

Understanding China in the Asian Century: A Future of Higher Education Internationalization?

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Abstract

Asia's growing influence in global higher education, visible in China's emergence as a key destination for international students, comes with a call to re-examine international student mobility (ISM) through evolving geopolitical and cultural lenses. This collective-writing study discusses the motivations and adaptive experiences of international Ph.D. students in Chinese universities, and reveals that while academic opportunities and career prospects initially drive enrollment, students' objectives and perceptions shift substantially during their academic journeys in China. Through our discussion we demonstrate how institutional policies, intercultural dynamics, and geopolitical positioning collectively shape these transformations. Our conclusions challenge static student-choice models, and call for further analyses of the continuously evolving academic or sociopolitical factors that inform responsive internationalization policies in Chinese higher education.

Keywords: international student mobility (ISM), China's higher education, student experience, global higher education, Asian Century

Introduction (Candice Xiyuan Zhang)

Rooted in Confucian and Daoist traditions, Chinese society emphasizes harmony, relational dynamics, and moral leadership over codified rules – cultural framework that diverges markedly from Western institutional paradigms. For observers accustomed to

individualistic values and rigid legalistic governance, these principles may prove challenging to fully grasp, as China's social structure prioritizes collective ideology and historical continuity. This cultural foundation is increasingly reflected in the nation's political rhetoric, shaping both domestic governance and international engagement. President Xi Jinping (2022), for instance, often references classical figures like Confucius and Laozi to support his vision of blending Marxism with traditional Chinese values. Against the backdrop of what many term the "Asian Century," China, alongside India, is poised to emerge as a preeminent global force in the coming decades. This anticipated ascendancy extends beyond economic metrics to encompass cultural and political influence. Yet realizing this vision necessitates unprecedented cooperation at national, regional, and international levels. While historical traditions continue to inform policymaking across Asia, contemporary geopolitical tensions - particularly in high-tech competition between the U.S. and China - will play a decisive role in redefining the future global balance of power.

The compelling vision of a shared human destiny faces pragmatic constraints, as competing national interests may impede substantive collaboration. Amid this broader transformation, China is gaining prominence as a destination for international education, particularly at the doctoral level. Strategic investments in higher education, scientific research, and global academic partnerships - epitomized by initiatives such as the Belt and Road - are attracting students who might have previously opted for Western institutions. For some, China represents a forward-looking, economically robust, and culturally rich alternative to the traditional study-abroad model long dominated by Western norms. To examine this shift, an empirical study was conducted involving international PhD candidates in China. Their experiences showcase the evolving role of Chinese academia in global education and raise a critical question: Can China become the next major hub for international graduate study? This inquiry demonstrates the interconnected trajectories of education, culture, and geopolitical influence in the 21st century - dynamic that warrants scholarly attention as the global academic and educational realms undergo realignment.

Methodology (Candice Xiyuan Zhang)

In the pages that follow, we present a series of critical reflections from scholars invited to contribute to this collaborative inquiry - a methodological undertaking that treats collective writing as a means of illuminating complex, interconnected themes (Peters, 2019). While their essays vary in focus and approach, each engages with the evolving narratives of China's internationalism and the transformative role of its higher education sector. Drawing on perspectives ranging from theoretical debates to granular case studies, the authors employ collaborative writing as a dialogic framework to critically examine China's cultural heritage, its geopolitical aspirations in the "Asian Century," and the tensions and synergies shaping its global academic influence. Collectively, these contributions do more than uncover a shared commitment to interrogating China's dual identity as both a civilizational anchor and an emerging epistemic power. They also demonstrate the methodological value of polyvocality as a method of and for navigating contested discourses towards reconfiguring global knowledge production.

