

# Comparison of Urban Studies and Urban Planning

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**Abstract.** This research aimed to find the differences between the American undergraduate major Urban Studies and the Chinese undergraduate major Urban Planning and aimed to figure out which major would help students find a better job in China. The researcher reviewed different universities' syllabi and found that the learning objectives and course contents of the two majors in the two countries were different. The American major Urban Studies was more about social science. The Chinese major Urban Planning was more about planning and designing, including sketching graphs for architecture and communities. Both majors had their advantages. After that, the researcher reviewed different companies' employment requirements and found that almost none of the planning institutes in China refused to employ overseas returnees who majored in Urban Studies. The researcher then published a survey on a Chinese Q&A platform to check whether overseas returnees had problems when they were working in a Chinese planning institute, and found that some of them were not familiar with the Chinese style of urban planning. As a result, the researcher interviewed two Chinese urban planning experts for finding solutions to the above question and found it was easy to solve since most people who had abroad education experience would have strong learning abilities. In addition, they could work in the field they were familiar with because there were diverse working forms in Chinese planning institutes. Thus, it could be a good choice to learn Urban Studies in America, especially for students who are interested in social science, and those people could find a good job in China.

**Keywords:** Urban Studies; Urban Planning; College Education; Undergraduate Study.

## 1. Introduction

Urban Studies is an undergraduate major in the US, which could help students to understand the history of urbanization, the layout of cities, and related fields that address a wide range of urban issues (UC Berkeley, n.d.). There is a similar major in China, which is called Urban Planning (The two names are different since the second word of the Chinese one is "planning", not "studies"). It focuses more on designing and sketching (Tongji, 2018), so the two majors are not exactly the same.

As China has made great progress in city development, some Chinese students who majored in Urban Studies in America would choose to return to China and find a job in China after graduating. Why don't they just study Urban Planning in China? Do American universities really have advantages in the Urban Studies field? Which major will help students to be better prepared for their future careers in China? Here comes a doubt about whether Chinese students need to go to America for learning Urban Studies if they want to work in China after graduation. For offering a guide to students who are interested in urban issues, this research is necessary. The research makes a comparison between the American Urban Studies major and the Chinese Urban Planning major, by reviewing different universities' syllabi and different companies' employment requirements, publishing a survey on a Chinese Q&A platform, interviewing two Chinese urban planning experts, and finding out that the two majors in two countries are different in their course contents and learning objectives, but none of them has the absolute advantage to each other and it could be a choice for Chinese students to learn Urban Studies in America if they want to work in China after graduate.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Differences in Learning Objectives

The largest difference between the two majors lies in their learning objectives.

### **2.1.1 Overall vs. Specific**

Urban Studies in America is only a basic major that introduces the overall concepts of urban, including the progress of urbanization, the division of rich and poor urban areas, the research on slums, and the basic concepts of urban planning (UCB, n.d.). Most of the Urban Studies major in American universities are in the college of social science, which focuses more on statistics and economics (UCB, 2018), and planning the city is only a small portion of that major. However, Urban Planning in Chinese universities pays more attention to planning and sketching maps (Tongji University, 2018). The objective of that major is to make students be able to plan the city after graduation.

### **2.1.2 Urban vs. Rural**

Urban Studies in American universities is only the “study of cities”, which do not focus on farms and villages (Rutgers, n.d.). However, Urban Planning in Chinese universities would spend time in small towns and villages. “Students should be able to analysis planning maps for villages and to make plans for villages and towns after graduating” (MOE, 2017).

## **2.2 Differences in Contents of Courses**

The contents of courses of the two majors in the two countries are different, but they do share some similarities: both majors need to learn basic principles of Urban Planning, ecology (UCB, 2018), geography (Tsinghua University, 2019), and GIS (Southeast University, 2018). However, the rest courses are different.

### **2.2.1 Sociology vs. Architecture**

As the researcher reviewed above, Urban Studies belongs to the social science department in American universities. As a result, this major would pay more attention to economics, sociology, and culture studies (UCB, 2018). Because it spends more time on culture and society, it does not pay much attention to the outlook of Architecture (Rutgers, n.d.). However, students in most Chinese universities, such as Tongji and Tsinghua, need to learn Architecture Design in the first two years of college (Tongji University, 2018). They also need to take the History of Architecture and Traditional Chinese Architecture in college (Tsinghua University, 2019).

## **2.3 Differences after Graduate**

After graduation, students would face different choices. Both students in America and China would choose to study for a master’s degree or go to work. The following passage would review both choices in two countries.

### **2.3.1 Apply for Master**

According to the vice-principle of Tongji University, 35% of Tongji graduates who majored in Urban Planning would apply for a master’s degree abroad (Tongji University, 2018). However, none of the documents show whether students who majored in Urban Planning in China or students who majored in Urban Studies in America would have an advantage on the application of master’s degree. In addition, the application of a master’s degree is not the main focus of this research, so the researcher would not review it too much.

