A Comparative Study on the Statistical Systems of Sino-US Trade in Services

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This paper makes a multi-dimensional comparative study on the service trade system between China and the United States. In terms of legal basis, the United States has established the statutory statistical authority of the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) of the Ministry of Commerce with the International Investment and Trade in Services Survey Act, forming a multi-sectoral coordination mechanism; China mainly relies on departmental regulations and lacks legislative protection at the national level. In terms of statistical system, the United States has built a three-dimensional data system of "core survey + administrative records + model estimation" and has taken the lead in carrying out special statistics on digital deliverable services; China focuses on direct reporting by key enterprises, and data integration and technical means are relatively lagging behind. In terms of market opening, the United States pursues a comprehensive liberalization policy, actively promotes high-standard agreements such as Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), and advocates the free flow of data; China has implemented gradual opening up through platforms such as the Pilot Free Trade Zone and the comprehensive pilot program for expanding the opening up of the service industry, and established a negative list management system, but regional policies still have fragmentation problems. In terms of industrial support, U.S. service trade is dominated by high value-added areas such as intellectual property rights, finance, and professional services; although China has advantages in scale in traditional service industries, its international competitiveness in knowledge-intensive services still needs to be improved. It is suggested that China should speed up the legislative process of service trade, improve the cross-departmental data sharing mechanism, promote institutional opening up, and strengthen the innovation capability of digital services.

Keywords: statistical systems, service trade, institutional frameworks

With the deepening of global economic integration, the role of service trade in international trade has become increasingly prominent. As the world's two largest economies, the interaction between China and the United States in the field of service trade not only profoundly impacts the economic structures and development paths of both countries but also holds significant strategic implications for the global service trade landscape. According to the latest data released by the Ministry of Commerce, China's total service trade volume surpassed the trillion-dollar mark for the first time in 2024, reaching $1,056.46 billion, a year-on-year increase of 13.2%,

with its proportion in foreign trade rising to 14.6%. Meanwhile, the United States recorded a total service trade volume of approximately $1.9 trillion during the same period, maintaining a substantial surplus of $293.33 billion and ranking first globally. This substantial gap reflects systemic differences between China and the United States in service trade institutional frameworks, statistical systems, openness levels, and policy orientations. Based on the Manual on Statistics of International Trade in Services 2010 (MSITS 2010), the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) framework, as well as official documents and practical cases from both countries, this paper conducts an in-depth comparative analysis across five dimensions: legal foundations, statistical systems, management models, openness mechanisms, and development trends. The study aims to identify key challenges in the evolution of China's service trade system and propose optimization recommendations by drawing on advanced U.S. experiences.

In Terms of the Top-Level Design of Laws and Institutions, China and the United States Exhibit Entirely Different Construction Logics

The governance system for U.S. trade in services is built upon a foundation of high legalization and multi-agency coordination. As early as 1985, the U.S. Congress enacted the International Investment and Trade in Services Survey Act, which explicitly authorized the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) under the Department of Commerce as the sole authoritative agency for national trade-in-services statistics, granting it statutory power to conduct mandatory surveys of enterprises, thereby ensuring the authority and completeness of data collection. This legislation not only established BEA's central role but also facilitated the formation of cross-departmental collaboration mechanisms involving the Treasury Department, Department of Homeland Security, State Department, and others, enabling the integration and utilization of diverse data such as visa records, cross-border payments, and foreign direct investment. In contrast, China's trade-in-services management system, though gradually improving, lacks unified support from overarching legislation. Currently, it primarily relies on the Statistical Monitoring System for International Trade in Services (2022 edition), jointly issued by the Ministry of Commerce and the National Bureau of Statistics, which operates at the level of departmental regulations and lacks the legally binding force of national Homo sapiens-level legislation. Despite the introduction in recent years of a series of guiding documents such as the Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Trade in Services and the Opinions on the Reform and Innovative Development of Digital Trade, shortcomings remain in enforcement rigidity, legal liability definitions, and corporate compliance obligations. This "administrative-led + policy-driven" model, while offering flexibility, has led to inconsistencies in local implementation standards and insufficient motivation for data reporting, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises and individual service providers.

