

Chinese Students in Europe: Policies, Experiences and Prospects

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The paper briefly outlines the history of Chinese educational migration to the West and discusses some of the policies and socioeconomic trends that have made China the largest source of international students today. It then presents findings from studies of Chinese students' experiences in Europe, which indicate that personal development and time for reflection is becoming part of what some middle class students and their parents expect from the study abroad experience. This opens new possibilities for European universities in the fields of humanities and social sciences. At the same time we will probably see a growing demand for study abroad programmes that offer training for social service sector professionals, a field where China has a perceived need for developing new attitudes and skills.

Over the last few decades Chinese students have become increasingly visible on European campuses. When the Chinese state sent a few groups of students to Europe in 1978, at the very beginning of the reform period that followed the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, it marked the resurgence of a strategy that China first embarked on in the 1870s, during the late Qing dynasty (1648–1911), when the imperial state allowed a limited number of carefully selected students to go abroad to learn from technologically more advanced countries in order to bring back useful skills and knowledge to the motherland. Today, almost 40 years after the first post-Mao wave of student pioneers was sent abroad, educational migration from China has exploded, and it is no longer mainly driven by state planners but rather by the career strategies of individual Chinese students and their families. These strategies are highly sensitive to changes in the Chinese and global environment. Students' priorities and demands will shift as Chinese society develops and this offers new possibilities and challenges to European universities.

According to official Chinese statistics, almost 400,000 Chinese students studied abroad in 2012, which made China, by a wide margin, the most important country of origin of international students.¹ That year 22% of all international students enrolled in tertiary education in the OECD area came from China. Twenty-one percent of the

outgoing Chinese students went to EU21 countries, compared with close to 28% who went to the United States. Inside Europe, the UK received 11% of all Chinese international students, or more than half of Europe's total share. Chinese students made up 18% of all foreign students in the UK, and they also constituted a large proportion of the foreign student population in other European countries, such as Ireland (13%), Sweden (11%) and Germany, France and Italy (all around 10%).² So the Chinese presence on European campuses is already significant and it can be expected to grow with the continued rise of the Chinese middle class.

This development is not without problems. Some receiving institutions experience that Chinese students have difficulties adapting both socially and academically, while some Chinese students find their studies abroad generally disappointing. This paper will first outline the history and the policy framework behind the remarkable growth in Chinese educational migration. It will then present findings from studies of Chinese students' experiences abroad and finally discuss possible future trends in the field.

Chinese Studying Abroad: State Policies and Student Strategies

In the 1870s, the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM) established a blueprint for how the Chinese state would think about studies abroad for the next century. After being defeated in the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) reformers in the Chinese elite came to the conclusion that the superiority of the Western powers was rooted in their command of scientific knowledge and technological skills that were practically absent from the curriculum of the traditional Chinese educational system. Between 1872 and 1875 the Qing government therefore sent 120 very young boys to study in New England in the United States where they attended middle school and high school before entering Yale and other renowned universities. The aim was to make sure that at least some young Chinese would master what at that time in China was called 'Western learning'. Around the same time, 38 more mature students were sent to Europe to study military subjects, which the US government did not allow Chinese visiting students to specialize in. The students in the United States were called back to China in 1881, ahead of the original time plan, because the Qing government feared that they were becoming too Americanized, but they would later play important roles in China's modern transformation. Most of them had glorious careers in the mining, transportation, and communications industries or as university presidents and diplomats. Even the first prime minister of the Chinese Republic, Tang Shaoyi, was a returned CEM student.³

During the Republican period (1912–1949), studying abroad remained an important road for upward social mobility and a crucial source of intellectual and social change, but it was now primarily driven by individual initiative rather than by state programmes. Several prominent intellectuals of the Republican period were returned overseas students, such as Cai Yuanpei, once minister of education and later president of Beijing University, who had studied in Germany and France and was one of the main figures behind the modernization of Chinese higher education. While Cai was already part of China's intellectual elite before he ventured abroad, others went

at a younger age and under less privileged circumstances. Among them was the later chief architect behind China's post-Mao reform policy, Deng Xiaoping, who went to France on a work-study programme in the 1920s, and who would, more than 50 years later in 1978, revive educational exchange with the outside world. The many examples of successful returned scholars established the idea, across political division lines, that studying abroad both benefited individual careers and strengthened the Chinese nation.

Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) started sending students to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where around 10,000 Chinese received training up through the 1950s.⁴ Upon their return many of them played key roles as scientists, engineers and technical experts in socialist China, where they also helped restructure higher education according to the Soviet model. Some returned students even became prominent figures in the CPC, such as Li Peng who would become China's premier from 1987 to 1998. When the conflict between China and the Soviet Union escalated around 1960, however, the flow of outgoing students receded, and during the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976) educational migration played practically no role in China's development strategy. This changed, however, almost immediately after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

When Deng Xiaoping and the reform wing of the CPC gained power in 1978 they focused on education as the key to economic development. In some ways Deng's view of China's position on the global academic scene resembled that of the late Qing reformers 100 years earlier: science and technology were far more advanced in the West, so if China was ever to catch up it would need to gain first-hand knowledge of the scientific research going on in foreign universities. In order to break its academic isolation China started sending carefully selected groups of students to Western countries. The first students who came to my own country, Denmark, in 1978 had all been admitted to some of China's best universities based on the first rounds of university entrance exams in 1977–1978. One of these students recalled how he, shortly after arriving at his Chinese university, was called to a meeting with high-ranking university leaders, who told him that he should immediately pack his suitcase, as he had been selected to study abroad for several years. His major would be different from what he had signed up for in China, but it was a topic that China wanted to develop and where Denmark had considerable expertise. Together with 19 other students, all around 18 years old, he was first placed in a Danish high school to learn the language and get accustomed to life abroad and subsequently enrolled in the department preselected for him by the Chinese government. He could have refused to go abroad, but to ambitious young people of his generation, who had known and seen so little of the outside world, going to the West was the ultimate dream, so he never hesitated. To the Chinese leaders he was one small piece in a plan that should help China to modernize.

As could be expected, this model of sending out very young students for long periods of time turned out to have fundamental weaknesses, at least seen through the eyes of the Chinese government. The most significant problem was that the overwhelming majority of overseas students decided to remain in the West. They were

bright, diligent and ambitious, so after graduation they had few difficulties obtaining PhD scholarships, postdoc positions, and eventually attractive jobs abroad. Particularly after the suppression of the Chinese student movement in 1989 it was simply not attractive to them to return to an authoritarian system with much lower living standards. In spite of all official attempts to make students return to China, the CPC was soon facing a considerable brain drain problem. Its immediate answer was to put maximal pressure on the students to make them come back, including an intensive ideological campaign appealing to their patriotic feelings.⁵ When this strategy turned out to be counterproductive the Chinese authorities wisely decided to see those who remained abroad as a resource rather than as defectors. In 1992, Li Tieying, who was then in charge of the State Education Commission, introduced a new official mantra, which promised that the government would ‘support studies abroad, encourage [graduates] to come back to China, and grant them freedom to come and go’ (*zhichi liuxue, guli huiguo, laiqu ziyou*).⁶ This was a substantial step towards a more optimistic and flexible policy, which focused on the positive effects of ‘brain circulation’ rather than on brain drain.

In parallel to these changes in official policies the initiative behind overseas studies soon shifted from the government to individual families. Fewer than 10% of all Chinese students who have gone abroad in the 21st century have been funded by official Chinese sources. From being a strategic national investment, foreign education has increasingly become a commodity that Chinese families buy in the hope of a later return on their investment. In this process they are often assisted by private professional agents of mixed reputation who offer to guide students through the jungle of admission procedures to foreign universities.⁷ The state has maintained a discourse about ‘studying for the nation’ and still occasionally sends out patriotic appeals, but for all practical purposes the decisions about studying abroad, and about whether or not to return to China, have been privatized.

