

An Exploration of "Super-National Treatment" for International Students in Chinese Universities: Implications for Educational Equity and Global Competitiveness

Jinyue Zhang

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

zjy_eduhk@163.com

Abstract. This paper examines the phenomenon of “Super-National Treatment” (SNT) for international students in China. SNT refers to policies and practices that provide international students with superior amenities, financial incentives, and academic accommodations compared to domestic students. While originally driven by goals of internationalization and soft power, SNT has become institutionalized, creating a clear divide in the student experience. The paper outlines its manifestations in admissions, housing, financial support, and academic assistance. It then analyzes root causes such as national policy ambitions, university ranking pressures, and economic incentives. It also discusses the negative consequences, such as eroding educational equity, fostering social isolation, and ultimately threatening the global competitiveness of Chinese universities. The paper concludes by calling for a paradigm shift toward “equal treatment for equal merit,” advocating integration over isolation.

Keywords: Super-National Treatment, International Students, Chinese Higher Education, Educational Equity, Global Competitiveness

1. Introduction

The rapid internationalization of China’s higher education is central to its strategy to expand soft power and global influence. A major push to attract international students, through initiatives like the “Study in China” campaign and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has given rise to a controversial phenomenon known as “Super-National Treatment” (SNT). This refers to preferential policies, superior facilities, and often less stringent academic standards for international students compared to domestic ones [1]. While designed to boost appeal, SNT has sparked debate over its impact on educational equity and its role in long-term global competitiveness. This paper, therefore, takes up several critical questions: How does SNT manifested appear in the everyday practices of Chinese universities? What are the deeper drivers, both at the national and institutional levels, that perpetuate this differential treatment? Most importantly, what are the potential repercussions of this approach on the perceived fairness of the educational system and the authentic quality of China’s higher education on the world stage? The primary objectives of this research are threefold: to systematically document and argue for the existence of the SNT phenomenon and its causes, to

critically explore its multifaceted impact on educational equity and global competitiveness, and to propose actionable policy recommendations for a more balanced and sustainable approach to international student recruitment. The significance of this study lies in its timely examination of a growing internal contradiction within China's ambitious higher education strategy, offering insights that are crucial for policymakers and university administrators to reconcile the goals of international appeal with the imperatives of fairness and academic rigor.

2. Manifestations of "Super-National Treatment"

2.1. Admissions and academic standards

The most fundamental manifestation is in the admissions process. While domestic students must undergo the fiercely competitive National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao), a grueling marathon that often determines their life trajectory, international students are typically admitted through a separate, often less rigorous, process. This process usually involves submitting application materials, interviews, and sometimes completion of preparatory foundation courses. The academic bar, particularly for non-degree Chinese language programs or certain undergraduate programs, is perceived to be significantly lower. For instance, the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) proficiency requirements for degree programs are often set at a level that allows students to enter but not necessarily to thrive in a full Chinese-taught academic environment, leading to concerns about the varying levels of preparedness among the international cohort [2]. This admissions dichotomy creates a foundational inequality from the very outset.

2.2. Financial incentives

Financial perks are one of the visible aspects of SNT. A large share of international students in China receive generous scholarships. The flagship Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC) funded by the Ministry of Education often covers full tuition, accommodation, a living stipend of CNY 2,500-3,500 per month for undergraduates, and comprehensive medical insurance. Many local governments and universities also provide scholarships to supplement these benefits [3]. In sharp contrast, domestic students have far fewer opportunities for financial aid, and the scholarships available to them are usually strictly merit-based and rarely cover full living costs. As a result, many rely heavily on family support or take on substantial student loans, creating a wide gap in financial pressure and daily quality of life. This economic divide remains a constant source of frustration among Chinese students.

2.3. Accommodation and living conditions

The physical separation is perhaps the most daily reminder of SNT. Universities often provide international students with modern, well-furnished dormitories equipped with air conditioning, private bathrooms, kitchen facilities, and reliable internet. These are commonly referred to "foreign expert buildings" or "international student dormitories". In contrast, most Chinese students live in a far more basic accommodation, typically with 4-6 students sharing a room, communal bathrooms on each floor, and strict regulations on amenities like air conditioners or electric kettles. This segregation based on nationality not only reinforces a sense of privilege and separation but also makes genuine social interaction much harder.

2.4. Academic and administrative support

International students frequently benefit from dedicated support systems that far exceed what is available to domestic students. This includes specialized Offices of International Student Affairs, assigned language partners (often Chinese students voluntold or receiving minor credits), tailored academic counseling, and even dedicated administrative staff to handle visa and residency permits. More troubling are persistent reports, often shared anonymously on platforms like Zhihu and Weibo, of leniency in academic grading and assessment. Professors might be under implicit or explicit pressure from university administrators to ensure international students pass their courses to maintain retention rates, program viability, and the university's international reputation. This perception, whether entirely accurate or not, severely undermines the value of academic credentials for all students.

