

Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Growth of the Lawyers

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Abstract: In 2025, the number of lawyers in China exceeded 830,000, sparking discussions and concerns within the legal community. A review of the 40-year development history of the legal profession in China reveals that since the restoration and reconstruction of the legal system in China, the number of lawyers has maintained rapid growth. The legal profession in the United States started earlier and also experienced a continuous growth process, but the growth rate has gradually slowed over the past four decades. Through comparative analysis of the development processes of the legal professions in the two countries, it can be found that the main factors influencing the growth of the number of lawyers include economic growth rate, the status of the rule of law, the threshold for practicing law, career development space, regulation models, and competition among peers. It can be predicted that in the current and future periods, the number of lawyers in China will continue to maintain medium-to-high growth.

Keywords: lawyer; growth; influence; factor

Introduction

In September 2025, the Ministry of Justice of China revealed at a press conference organized by the State Council Information Office that the number of lawyers in China had reached 830,000. After this announcement, it sparked widespread attention in the legal profession, leading to discussions on whether the number of lawyers is excessive, whether the legal service market is oversupplied, and whether the entry requirements for lawyers should be strictly restricted. What is the current growth rate of the number of lawyers in China compared to historical levels? What are the reasons behind this growth? What are the future trends? These are all questions that require in-depth research.

In December 2025, the American Bar Association (ABA) released the 2025 National Lawyer Population Survey. The survey results showed that the number of lawyers in the United States has reached 1.37 million, an increase of 18,000 compared to the previous year, marking the first significant growth after years of stagnation. As the world's largest economy, the United States has a long history of legal profession development, with fluctuations in the number of lawyers over the past century. Many of the changes and discussions currently taking place in China's legal profession have occurred in the history of the U.S. legal profession. Therefore, comparing the development of China's and the U.S. legal professions and analyzing the factors

influencing the changes in the number of lawyers in both countries can help better understand the current state of China's legal profession and predict its future trends.

1. Historical review of the growth in the number of lawyers in china

At the press conference in September 2025, the Ministry of Justice of China did not specify the statistical cutoff date for the published lawyer data (i.e., 830,000), and the figure of 830,000 itself is not entirely accurate. Recently, the official website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China updated the statistical data on the legal profession, and annual statistics from 1984 to 2024 are now available for query. For the purpose of research, this article will use the relevant statistical data from the National Bureau of Statistics for analysis. Observations show that the statistical data on the legal profession by the National Bureau of Statistics underwent two changes in statistical scope in 1991 and 2007. In 1991, auxiliary personnel such as legal assistants were included in the statistics on the number of lawyers, while in 2007, auxiliary personnel were excluded from the statistical data, and data on public service lawyers, corporate lawyers, and legal aid lawyers were added. To ensure the continuity and comparability of the data, this article has excluded all auxiliary personnel numbers from previous years and compiled Table 1.

Year	Lawyers Total	Year-on-Year % Change	Year	Lawyers Total	Year-on-Year % Change
2024	798381	9.12%	2004	107841	1.12%
2023	731637	12.51%	2003	106643	4.35%
2022	650312	13.29%	2002	102198	13.23%
2021	574042	9.86%	2001	90257	6.49%
2020	522510	10.46%	2000	84756	7.50%
2019	473036	11.63%	1999	78843	14.32%
2018	423758	15.94%	1998	68966	4.07%
2017	357193	12.27%	1997	66269	-2.72%
2016	325540	9.54%	1996	68122	7.98%
2015	297175	9.48%	1995	63088	3.59%
2014	271452	9.18%	1994	60901	29.04%
2013	248623	6.99%	1993	47194	36.73%
2012	232384	8.10%	1992	34515	16.84%
2011	214968	10.14%	1991	29540	-23.81%
2010	195170	12.60%	1990	38769	-11.31%
2009	173327	10.60%	1989	43715	39.18%
2008	156710	8.85%	1988	31410	61.42%
2007	143967	4.38%	1987	19459	33.86%
2006	130310	6.91%	1986	14537	8.46%
2005	121889	13.03%	1985	13403	60.90%
			1984	8330	N/A
Table 1:Lawyers Population in China 1984-2024					

Due to the lack of annual data on public service lawyers, corporate lawyers, and legal aid lawyers before 2006, Table 1 only includes full-time and part-time lawyers for the period prior to 2006. Furthermore, when calculating the annual change rate of lawyers in 2007, only full-time and part-time lawyers were considered to ensure data

comparability.

