

Original article

The evolution of Sino-foreign cooperative education policies from the perspective of theory of institutional change

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Abstract:

This study employs the Theory of Institutional Change (TIC) as the analytical framework to systematically examine the evolution, mechanism, and future reform pathways of China's Sino-foreign cooperative education (SFCE) policies. The findings reveal that these policies have undergone four stages: initial exploration, standardized development, quality enhancement, and deepening reform. The policy content has progressively evolved from fragmented exploration to a systematic and standardized institutional system. The policy change is driven by the government, higher education institutions, and societal forces, among which the government plays a leading role, while higher education institutions and societal forces supplement policy adjustments through practical exploration and demand feedback. The impetus for change originates from the China's national strategy of educational opening-up to the world, the demand for connotative development of higher education, and the external pressure of the international competitive environment. The SFCE policy change presents a compound model characterized by the predominance of mandatory changes and complementary role of induced changes, with institutional optimization through an incremental pathway. Future policy reforms for SFCE should focus on improving institutional system, optimizing regulatory mechanisms, strengthening quality assurance and enhancing risk prevention and control, so as to promote the high-quality and sustainable development of the SFCE.

1. Introduction

Since the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy, China's education sector has been actively exploring pathways for the internationalization of higher education. Consequently, Sino-foreign cooperative education (SFCE) emerged in response to this impetus and has gradually evolved into a prominent vehicle for advancing this internationalization (Lin et al., 2024). Its development relies heavily on policy guidance and support. The policy framework for SFCE has undergone a complex evolutionary trajectory, emerging from a state of near absence and progressing through initial exploration toward gradual refinement. To align with globalization trends, China has continuously adjusted its SFCE policies to enhance the international competitiveness of its higher education system. Simultaneously, the diversification of domestic educational

demands and the deepening of higher education reforms have imposed greater requirements on the scientific rigor, rationality, and adaptability of SFCE policies.

Despite rapid development, SFCE faces persistent policy challenges at three levels. At the governance level, institutional barriers and overlapping departmental responsibilities have led to insufficient coordination and frequent regulatory gaps (Lin et al., 2024; Xue, 2017), while inadequate multi-stakeholder participation underscores the need for collaborative governance mechanisms (Liu, 2024). At the evaluation and supervision level, an overemphasis on approval rather than ongoing oversight persists, with the evaluation system relying predominantly on input-based indicators, leading some programs to lower standards after approval (Huang & Liao, 2020; Yi et al., 2021); issues of ambiguous evaluation purposes and insufficient third-party credibility remain prominent (Lin et

al., 2022), and the absence of exit mechanisms exposes student rights to considerable risk (Xue, 2017). At the institutional operation level, policy supply mismatches actual practice, with complex approval process and policy uncertainty affecting long-term stability (Xue, 2017), while inherent contradictions manifest in inefficient operational mechanisms, tension between scale and quality, the low contribution from disciplinary structures, and inadequate coordination in spatial distribution (Jing & Chen, 2022). These three fundamental tensions—the mismatch between institutional provision and governance effectiveness, the imbalance between access incentives and procedural constraints, and the lack of synchronization between scale expansion and substantive development—converge on a central question: What logic governs the evolution of SFCE policies, and how have their change mechanisms shaped the current institutional dilemmas? A systematic examination of policy evolution thus serves as a crucial starting point for addressing these practical issues.

The policy framework for SFCE involves cross-border educational resource flows, quality assurance, safeguarding national educational sovereignty, implementing international talent strategies, and modernizing higher education governance (Huang et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2026; Zhu, 2023). Existing research indicates that different policy orientations at various stages have generated distinct institutional effects in program accreditation, quality supervision, disciplinary structure, and regional development (Huang, 2024; Zhang & Ling, 2022; Zou, 2024). However, most studies focus on describing the phased policy characteristics rather than revealing the underlying logic of policy changes. Therefore, this study adopts the Theory of Institutional Change (TIC) to examine the internal mechanisms driving SFCE policy evolution. Specifically, we aim to answer the following questions: What has been the historical trajectory of SFCE policies? What mechanisms underlie these policy changes? What effective pathways should be pursued for future reforms?

2. Literature review

Existing research has examined SFCE policies and their effects from multiple dimensions including evolutionary history, governance mechanisms, quality assurance, and structural layout.

Firstly, policy evolution has profoundly shaped the cooperative network structure, yet this process is often accompanied by lagging policy supply. Wang, 2019 noted that China's SFCE policies have roughly undergone five stages since 1978: policy absence, policy germination, policy promulgation, policy legalization and policy implementation. The study further highlights that during the transition from “policy absence” to “legalized policies”, policy supply frequently lagged behind practical demands, resulting in a lack of clear regulations for institutional activities during certain periods. Chen et al. (2026) employed social network analysis to reveal that as policy stages evolved, the cooperative networks of SFCE exhibited significant increases in density, centrality, and partner diversity, demonstrating how policy frameworks shape collaboration structures.

Secondly, the governance structure exhibits a pattern of limited decentralization under state dominance. Lin & Liu (2016) emphasized that SFCE should be clearly positioned as a “component” rather than a “supplement” of China's education system, and on this basis establish a comprehensive quality assurance mechanism integrating categorized management, admission approval, evaluation certification, and exit penalties. Drawing on qualitative research on SFCE institutions, Si & Rayner (2025) found that although the central government maintains significant control over structural, policy, and financial governance, institutional administrative leaders and joint committees have gained greater autonomy in personnel management and daily operations, reflecting a complex governance landscape characterized by the coexistence of “decentralization” and “recentralization”.