In Terms of Statistical Systems and Data System Construction, Significant Differences Are Evident in Implementation Depth and Technical Means

Both China and the United States adhere to the international standards of the United Nations' "MSITS 2010" and "BPM6". However, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) has established a three-dimensional data collection system centered on "core surveys + administrative records + model estimation". Its annual "Survey of International Trade in Services" covers a large number of key enterprises, including dimensions such as transaction value, partner countries, and related-party attributes, and employs the "North American Industry

Classification System" (NAICS) to align with ISIC Rev. 4. The BEA actively integrates administrative data from customs, the Federal Reserve System, tax authorities, and other departments, and uses the Financial Intermediation Services Indirectly Measured (FISIM) method to estimate the service value implied by bank interest spreads, significantly improving the accuracy of financial services statistics. More forward-looking is that, since 2016, the BEA has begun specifically measuring and publishing trade data for "digitally deliverable services", covering areas such as Software as a Service (SaaS), cloud computing, and remote technical support, effectively addressing the statistical challenges posed by the digital economy. In contrast, China's "Statistical Monitoring System for International Trade in Services" has established four modules covering the four modes of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)—cross-border supply, consumption abroad, commercial presence (FATS), and movement of natural persons—but in practice, it still relies mainly on direct reporting by key enterprises, with limited integration of sampling surveys and administrative data. Particularly in FATS statistics, despite years of pilot programs, challenges such as the complexity of financial independent accounting for foreign-funded enterprises and limited information sharing between parent and subsidiary companies have resulted in room for improvement in data coverage and timeliness. For the movement of natural persons (Mode 4), China currently relies primarily on immigration management data for estimation, lacking a mature quantitative model for support.

Regarding the Opening of Service Trade and Market Access Mechanisms, China and the United States Have Adopted Different Approaches

The United States, as an advocate for global trade liberalization in services, maintains a highly open domestic market with minimal restrictions on foreign investors, particularly in sectors such as finance, telecommunications, and professional services. This openness is built upon its robust competitiveness in the service industry. For instance, the U.S. financial services sector accounts for nearly 30% of global value-added, housing globally influential multinational financial institutions like JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs. The U.S. actively participates in negotiations for high-standard economic and trade agreements such as CPTPP and DEPA, striving to shape digital trade rules by advocating for principles like cross-border data flow freedom, prohibitions on data localization requirements, and source code protection. In contrast, China has been steadily advancing institutional openness in recent years, establishing a tiered, multi-level platform system for openness. By October 2025, China had established 22 pilot free trade zones, the Beijing Comprehensive Demonstration Zone for Expanding Openness in Services (Version 2.0), and the Hainan Free Trade Port, while releasing both national and pilot free trade zone versions of negative lists for cross-border trade in services, reducing the number of restricted items to 27 and below 70 respectively. Breakthroughs have been made particularly in sectors like healthcare, education, finance, and data. For example, China now allows qualified foreign financial institutions to establish wholly-owned securities and fund companies domestically; promotes pilot mutual recognition of professional qualifications in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area; and explores mechanisms for outbound data security assessments and a "whitelist" system. However, compared to the comprehensive openness of the U.S., China's approach remains more gradual and selective, with stringent controls still in place for sensitive sectors like value-added telecommunications and news publishing. Additionally, openness policies exhibit fragmentation across regions, yet to form a unified and efficient national institutional framework.

In Terms of Development in Key Areas and Industrial Support Capabilities, China and the United States Have Complementary Advantages

The U.S. service trade structure, highly knowledge-intensive and technology-driven, is concentrated in high-value-added sectors such as financial services, intellectual property royalties, professional and management consulting, and information technology services. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2024, these four categories of service exports accounted for over 60% of the total, with intellectual property royalties alone exceeding $140 billion, reflecting its core position in the global innovation value chain. Companies like Apple, Microsoft, Disney, and Hollywood film studios generate substantial overseas revenue through patent licensing and copyright exports. Concurrently, the U.S. places great emphasis on digital technology empowering the transformation of traditional services, encouraging cross-border e-commerce, telemedicine, and online education platforms to expand into international markets, thereby creating a new development model of "technology-driven—platform-enabled—ecosystem symbiosis". In contrast, although China's service trade started relatively late, it is accelerating its transformation toward high-end and digitalization, leveraging its manufacturing advantages and vast domestic market. Currently, China's service trade remains dominated by traditional sectors such as travel, transportation, and construction, which together account for over half of the total service imports and exports. However, knowledge-intensive services have shown rapid growth in recent years, with a 17.3% increase in 2024, 4.1% points higher than the overall growth rate, demonstrating strong development potential. Particularly in the digital platform services sector, companies like Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance have performed remarkably in e-commerce, social media, and digital content globalization, serving as vital bridges connecting consumers in China, the U.S., and beyond. China is actively promoting "servitization of manufacturing", supporting leading enterprises such as Foxconn and BYD to incorporate embedded services like industrial design, remote operation and maintenance, and supply chain management into their export portfolios, thereby fostering new growth drivers.