Narratives of Chinese Internationalism (in a post-American world) (Dora Dong Li)

Historically, as an ancient giant country, China has influenced many of its surrounding countries economically, ideologically, and politically. Southeast Asian countries adopted Chinese philosophy and Confucius mentality, which exerted an intangible cultural influence on how people act and organize their daily lives. For a long time,

Western countries have been puzzled as to why the Chinese firmly uphold their political paths and institutions or act against their expectations. The fact is, Westerners, are sometimes annoyed by Chinese mentalities, such as Chinese people living in a relationship society without many rules or clear regulations. Chinese are considered tricky and mysterious, as they are sometimes obedient and sometimes manipulate rules. Ways that the Chinese act cannot be adopted by an outsider quickly. Sometimes, even the Chinese themselves cannot provide a reasonable explanation. The social institution is a creation of our own based on different beliefs and ideologies (Madhu, 2021). Talcott Parsons dialectically analyzed that a shared value and ideology is the main driving force of the social action and institution that directs means of actions in reality (Parsons, 1937). For instance, influenced by the religious value system, Durkheim et al. (2002) uphold that discipline and belonging are two main characteristics of moral education. Other scholars criticized that means of action, such as the force of power and energy, should be emphasized in forming social action (Pinney, 1940). In the system of the unit of action of voluntarism, norms and values are the foundation of the unit of actor, means of action, and goals (Turner, 1974).

Recent Chinese scholar asserted that Chinese institution is orientated by the perfect match of the Chinese value system and believe in socialism (Wang and Yan, 2022). In Wang and Yan's (2022) words, 'The key to forming a new form of civilization of "Confucian tradition communism" in China is that the Confucian tradition, as the core of Chinese civilization, is intrinsically compatible with the communist ideal.' Two thousand years ago, Confucius's culture had explicitly detailed the hierarchy of Chinese morals. The descending order of moral standards from Chinese sages is benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and trust (Confucius, 2016). In 'The Scripture of Ethics and Nature Rules (Daode Jing),' Taoist founder - Laozi elaborated on rules of nature, administration, and moral rules. Supreme of benevolence, Laozi said it is the rule of nature, which some scholars explained as causal relationships of nature. Laozi also specified four levels of management of social action. Laozi asserted that the best administration is that people follow the rulers without consciousness. The second best administration is that people and the ruling class have a mutual admiration and understanding. The worst administration is through threatening, humiliating and oppressing (Laozi, n.d.). Confucius and Laozi's mentalities are deeply rooted in Chinese society and the ruling class, just as the religious power in Western society and politics. It is evidenced that as a cultural discourse, both Taoists and Confucius have been distorted and adopted by the ruling class for political purposes throughout Chinese history. Chinese scholars believed that the Chinese ruling class is seemingly Confucius, but Taoists or hundreds of Chinese philosophies indeed. On May 4, 2014, President Xi visited Peking University and listed the excellent ideas and concepts in Chinese culture at the teacher-student symposium, where he cited the "unity of heaven and man" for the first time (Confucius Quotations, 2015).

In 2022, the 20th National Congress of the CPC, President Xi emphasized that 'adherence to the development of Chinese Marxism must be combined with the excellent traditional Chinese culture. The tree of Marxist truth can take root only when rooted in the rich soil of our own country and national history and culture. He elaborated on the Chinese values of nature, people, and the world's view and society, citing directly from Confucius and Laozi (Xi, 2022). Based on Chinese Taoist philosophy and culture, the Chinese government advocated a type of "natural relational society", the balance between rivals not only in winning the game (Laozi, n.d.). The schools of Taoists and Confucius strongly impacted how the Chinese weighed and prioritized their domestic and foreign affairs. Therefore, the Chinese government and people appeared more tolerant than their Western counterparts.

Reimagining Global Academic Collaborations in the Asian Century (Candice Xiyuan Zhang)

The concept of the “Asian Century” has gained considerable traction in academic and policy circles, referring to Asia’s anticipated geopolitical and economic preeminence in the 21st century, driven by its rapid economic growth and demographic advantages. The intellectual origins of this concept can be traced to Jan Romein’s seminal 1956 work, *The Asian Century: A History of Modern Nationalism* (Peters, 2021), which framed Asia’s resurgence within the context of decolonization and post-war nationalism. Over time, this notion has evolved beyond its initial Eurocentric apprehensions – epitomized by the late 19th-century “Yellow Peril” discourse that portrayed Asia’s rise as a civilizational threat (Peters, 2021) – to encompass a more holistic understanding of Asia’s role in reshaping global governance, economic systems, and knowledge production. The implications of Asia’s ascendancy are particularly evident in the realm of international higher education. As regional economies expand and their global influence grows, Asian nations have made strategic investments in higher education to cultivate the human capital necessary to sustain their development trajectories.