Thirdly, research on quality assurance focuses on the dual pathways of standard construction and resource integration. Lin (2016) emphasized that high-quality educational resources encompass not only the overall institutional strength of first-class universities but also diverse forms such as distinctive disciplines, high-quality curricula, and outstanding faculty, with their introduction guided by principles of diversity, practicality, complementarity, and proceduralization. Lin & Liu (2016) further suggested that an exit mechanism for low-quality providers should be established to achieve “survival of the fittest”, thereby systematically enhancing the overall quality ecosystem of SFCE. Huang et al. (2023) also argued that institutional quality is influenced by multiple dimensions, including resource investment, faculty environment, teaching processes, and instructional outcomes.

Fourthly, the structural layout exhibits pronounced spatial and disciplinary imbalances. Using data from the Ministry of Education's regulatory platform, Shu (2025) noted that over 70% of SFCE institutions are concentrated in the eastern coastal regions, while the introduction of high-quality resources lags in the central and western regions. Disciplinarily, economics and management programs account for approximately 30%, whereas programs in fields of national strategic urgency—such as artificial intelligence, big data, emerging engineering, and smart agriculture—represent less than 20%, reflecting insufficient alignment with China's innovation-driven development strategy. Cheng et al. (2024) corroborated this trend, revealing that Jiangsu, Shandong, and Henan led nationally in total SFCE institutions and programs, whereas western provinces like Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia had extremely limited offerings.

Although existing research has provided valuable multidimensional insights into SFCE policies, there remains significant room to deepen the systematic analysis of the driving mechanisms and change patterns underlying policy evolution. In terms of analytical perspective, the majority of studies focus on describing policy content at specific stages or evaluating effects along a single dimension, with insufficient attention to the deeper logic of “why policies change” and “how policies change”. In terms of theoretical construction, explanations of the dynamic mechanisms and change patterns of policy evolution largely remain at the level of empirical generalization, lacking systematic theoretical framework support. The

evolutionary trajectory of China's SFCE policies is essentially a process of educational institutional change, whose phased transitions, path dependence, and critical juncture choices resonate precisely with the core concerns of TIC. On this basis, our study adopts TIC as the analytical framework to systematically dissect the evolutionary trajectory of policy supply and the underlying logic of institutional change within China's SFCE, thereby exploring practical pathways for reforming and optimizing the policy system.

3. Theoretical framework

The TIC constitutes a fundamental component of new institutional economics. As a core representative, North (1990) thinks institutions encompass formal rules (e.g., laws and policies), informal constraints (e.g., conventions and behavioral norms), and their enforcement characteristics of both. In North's (1994) conception, institutional change refers to "the process by which institutions are created, altered, and broken down over time" (p.225). TIC furnishes a systematic analytical framework for examining policy evolution. Its primary components include the following (Lin, 1991; North, 1990; North, 2014):

(1) *Actors in institutional change*. The behavioral agents of institutional change are differentiated into primary and secondary roles. *The primary action group* plays a leading role in institutional change, serving as the initiator that proposes schemes for institutional transformation and, in accordance with the principles of institutional change, evaluates and selects optimal alternatives. *The secondary action group* assumes a subsidiary role, functioning as the practitioner that supports and assists the primary group in realizing institutional change.

(2) *Driving forces of institutional change*. The equilibrium between institutional supply and demand serves as the prerequisite for institutional change. Whether this existing institutional equilibrium can be disrupted depends on whether the agents of change can maximize their own interests through the process of transformation.

(3) *Modes of institutional change*. *Mandatory institutional change* refers to institutional transformations initiated and led by authoritative actors such as the state, imposed through top-down mechanisms of administrative decrees, laws, and regulations. Conversely, *induced institutional change* originates from micro-level actors—organizations or individuals—who, based on calculations of self-interest maximization, gradually prompt institutional adjustments through bottom-up practical exploration and demand feedback.

(4) *Basic pathways of institutional change*. *Incremental change*, wherein institutions are progressively optimized through continuous minor adjustments and localized innovations rather than through radical rupture. Radical change, however, wherein institutions undergo fundamental, discontinuous institutional transformations in response to exogenous shocks or internal crises.

The applicability and feasibility of TIC for analyzing policy evolution have been extensively validated across multiple domains. Tan (2026) applied TIC to collaborative governance in application-oriented undergraduate education, quantitatively

analyzing industry-academia integration policy and identifying conflicts among bureaucratic, academic, and market logic behind government, university, and enterprise actors, proposing that "proforma cooperation" be resolved through institutional innovations based on reciprocal authority and responsibility, benefit sharing, and capability synergy. Li et al. (2024) employed TIC to trace China's archival governance system from "unitary control" to "pluralistic governance" and ultimately to "collaborative governance", revealing both the government-led mandatory change pathway and the characteristic of incremental adjustment under "path dependence". The study elucidated how supply-demand interactions drive the shift from "management" to "governance". Drawing on North's TIC to examine the discipline evaluation system, Bao (2019) attributed its institutional change to a state-led mandatory incremental change, instrumental rationality, and path dependence, noting this mechanism dual role in facilitating and constraining institutional deepening.

The TIC not only clarifies the stages and change mechanisms of institutional evolution but also identifies the deep-seated roots of institutional imbalance and provides directional guidance for future optimization. This constitutes the core rationale for adopting TIC as the analytical framework of our study.