As can be seen from Table 1, over the past 40 years, the number of lawyers in China has generally maintained a relatively high growth rate, but the growth rate has not been stable, even experiencing some declines. In 1979, the lawyer system in China was restored and rebuilt, with the number of lawyers nationwide being only slightly over 200. In 1980, the "Interim Regulations on Lawyers" were promulgated. This was the first legal provision concerning the lawyer system in China, and its promulgation and implementation put the establishment and development of the lawyer system on a legal track. The regulations clearly stated that lawyers are the legal workers of the state, and the legal advisory office is the working institution for lawyers to perform their duties, which is a public institution funded by the state. During this period, the state strengthened the lawyer workforce by allocating cadres, resulting in a pulsatile growth pattern in the number of lawyers. Due to the low base, the growth rate of the number of lawyers was generally high.

In 1986, China established the lawyer qualification examination system and held the first national lawyer qualification examination, changing the previous practice of assessing and granting lawyer qualifications. That year, due to adjustments in examination policies and other factors, the growth of the number of lawyers slowed down. In 1987, legal advisory offices across the country were uniformly renamed as law firms, and pilot projects for establishing cooperative law firms were launched. The characteristics of cooperative firms, such as "self-financing, self-responsibility for profits and losses, self-development, and self-management," broke the restriction of state control over income and expenditure, endowing law firms with enormous potential to serve the market economy. At the same time, the state-owned law firm system also underwent significant changes, with funding management shifting from full allocation and centralized revenue and expenditure to self-financing and retained surplus, and the distribution system changing from a fixed salary system to a performance-based floating system, effectively stimulating development vitality. From 1987 to 1988, both the number of law firms and lawyers saw substantial growth.

From 1989 to 1990, influenced by various factors, China's GDP growth rate dropped to around 4%. With the changes in the macroeconomic situation, the legal profession, as a service industry, was inevitably affected. At the same time, in response to issues such as the one-sided pursuit of economic benefits, disregard for professional ethics, violation of professional discipline, and unfair competition in the legal profession at that time, China's Ministry of Justice launched a centralized rectification of the legal profession in 1990. During this rectification, judicial administrative authorities strictly implemented access to legal practice, strengthened the management of legal practice certificates, eliminated part-time lawyers who did not meet the requirements, and no longer approved law firms composed entirely of invited or part-time personnel. The strict entry and exit policies led to a significant decline in the number of lawyers in 1990 and 1991.

In 1992, China officially established the socialist market economy system. Subsequently, the reform of the legal profession, guided by market-oriented principles, continued to deepen, and the partnership-based law firm, as an organizational form better suited to the needs of market economic development, was widely introduced into the legal profession. In 1993, the Ministry of Justice of China formulated the "Plan for Deepening the Reform of the Legal Work," which was implemented after

approval by the State Council. This plan explicitly stated that the nature of legal institutions would no longer be defined by the ownership model of means of production or administrative management models, and instead emphasized the vigorous development of self-regulatory law firms that do not occupy state staffing or funding and are adapted to the socialist market economy. Following this, a number of partnership-based law firms were rapidly established, and a group of legal professionals left their institutional positions to start their own law firms or transition into the legal profession. The number of lawyers surged from 34,500 in 1992 to 60,900 in 1994. After experiencing the dividends of market-oriented reforms, China's legal profession entered a phase of steady development.

In May 1996, China promulgated the "Lawyers Law". The law clarified that lawyers are practitioners who provide legal services to society, stipulated three organizational forms of law firms: state-funded, cooperative, and partnership, and strengthened the protection of lawyers' professional rights. Since then, the Ministry of Justice and the All-China Lawyers Association have formulated a series of regulations, normative documents, and self-discipline norms related to lawyers' profession, ensuring that lawyers' professional activities are basically conducted in accordance with laws and regulations, and making the management of the legal profession more standardized.