These efforts have yielded tangible outcomes: a surge in intra-Asian student mobility, the rapid ascent of Asian universities in global rankings, and the emergence of the region as a pivotal player in the global knowledge economy (Xiyuan et al., 2022). Concurrently, there has been a marked shift toward regional academic integration, exemplified by initiatives such as the ASEAN Higher Education Space, which facilitates cross-border student mobility, credit recognition frameworks, and collaborative research networks despite persistent political and socioeconomic divergences among member states (Xiyuan et al., 2022). These developments demonstrate Asia’s growing capacity to shape the norms and structures of global higher education.

At the pedagogical level, the Asian Century has fostered a reconfiguration of international education paradigms and the rise of Asia-centric model. Universities across the region spearheaded interdisciplinary programs designed to address pressing global challenges - including climate change, social inequality, and technological disruption - while nurturing a new generation of globally minded, culturally agile thinkers capable of driving innovation (Xiyuan et al., 2022). This shift has also redefined Asia’s academic relationships with Western institutions, as evidenced by the proliferation of equitable partnerships that transcend traditional exchange models. Contemporary collaborations increasingly emphasize joint degree programs, co-designed curricula, and research consortia that leverage the distinct strengths of participating institutions (Xiyuan et al., 2022). Such initiatives reflect a broader transition toward a more polycentric global higher education era, one in which Asian universities are not merely participants but co-architects of the future of international education.

The Impact of Culture on the Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education (Zhujun Jiang)

Culture exerts an essential influence on each nation. Throughout history, different nations and regions have developed historical traditions and cultural customs that accord with their geographical locations and natural surroundings. These profound histories and cultures have substantially impacted the formation of distinct national identities. From political decisions to the preferences of ordinary individuals, every aspect of society is shaped by these intangible forces. Education, being an integral part of social life, is inevitably influenced by historical and cultural heritage. In the age of globalization (perhaps post-globalization), the internationalization of higher education, as a prominent trend within the entire education system, is also subject to the influence of culture. Concerning the concept of ‘internationalization’, there is a related concept in

Chinese culture known as ‘天下’ (Tiānxià). In ancient Chinese society, ‘天下’ refers to both the geographical sense of ‘all lands under the sky’ and the psychological sense of ‘the thoughts of all people living on these lands’. Moreover, it holds ethical and political implications as the ‘ideal world of a unified family’ or a ‘utopia’ (Zhao, 2003). This signifies that China comprehends the world as a whole, with all countries interconnected and forming a ‘community of shared future for mankind’. From this perspective, China’s higher education naturally adopts a stance of unity, cooperation and mutual benefit when engaging with other countries. The Analects of Confucius states: ‘When walking with two other people, there is always a teacher among them. I select the good qualities of others and follow them, and I see the bad qualities in myself and correct them’.

The tradition of learning from others’ best experiences has influenced the internationalization of Chinese higher education. After the reform and opening-up, China implemented a series of projects to attract outstanding talents from abroad to serve in Chinese higher education institutions. Furthermore, a large number of Chinese students and professors studied overseas. According to UNESCO UIS, at the higher education level, China has approximately 1.09 million students studying abroad, accounting for 17.1% of the total mobile students globally¹. As higher education develops, China has also realized that learning from others’ best experiences needs to be combined with China’s realities in order to explore a truly suitable development path for Chinese higher education. Furthermore, the Chinese concept of ‘有教无类’ (yǒu jiào wú lèi) conveys an idea of educational equity, meaning that regardless of social status or background, everyone should have the right to receive education.