4. Research methods

This study employs TIC as its framework and utilizes literature review method, text analysis method, and historical research method. The combination of these diverse methods enables a multifaceted examination of the evolution of SFCE policies and their underlying mechanisms, thereby rendering the findings more persuasive and credible.

First, the literature review method involves examining, analyzing, and synthesizing documentary evidence to identify the essential attributes of the research question, with an emphasis on developing a scientific understanding through systematic literature collection, identification, and organization (Meng, 2001). Drawing on the literature review method, our study draws on this method to analyze the main problems in current SFCE policies including their evolutionary history, governance mechanisms, quality assurance systems, and structural layout, thereby providing theoretical perspectives and a practical foundation for understanding the evolution, operational mechanisms, and future reform pathways of China's SFCE policies.

Second, the text analysis method analyzes the content of textual materials through qualitative research procedures to examine the value of specific concepts and underlying meanings, focusing on implicit, latent meanings rather than surface-level explicit content to decode the symbolic structures and contextual logic, and embedded cultural presuppositions (Scott, 2006). In our study, this method is applied to systematically review SFCE policies over the years, examining their continuity and refinements, identifying blind spots and challenges, and assessing the intended objectives and overall direction.

Third, the historical research method systematically col-

lects and organizes data to better understand historical phenomena and their potential causal relationships (Gall et al., 2023). This study adopts this method to examine the evolution of China's SFCE policies, dividing it into four stages: the initial exploration stage, the regulated development stage, the quality enhancement stage, and the deepening reform stage. Through this periodization, the study reveals the external drivers and internal logic underlying policy adjustments in each phase, offering historical insights into the continuity and turning points in institutional evolution and providing a basis for interpreting current policy orientations and anticipating future trends.

5. Findings

5.1 The evolution of SFCE policies in China

5.1.1 Initial exploration stage (1978–1994)

The reform and opening-up policy, inaugurated in 1978, marked the commencement of a gradual restoration of exchange and cooperation between China's education sector and the international educational community. During this period, SFCE remained at an embryonic and exploratory stage, characterized by the absence of dedicated policy provisions; relevant activities were conducted primarily under the auspices of broader macro-educational policies. In 1985, the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Education System Reform* emphasized the transformation of the educational system from a single state-run model toward a diversified structure with the state remaining the primary provider, while simultaneously expanding the autonomy of higher education institutions (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1985). These policy arrangements created favorable conditions for universities and colleges to explore Sino-foreign cooperative endeavors. In this context, a number of institutions began to engage in cooperative activities with overseas counterparts on their own initiative, including the recruitment of foreign faculty members and the conduct of academic exchanges. A notable exemplar of these early cooperative efforts was the Nanjing University–Johns Hopkins University Center for Chinese and American Studies, established in 1986, which emerged as a successful model of the SFCE (Internationalization Office of Nanjing University, 2025). The State Council (1993) issued the implementation opinions on the Outline for Education Reform and Development in China, explicitly calling for strengthening international educational exchanges and cooperation and encouraged higher education institutions to expand international partnerships. This policy further promoted institutional experimentation in SFCE.

Overall, however, policy supply during this period remained fragmented and limited. Specific operational regulations were largely absent, and most initiatives emerged from universities' own needs and the broader context of international educational exchange. As a result, SFCE remained small in scale, relatively simple in form, and concentrated primarily in short-term training programs and academic exchange activities, with a generally low level of educational provision.

5.1.2 Regulated development stage (1995–2002)

As the number of SFCE activities increased, a series of problems emerged during the process of rapid expansion, including disorderly operations and uneven quality (Wang et al., 2014). These challenges urgently necessitated the introduction of dedicated state policies to provide regulatory guidance. In response, the former State Education Commission (1995) promulgated the *Interim Provisions on Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* (hereinafter referred to as the *Interim Provisions*). As China's first specialized regulation governing SFCE, the policy established systematic requirements regarding institutional establishment, approval procedures, and supervision. It defined the basic regulatory framework for SFCE and marked the beginning of its standardized development. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 introduced new challenges arising from international soft-law frameworks such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), particularly regarding the protection of national educational sovereignty. Given the ambiguities in the definition of cross-border education between international agreements and domestic Chinese law, the Ministry of Education issued an emergency notice emphasizing that all SFCE activities remained subject to the provisions of the *Interim Provisions*.

During this stage, policy priorities were centered on regulating operational order. Through the clarification of approval procedures and operational requirements, the government guided SFCE toward a more standardized path of development. The number of programs increased from more than 70 in 1995 to over 700 by the end of 2002 (Zhang & He, 2019). Educational forms also became increasingly diversified, encompassing both degree and non-degree education. Although undergraduate-level programs began to emerge, associate-degree programs continued to dominate the sector.

5.1.3 Quality enhancement stage (2003–2015)

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, China has experienced rapid economic development, with international trade emerging as a significant engine driving economic growth, accompanied by a sharp increase in demand for internationally competent talents. As an important vehicle for cultivating such talent, SFCE entered a period of rapid expansion. To address inconsistencies between domestic and international understandings of cross-border education, *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* (hereinafter referred to as the *Regulations*) were formally promulgated in 2003 (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2003). Building upon the foundation of the 1995 *Interim Provisions*, the *Regulations* further refined the legal-institutional framework governing SFCE by clarifying its nature, legal status, and governance structure, thereby augmenting the authority and stability of the policy regime. Subsequently, a suite of supporting policies was successively enacted. The *Implementation Measures for the Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2004) es-

tablished detailed operational rules governing specific aspects of implementation, encompassing institutional establishment, student recruitment, instructional delivery, faculty staffing, certification issuance, and financial and asset administration, thereby instituting a comparatively comprehensive system of institutional norms across the entire chain of operations. In 2013, the Ministry of Education further issued the *Opinions on Further Strengthening Quality Assurance in SFCE in Higher Education Institutions* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2013).