3. Causes of the "Super-National Treatment" phenomenon

3.1. National policy and soft power ambitions

At the macro level, the Chinese government views international education as a vital tool for enhancing its global image and soft power, a concept popularized by Joseph Nye. Attracting students, particularly from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partner countries, is seen as a long-term investment in fostering goodwill, building diplomatic and economic networks, and cultivating a cohort of future leaders, professionals, and elites who are familiar with and positively disposed towards China [4]. SNT, in this geopolitical calculus, is a necessary cost to achieve these broader strategic objectives. The quantifiable growth in student numbers is used as a key performance indicator (KPI) for the success of these policies, creating a top-down pressure for numbers.

3.2. University rankings and internationalization metrics

The pursuit of global university rankings, such as the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, has a profound influence on university policy. These rankings heavily weigh the proportion of international students and faculty as critical indicators of "internationalization". To rapidly climb these rankings and gain prestige, Chinese universities are incentivized to boost their international student numbers by any means necessary. Preferential treatment becomes a primary and effective tool to attract a larger cohort quickly, sometimes at the expense of selective quality and integration [5]. This creates a "numbers game" where quantity can overshadow quality, and universities compete on perks rather than academic excellence.

3.3. Economic and institutional incentives

While government scholarships fund many students, those who are self-funded represent a direct source of revenue for universities. Furthermore, hosting a large international student body can lead to increased government funding allocations tied to internationalization metrics and enhanced institutional prestige domestically. A high number of international students is often touted in university propaganda as evidence of world-class status, appealing to domestic applicants and local governments. This economic and reputational calculus encourages universities to continue and even amplify preferential policies.

4. Potential problems posed by "Super-National Treatment"

4.1. Erosion of educational equity

While designed to attract students, SNT generates several profound negative consequences that threaten to undermine its own strategic objectives and the health of the university ecosystem. The most immediate impact is the sense of injustice felt by domestic students. Seeing their peers receiving better resources and being held to different academic standards fosters resentment and makes them feel like second-class citizens in their own institutions. Such blatant inequity damages the moral fabric of the university and can lead to social tension on campus [6].

4.2. Social isolation and failed integration

By creating separate, privileged bubbles for international students, SNT actively hinders meaningful cross-cultural interaction and integration. When international students are housed separately, taught in segregated programs, and not held to the same standards, opportunities for genuine academic and social exchange with Chinese students are minimized. This results in parallel societies on campus, defeating a core purpose of internationalization: mutual learning and understanding.

4.3. Questionable educational quality and long-term reputational risk

If academic standards are compromised to accommodate international students, the value of the degrees they earn is diminished. This practice can lead to a reputation for being a "soft touch" or a "degree mill" for foreign students, ultimately damaging the global reputation and credibility of Chinese universities in the long run [7]. Genuine competitiveness is built on academic excellence, not on lavish perks and lowered standards.

5. Future policy recommendations

Future policy should shift from preferential to equal treatment, moving away from the counterproductive model of SNT toward a courageous and strategic reorientation, such as from quantity-based to quality-based internationalization, and from isolation to integration. Policies should emphasize "equal treatment for equal merit", with rigorous admission standards applied to all students so that international recruits are genuinely prepared for the academic workload, and scholarships awarded on the basis of academic merit and talent rather than nationality. At the same time, universities should promote integration, not segregation, by breaking down physical and social barriers through measures such as mixed housing options, mixed-team classroom projects, and mandatory cultural exchange events that foster genuine connection and mutual respect. Finally, instead of reducing standards, support should be enhanced for all students who need it, including robust Chinese language training and academic tutoring for international students to help them meet high standards rather than lowering those standards for them.

6. Conclusion

The "Super-National Treatment" of international students in China stems from a genuine desire to globalize higher education, but the current reliance on preferential policies and financial incentives is flawed. While it has boosted enrollment, it risks eroding educational equity and academic integrity. The resentment it creates among domestic students, and the isolation it imposes on

international students, undermine the goals of cultural exchange and soft power. A reputation built on lowered standards is fragile and damaging to global competitiveness. To become truly world-class, Chinese universities must shift from privilege to excellence and integration—upholding high, uniform academic standards, fostering inclusive campuses, and valuing educational quality over numbers. Such a change is not only necessary for fairness but vital to building a sustainable, respected global education system that serves all students equitably.

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