This does not mean, of course, that the Chinese government has lost interest in the issue. On the contrary, in China’s strategic move from ‘made in China’ to ‘created in China’ the competition for global talent is seen as the key factor. The country still suffers from a considerable brain drain problem as huge numbers of its highly skilled citizens live and work abroad. According to a report from an influential Chinese think tank, by the end of 2011 the total number of students who had gone overseas since 1978 had reached 2,244,100 while only 818,400, or about 36%, had returned. To make matters worse for China, those with high level degrees, such as PhDs, are even less likely to return compared with graduates from programmes at lower academic levels.⁸ The Chinese state has taken several initiatives to attract these highly skilled migrants, most significantly the ‘1000 Talents Plan’ introduced in 2008, but with limited success.⁹ Seen from the perspective of the receiving countries, of course, this means an injection of highly skilled academics and researchers from China.

The Study Abroad Experience

The actual experiences of those Chinese who go abroad to study and of the institutions that receive them are highly diverse and research in this field is still rather limited.

Much of the existing literature has focused on the problematic sides of the encounter of what is sometimes referred to as different 'learning cultures' in the international classroom. Jürgen Henze and Jiani Zhu have summarized the ways in which Chinese students abroad have been problematized in the existing academic literature. First of all, they are found to have substantial difficulties with the English language and, to an even greater degree, with the second foreign language they have to learn if they study in continental Europe. Secondly, they have academic problems. Their participation in class is perceived to be inadequate as they do not take part in classroom discussions and neglect group work. They are also perceived to be unfamiliar with Western academic standards for referencing, footnotes, plagiarism, etc. Finally, they are said to have severe socio-cultural problems. They isolate themselves in co-ethnic groups instead of mixing with local or other international students, which can in some cases lead to loneliness and even depression.¹⁰ Heidi Ross and Yajing Chen have succinctly summarized many of the complaints from the receiving institutions in the following three questions: 'Why are those Chinese students silent in classroom? ... Why do those Chinese students stick together? ... Why are those Chinese students so instrumental?'¹¹ While the general impression from the academic literature is quite pessimistic, it should be mentioned that some schools and programmes have had more success integrating their Chinese students. Rather than looking for the shortcomings of the visiting students, Western universities should perhaps realize, as several authors have suggested, that the way teaching is organized may contribute to excluding Chinese students from the class communities, and that teachers should pay more attention to such mechanisms of exclusion.¹² What I want to call attention to in the following section, however, is a different point, namely that some of the factors that have shaped the stereotyped images of Chinese students may be changing because of internal transformations in the outlook of the Chinese middle class.

One example of this is the nature of the motivation that drives so many students to leave their family and friends and spend large amounts of money on education abroad. In her excellent longitudinal study of Chinese overseas students, Vanessa Fong describes how studying abroad for her informants was part of a strategy for upward social mobility:

China's socioeconomic stratification system has little room at the top. But Chinese singletons in my study were too ambitious to accept relegation to the bottom... When they were denied prestigious education and high-paying careers in China, they saw study abroad as an alternative way of attaining developed world citizenship regardless of their abilities and their parents' ability to pay for their education and career opportunities.¹³

This observation highlights the instrumental and strategic attitude to education that the Chinese school system often fosters in its students. It fits the image of Chinese students who are not genuinely interested in 'deep learning', and it certainly also fits many individual cases. My own study of Chinese students in Denmark, however, indicates that some students' motivations go beyond the diploma they receive upon graduation. Over the last four years I have followed three classes of students doing a joint degree in a Chinese and a Danish professional college for pre-school teachers.¹⁴

To these students, studying abroad was not just a way of preparing for a highly competitive job market. In fact, their rather costly stay abroad was not even economically rational, as their salary in China would not be higher than that of their classmates who stayed at home. However, besides being a way to gain concrete skills and thereby a competitive edge, they saw living and studying in the West as a transformative experience that could bring them to a higher level of personal development. This is closely connected to the Chinese idea of *suzhi*, or personal quality, which has become central for how Chinese individuals categorize and rank themselves and others.¹⁵ As expressed by one young woman before she went abroad:

It would be great to go abroad, so we could really experience education in foreign countries and some other stuff, like culture. We will be completely different when we come back. It's like we will be in a different league.¹⁶

This view of studying abroad as a maturing and even civilizing process breaks with the standard Western image of Chinese students as highly pragmatic and driven only by hard cost-benefit analyses. As Anders Sybrandt Hansen observes, some Chinese elite students even see their stay abroad as a way of escaping the permanent pressure in China. Once outside their own country they find that they can, maybe for the first time since early childhood, control their own time, as they have left the closely structured Chinese social space where every move represents a carefully planned step towards a specific career goal in close competition with others.¹⁷ Such attitudes should be seen against the background of rising internal criticism of the Chinese education system, which many Chinese experts and parents see as unable to match the future demand for innovative, creative, self-motivated and independent academics. Personal development and time for reflection may well become part of what at least some middle class students and their parents expect from a study abroad experience.