During this period, the number of institutions and programs increased substantially, rising from 772 in 2003 to 2,058 in 2015 (People's Daily Online, 2015; People's Daily Online - Market News, 2004). Meanwhile, the policy system continued to mature, with increasing emphasis on educational quality. Through the establishment of quality evaluation mechanisms and the strengthening of faculty management, policy priorities gradually shifted from quantitative expansion toward quality enhancement. The educational level was further elevated, characterized by a sustained increase in master's and doctoral-level cooperative programs, and the spectrum of disciplinary offerings was continuously expanded to encompass the humanities, sciences, engineering, management, medicine, and other broad disciplinary categories.

5.1.4 Deepening reform stage (2016–present)

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, educational opening-up has entered a new stage of development. As an important component of this strategy, SFCE has encountered both new opportunities and new challenges. In 2016, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee & the General Office of the State Council (2016) jointly issued the *Several Opinions on Effectively Undertaking Education Opening-up in the New Era*, which set forth comprehensive directives for enhancing the quality and level of SFCE. The National Education Conference in 2018 further emphasized expanding educational opening-up and promoting high-level cooperation with world-class educational resources, thereby outlining a new direction for future development (China Civilization Website, 2019). Against this background, SFCE policies entered a stage of deepening reform and innovation. Policy priorities shifted toward removing institutional barriers and strengthening reform initiatives. For instance, to address the impact of sudden public emergencies on study abroad, the Ministry of Education introduced policies allowing eligible SFCE institutions and programs to temporarily expand enrollment quotas in order to address the difficulties faced by students seeking overseas study opportunities during extraordinary circumstances (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). In terms of approval system reform, efforts were made to improve approval procedures, optimize admission criteria, conduct targeted governance initiatives, and strengthen evaluations of Chinese institutions' internationalization capacity and educational foundations (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Concurrently, pilot programs of ministry-provincial joint approval mechanisms were launched in provinces such as Hainan, Fujian, and Guangdong, with

the aim of expediting approval efficiency by devolving certain approval authorities (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

According to statistics from the Ministry of Education's Platform for the Supervision of SFCE, as of July 17, 2025, approximately 3,016 institutions and programs had been officially approved and established nationwide (National Information Platform for Supervision of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education Programs operated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025). During this phase, SFCE policies have been increasingly aligned with national strategic imperatives, actively exploring innovative institutional models and management mechanisms that accommodate the educational development needs of the new era, thereby promoting the high-quality and connotative development of SFCE.

An examination of the evolution of SFCE policies over nearly 50 years across the four stages (see Table 1) reveal a trajectory of institutional changes from conceptual foundations to strategic deepening. In the mid-1980s, educational reform initiated institutional transformation through administrative streamlining and structural adjustments. "Three Orientations" policy of the early 1990s laid the conceptual groundwork for opening up education, and the first dedicated regulation in the mid-1990s defined it as "a supplement to Chinese education" while instituting an initial approval framework. In 2003, an administrative regulation elevated it to "an integral component of China's educational enterprise", marking a fundamental shift from supplementation to integration. Subsequently, the policy focus transitioned from scale expansion to quality enhancement, embedding SFCE within the broader agenda of national educational openness. Since the 2020s, it has been closely aligned with national strategic priorities, emphasizing the introduction of world-class resources and advancing the strategy to build a strong education system.

5.2 The evolution of SFCE policies from the perspective of theory of institutional change

5.2.1 Driving actors of policy change in SFCE

North (1990) argued that "organizations and their entrepreneurs engage in purposive activity and in that role are the agents of, and shape the direction of institutional change". (p.73) Here, "organizations" may refer to governments, social classes, enterprises, or other groups; any actor that purposefully drives institutional change constitutes an agent of institutional change. As discussed above, the actors of institutional change consist of *the primary action group*, —that is, the organization or group that initiates and propels institutional change —and *the second action group*, namely, the auxiliary forces that assist in realizing the institutional change (North, 2014). The interaction between these actors determines both the direction and effectiveness of institutional change. The driving agents of China's SFCE policy change primarily include the government, higher education institutions, and social forces. These actors perform distinct functions while interacting and reinforcing one another throughout the process of policy change.

Table 1. List of policies related to Sino-foreign cooperative education.

