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Chapter 1 Introduction: International Students in China

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This chapter functions as an introduction to the volume. It starts with a discussion on traditional and current trends of international student mobility worldwide, and a review of the recent expansion of international student enrolment in China as partly a response to the country's high-profile "Belt and Road" Initiative. The chapter then reviews major findings of the research on international student in China, pointing out the significance and urgency of researching these students' academic experience, so as to assure the sustainable development of China's international student education. The chapter ends with an introduction to the contents of each chapter.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

The number of students pursuing higher education outside their home countries has been increasing, now hitting its historic high. OECD (2019) statistics show that there were 5.3 million internationally mobile students in tertiary education in 2017, up more than 2.5 times from 2 million in 1999. The accelerated growth of international students is a response to the trend of globalisation and the consequent significance of knowledge economy in individual countries and worldwide (Altbach, 2004).

The globalised higher education, however, is marked by developmental inequality among countries (Altbach, 2004). The flow of international student mobility is predominantly from “peripheral”, developing and non-English-speaking countries to “central”, developed English-speaking countries, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (*ibid.*). In 2001, for example, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia together attracted 43% of the 2.1 million students engaged in international education (Institute of International Education, 2018).

Since then, the dominance of the East-West flow of international student mobility has been challenged (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011). The United States and the United Kingdom are slowly losing their share in the world international student market, while regional educational hubs are emerging, such as South Africa (Lee & Sehoole, 2015), Turkey, Mexico and Russia (Kondakci, Bedenlier, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). In Asia, South Korea (Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017), Singapore and Malaysia (Mok, 2011), the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain (Knight & Morshidi, 2011) and China (Altbach & de Wit, 2017) are also changing their roles from traditionally sending countries to study-abroad destinations. Behind the growing inflows of international students to these “new” destinations are the extensive national initiatives and generous government investments to sustain knowledge-driven economy (Sidhu, Ho, & Yeoh, 2011) and enhance educational competitiveness (Mok, 2011).

In relation to regional and global international student mobility, a country of significance is China. Once an exporter of international students, China is now rising as the third-largest study-abroad destination in the world, following only the United States and the United Kingdom. Similar to the other emerging hubs “planned” by national policies (Kondakci, Bedenlier, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018), government investment and initiatives feature the development of China's international education. With funding secured by the national “985” project, the “211” project and the most recent “double

world-class” initiative, Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly the first-tier universities, play a key role in cultivating “international personnel who are well-versed in Chinese and friendly toward China” (Kuroda, 2014, p. 448). Linked to the high profile “One Road One Belt” strategy, international student graduates are expected to “make good impressions to the world, to make more people think well about China, and to promote mutual understanding” (Ma & Zhao, 2018, p. 737).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLMENT IN CHINA

International student education in China can be traced back to 1,300 years ago in the ancient *Sui* and *Tang* Dynasties (Cheng, 2012). In 1950, the second year after its foundation, the People’s Republic of China welcomed the first group of international students, 33 students from East European countries (Li & Tang, 2015). From 1950 to 1978, international student recruitment slowly expanded to other developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The major aim of international student education during the period was to fulfil internationalist obligations for educational assistance (Chen & Qu, 2016). In those years, around 12,800 students studied in China, all of whom were sponsored by Chinese government scholarship (Zhao, 2015).

The implementation of China’s “opening-door” policy in 1979 marked a new era of the country’s international student education. In 1979 Chinese universities started to recruit self-funded students (Cui, 2008). In the following ten years, roughly 26,000 self-funded international students studied in China, most of whom were from Japan, the United States and other developed countries (Cui, 2006). International student education was further promoted by Deng Xiaoping’s “Southern Tour Speech” in 1992, which called for “deepening the reform, expanding the opening-up”. In 1999 the number of international students in China reached 44,711, 88.35% of whom were self-funded (MoE, 2015). The

top five source countries in 1999 were Japan, South Korea, the United States, India and Germany (*ibid.*).

