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International students' experiences in China: Does the planned reverse mobility work?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influx of international students to China in recent years and the corresponding internationalization strategies in the higher education sector. In assessing international students' learning and socio-cultural experiences in Chinese universities, we review the development of internationalization of China's higher education from the perspective of inbound international students and the national strategy to develop the country's soft power and international competitiveness. Data from a nationwide census of international students and the Survey of International Students' Experience and Satisfaction suggest that China is gradually becoming a key higher education destination for developing countries, particularly for students from neighboring Asian countries. Major challenges for international students include limited English resources, inadequate student-faculty interaction on campus, and difficulties in socio-cultural adjustment. This study outlines the key strengths and limitations of the internationalization of higher education in China and also provides directions for future research in this regard.

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1. Introduction

There has been an influx of international students to China's higher education institutions (HEIs) in recent years. Many "traditional suppliers" of international students such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and mainland China—which in the past sent substantial numbers of students abroad to study—have begun developing higher education internationalization strategies to attract overseas students (Sidhu, 2005; World Bank, 2007; Chan and Ng, 2008; Ruby, 2010; Wen, 2012, 2013, 2014). While China has been the major source of supplying international students to Western developed countries, its share of the international education market has also boomed from attracting a significant number of students from Asia and beyond (Hvistendahl, 2008). There are 730 HEIs from 31 provinces in China which provide education for international students, and the number of international students in Chinese higher education has increased from 1236 in 1978 to 397,635¹ in 2015 across over 200 countries (MoE statistics, 1978–2016).

Over the past two decades, China has placed attracting international students on its agenda along with the growing of global influences, economic development, and international engagement. In particular, after China's entry into WTO in 2002, the central government formed policies and provided national guidance to expand inbound international students in two government documents: the 10th "Five-year Plan for National Education Development" promulgated in 2001 and the "2003–2007 Action Plan for Reinvigorating Education" promulgated in 2004. During the state conference on international education (including both Chinese students abroad and international students in China) held in Beijing on December 2014, both China's current President, Xi Jinping and the Premier, Li Keqiang, addressed the importance of recruiting international students as a national strategy in strengthening soft power and international competitiveness. In the latest "Study in China Program", the government's ultimate goal is to host 500,000 international students, to become the biggest host country for international students in Asia, and a major study destination in the world.

In contrast to the rich studies on international students' mobility in western countries, scholars seldom examine the government-initiated inbound mobility of international students in China (Wen, 2014). As prior findings may be generalizable in Western contexts, our study helps in gaining understanding in emerging study destinations and compliments the knowledge in

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¹ Short-cycle visiting students or non-degree language learners are included.

this field (Hu et al., 2016). Moreover, this paper fills a gap in the reverse mobility literature by looking into international students' learning and socio-cultural experiences in China. Implications for related policies will be discussed along with suggestions for future studies.

2. Background of the study: the case of China

2.1. Development of higher education internationalization in China: from the perspective of inbound international students

The number of inbound international students is often used to measure the development of higher education internationalization. Each host country has their distinct characteristics in attracting potential students from the globe and the phenomenon of international student mobility reflects various ideologies of different study destinations. Neo-liberalism and the developmental-state thesis are two contrasting ideologies underpinning the flows of international students since the 1950s (Pan, 2013). For most rising destination countries, their triumphs rely mainly on the development of neo-liberalism, characterized by its export-oriented market-driven approach towards higher education (Findlay and Tierney 2010; Marginson, 2009, 2011; Ng, 2012). However, China provides a counter example to the argument for the triumph of neo-liberalism as a model for the internationalization of higher education. We do not agree with the argument that China is taking a complete developmental-state model in becoming an emerging destination for international students (Pan, 2013). However, we acknowledge that China's approach towards globalization fits somewhere between neo-liberalism and the development-state thesis.