### **2.3.2. Employment**

Students can choose to work in China or America after graduation. In China, the most popular places for Urban Planning majors are urban planning and designing institutes (UPDI), government, or estate agents (Pecking University, 2018). The following paragraphs would review whether students who majored in Urban Studies in America can have the same opportunities as students who study in China on certain jobs.

Discrimination against students who study abroad does exist in some Chinese planning institutes, such as Wuxi UPDI. They prohibit to employ anyone who has abroad education experience and it is clearly written on their employment requirements (Wuxi UPDI, 2018). However, most other famous

planning institutes in China do not refuse to hire students who studied abroad by reviewing their requirements. They only refuse to hire people with a bachelor's degree, because such people cannot plan the city well (Brown University, 2018). As a result, the most famous three planning institutes (see e.g., China UPDI, 2020; Shenzhen UPDI, 2020; Beijing UPDI, 2020; AECOM, n.d.) would only hire people with a master's degree or above, and there is no difference between students who graduate in China or in America on their policy level.

To conclude, there is no absolute advantage for both majors after graduation. Except for Wuxi UPDI, none of the other planning institutes in China refuse to hire people with overseas education experience. Thus, the above review is not enough to figure out which major is better.

### 3. Methodology

The above review has discovered that Urban Studies in America has different learning objectives and course contents from Urban Planning in China. However, the researcher cannot tell which one is more practical since both majors have almost the same employment opportunities according to present sources (most discrimination on employment would not be stated in formal documents). Which major is more practical in China? Which major is more suitable for Chinese cities? Which major would make students be more competitive in China? For answering the above questions, the researcher is going to make a survey on people who are working in this field.

First, the researcher asks some questions on a Chinese Q&A platform: Zhihu. The specific questions are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Specific questions which are asked on Zhihu

#	Title of Question
1	Is it possible for American style of Urban Planning to be realized in China?
2	Is it possible to get a good job in China if students study Urban Studies abroad?
3	Will students learn a lot when they go abroad to study Urban Studies?
4	Why do some planning institute think that students who studied abroad are “unusable”?
5	Why some planning institute refuse to hire students who study abroad?
6	Are there many people who studied abroad in the planning institute?

After that, the researcher interviewed Li Weibin and Ma Rui, two expertise in Transportation Office of Beijing UPDI, with similar questions, in order to verify the results on Zhihu.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Results from Zhihu Questions

There are 43 people on Zhihu who answered the above questions in two weeks. Most answers have different opinions so the researcher divides them into two types (type A and type B). The specific classification of answers are listed in Table 2.

All the “Type A” answers to each question are similar since they support learning Urban Studies abroad. In addition, most “Type B” answers in question 4 don’t against learning Urban Studies abroad, but they just analyzed reasons for some companies to think that students who graduate abroad are “unusable”. Some of the answers qualified the question, so they did not agree with those companies’ opinions. Thus, the 14 answers in question 4 should not be counted into the total results, and the total number of answers is 29, in which 17 answers support students to learn Urban Studies in America, and 12 answers against learning Urban Studies in America. The number of supporters is more than the number of people who are against it.

**Table 2.** The classification of answers

#	Title of Question	Perspective of type A	Perspective of type B
1	Is it possible for American style of Urban Planning to be realized in China?	It is possible and China had imitated a lot from America	American urban style is not suitable in China.
2	Is it possible to get a good job in China if students study Urban Studies abroad?	They would get a good job	They cannot get a good job.
3	Will students learn a lot when they go abroad to study Urban Studies?	They have learnt a lot	It is useless
4	Why do some planning institute think that students who studied abroad are “unusable”?	Normal institutes would not think in that way	It’s understandable for institutes to think in that way, because those students have their own problem
5	Why some planning institute refuse to hire students who study abroad?	Normal institutes would not refuse to hire anyone	It’s understandable because those students have problems
6	Are there many people who studied abroad in the planning institute?	There are a lot.	Nobody has oversea learning experience in a institute

**Table 3.** Data results from the survey

#	Number of answers	A type answer	B type answer
1	9	2	7
2	5	4	1
3	7	4	3
4	14	4	Most answers qualified the question
5	3	3	1
6	5	4	0
T	43	21	22

## 4.2 Anlysis of Zhihu Question

### 4.2.1 Overall Disscusion

By making this survey, the researcher finds that Urban Studies majors in America do have some advantages. Many people think it is necessary to learn Urban Studies abroad.