Since the start of the new century, with its booming economy and accelerated development of higher education, China has increased its popularity among international students. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of international students studying in China grew at an average rate of over 10% annually (see Figure 1.1, MoE 2002, 2004-2008, 2010a, 2012; China Association for International Education, 2008, 2010). The only decrease in number was during the 2002 to 2003 period when China suffered from SARS epidemic (MoE, 2004). In 2010 China's Ministry of Education (2010b) released its first strategic plan on international student recruitment, the *Study in China* Scheme, announcing a target of becoming the largest destination country in Asia by 2020. The target was achieved in 2017 (MoE, 2017). In 2018, 492,185 international students from 192 countries studied in 1,004 HEIs in China (MoE, 2019b). China is ranked the third most popular destination country for international students, following the United States and the United Kingdom only (Institute of International Education, 2018).

China's attempt to boost its soft power has been intensified with its implementation of "the Silk Road Economic Belt" and "the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road" initiatives (known as "Belt and Road"). Proposed in 2013, the "Belt and Road" initiative is intended to connect China with Central Asia, Europe, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and the Middle East (China.org.cn, 2015). As a supporting document, the Ministry of Education issued in 2016 a notice of "Promoting the Jointly Building of 'Belt and Road' Education Action" (MoE, 2016). The Action stated that China will work together with countries along the "Belt" and the "Road" to jointly build a "Belt and Road" education community, and that China will undertake more responsibilities to contribute to the regional education development. By far, China has signed a mutual recognition agreement for higher education qualifications with 24 "Belt and Road" countries (MoE, 2019a). In 2016 the state

established the Chinese government “silk road” scholarship, funding annually 3,000 talents from “Belt and Road” countries to study in China (MoE, 2016). Following this national policy, provinces, cities and universities have also set up scholarships to expand the enrolment from countries along the “Belt and Road” routes (see Scnews.org, 2017; Xinhua.net, 2017). In 2018, 260,600 international students from 64 “Belt and Road” countries studied in China, accounting for 52.95% of the total (Yidaiyilu.org.cn, 2019).

Attempts to use higher education as a soft power tool is, however, imbued with tensions. Differing from traditional destination countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, the proportion of international students in non-degree courses in China is high (see Figure 1.1). Short-term Chinese courses and many degrees programmes, particularly in the Chinese language and medicines, are designed and administrated for international students only. Separating international students from domestic students makes English-mediated instruction feasible; the English-mediated courses, however, put pressures on the shoulders of both Chinese faculty and non-native English speaking students (He & Chiang, 2016). Meanwhile, the separation of teaching increases educational costs at both institutional and national levels, and limits the scope of international education development (Cheng, 2012). These tensions raise concerns over the extent to which Chinese universities can appropriately respond to international students’ academic demands (e.g. Ma & Zhao, 2018), particularly in English-medium-instruction programmes (He & Chiang, 2016).

<Figure 1.1 About Here: Number of international students in China>

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA

English academic literature has been focused on China’s out-flow student mobility. This is not surprising, as China was not a major receiving country of international students until the turn of the

century. The recent increase in the number of international students studying in Chinese institutions has led to studies of student experiences beginning to appear in international literature. These studies, though sparse in number, discussed significant issues in China's international student education. A brief review of the studies is provided below, based on which we position the focus of this volume.

Firstly, the existing research explores the reasons for international students to choose China as their study destination. Ma (2017) conducted an exploratory interview study with 42 full-time students in different HEIs in China and found that prospects of China's economic development was the most important factor influencing the interviewees' choice. The booming economy was also revealed as a major pulling factor for international students in Beijing (Wen & Hu, 2019) and Shanghai, China (Ding, 2016). Haugen's (2013) interviews in Guangdong and Zhejiang, China, revealed different reasons for African students' choice of Chinese universities: The scholarship interviewees stressed improved job prospects and commercial opportunities, while the self-funded interviewees were attracted by China's economic development, the relative ease of obtaining a visa, and low tuition fees and living costs. It is argued that the international students' over-stress on non-academic reasons for choosing to study in Chinese HEIs reflect the need for China to ensure high quality of education.