Since 1997, judicial administrative authorities have strengthened the management of lawyers' practice certificates, with each certificate being individually numbered and reported to the Ministry of Justice for record. This has eliminated the arbitrary issuance of lawyers' certificates to unqualified individuals, and those who had obtained practice certificates but were not actually practicing law were also cleared out, making the statistics on the number of lawyers more accurate. Meanwhile, as the number of lawyers increased, the necessity of specially invited lawyers gradually diminished, leading to a gradual reduction in their numbers. In terms of statistical data, the number of lawyers in China saw a slight decline in 1997, and only a modest increase of 2.34% in 1998.

The 1999 revision of the China Constitution added the content of "governing the country according to law and building a socialist country under the rule of law," and the whole society's emphasis on the rule of law has been continuously increasing. In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization, and the market demand for legal services was further unleashed. This played a promoting role in the development of the legal profession, with the growth rate of lawyers exceeding 13% in 2002. At the same time, the rapidly growing legal profession was uneven in quality, and some irregularities such as illegal and non-compliant practice emerged. Starting from 2003, the Ministry of Justice intensified the supervision of lawyers' practice and launched a centralized education and rectification campaign for the legal profession in 2004. That year, the growth rate of lawyers dropped to 1.12%. After the centralized rectification, the growth rate of lawyers steadily recovered.

In 2007, China amended its Lawyers Law, refining institutional frameworks through multiple measures. The revision introduced two new organizational forms—individual law firms and special general partnership law firms—while detailing lawyers' professional rights. These reforms created a more favorable environment for the legal profession. In subsequent years, a combination of factors drove a surge in lawyers: skyrocketing case volumes, reforms to the judicial examination policy (allowing third-year university students to take the national exam), continuous expansion of law

school enrollments, and mounting employment pressures for law graduates.

After 2014, China's emphasis on the rule of law reached a new level. At the national level, a series of policy measures were introduced to deepen the reform of the lawyer system, further strengthening the protection of lawyers' rights and optimizing the working environment for lawyers. Meanwhile, the systems of public service lawyers and corporate lawyers were widely implemented, with the ranks of government public service lawyers and state-owned enterprise corporate lawyers expanding rapidly. Under the combined effect of these factors, the number of lawyers continued to maintain a high growth rate.

2. Historical review of U.S. lawyers' growth

The American Bar Association released data on the U.S. legal profession from 1878 to 2025 in its National Lawyer Population Survey, as shown in Table 2 below.

Year	Lawyers Total	Year-on-Year % Change	Year	Lawyers Total	Year-on-Year % Change
2025	1,374,720	1.38%	1982	617,320	0.77%
2024	1,355,963	-0.53%	1981	612,593	6.57%
2023	1,363,126	0.07%	1980	574,810	15.37%
2022	1,362,231	-0.06%	1979	498,249	7.18%
2021	1,362,982	0.00%	1978	464,851	7.62%
2020	1,363,017	0.90%	1977	431,918	1.63%
2019	1,350,864	0.69%	1976	424,980	4.99%
2018	1,341,630	0.42%	1975	404,772	5.00%
2017	1,335,963	1.78%	1974	385,515	5.37%
2016	1,312,630	0.87%	1973	365,875	2.05%
2015	1,301,357	1.59%	1972	358,520	4.53%
2014	1,281,022	1.03%	1971	342,980	4.94%
2013	1,268,011	1.83%	1970	326,842	1.67%
2012	1,245,205	1.61%	1969	321,473	1.70%
2011	1,225,452	1.86%	1968	316,104	1.73%
2010	1,203,097	1.92%	1967	310,736	1.76%
2009	1,180,386	1.57%	1966	305,368	1.79%
2008	1,162,124	1.64%	1965	300,000	0.95%
2007	1,143,358	2.36%	1964	297,186	0.96%
2006	1,116,967	1.10%	1963	294,372	0.96%
2005	1,104,766	1.87%	1962	291,559	0.97%
2004	1,084,504	2.44%	1961	288,746	0.98%
2003	1,058,662	0.85%	1960	285,933	2.58%
2002	1,049,751	0.08%	1959	278,746	2.65%
2001	1,048,903	2.59%	1958	271,560	2.72%
2000	1,022,462	2.20%	1957	264,373	2.79%
1999	1,000,440	1.47%	1956	257,186	2.87%
1998	985,921	3.43%	1955	250,000	12.81%
1997	953,260	0.71%	1950	221,605	10.80%
1996	946,499	5.62%	1945	200,000	10.36%
1995	896,140	3.53%	1940	181,220	13.26%
1994	865,614	2.31%	1935	160,000	15.06%
1993	846,036	5.79%	1930	139,059	6.15%
1992	799,760	2.91%	1925	131,000	6.92%
1991	777,119	2.84%	1920	122,519	0.43%
1990	755,694	4.15%	1915	122,000	-0.12%
1989	725,579	1.70%	1910	122,149	3.52%