In Terms of International Cooperation and Rule Discourse Power, China and the United States Exhibit Different Strategic Orientations

The United States has long dominated international organizations such as the WTO, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and International Monetary Fund (IMF), wielding significant influence in areas like service trade statistical standards, investment rules, and digital governance. For instance, the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) not only serves as the primary agency for releasing domestic data in the U.S. but also plays a leading role in innovating global service trade statistical methodologies. Its developed supplementary indicators for Foreign Affiliates Trade in Services (FATS) and digital service measurement tools have been adopted by multiple countries. Through bilateral and regional agreements, the U.S. exports its regulatory model, emphasizing principles such as transparency, non-discrimination, and procedural justice, aiming to shape an international regulatory environment favorable to its domestic enterprises. In recent years, China has accelerated its participation in global governance, proactively aligning with high-standard international trade and economic rules. Beyond joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partners (RCEP), China has formally applied to join the CPTPP and DEPA, while conducting stress tests in its pilot free trade zones to explore institutional arrangements compatible with internationally accepted rules. In the field of service trade statistics, China has continuously revised its International Service Trade Statistical Monitoring System to enhance

alignment with MSITS 2010, improving data comparability and transparency. Notably, Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region of China, has played a unique role in service trade statistical practices. The Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department has compiled balance of payments and service trade statistics since 2002, strictly adhering to BPM6 and SNA 2008 standards. In 2023, it released the Service Classification (2023), further refining local-specific categories such as transportation and financial services, thereby strengthening its capability to support re-export trade and offshore services. Hong Kong's experience demonstrates that a robust statistical system—characterized by sound legal frameworks, transparent data, and detailed classifications—is key to enhancing international trust and attracting foreign investment.

In summary, the differences in the service trade systems between China and the United States essentially reflect the distinct economic development stages and governance logics of the two countries. The United States, leveraging its mature market economy system, strong service industry foundation, and dominant position in global rules, has formed a system characterized by "freedom and openness + detailed statistics + legal guarantee", while China is in a critical period of transformation from a "manufacturing giant" to a "service power", adopting a development path of "pilot first + gradual opening + policy guidance". The former is more stable and predictable, while the latter demonstrates greater flexibility and execution. In the face of the new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation, China should, under the premise of maintaining self-reliance and controllability, further absorb international advanced experience and accelerate the construction of a service trade system that is in line with high-standard international economic and trade rules. Only in this way can we truly achieve the leap from "large trade volume" to "strong trade quality", providing a solid foundation for building a trade power.

Looking ahead, service trade will become a new frontier where competition and cooperation in China-US relations intertwine. Whether it is the contest over digital rules or the competition and cooperation in emerging fields such as green and low-carbon, health care, etc., will profoundly reshape the economic and trade relationship pattern of the two countries. China can only firmly promote institutional opening, continuously improve statistical monitoring capabilities, optimize the business environment, and gain the initiative in this transformation.

Conclusion

This study conducts a systematic comparative analysis of the service trade systems between China and the United States from five dimensions: legal basis, statistical system, management model, opening mechanism and development trend. The research finds that China and the United States show significant differences in the construction of service trade systems, reflecting two different economic development stages and governance logics.

The United States, with its mature market economy system, strong service industry foundation and dominant position in global rules, has formed a system of "freedom and openness + meticulous statistics + legal guarantee". Its service trade governance system is based on a high degree of rule of law and multi-departmental collaboration. The statistical system is centered on "core investigation + administrative record + model estimation", the open mechanism is highly market-oriented, the service trade structure is highly knowledge-intensive and technology-driven, and the measurement of digital trade leads the world.

China is currently in a critical period of transformation from a "manufacturing giant" to a "service power", and is adopting a development path of "pilot first + gradual opening up + policy guidance". Although significant progress has been made in recent years in areas such as the statistical system for trade in services, the construction

of open platforms, and breakthroughs in key areas, there are still challenges such as a weak legal foundation, insufficient refinement of the statistical system, inadequate alignment of openness with international rules, and the need to enhance the statistical capacity for digital trade.

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