Secondly, existing research has investigated international students' satisfaction with their experience in China and the factors influencing their satisfaction. Akhtar, Pratt and Bo (2015) surveyed 110 African students in Chinese universities. The study found that prior intercultural experiences, a broader circle of friends, awareness of cultural differences and submission assignments in English significantly predicted the students' satisfaction with their life experiences in China, while over-expectation of China negatively related to their experiences and adjustment. Wen and her colleagues in Tsinghua University, using an adapted I-graduate, surveyed on 1,674 international students in Beijing in 2012. The research reported that the participants were more satisfied with their academic experiences than university support services (Hu, Wotipka, & Wen, 2016), whilst regarding the academic experiences the participants were least satisfied with teachers' poor command of English

and inadequate interactions with faculty (Wen, Hu, & Hao, 2018). Ding's mix-method research (2016), involving 40 international students in interviews and 1,993 in a questionnaire survey in Shanghai in 2013, revealed consistently low levels of satisfaction among the participants with the quality of education and university services they received.

Thirdly, other research discussed national policies through case studies of Chinese educational programmes provided to international students. Wang and Curdt-Christiansen (2016), using "ethnography of language policy", discussed the implementation of a programme of learning the Chinese language as a foreign language at a 211-project university in central China (p. 725). The study revealed the tensions between the government's and the institutions' perceived rationales of internationalisation, between the courses of the Chinese for general purposes offered by the universities and international students' needs to improve their Chinese for academic purposes, and between Chinese and English as a lingua franca on campus. The study concluded that the tensions run counter to the objectives of the International Chinese Promotion policy, i.e. to spread Chinese culture and promote China's soft power via the teaching of Chinese to international students.

Kuroda (2014) conducted case studies of eight English-medium instructed master's degree programs for international students (EMIMDPs) at four leading universities in Beijing and Shanghai. Through documentary analysis and interviews with Chinese faculty, the study showed that EMIMDPs were well constructed to "disseminate China's excellence" (p. 549), whereas the questions remained regarding how to monitor the education provided by EMIMDPs and whether the EMIMDPs can satisfy international students' needs of intellectual development.

Similar observations were made by Haugen (2013). Through interviewing 28 African students in Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces in China, the study found that the students were disappointed with their academic experiences, and that the increasing number of African students manifests China's economic power, rather than its soft power. The sustainable growth in the international

student market ultimately depends on the high-quality education the country provides (Ding, 2016). Herein emerges the focus of this volume.

FOCUS OF THIS VOLUME

This volume discusses the educational tensions and challenges faced by China in its development of international education. The volume contains research on international student experiences in teaching and learning in various educational settings, i.e. English or Chinese-mediated language programmes, degree programmes, and short-term exchange programmes in universities with different academic levels and locations in different geographical regions in China. This volume adopts a critical, anti-essentialist point of view when researching issues related to China and Chinese academic culture.

The volume consists of nine chapters. In Chapter 2, **Hantian Wu** and **Cassidy Gong** investigate China's international student recruitment as a dimension of its "outward-oriented" higher education internationalisation. Adopting a historical-comparative approach, the authors categorise China's international student recruitment into three phases. The first phase was before the "Reform and Opening Up" in 1978 when China regarded international student recruitment as an instrument for optimising its geopolitical context within a bipolar system during the "Cold War" era. The second phase was after 1978 and before 2008, when "those coming to China to study historically outnumbered those leaving China to study abroad" (Yang, 2014, p. 158). The discussion of these two phases is followed by an analysis of existing challenges of the present phase, which began in 2008 when China has concentrated on using international student recruitment for soft power enhancement.