1988	713,456	2.65%	1905	118,000	3.09%
1987	695,020	2.72%	1900	114,460	27.70%
1986	676,584	3.50%	1890	89,630	39.75%
1985	653,686	0.94%	1880	64,137	0.00%
1984	647,575	4.01%	1878	64,137	N/A
1983	622,625	0.86%			
Table 2:Lawyers Population in USA 1878-2025					

It can be observed that the United States legal profession did not have complete annual statistical data until 1955. Prior to this, only 5-year or 10-year statistical data was available, and some of this data may have been estimated, thus not entirely accurate. Some data showed abnormal increase or decrease, such as the number of lawyers in 1980 increased by 15.37% compared with 1979, which was probably caused by the change of statistical caliber. Nevertheless, the aforementioned data still holds significant research value.

Richard L. Abel once conducted a comprehensive analysis of the development of the American legal profession from its inception to the 1980s. He found that over the century between 1880 and 1980, the number of lawyers increased by ninefold, while the growth rate of the U.S. population during the same period was less than half of that. During this century, the growth of the number of lawyers was erratic and fluctuated greatly.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the U.S. legal profession thrived in a relatively free market, with the number of attorneys growing rapidly—particularly in the 1920s. This expansion mirrored the nation's economic prosperity and was directly linked to the proliferation of low-tuition part-time law schools, as well as the surge in immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe seeking legal careers.

After a period of expansion in the U.S. legal profession, state bar associations began implementing stringent access controls, including requiring pre-legal education for licensing, excluding graduates from non-accredited law schools, and increasing the difficulty of bar exams. After the 1930s, the Great Depression and World War II's massive economic losses led to a decline in demand for legal services, resulting in a significant slowdown in the growth of the legal profession.

To address challenges and protect the profession's interests, the U.S. legal profession has implemented restrictions on both internal and external competition. Previously, intense rivalry existed among lawyers and between legal professionals and non-lawyers, with lawyers maintaining their monopoly solely through courtroom practice. Legal service advertising and sales were unrestricted and widespread. The American Bar Association and numerous state bar associations established unlicensed legal practice committees to promote legislation limiting the conduct of court clerks, real estate agents, banks, and trust companies. They also reached market-sharing agreements with competing associations such as accountants, banks, collection agencies, insurance adjusters, life insurers, life insurance underwriters, and real estate brokers. Some state bar associations imposed residency requirements to restrict interstate lawyer mobility, banned advertising promotions, and introduced minimum fee plans to curb competition.

After World War II, the U.S. economy entered a period of prosperity, leading to a growing demand for legal services. With the rise of consumer movements and the

prevalence of the "free market" ideology, various professional protections for lawyers were gradually weakened. The Unlicensed Lawyers Commission was dissolved, and market segregation agreements were abolished. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the minimum fee plan violated antitrust laws, deemed the ban on advertising unconstitutional due to its infringement on freedom of speech, and declared that requirements for citizenship and residency violated privileges and immunities as well as constitutional provisions on interstate commerce. These developments contributed to the relaxation of legal practice access and an increase in the number of lawyers.

