Pakistani students to pursue medical education abroad. China, with its large number of high-quality medical universities, has therefore become one of the preferred destinations for Pakistani medical students.

A second push factor is the tightening of visa and immigration policies in traditional Western study destinations. In recent years, visa policies in countries such as the United States have become increasingly restrictive. According to a report published by Shorelight, the global F-1 student visa rejection rate in the United States reached a ten-year high of 35% in 2025, while the rejection rate for Pakistani applicants was as high as 71%.[30] This trend is closely associated with stricter immigration policies implemented by the U.S. government, including temporary suspensions of F/M/J visa appointments and enhanced social media screening requirements for applicants.[31] At the same time, the cost of studying in Western countries has continued to rise. In the United Kingdom, for example, annual tuition fees for undergraduate international students range from approximately £11,000 to £32,000, while master's programs range from £12,000 to £35,000, with some programs in medicine and engineering exceeding £38,000.[32] For most Pakistani families, such costs are prohibitively high. These combined factors have made China a more cost-effective alternative destination.

Finally, subjective and socio-cultural factors also play an important role. With the continuous improvement in the quality of Chinese higher education, many Pakistani students and parents view

[30] "Beyond the Interview: A Decade of Student Visa Denials and What Comes Next", *Shorelight*, 2026-04-06. https://shorelight.widen.net/s/gggtjq8lwp/sl_white-paper_beyond-the-interview_26_lr, 2026-05-29.

[31] "Pakistan ranks third in number of int'l students studying in China", *The Nation*, 2025-04-16.

[32] "Actual Cost of Studying in UK for Pakistani Students in 2025", *Pakistan Observer*, 2025-11-12, https://pakobserver.net/actual-cost-of-studying-in-uk-for-pakistani-students-in-2025-full-fee-structure/, 2026-5-29.

studying in China as a reliable pathway to obtaining high-quality education and enhancing competitiveness in the labor market. In addition, the long-standing "iron brother" relationship between China and Pakistan, together with employment opportunities generated by the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), further strengthens students' motivation to study in China. Government efforts to promote educational cooperation, combined with strong family support and individual aspirations for personal development and national contribution, have together created a strong internal driving force.

Pull Factors: The Attractiveness of China as a Study Destination

The first major pull factor is policy- and strategy-level support. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor has become a flagship project, generating substantial demand for Chinese-language proficiency, engineering expertise, and management skills. By the end of 2022, CPEC-related projects had created approximately 236,000 jobs, many of which favored individuals with Chinese educational backgrounds.[33] Educational cooperation has thus provided essential human capital support for the development of CPEC. Chinese enterprises operating in Pakistan tend to prioritize local talent with Chinese educational experience or training, further increasing the attractiveness of studying in China.

China's government scholarship system constitutes another major pull factor. These scholarships typically cover tuition fees, accommodation, living allowances (2,500 RMB per month for undergraduates, 3,000 RMB for master's students, and 3,500 RMB for doctoral students), and comprehensive medical insurance.[34] For students from developing countries such

[33] https://news.bjd.com.cn/2023/10/17/10594489.shtml, 2026-04-08.

[34] "Education Cooperation", https://pakbj.org/educationcooperation/index.htm, 2026-04-06.

as Pakistan, these financial supports significantly reduce the cost of studying abroad. In regions such as Gwadar, for example, 99 students were awarded the "Chinese Consul General Scholarship" in 2025, covering disciplines such as pharmacy, business administration, fine arts, medicine, civil engineering, and fisheries.[35] In addition, Chinese universities have launched numerous scholarship programs for Pakistani students for the 2025–2026 academic year, covering undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and research programs.[36] These scholarships not only reduce financial burdens but also generate strong demonstration effects through alumni networks, attracting more self-financed students.[37]

A second pull factor is the continuous improvement in the quality of Chinese higher education. In the QS World University Rankings 2026, 72 universities from mainland China are listed, with 5 institutions ranked among the global top 100 and 33 among the top 500.[38] This reflects the steadily increasing international competitiveness of Chinese higher education institutions. Medical education in particular has developed rapidly, with many Chinese medical universities recognized by the Pakistan Medical Commission. Programs in clinical medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and nursing are widely accepted. Chinese universities are equipped with advanced laboratories, strong affiliated hospitals, and internationally aligned curricula. Rapid developments in public health, minimally invasive surgery, and digital medicine further enhance their attractiveness. Medicine,

[35] "99 Gwadar students awarded Chinese Consular Scholarship Programme", *The Nation*, 2025-05-01, https://www.nation.com.pk/01-May-2025/99-gwadar-students-awarded-chinese-consular-scholarship-programme, 2026-05-15.