However, another portion of answerer (Type B) thinks that learning Urban Studies in America is a “waste of time”, which “have little help for students’ future work”. In addition, some planning institutes, such as the examples in question four, might think that students who study abroad are unusable. Why those people would have such opinions? What are the problems that students who studied abroad are facing? For finding out the shortages of learning abroad, the researcher summarizes some type B answers.

### 4.2.2 Shortages for Students Who Studied Abroad

Unfamiliar with Chinese policies. There are significant differences in the policies of Urban Planning between China and America. Students would learn a lot of American policies in Urban Studies major, but they would use none of them when they back to work in China because China has its own Urban Planning laws and standards. Thus, students who study abroad may be confused about some Chinese policies and apply the wrong law.

Differences at planning levels. China is a developing country, so it would pay more attention to the overall planning of a city or a region. However, as a developed country, America would spend more time on details in urban planning, such as street optimization or beautifying the outlook of buildings. Students who learn Urban Studies in America would not have a strong ability to plan the overall of the city. Thus, it becomes a weak point for them.

Unfamiliar with Chinese terminologies. Chinese urban planners do invite certain terminologies, such as the “floor area ratio”, “general plan”, and “master plan”. Those terminologies would not be

mentioned in Urban Studies class in America, but they are often used in China. That would be a shortage for students who studied in America because they would not use them well in their work.

### 4.3 Records in the Interview

Ma Rui and Li Weibin, two urban planners in Beijing UPDI and are majored in Urban Planning in China, were interviewed. The following are some records (or summary) during the interview.

Q: Do you think it is necessary to learn Urban Studies abroad?

Ma: It's not necessary, but it could be a choice. Beijing UPDI hires a lot of urban planners who graduate from American universities every year. We don't have discrimination on people who have abroad education experience.

Q: What is the difference between American Urban Studies major and Chinese Urban Planning major?

Ma: Urban Studies in America would pay more attention on people, including residents who live around and office workers in surrounding buildings. American urban planner would consider more about the citizens' thoughts and rights, and Chinese urban planner would not do that. In addition, most frontier concepts on urban planning come from America, so it is important to hire students who learned in America.

Q: What if people who studied abroad do not know much about Chinese Urban Planning's rules or terminologies?

Li: That would be a problem, but most "oversea returnees" in our institute would learn those things quickly. There is a law called The Urban and Rural Planning Law of PRC. Those students would remember that quickly when they enter the institute. They all have strong learning abilities.

Q: Would graduates who studied abroad have same work as other people?

Li: Not exactly. Everyone can choose a specific program to do in Beijing UPDI. If people who studied abroad are more familiar with statistics analysis, then they can do those works in the institute. Planning institutes have diverse types of works, including designing, data analyzing, sketching maps, programing, and policy making. If your major is related to those area, then you can get a job in our institute.

### 4.4 Analysis for the Interview

The interview verifies that a good planning institute would not refuse to hire people who have abroad experiences, which shows the same as Beijing UPDI's enrollment requirements that is reviewed before. Li also suggested that students who are not familiar with the Chinese style of Urban Planning can learn those terminologies and policies when they start to work, so it would not be big trouble for students who studied abroad. In addition, people who studied abroad can do what they are good at in the institute. They don't need to do something they are not familiar with.

## 5. Conclusion

There are many differences between the Urban Studies major in America and Urban Planning major in China, especially in their learning objectives and course contents. The learning objective of Urban Studies is to introduce the overall concepts of urban, including urbanization, slums, urban culture, and urban economics. As a result, the courses of Urban Studies in America are more about social science, statistics, and macroeconomics. On the other hand, Chinese universities focus more on "designing and sketching". Students in China would not learn much about social science but they will learn how to design architecture or a community. Thus, there are differences between Urban Planning in China and Urban Studies in America.

As a result, people who studied Urban Studies in America would not be familiar with the Chinese style of urban planning. Urban planning policies, styles, and terminologies with Chinese identities would confuse some of the "overseas returnees". However, most of them can learn those terms at

work. In addition, people who studied abroad can choose to work in the field which they are good at since urban planning contains a wide range of works.

Because people who learned Urban Studies have a specialty in certain fields of urban planning, almost all planning institutes in China are willing to employ overseas returnees. As a result, it could be a choice for Chinese high school students to major in Urban Studies in America and back to work in China when they graduate. Since American Urban Studies spend more time on social science, students who prefer social science, rather than architecture, are more suitable to study in America. They can choose to work on culture, statistics, and urban economy analysis in the planning institute after they graduate, and they would be familiar with those works.

Although there are differences in contents between the two majors in two countries, those differences would not matter and can be transformed into the specialty of overseas returnees'. Thus, America has some comparative advantages in the Urban Studies field and it could be a choice for Chinese students to learn Urban Studies in America. They could find a good job in China after they graduate and they would not have any disadvantages to students who learn Urban Planning in China.

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