Trends and Prospects

This tendency could make European universities even more attractive to Chinese students in the future. When students and parents make their decision about where to study, they tend to look very closely at the international ranking of universities.¹⁸ If middle class parents start putting more emphasis on gaining cultural capital, however, or a higher *suzhi* as they would often express it, we may see even larger groups of students coming to Europe, which among Chinese students is typically stereotyped as 'having more culture and history' than North America. The same motivation could lead to more interest in the humanities. The large majority of Chinese students so far has gone to the natural sciences, engineering, and business studies. This will no doubt be the case also in the future, but we will probably see parallel but smaller flows of students coming to Europe to study art, music, philosophy and other 'soft' topics, where they earn more cultural capital than cool cash.

In addition, professional colleges training staff for the social services will probably experience an increasing demand from Chinese students. These services will have to be expanded in the future when China faces the consequences of the changes in family

structure engendered by smaller families and the aging of the population. Nurses, physiotherapists and social workers will be needed for the increasing number of old citizens. China already trains large numbers of people in these fields, but the growing middle class will demand a higher level of service and new approaches from the staff towards ordinary citizens. The social welfare systems of particularly northern and western Europe enjoy a good reputation in China. Several European universities already receive Chinese students in these fields and we can expect that more will join either European master programmes or double and joint degree programmes at the bachelor level. As already mentioned in connection with the pre-school teachers, such programmes may not 'pay off' for the individual student in the short run, because salaries in this sector are still low, but families may well decide that it is an attractive way ahead for a young person who has been unable to pass the exam to more prestigious study programmes in China or abroad.

Professional colleges have an extra advantage because they often include internships in their programmes. When I interviewed Chinese students in Denmark about their life abroad it was evident that experiences from internships often had made the deepest impression on them. This highlights students' interest in the host society and indicates that the social isolation in co-ethnic groups, which is often mentioned as a special problem for Chinese students, is not always the consequence of students' voluntary withdrawal from contacts. This should encourage receiving universities to integrate more practice-oriented elements in the curriculum so that the foreign students can get more hands-on experience with the host society.

Conclusion

Studying abroad is still, to a large extent, a middle-class phenomenon in China, because the overwhelming majority of the students, or rather their families, have to cover all the expenses involved. The Chinese state has an intense interest in the global competition for talented people, but in contrast to the late 1970s and 1980s it is unable to control student flows. This means that the patterns of students' demands and expectations will primarily follow changes in the values and strategies of the growing middle class.

The top priority of the majority of these urban professionals, academics and business people has probably not changed. They want their offspring to enter a high-ranking university, in China or abroad, in order to study subjects that are believed to lead to money and prestige: medicine, engineering, science, finance, IT, business, etc. Still, I hope to have demonstrated in this paper that new and interesting developments are happening on the fringes of this competitive and instrumentalist block. A new narrative is being shaped about studying abroad as a stage in students' personal development, a stage that may not be rational in cost-benefit terms, but which will pay off in the end by raising a young person's cultural level and his or her general understanding of the wider world. Perhaps something in between the Grand Tour of European gentlemen in earlier times and the backpacking experience of today's youth. This narrative is reinforced by an increasing scepticism towards the

ability of the Chinese education system to cultivate the personal competences that will be in demand in the future and it may lead to more interest in the humanities and other 'soft' fields. At the same time we will probably see another alternative route towards training for the social service sector where new attitudes and skills will be in strong demand. European universities have been able to attract a large share of the Chinese students of the more traditional type and will in many ways have even better preconditions for offering opportunities for the future demands.

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