From 1960 to 1980, sustained economic growth created a massive demand for legal services, creating ideal conditions for the expansion of the legal profession. Rising attorney incomes further enhanced the profession's appeal. The civil rights and women's rights movements removed barriers for ethnic minorities and women to enter legal careers. A significant increase in law school graduates provided a robust talent pool. These combined factors led to a rapid surge in the number of lawyers in the United States.

Since the 1980s, the growth rate of U.S. lawyers has been steadily declining. During the 1980s, the average annual growth rate was 2.77%; in the 1990s, it rose to 3.07%; in the first decade of the 21st century, it averaged 1.64%; in the 2010s, it dropped to 1.26%; and since 2021, the annual growth rate has been a mere 0.174%. This trend largely mirrors the broader slowdown in U.S. economic growth. Benjamin H. Barton and Deborah Rhod argue that emerging technologies and service models are fundamentally transforming the legal profession. Between globalization, computerization, outsourcing, insourcing and the provision of legal services over the internet, American lawyers are facing an increasingly diversified and unregulated market. New York and Washington have implemented licensing structures for qualified non-lawyers in certain limited contexts, and other states are considering or have established similar systems. This consumer-oriented approach creates a more socially justifiable governance framework compared to the conventional ban on non-lawyer practice, regardless of its quality or cost-effectiveness. Online dispute resolution also provides a significantly cheaper and potentially more disruptive alternative. These factors collectively hinder the growth of the legal profession.

3. Analysis of the influencing factors of the growth of the number of lawyers

Comparing the development of the lawyers' profession in China and the United States, we can find that there are several main factors influencing the change of the number of lawyers.

The first factor is economic growth rate. The legal profession serves dual purposes as both a productive service and a lifestyle service. During economic expansion or rapid growth, increased market transactions drive demand for legal services, leading to market prosperity, rapid expansion of the legal workforce, and increased service supply. Conversely, during economic contraction or recession, the legal profession faces more complex challenges. On the one hand, reduced market activity and decreased financing activities directly hinder the expansion of legal advisory services. On the other hand, the surge in legal disputes and litigation cases creates short-term opportunities for legal practice. This demonstrates the legal profession's relative

resilience in weathering economic cycles, maintaining stable income in changing market conditions. However, prolonged economic downturns significantly reduce clients' willingness to pay. To cut costs, clients often reduce legal service budgets, with some corporate clients opting to strengthen in-house legal teams instead of hiring external attorneys. In summary, while the legal profession's development remains fundamentally dependent on economic conditions in the long term, it exhibits countercyclical characteristics in the short term.

The second aspect is the status of legal system construction. The more a country values the rule of law and the role of lawyers, the more solid the foundation for the development of the legal profession becomes, thereby enhancing its appeal to legal talent. The development trajectories of the legal professions in China and the United States both confirm this point. The United States has a long-standing tradition of the rule of law and is known as "a nation under lawyers," with lawyers enjoying a high social status. Since the reform and opening up, China has emphasized the construction of the legal system, and the restoration of the Chinese legal profession itself is a result of strengthening the rule of law. The rapid growth of China's legal profession over the past decade is also closely related to the advancement of the strategy of "comprehensively governing the country according to law."

Third, the threshold for practicing law. The threshold for practicing law mainly includes professional knowledge, educational background, and the entrance exam. In terms of professional knowledge, China is a civil law country, where legal knowledge is mostly presented in the form of statutes and legal interpretations, with the focus of learning being memorization and familiarity. In contrast, the United States is a common law country, requiring both the study of legal principles and the development of practical skills. Regarding educational background, American law schools have special admission requirements, mandating that students first obtain a bachelor's degree before entering law school, and only after earning a JD degree can they qualify to take the bar exam. The American Bar Association has established a mechanism for recognizing the implementation of legal education, with approximately 200 law schools accredited by the association. This mechanism effectively controls the scale of legal education. In contrast, China lacks such a control mechanism, with over 620 universities having established law schools (or departments), producing an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 graduates annually, which is 4-5 times that of the United States. In terms of exam difficulty, the pass rate for bar exams in various U.S. states ranges from 40% to 80%. China has not officially released the pass rate for the Unified Legal Professional Qualification Exam, but many insiders estimate it to be between 10% to 18%. Some argue that the pass rate of less than 20% for the unified legal professional qualification exam still indicates its high difficulty. Others believe that although the pass rate for a single exam is not high, the cumulative pass rate after multiple attempts is not low. Overall, the threshold for practicing law in the United States is higher than in China.