The two streams of ideologies have intertwined throughout the development of higher education internationalization in China. On one hand, providing education to foreign students has been considered a diplomatic issue rather than an educational or economic issue in mainland China (Wen, 2013). It is best exemplified by the government's preference in recruiting and offering governmental scholarships to students from socialist countries and other ally countries since 1950s (Wen, 2012) and its objective of training foreign talents to "know China" (zhihua), "be friendly towards China" (youthua), and "love China" (aihua). In 1997, the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) started establishing government scholarships for international students. The government officials' discourse on receiving international students also revealed the country's objective of importing international students to suit its diplomatic strategy and repositioning Chinese higher education in the world. As cited in Pan (2013), Zhou (2006), the then Minister of Education from 2003 to 2009 said he hoped international students would become China's future political and business partners. Liu (2010), the state counselor in charge of education and science, called on Chinese universities to execute the nation's diplomatic strategies. This has served as the rationale for increasing the State's financial contribution towards subsidizing foreign students who studied at Chinese universities. The governmental input for providing education for international students has been increased in recent years, from 80 million RMB in 2010 to 1950 million RMB in 2014 (MoE statistics, 2010 and 2014). Recent initiatives led by the government include establishing a global educational network such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes around the world promoting the importance of Chinese language and sinology, the 100,000 Strong Initiative from the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2014), the Generation UK Program (British Council, 2014), and the recent Schwarzman Scholars Programs with a \$300 million endowment by the Rhodes Trust (Bradsher, 2013).

On the other hand, the stream of neo-liberalism is also obvious in the process of internationalization of higher education in China. Along with marketization in Chinese higher education sector, the government began to decentralize its power in providing education for foreign students to individual HEIs in the early 1990s. The government mainly takes charge of market access and external quality supervision, while HEIs take charge of enrollment, teaching, and management of international students.² A few institutional arrangements have been set up to facilitate the marketization process: from 1978 the government started to enroll self-funded international students; the standardized Chinese proficiency test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, HSK) was established in 1990 as the threshold of enrolling international students for individual HEIs. As economic incentives have become driving forces at the institutional level, the situation has become more complex. Take the government-financed college preparatory course for instance: the MoE only authorized 10 universities to run the course for 1600 international students with conditional offers from Chinese universities. Therefore it is highly competitive for individual higher education institutions to obtain authorization for running such courses for international students. However, for most of the non-elite universities, it is the economic incentive rather than the demand to internationalize that drives them to compete for such an authorization. For enrolling every one international student, the university is subsidized by 56,000 RMB.

2.2. A critical analysis of international student enrollment trends in China

The strengths of higher education systems are not comparable when they have widely divergent concentrations of student purposes and incentives. While the gross number of international students may have placed China as one of the top 10 host countries for international education in the world, there are fundamental differences between emerging study destinations like China and traditional developed countries like U.S., U.K. and Australia. Critical features in examining these differences are: (1) the scale and pattern of students' growth; (2) students motivation for academic degrees; (3) distribution of studied subjects and courses; (4) students' country of origin. China's international education system has expanded enormously over the last two decades (Fig. 1), but growth of inbound international students seems tied closely with political and economic issues. Scholars suggested that China's increasing outward investment and the slowdown of global trade since 2005 have strongly influenced the increase the inflow of international students (Constantinescu et al., 2015). Different from other major developed study destinations which mainly attract students for post-graduate degree programs, most international students in China are either non-degree students (accounted for 56.4% in 2014) or undergraduate students (comprised 70.8% of the degree seekers in 2014). The government has thus tried to encourage more "higher-level" academic degree-seeking students with respective scholarships and programs, which subsequently helped the increase in degree-seeking students since 2005.

Academic subjects and courses have also expanded across Chinese HEIs in order to cater international students' needs. International students only had limited course options among Arts, Engineering, Chinese language, and Medicine before 2000, and it was almost all open to them nowadays. However, Chinese, Medicine, Engineering, Arts, Management and Economics remain as the most attractive courses to most international students.

According to OECD (2011), regional mobility is sometimes more

² It was explicitly proposed in a series of policies regarding international education in the early 1990s.

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