Policy document	Date of publication	Core content and function
<i>Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Education System Reform</i>	1985	It marked the beginning of educational reform, put forward the principle that “education must serve socialist construction” and set the direction of streamlining administration, delegating power, and adjusting the education structure.
<i>Outline for Education Reform and Development in China</i>	1993	It established the strategic priority of education and affirmed the “Three Orientations”—oriented toward modernization, the world, and the future—laying the policy foundation for subsequent opening-up and cooperation.
<i>Interim Provisions on Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools</i>	1995	It provided the first specialized regulation for SFCE, defining its status as “a supplement to Chinese education” and establishing the framework for approval and management.
<i>Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools</i>	2003	It established the legal status of SFCE as “an integral component of China’s educational enterprise” and defined the guiding principles of expanding opening-up and standardizing management.
<i>Implementation Measures for the Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools</i>	2004	It refined the regulations by providing more specific operational provisions on the establishment and operation of SFCE, thereby completing the legal and regulatory framework.
<i>Opinions on Further Strengthening Quality Assurance in SFCE in Higher Education Institutions</i>	2013	The policy focus shifted from scale expansion to quality enhancement in SFCE, emphasizing the strengthening of quality assurance and oversight.
<i>Several Opinions on Effectively Undertaking Education Opening-up in the New Era</i>	2016	It incorporated SFCE into the broader framework of national educational opening-up and set forth the overarching requirements of enhancing quality and efficiency while serving the broader national priorities.
<i>Opinions of Eight Departments Including the Ministry of Education on Accelerating and Expanding Educational Openness in the New Era</i>	2020	It emphasized “accelerating and expanding” educational opening-up in the context of the new era and supported the development of new frontiers.
<i>Outline of Strategic Planning for Expanding Domestic Demand (2022-2035)</i>	2022	It linked SFCE with the expansion of domestic demand, encouraging the provision of high-quality educational services to facilitate the return of education consumption.
<i>Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education System (2024-2035)</i>	2025	It implemented the strategy of building a leading country in education within the field of SFCE, focusing on introducing world-class resources and promoting high-level international exchange and cooperation.

a) *Government-led dominance*: The government has consistently occupied a dominant position throughout the trajectory of SFCE policy change. As the supplier of institutions, the government formulates and adjusts relevant policies in accordance with national strategic priorities, socioeconomic development goals, and educational reform agendas. Through a series of policies and regulations, it provides the institutional framework and developmental direction for SFCE. Therefore, the government belongs to the *primary action group* among the behavioral agents of institutional change. During the initial exploration stage, the government encouraged international educational cooperation through broad macro-educational policies, thereby providing policy support for the SFCE. During the standardized development stage, it introduced specialized regulations to address emerging problems and guide the orderly development of SFCE. During the quality enhancement stage, the government improved the policy system and estab-

lished quality assurance mechanisms to enhance educational quality. In the deepening reform stage, policy innovation and institutional optimization have been further promoted to align SFCE with national strategic priorities and educational modernization initiatives. The government’s leadership is reflected throughout the entire policy process, including goal setting, policy formulation, implementation, and supervision, thereby ensuring consistency between policy development and broader national strategies.

b) *University-driven facilitation*: As the direct implementers of SFCE, universities possess strong intrinsic demands for policy change and have, to a certain extent, propelled the adjustment and refinement of policies. Consequently, universities also function as members of the *second action group* among the behavioral agents of institutional change. Through their active engagement in SFCE practice, universities have accumulated valuable experience while simultaneously identi-

fying problems and deficiencies inherent in existing policies, thereby indirectly influencing policy formulation by providing feedback and proposing recommendations for policy improvement to the government. On the one hand, some universities have encountered numerous difficulties in conducting international cooperation due to policy constraints regarding institutional qualifications, approval procedures, and the like (Wang et al., 2024; Yang, 2023). These practical issues have prompted universities to advocate for more flexible regulations and streamlined approval procedures in order to improve institutional efficiency and flexibility. On the other hand, universities' innovations in faculty recruitment, curriculum development, and talent cultivation models have furnished the government with empirical evidence for formulating more scientifically sound and rational policies, thereby impelling the government to continuously refine policy content in response to the developmental needs of SFCE. Representative institutions such as Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China have developed distinctive operational models and accumulated successful experiences in their cooperative endeavors, which can serve as practical references for policy formulation and facilitate policy innovation and dissemination (Liu, 2023; Ru, 2021).

c) Social participation: Social forces have also contributed to the change of SFCE policies. Enterprises, through collaborative talent cultivation programs with universities and the provision of internship and practical training bases, are deeply involved in the process of SFCE. Their demand for internationally competent graduates influences disciplinary structures and talent cultivation orientation, thereby encouraging policy adjustments in areas such as program distribution and talent cultivation objectives. Parents and students, as consumers of educational services, have also shaped policy development, as their pursuit of high-quality educational resources and diversified educational opportunities has encouraged continuous innovation in program design and talent cultivation models. At the same time, increasing public concern regarding educational quality has strengthened social demands for accountability, prompting the government to enhance regulatory oversight and introduce policies aimed at protecting students' interests (Zhang & Ling, 2022). In this sense, social forces constitute the *second action group* among the behavioral agents of institutional change.

5.2.2 Driving forces of policy change in SFCE

Examining the trajectory of SFCE policy change since the reform and opening-up, the government, as the dominant force in policy change, has consistently aimed to promote the diversification and high-quality development of higher education through the refinement and innovation of these policies, thereby contributing to the construction of a strong education nation, enhancing international competitiveness, and securing maximum benefits for the state. The driving forces behind China's SFCE policy change encompass macro-level imperatives at the national strategic level, developmental demands internal to the education system, and external impulses emanating from the international environment. Fundamentally, however, the SFCE policy change is state-led, with its core

driving force being the maximization of national interests; the state stands as the primary beneficiary of SFCE.

