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International Student Recruitment as an Exercise in Soft Power: A Case Study of Undergraduate Medical Students at a Chinese University

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Introduction

While Altbach (2004, p. 24) rightly warns us of the inequality which globalization can bring to the academic world, others have noted that non-Western countries can actively adopt—rather than passively follow—the Anglo-American model in their development of higher education (Lo, 2011). China in particular, with its growing economic and political power, has been using the internationalization of higher education to enhance its soft power (Lo & Pan, 2016). Most recently,

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higher education has been declared as playing an important role in China's realization of 'the Asia-Pacific dream', which involves the revival of the ancient Silk Road and the development of a Maritime Silk Road (i.e. 'One Road One Belt', China.org.cn, 2015). A central strategy to achieve this is the recruitment of international students, particularly from developing countries and the countries along the Silk Road (Sebastian & Choudaha, 2015). It is expected that these international students will gain better knowledge of Chinese language, society, culture, and politics and will appreciate Chinese 'viewpoints and interests' (Yang, 2007).

The literature on international students and Asia is largely uni-directional in focus. Much has been written on Asian students moving into Anglophone education systems (e.g. Habu, 2000; Li & Campbell, 2008; Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1999; Yen & Stephens, 2004), and on Chinese students in particular (e.g. Skyrme, 2007; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Tian & Lowe, 2009, 2010, 2013). Recent significant increases in the number and diversity of international students studying in China have led to studies of student experiences beginning to appear in the academic literature, but these remain quite limited in number and scope (Akhtar, Pratt, & Shan, 2015; Haugen, 2013; Li, 2015; Tian & Lowe, 2014). This chapter is intended to add to this coverage but does not attempt to meet the growing need for a more generalized account and analysis of international student provision and experiences in China. It reports findings of our research into the academic and social experiences of a group of international students taking an undergraduate degree in medicine at a single university in China. We discuss the extent to which Chinese international education has matched its diplomatic mission in this particular case; that is, how successfully soft power goals are being achieved in terms of this group's experiences in China. We first describe the research context, followed by a brief review of the concept of soft power and its relevance to Chinese higher education before presenting our research methods and findings, and drawing some conclusions.

Context: Increasing Number of International Students in China

Although China has been a major supplier of international students across the world since the latter years of the twentieth century, more recently China has also become a leading host country to international students (Macready & Tucker, 2011). Between 2001 and 2011, the number of international students in China has increased by more than 10% annually (MoE, 2012), reaching 377,054 in 2014 (MoE, 2015). Table 10.1 gives a breakdown of the number of international students in China in 2014 in terms of their geographical regions of origin (*ibid.*). In recent years, China has become the third most popular country in the world for international tertiary education students, following the USA and UK (Institute of International Education, 2016), as shown in Table 10.2.

This expansion of international enrolment has been actively pursued as a Chinese government policy initiative and continues to be so, with the Ministry of Education proposing the 'Studying in China Scheme', the major task of which is to attract over 500,000 international students by

Table 10.1 Number of international students studying in China in 2014 (MoE, 2015)

Region of home country	Number	Percentage
Asia	225,490	59.80
Europe	67,475	17.90
Africa	41,677	11.05
America	36,140	9.58
Oceania	6272	1.33

Table 10.2 Top 5 host destinations worldwide in 2015 and 2016 (Institute of International Education, 2016)

Destination	2015 total	2016 total	Increase (%)
United States	974,926	1,043,839	+7.1
United Kingdom	493,570	496,690	+0.6
China	377,054	397,635	+5.5
France	298,902	309,642	+6.8
Australia	269,752	292,352	+8.4

2020 (MoE, 2010a; see also Central Government of the People's Republic of China, 2012). In addition, Chinese policy is to achieve a better balance of regional origins among these international students (MoE, 2010b). More recently, it is argued that China should try to attract students from neighboring countries, especially Southeast Asia and Central Asia, rather than targeting 'something beyond its grasp at the moment', students from developed countries (Wen, 2015). This viewpoint reflects President Xi's aim to use education as a tool in the 'One Belt One Road' initiative to enhance China's influence in the neighboring region (NewsChina, 2015; Sebastian & Choudaha, 2015).

The rationales behind China's determination to internationalize its higher education institutions (in which the attraction of international students is just one component, although a significant one) show elements of those identified for other systems, namely, the economic, academic, political, and cultural rationales, but the balance among these shows particular Chinese characteristics. In trying to understand these rationales, among the most significant recent policy documents are 'the National Outline for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)' (Central Government of the People's Republic of China, 2010), which sets overall aims for internationalization, and the Ministry of Education's 'Studying in China Scheme' (MoE, 2010b), which deals more specifically with the expansion of international student numbers and their origins. The former document emphasizes the contribution that internationalization can make to the modernization and quality enhancement of Chinese higher education (the academic rationale, at least as a first analysis), but also states that such internationalization will 'enhance the nation's global position, influence and competitiveness in the field of education' (Kuroda, 2014, p. 448), which brings in elements of a political rationale. The 'Studying in China Plan' is explicit in this respect in declaring one of the aims in attracting more international students to be 'to cultivate international personnel who are well-versed in Chinese and friendly toward China' (*ibid*., p. 448).