Fourth, career development opportunities. The legal profession is often regarded as a representative of "freelance" due to its relatively flexible working hours, strong autonomy, and high income ceiling. According to the Profile of the Legal Profession 2024, which is published by the ABA Center for Bar Leadership, as of May 2023, the average lawyer wage was \$176,470. That does not include profits for law firm partners and shareholders. Lawyers are among the highest-paid people in the United

States. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics compiles pay statistics on more than 800 jobs. The average wage for all U.S. workers was \$65, 470, while Lawyers ranked 28th in average wages in 2023. The high income of American lawyers is largely the result of restricting practice access and controlling the number of practitioners. In China, there is no specific statistics on the salary or overall income level of the legal profession. However, based on experience, the legal profession exhibits a 80-20 split, with average incomes not being high. Nevertheless, due to the broad growth potential of the legal profession and its high income ceiling, it remains an important career choice for many legal professionals.

The fifth factor is the regulation model of the legal profession. The legal profession has always been a profession that pursues self-regulation. The advantage of self-regulation lies in its professionalism, but it also has some drawbacks, such as a tendency to prioritize the interests of the profession itself over public interests. This necessitates state regulation to impose restrictions. Therefore, in practice, the legal profession regulation models of various countries mostly seek a balance between state regulation and self-regulation of the legal profession. The United States belongs to a regulatory model that emphasizes self-regulation. Under this model, self-regulatory bodies naturally tend to enforce strict access and control the number of practitioners, thereby limiting internal competition and maintaining monopolistic profits. However, in recent years, many countries, including the United States, have strengthened external regulation of the legal profession to better protect consumer interests. China, on the other hand, belongs to a typical state regulation model, where government regulatory bodies must consider both the development of the legal profession and public interests. Under this model, regulatory bodies are more inclined not to impose restrictions on the number of lawyers to promote competition in the legal service market and expand the supply of legal services.

The sixth factor is competition among peers. In the legal service market, lawyers are often not the only service providers. In the United States, the legal profession has promoted the formulation and implementation of a series of legal rules to restrict non-lawyers from engaging in legal activities. But in recent years, a broader consensus has emerged that non-lawyer assistance is critical to addressing America's problems regarding access to justice. With the emergence of legal technology service providers as new competitors, the U.S. legal profession is facing increasing challenges. In China, the legal service market has long been fragmented. In addition to lawyers, grassroots legal service offices and legal consulting service companies are also providing legal services. Grassroots legal service providers are also managed by judicial administrative departments, their numbers are continuously decreasing, and their practice is geographically restricted, making it difficult for them to form strong competition with lawyers. However, legal consulting service companies have long been in a state of regulatory deficiency, leading to numerous issues that harm the order of the legal service market. The Ministry of Justice of China has begun to work with relevant departments to strictly regulate legal consulting service companies. This will help optimize the development environment for the legal profession.

4. Conclusion

There are many factors influencing the development of the legal profession, but most can be categorized into the aforementioned aspects. Based on the above analysis, we

can better understand the logic behind the recent growth in the number of lawyers in China. A favorable external economic environment, continuous strengthening of the rule of law, low entry barriers, abundant legal talent reserves, ample career development opportunities, a state-led regulation model, and limited competition among peers have collectively contributed to the rapid expansion of the legal workforce. It can be anticipated that in the current and future periods, China's economy will continue to maintain medium-to-high growth, the rule of law will be further implemented in all aspects of national work, the regulation model and threshold for practicing law will not undergo significant adjustments, the supply of legal talent will remain at a high level, the legal profession will still be highly attractive, and the number of lawyers will continue to grow at a medium-to-high rate.

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