In the process of internationalization, Chinese higher education adheres to the principle. China not only seeks to develop partnerships with developed countries but also with other developing nations. China has signed degree recognition agreements with over 20 countries along the ‘Belt and Road’. It has established the ‘Silk Road’ Chinese government scholarship program, which provides no fewer than 3,000 scholarship opportunities annually for students from countries along the ‘Belt and Road’. In addition, under the framework of the ‘Chinese-African University 20+20 Cooperation Plan’, 20 Chinese universities and 20 African universities have developed long-term collaboration in the areas of joint research, teacher training, academic exchanges, student visits, curriculum development, and joint graduate student program (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2017). Culture is the soul of every nation. To establish a quality higher education system that aligns with the unique national context of each country, it is crucial to integrate cultural heritage with modern educational theories and practices.

The Role and Limitations of China’s Epistemological Framework in the Future of International Education” (Carlos Cardenas)

According to Peters et al. (2022), “declinism is back in fashion again”. This time the turn for demise is for Western powers, particularly, for the US. On the contrary, the spirit of Asian nations is at its apex following the astonishing improvement of their economies and their better handling of the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Mahbubani, 2022). This scenario leaves way for China to sway a more robust influence in the global scenario and this includes the scope of international education (IE). However, the question here is whether China will enjoy an undisputed leadership in IE and what challenges will arise while consolidating a new influential role in IE. In a comprehensive series of essays, Mahbubani (2022) explains why the West as a world power is coming to its dawn. Just to mention a few reasons, the economic performance of Asian countries has already caught up with the West: while “the total trade among the three countries in NAFTA amounts to just over USD 2.3 trillion and that among the 27

¹ Retrieved 2 August 2023 from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

countries of the EU amounts to USD 2.3 trillion”, the total trade among the 15 countries of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) amounts to USD 2.5 trillion. Mahbubani (2022) further states that “the US is no longer even the most globalized power; that title now goes to China” because it is already a trading partner to more countries than the US (P.215). But unlike the US, which has progressively walked away from the family of United Nations institutions, China’s stronger presence in global affairs has also come with greater responsibilities. For example, China has so far demonstrated a greater commitment with the progress of humanity as a whole as it is demonstrated by China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a governmental program launched in 2013 to strengthen regional economic cooperation in Asia, Europe, and Africa through massive investments in infrastructure” (Mahbubani, 2022. P. 152).

It may be clear that China and other Asian countries are poised to lead the way in the 21st Century at least in the economic realm; however, are they also ready to become a major cultural influence and take the lead in international education? Short answer: yes, they are! Actually, China is already exerting big influence in some arenas of international education. For instance, China currently leads the chart of research output; only in 2020, the country’s output was 767.530 publications relegating the US to the second place (UUKi, 2021. P. 25). Additionally, China ranks third worldwide in attracting international students to universities and vocational schools, behind the USA and the UK (Zhang, 2022). Even in the light of the current favorable economic position of China and its growing sway in international education, it cannot be declared just yet that China will enjoy the undisputed leadership of IE in the future. Mahbubani (2022) states that “declining powers can also retain their cultural attractions... witness the UK with Cambridge and Oxford”.

What is more, in the same way as countries don’t want to be caught in a zero-sum geopolitical contest between the US and China (Mahbubani, 2022. P. 173), international students are not supposed to choose solely between China and US as their study-abroad destinations. As a conclusion, given the increased influence of China and other ASEAN countries, they now have the opportunity to inherit and reform classic institutions of the current world order for a new era. But with China’s newly consolidated position in the world order, it is indeed time to move away from the westernized education internationalization paradigm (Guo, et al. 2021). Westernization only helps naturalize “Western/European domination and capitalist, colonial social relations and projects a local (Western/European) perspective as a universal blueprint for imagined global designs” (Andreotti et al., 2016). China has its own roots approach to knowledge production; therefore, it is time to value Chinese language and epistemology and start selling a local model of internationalization.