[36] http://www.huashangnews.cc/static/content/GNYW/2024-12-04/1313919122471928640.html, 2026-06-14.

[37] https://chinese.app.com.pk/2022/11/09/6477/, 2026-04-15.

[38] https://www.qschina.cn/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2026, 2026-01-18.

computer science, and information technology are particularly popular due to their high employ-ability and practical training opportunities.

A third pull factor is the comparative economic advantage of studying in China. Compared with Western countries, where annual costs often reach tens of thousands of US dollars, studying in China remains relatively affordable. Although tuition and accommodation fees vary by institution, Chinese universities operate under a system of school-based pricing combined with macro-level government guidance. Earlier standards set in 1988 indicated tuition fees ranging from RMB 14,000 to 26,000 per year for undergraduate programs in humanities, RMB 18,000 to 30,000 for master's programs, and RMB 22,000 to 34,000 for doctoral programs, with accommodation fees ranging from RMB 12 to 32 per bed per day.[39] Although these standards are no longer mandatory, universities continue to set fees within a relatively moderate range based on local economic conditions.[40]

Finally, cultural factors also constitute a significant pull force. The deep-rooted friendship between China and Pakistan has fostered strong mutual trust between the peoples of both countries, who often refer to each other as "iron brothers." Many Pakistani students have a natural sense of affinity toward China. In addition, the growing popularity of Chinese language education in Pakistan further strengthens cultural ties. China has established five Confucius Institutes and two Confucius Classrooms in Pakistan, which are responsible for Chinese language teaching, teacher training, HSK examinations, and cultural exchange activities.[41] The National University of

[39] https://cwc.jmu.edu.cn/__local/4/B9/19/5337DBF5844D189955AECB4C198_F82800EE_1F416.pdf, 2026-05-21.

[40] http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A05/s7503/202008/t20200827_480721.html, 2026-05-21.

[41] Xu Mo, "Education Cooperation and Exchange between China and Pakistan under the Perspective of Belt and Road", World Education Information, No. 9, 2023, p. 42.

Modern Languages (NUML) plays a particularly important role in Chinese language education. Over the past three decades, it has trained a large number of Chinese language professionals, many of whom, after studying in China, have returned to Pakistan to work in education, Chinese enterprises, and government-related sectors, thereby serving as important cultural bridges between the two countries.

Conclusion

The development of Pakistani students studying in China since 1964 reflects a continuous evolution from small-scale, government-sponsored exchanges to large-scale, diversified, and institutionalized educational mobility. Over more than six decades, this process has demonstrated a clear trajectory of expansion in scale, improvement in educational structure, and increasing institutional depth.

From the initial stage of sporadic and symbolic exchanges to the present status in which Pakistan has become the third-largest source country of international students in China, this transformation has been closely associated with the steady development of China–Pakistan bilateral relations. In particular, major policy initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor have provided strong institutional and strategic support for the expansion of educational cooperation.

The findings of this study indicate that the growth of Pakistani student mobility to China is the result of both domestic conditions in Pakistan and the increasing attractiveness of China as a destination for international education. On the one hand, limited higher education capacity, intense competition in key disciplines such as medicine and engineering, and restrictive visa policies in Western countries have created strong push factors encouraging students to seek alternatives

abroad. On the other hand, China's expanding higher education system, scholarship support policies, relatively lower educational costs, and long-standing cultural and political friendship with Pakistan have constituted powerful pull factors.

At the same time, educational cooperation between China and Pakistan has gradually evolved beyond simple student exchange. It has become an important mechanism for human capital development, knowledge transfer, and cultural exchange. Pakistani students educated in China have not only contributed to addressing skilled labor shortages in Pakistan but have also played an important role in sectors such as higher education, healthcare, agriculture, engineering, and public administration upon their return. In this sense, they function as both beneficiaries of educational cooperation and active agents in strengthening bilateral relations.

Moreover, the institutionalization of mutual degree recognition and the normalization of educational mobility have further strengthened the sustainability of this cooperation. The signing of bilateral agreements on academic qualification recognition in 2022 marks a significant step toward the standardization and long-term development of China–Pakistan educational exchanges.

In conclusion, the historical trajectory of Pakistani students studying in China is not merely a phenomenon of international student mobility, but also a reflection of the broader transformation of China–Pakistan relations. It illustrates the shift from traditional cultural diplomacy toward a comprehensive strategic partnership characterized by deepened educational connectivity and people-to-people exchanges. This experience also provides useful insights for understanding China's educational cooperation with other countries along the Belt and Road Initiative.