a) The strategic imperative of educational opening-up: Educational opening-up constitutes an integral component of China's overarching opening-up strategy. The SFCE, as a core vehicle for educational internationalization, has undergone policy adjustments that resonate consistently with the pace of national opening-up. In the initial period of reform and opening-up, China urgently needed to overcome its relative isolation and introduce advanced educational concepts, technologies, and management practices from abroad. The preliminary exploration of SFCE was essentially intended to serve the national strategy of "bringing in", removing policy obstacles for international cooperation in the education sector through regulatory relaxation (Zhou & Xiang, 2019). Following China's accession to the WTO, and in the face of rule-based challenges from the global trade in educational services, SFCE policies pivoted toward compliance-oriented adjustments. The promulgation of the *Regulations* on SFCE represented not only an adaptation to international norms but also a strategic effort to safeguard educational sovereignty while expanding international cooperation. In the new era, national initiatives such as the Belt and Road initiative and the vision of building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind have further promoted the transition from quantitative expansion toward high-quality educational opening-up. By encouraging cooperation with world-class educational institutions and supporting regional innovation initiatives, SFCE has increasingly been integrated into broader national efforts to enhance China's global governance capacity (Lin, 2018).

b) The internal demand for the connotative development of higher education: As China's higher education system has shifted from quantitative expansion toward quality-oriented development, SFCE policies have increasingly focused on addressing structural tensions inherent the higher education system. On the one hand, early policy reforms expanded access to high-quality educational resources by lowering entry barriers and supporting the development of undergraduate and postgraduate cooperative programs. These initiatives directly responded to growing societal demand for internationally competent talent. On the other hand, when problems such as quantity-oriented growth and homogeneous competition emerged, the policy promptly shifted toward quality assurance, establishing evaluation and accreditation mechanisms that compelled cooperative programs to move from superficial collaboration to substantive integration (Internationalization Office of Nanjing University, 2025; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2009). Moreover, the growing diversification of China's higher education system has prompted further policy differentiation. Research-intensive universities have been encouraged to establish disciplinary partnerships with leading international institutions, while application-oriented universities have received support for introducing high-quality vocational education resources. These differentiated policy arrangements reflect the increasing complexity of higher education development and the need for more targeted governance approaches.

c) External impetus from international competition and cooperation: The changing landscape of global education has exerted persistent external pressure and impetus on the evolution of SFCE. Since the late 20th century, developed countries have actively expanded transnational education and promoted their educational brands in an effort to compete for global talent and educational markets. Intensifying international competition has compelled China to optimize its policy framework in order to attract world-class educational resources. Consequently, SFCE have gradually raised entry standards, including stricter requirements for foreign partners and stronger emphasis on disciplinary quality, with the aim of enhancing China's international competitiveness. Meanwhile, emerging trends in international educational cooperation have stimulated policy innovation. For example, in response to disruptions affecting overseas study opportunities during extraordinary circumstances, the government permitted qualified cooperative institutions to temporarily expand enrollment in order to protect students' educational rights (Lin, 2022). This measure also opened up new avenues for the local adaptation of international education, demonstrating the policy system's capacity to respond swiftly to external shocks. Additionally, in alignment with the digital transformation of education, pilot programs for online international cooperation have been encouraged (Tianjin Government Website, 2024).

5.2.3 Modes of policy change in SFCE

Lin (1991), drawing upon the distinctiveness of China's reform experience, was among the first to propose and elaborate the concepts of *mandatory institutional change* and *induced institutional change*, both of which have been discussed in the preceding sections. The change of SFCE policies in China does not follow a single mode. Rather, it reflects a composite model characterized by the dominance of government-led *mandatory institutional change* and the complementary role of *induced institutional change* driven by multiple actors. This combination ensures consistency with national strategic priorities while enhancing institutional adaptability through practical experimentation, thereby providing flexible yet stable institutional safeguards for the sustainable development of SFCE.

a) The predominance of mandatory institutional change: *Mandatory institutional change* has played a dominant role throughout the evolution of SFCE policies. Through the formulation and adjustment of laws and regulations, the government has directly shaped both the direction and pace of institutional change. The promulgation of the *Interim Provisions* on SFCE in 1995 marked the first attempt to regulate SFCE through specialized legislation, establishing a basic institutional framework and filling a significant regulatory gap. The *Regulations* on SFCE issued in 2003 further strengthened governmental intervention by improving quality supervision mechanisms and imposing more comprehensive regulatory requirements. The issuance of the *Several Opinions on Effectively Undertaking Education Opening-up in the New Era* in 2016 (General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee & the General Office of the State Council, 2016) exemplified the mandatory characteristic of government-led

deepening reform through top-level design, explicitly requiring SFCE to serve national strategic imperatives. The advantage of mandatory institutional change lies in its capacity to respond rapidly to national priorities and maintain consistency between policy development and macro-level strategic goals. However, excessive reliance on top-down governance may constrain grassroots innovation and lead to rigidity in policy implementation.

b) The complementarity of induced institutional change: While the preceding section examined the dominant role of mandatory change, the process of institutional evolution in SFCE has also been shaped by a complementary dynamic: induced institutional change. With the deepening of SFCE practice, the interest appeals of micro-level actors have gradually come to the fore, and the practical experiences derived from their spontaneous explorations have in turn driven policy adjustments, constituting an important complement through induced change. The practical experiments undertaken by universities may serve as "catalysts" for policy adjustment. For instance, the Nanjing University–Johns Hopkins University Center for Chinese and American Studies, as the earliest established SFCE institution in China, has integrated academic resources from both countries across politics, economics, law, and other fields, forming a distinctive transnational pedagogical system that has provided a replicable model for other such institutions (Xiao & Chen, 2004). Similarly, institutions such as the University of Nottingham Ningbo China and Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University have developed innovative practices, including bilingual instruction, credit transfer systems, and dual-degree arrangements (Li, 2024; Li & Zhao, 2019). Many of these successful practices were later incorporated into policy revisions and contributed to the refinement of provisions concerning substantive cooperation and quality assurance mechanisms in subsequent regulatory documents. Compared with *mandatory institutional change*, *induced institutional change* is more flexible and responsive to the practical needs of diverse stakeholders. Nevertheless, its progress is often gradual and may generate policy fragmentation arising from competing interests.