Is China a future global graduate study destination? – A critical look at motivations to study in China (Stephanie Hollings and Stefan Reindl)

It is undeniable that China is a rising star in the field of international student mobility. China is no longer just the largest exporter of international students but as the data shows a formidable opponent to traditional destinations such as the USA, the UK and Australia when it comes to recruiting international students. It has been noted by Peters et al. (2021) that there is a changing map when it comes to international student mobility (ISM). Some like Bartram (2018) are quick to note the implications to student mobility in terms of students’ perceptions of feeling welcomed to their chosen study abroad destinations on developments such as the election of Donald Trump and Brexit. This is also a feature of Choudaha’s (2017) third wave of ISM, which also features an increasingly saturated market in which traditional and new destinations struggle to attract international students. Within these new destinations is where we will find China. Likewise, in other collective projects like this one, part of the reason for China’s switch from exporter to importer of international students is the Belt and Road Initia-

tive (BRI). As Peters et al. (2020) notes that the ideological principles that constitute this mega-project are not just 'a new development model' but an 'alternative mode of globalization' (p. 2). Thus, to many (perhaps even other contributors to this article) China presents an alternative to the neoliberal dominated study abroad motifs that dominate the more traditional destinations and is rife in the literature on ISM. And the increasing numbers themselves might suggest that China has found success within the market by distinguishing itself as a destination where international students will not be seen as cash cows but as part of their lofty BRI ambitions. What this brief passage attempts to do is provide insight into the motivations and decision-making process that 6 PhD students at a leading Beijing university gave for deciding to study in China. Having asked incoming first-year international Education students to provide an autoethnographic reflection on their decision-making process, it became apparent that these students from around the world do see China as a viable option for PhD studies. However, whether or not it is because of China's academic progress or it being a neoliberal alternative is debatable. Indeed, it is difficult to say something general about decisions tied up in numerous contingencies based on unique personal and academic factors but some themes did emerge that add some critical perspective.

So why did these six students choose China? Although we want to avoid categorizing them, it does seem that two groups of students emerge. In what we might call the Chinese ISM equivalent to the chicken or the egg. We have the students that seemingly chose China first and those that either chose the program/PhD first. Some explained their rationale coming from an early childhood fascination with China, previous experience in China, wanting to continue practicing their Chinese language skills and even the convenience of already being there. On the other hand, other students explained that China was not their first choice and stated previous difficulties with previous unsuccessful applications to the more traditional ISM destinations and limited opportunities within their home countries in terms of PhD study. For these students, China offered easier admissions by inviting larger incoming cohorts and more access to scholarships and hence to achieve their dreams of pursuing PhD studies. One student even suggested that her alternative education background seemed to be more valued in China than in the other countries that she applied for. Yet, what is mentioned above is just part of their decision-making story. Other factors mentioned were China's heavy investment in education, the economic power of China, a growing appreciation for Chinese diplomas at home, personal development and bilateral relations between China and their home country. What all of these stories suggest is that there is more to the increasing number of international students choosing to study in China than meets the eye. And any measurement of success that comes from such an increase in number must account for the realities of these decisions and the millions just like them.

Concluding Remarks (Candice Xiyuan Zhang)

The rise of Asia - and China in particular - as a pivotal actor in the global knowledge economy represents more than a geographic shift in educational mobility patterns; it signals a fundamental reconfiguration of the ideologies, infrastructures, and power dynamics underpinning international higher education. This study has illuminated how Asia's growing investments in human capital development and regional academic integration are fostering new models of transnational education - models that privilege intercultural competency, interdisciplinary problem-solving, and glocalized perspectives. Yet these developments unfold within a complex matrix of geopolitical ambitions, cultural diplomacy, and economic calculus, wherein student mobility serves simultaneously as an instrument of soft power and a barometer of shifting epistemic authority.

Our discussion, while limited in scope, demonstrate the inadequacy of tradi-

tional push-pull frameworks for understanding student motivations among these complex dynamics. As Eckensberger & Meacham (1984) remind us, educational decision-making is invariably mediated by intersecting cultural, political, and economic forces - a reality acutely visible in China's case, where internationalization strategies are deliberately aligned with broader national objectives.

Three fundamental issues emerge from our analysis: Firstly, what are the primary drivers influencing international students' decisions to pursue degree programs in China? Secondly, how do their academic objectives, behavioral patterns, and perceptions evolve throughout their educational sojourn? These questions point to the necessity for future research to move beyond superficial analyses of study abroad motivations and instead examine the dynamic interplay of factors that shape students' evolving attitudes and experiences throughout their academic journey in China.

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