In Chapter 3, **John Lowe** and **Fang Yu** discuss the experiences of students at a trans-national British university in China to raise questions about who the "international students" are in such a context. The prevalent "classroom culture" and its expectations are more familiar to the British students than

Chinese students at this university, although British students are described as “international” students in China. Drawing on a qualitative study, the authors challenge aspects of current thinking on the meaning and nature of “the international” in higher education in a contemporary world that is rapidly changing.

In Chapter 4, **Cornelius B. Pratt**, **Nadeem Akhtar**, **Ying Hu**, **Awais H. Gillani** and **An Ran** extend a conceptual framework of instructional communication to study Chinese professors’ interactions with international students in the classroom. 313 Chinese professors in nine Wuhan-area universities completed a questionnaire on their classroom instructional relationships with their international students. The research finds that Chinese professors most frequently discussed with their colleagues the methods to improve their instructional communication with international students, and least frequently discussed the instructional difficulties the international students faced. It is also found that female professors tended to spend more time than male professors in trying to make international students’ classroom experience more fulfilling. This chapter presents pedagogical implications for practices in Chinese universities and higher-education institutions with significant international-student populations.

In Chapter 5, **Melissa Shani Brown** and **David O’Brien** explore perceptions of “silence” in classroom settings at a foreign university within China. Based upon interviews with international students and domestic Chinese students, the findings problematise essentialist interpretations of “silence”, highlighting the complexity of factors within an international classroom setting. While both international students and domestic Chinese students perceived silence to be a “problem”, they differed significantly in terms of their perceptions of its causation, how they experienced “silence” and its relation to their perceptions of what constituted a “good student”.

In Chapter 6, inspired by Said’s postcolonial approach, **Yang Liu** discusses the “other” identity of American students in China. Drawing on the data generated by interviews with 32 American students

in four major cities in mainland China, this study reveals that American students felt exoticised as the alien *Other* when being bombarded with questions about their nationality and sojourning purpose, stereotyped as the generically disparate *Other* who were deemed physically different and linguistically incompetent, and estranged as the ostracized *Other* who were excluded from Chinese circles. Based on these findings, this study argues that it is urgent for Chinese policymakers, educational institutes, teachers and students to learn about international students' experiences in mainland China and map out realms in which they might misinterpret the students' communicative acts, so as to better interact with this group of migrants.

In Chapter 7, **Ping Yang** examines how international students learn the Chinese language and culture through informal learning. Based on current linear models of informal learning, the researcher proposed an integrated model of informal learning representing the dynamic, international and complex processes of informal learning environments. Using a qualitative method, the researcher collected data from popular Chinese TV shows in which international students participated and told their life stories and learning experiences in China. Based on these materials, the researcher coded and analysed the data and discussed emerging themes. The results show that international students were highly motivated to learn the Chinese language and culture through participating in real life activities, overcame language and culture barriers, and eventually developed communicative competence in language use and cultural understanding.

In Chapter 8, **Genshu Lu, Mei Tian and Lijie Li** explore the influence of learning experiences on personal development of international students in China. Drawing on questionnaire data from 1,428 international students at 34 universities located in central, eastern and western China, the research examines international students' self-reported academic abilities across its five constituent subscales, i.e. core skills research capacities, self-understanding, global abilities and Chinese proficiency. The findings reveal that the respondents' perceived learning environment, campus climate and academic engagement had statistically significant influences on their academic abilities. Implications for

policy, research and practice are discussed.

In Chapter 9, **Fred Dervin** and **Ning Chen** point out the problematic tendency to study the learning of international students in China using theories, concepts and methods developed in Western contexts. The authors urge scholars and educators to embrace uncertainty and flexibility of international students' academic experience in China. A list of principles is provided to rethink imaginaries and representations about learning, travel and China, the Chinese and Chinese education.

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