5.2.4 Pathways of policy change in SFCE

North (1990) argued that institutional change is typically the result of the accumulation of numerous small contractual adjustments among actors over time. Consequently, most institutional change is incremental rather than revolutionary. Incremental institutional change builds upon existing institutions and emphasizes continuity between successive institutional arrangements. The change of SFCE policies in China exhibits the characteristics of an incremental pathway. Through a dynamic balance between path dependence and institutional innovation, policy reforms have gradually promoted institutional optimization while maintaining stability, adaptability, and sustainability.

One important feature of this pathway is the progression from localized experimentation to nationwide implementation. In the early stages of policy formulation, selected regions or institutions are often chosen for pilot implementation. Through small-scale practice, the feasibility and effectiveness

of policies are tested, and upon accumulating experience, the scope of implementation is gradually expanded. For example, in advancing the reform of ministry-provincial joint approval systems, pilot programs were first launched in provinces in provinces such as Hainan and Fujian. After demonstrating positive outcomes in streamlining approval procedures, improving administrative efficiency, and promoting regional development, these experiences were gradually extended to other regions. This approach effectively reduces policy risks and avoids the systemic disruptions that may result from large-scale implementation.

Policy change has also been realized through the continuous revision and refinement of policy documents. As educational practices evolve, policies are adjusted accordingly, resulting in the gradual emergence of a comprehensive policy system from initially fragmented regulations (Xue, 2017). Each policy reform builds upon previous institutional arrangements while responding to newly emerging challenges and demands. During the implementation of the *Regulations* on SFCE, for instance, supplementary measures and interpretive documents were introduced to clarify and refine existing provisions, thereby enhancing policy operability and adaptability (Lin, 2017). Simultaneously, new policies generally represent both continuation and development of old ones: while retaining the rational core of existing policies, they incorporate new concepts and requirements, driving continuous policy advancement.

Although the incremental pathway has reduced policy risks, it also renders policies susceptible to the inertia of historical institutional arrangements, making it difficult to achieve major breakthroughs beyond existing frameworks. For example, the earlier emphasis on quantitative expansion may continue to affect the implementation of subsequent quality-oriented reforms, contributing to persistent problems such as program homogeneity and superficial cooperation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Similarly, the existing regional imbalance, whereby high-quality programs are disproportionately concentrated in the eastern provinces, may prove resistant to rapid change due to path dependence, thereby undermining the effectiveness of policies designed to promote balanced development. Moreover, the reliance on existing policy frameworks may contribute to delays in policy revision (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). For instance, the current *Regulations* has long lacked specific provisions concerning program exit mechanisms and differentiated management systems, making it difficult to phase out low-quality programs and implement differentiated governance—deficiencies that have only begun to receive attention and be progressively refined in recent years (Zhang & Ling, 2022; Zou, 2024).

6. Discussion

This study employs TIC as an analytical framework to systematically examine the evolution and underlying mechanisms of China's SFCE policies since the reform and opening-up period. The findings reveal four progressive stages of this policy system: initial exploration, standardized development, quality

enhancement, and deepened reform, with policy content evolving from fragmented, vague guidelines into a comprehensive, legally grounded institutional framework. Regarding change mechanisms, the government, as the primary action group, has consistently played a dominant role, while higher education institutions and social actors, as important participants, have exerted supplementary influence through practical experimentation and demand-based feedback. The driving forces stem from the strategic imperatives of national educational opening-up, the intrinsic momentum of connotative development in higher education, and the external pressures of international competition and cooperation. These forces have produced a composite model dominated by mandatory changes supplemented by induced changes, achieving continuous institutional optimization and localized innovation through incremental change. However, this incremental change has also engendered path dependence, as reflected in delayed policy adjustments in certain regions and persistent structural contradictions.

Based on the above findings, this study engages in the following dialogues with existing literature. First, regarding policy phase division, our analysis broadly aligns with Wang's (2019) progression from "policy blank" to "policy implementation", while further defining post-2016 practices as the "deepening reform period", highlighting institutional innovation aligned with national strategies. Second, concerning change mechanisms, the study corroborates the state-led governance coexisting with limited decentralization proposed by Lin & Liu (2016) and Si & Rayner (2025), yet further elucidates the hierarchical roles and interactive dynamics among government, universities, and social actors, transcending static descriptions of governance structures prevalent in prior research. Third, in explaining driving forces, we build upon Huang's (2024) and Zou's (2024) stage-based analyses by integrating external strategic demands, internal quality-driven factors, and international competitive pressures into a unified analytical framework, thereby addressing theoretical gaps regarding the underlying causes of policy changes. Fourth, regarding path characteristics, the study identifies a composite pattern dominated by mandatory changes and supplemented by induced changes, along an incremental path. This not only addresses Xue's (2017) observations on policy implementation tensions but also provides a deeper explanation at the level of change logic for the institutional barriers proposed by Lin et al. (2024): institutional inertia stemming from path dependence renders certain structural contradictions difficult to resolve in the short term. In summary, this study advances theoretical understanding of SFCE policy evolution in terms of phase refinement, actor stratification, driving force integration, and pathway mechanisms, providing a more explanatory analytical foundation for future policy optimization.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the evolution and underlying mechanisms of China's SFCE policies. It identifies the progressive stages through which the policy system has evolved and analyzes the mechanisms of change, including the roles of key actors and the driving forces shaping policy development.

The study further traces the change model that characterizes this policy domain and examines the effects of its incremental change approach on institutional outcomes. Based on these findings, the deepening reforms of SFCE policies in China may be advanced through four key pathways.

7.1 Improving the institutional system and enhancing policy coherence

The deepening reform of SFCE policies should begin with the construction of a more systematic and coordinated institutional framework. At present, China has put in place a policy system anchored the *Regulations* on SFCE. However, as the strategies of building a strong education system and promoting high-level educational opening-up continue to advance, gaps and inconsistencies remain in certain policy areas, some existing institutional arrangements are no longer fully capable of responding to the practical demands of the high-quality development of SFCE in the new era (Xue, 2017).

Future efforts should further refine supporting policies, clarify the boundaries of authority and governance requirements for different types of cooperative education institutions and programs, and cover the entire process from access, quality evaluation, to exit mechanisms, ensuring policy completeness and operability. Such efforts will build an institutional framework aligned with the new era of education opening-up. Meanwhile, stronger policy coherence should be established between SFCE policies and other strategic initiatives, including educational opening-up, the Double First-Class Construction, and vocational education reform, so as to avoid policy conflicts or redundancies. Furthermore, a dynamic policy adjustment mechanism should be established to regularly evaluate policy implementation outcomes and respond promptly to emerging challenges and new demands in practice, ensuring that policies remain current and adaptive to changes in both domestic and international educational environments.

7.2 Optimizing the regulatory mechanisms and enhancing governance effectiveness

As the types, levels, and regional distribution of SFCE have become increasingly diversified, the governance system requires strengthened process supervision and evaluation functions (Wang et al., 2025). Against the broader backdrop of administrative streamlining and decentralization, policy reform should strike an appropriate balance between institutional autonomy and regulatory compliance. On the one hand, approval procedures should be simplified, granting more autonomy to localities and universities to stimulate grassroots innovation. On the other hand, ex-post and process-oriented supervision should be reinforced through the establishment of dynamic monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure educational quality. Moreover, differentiated regulatory standards and support policies should be formulated for various types and levels of cooperative programs, such as research-oriented, application-oriented, or vocational institutions, and undergraduate, master's, or doctoral programs, so as to achieve targeted governance. Moreover, emerging technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence can be leveraged to establish

integrated information management platforms for SFCE. By digitalizing the entire process of approval, supervision, and evaluation, policymakers can improve governance efficiency, enhance transparency, and generate evidence-based support for policy implementation.

7.3 Strengthening quality assurance and promoting connotative development

Quality constitutes the foundation and lifeline of SFCE. Future policies should place greater emphasis on connotative development and establish a scientific and diversified quality assurance system. Drawing upon internationally recognized quality accreditation standards while taking into account China's educational context, policymakers should develop a comprehensive evaluation framework encompassing faculty qualifications, curriculum design, teaching effectiveness, and student development. Independent third-party evaluations should be conducted on a regular basis, and evaluation results should be disclosed to the public to enhance accountability and transparency. With regard to faculty and curriculum development, cooperative institutions should be encouraged to recruit world-class faculty and promote deep integration and innovation within curriculum design, avoiding mere formal transplantation or low-level duplication. Furthermore, attention should be devoted to students' learning experiences and employment competitiveness, with robust mechanisms for safeguarding students' rights and interests. Mutual credit recognition and joint or dual degree conferral should be promoted to enhance the international standard of talent cultivation. Through a stronger quality-oriented approach, SFCE can be steered from quantitative expansion toward high-quality development.

7.4 Strengthening risk prevention and safeguarding educational sovereignty

As the international political and economic environment undergoes profound transformation and the global landscape of higher education cooperation continues to evolve, the reform of SFCE policies must adhere to the principle of balancing development and security. Efforts should be coordinated across legal regulation, administrative governance, and risk early warning mechanisms to further improve risk prevention and control systems and ensure the healthy and the orderly development of cooperative education. From a legal perspective, the *Regulations* on SFCE should be revised in a timely manner to incorporate provisions concerning data security, intellectual property protection, and academic ethics, thereby providing clearer legal guidance for educational practice. From a governance perspective, dynamic risk-warning and emergency-response mechanisms should be established to address uncertainties arising from changes in the international environment, including geopolitical conflicts and global public health emergencies. Such mechanisms would help ensure the continuity and stability of cooperative education programs. Additionally, greater attention should be paid to ideological and cultural risk assessment pertaining to curriculum content, teaching materials, and educational resources, so as to ensure that cooperative programs remain aligned with national

regulatory frameworks and cultural contexts. Such measures contribute to the protection of educational sovereignty and the sustainability of transnational education partnerships. By strengthening risk prevention and control capabilities, China can foster a more secure and resilient institutional environment for the long-term development of SFCE.

This study contributes to the literature by systematically examining the evolutionary trajectory, mechanisms (e.g., driving actors, dynamics, patterns of change, and pathways), and future reform directions of China's SFCE policy through the lens of TIC—an approach that remains relatively rare in the existing literature. However, a key limitation is the lack of empirical support, which constrains the study's capacity to effectively advance the localized adaptation of TIC. Future research should draw on empirical methods to test the findings of this study and to advance the theoretical localization development of TIC.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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