The economic rationale, which has often been more explicit in the policies of other major players in the international student market, appears to be less emphasized in China, although the contribution to the national economy made by the roughly 90% of international students in China who pay their own fees and living costs rather than relying on

scholarships (Haugen, 2013) cannot be ignored. This contribution is likely to be even more valued at the individual institution level in view of the reductions in public funding of higher education as part of the 'marketization' of Chinese higher education, particularly since its massive expansion in recent decades (Mok, 2000). Nonetheless, we tend to agree with Kuroda's (2014) analysis that, as a national if not institutional policy, international students are prized 'primarily for political reasons' (p. 447), with the economic benefits being seen as a valuable spin-off. In this chapter we approach this political rationale through the concept of 'soft power' and argue that in the Chinese context, the political and the cultural rationales are tightly interwoven.

Soft Power, China, and International Education

Widely recognized as the originator of the term, Joseph Nye (1990) uses 'soft power' to describe the 'third' source of power of a country, in addition to its economic and military strength. Distinct from these other forms of power, soft power is a power of attracting, rather than forcing or paying, to get what you want (Nye, 2004). Nye also notes the difference between soft power and influence: while influence can be a result of threat or payments, soft power is a power of attraction in world politics. A country can attract other nations to follow it by promoting its value system, prosperity, and degree of openness, in order to help it achieve its external political aims.

According to Nye, a country's soft power is based on three sources, culture, political values, and foreign policy. We suggest that this distinction is unlikely to be clear-cut for any country, but particularly so for contemporary China. National approaches to international issues and relationships must inevitably respond to the realities of global politics, but they also reveal distinctions influenced by national cultural values that in turn shape political perspectives. The claim made for and by China that it differs from the nation-state example presented by other countries in being instead a 'civilizational state' (Zhang, 2012), and one that has a uniquely long and continuous cultural history, is central to the way in which it seeks to be known and respected in the world. This leads

us to emphasize culture as being at the core of China's approach to soft power. Indeed, in Chinese documents it is usual to see 'soft power' expressed explicitly in terms of 'cultural soft power' (*wenhua ruanshili*) (Wang, 2011).

The significance of higher education in national soft power has attracted the attention of policy makers. Hu Jintao (Xinhuanet, 2010), former General Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee, stressed at the National Education Working Conference that 'to vigorously develop education… is the only way to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. Similarly, the important guiding policy document for Chinese education in general, the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Plan (2010–2020), declares an aim 'to accelerate internationalization of education in China [so as] to enhance its international status, influence and competitiveness' (Central Government of the People's Republic of China, 2010). China's attempt to boost its soft power has been intensified since President Xi Jinping took office, with a series of relevant initiatives, including the 'China Dream' (November 2012; Xinhuanet, 2012), 'Asia-Pacific Dream' (November 2014; NewsChina, 2015), 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (September 2013; Xinhuanet, 2013a), and 'Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road' (October 2013; Xinhuanet, 2013b). The Silk Road 'Belt' is intended to connect China with Central Asia and Europe, while the Maritime Silk Road links China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (China.org. cn, 2015). While China is investing, universities are expected to play an important role in supporting these efforts to consolidate its position in the region. To display 'the charm [of China] to the world', President Xi required that 'stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained' (*Chinadaily*, 2014).

Yang (2010) has suggested that the establishment and proliferation of Confucius Institutes across the world 'is arguably Chinese most systematically planned soft power policy' (p. 235). He points out that these Institutes massively implicate both Chinese and other countries' universities in this expression and promotion of soft power, since they are almost universally established on the campuses of partner overseas universities. The policy of increasing the number of international students at Chinese

universities is a qualitatively different approach to promoting national cultural soft power. The Confucius Institutes are designed to take Chinese culture to the 'outside' world in a managed format that allows considerable control over the message (Falk, 2015), although Zhou and Luk (2016) have shown that they have often failed in their primary purpose, being treated with suspicion as propaganda tools and a threat to academic freedom. Inviting 'outsiders' to come to China, to live and study there for a considerable length of time, however, is a high-risk approach, as the scope for control over individuals' experiences is severely limited—indeed, attempts to exert significant control over the experiences of those who take up such an invitation may be counter-productive to promoting a positive image of the country.

Articles in Chinese academic journals have also recognized the contribution of international education to China's soft power. Such literature tends, however, simply to take the growing number of international students in China as a measure of the 'attractiveness' of Chinese culture. Yan and Xu (2008), for example, made a quantitative comparison of soft power between the USA and China, using the number of international students as one of the two measures of the 'power of cultural transmission'. Such literature conflates the sources and effects of soft power. Nye (2004) warns us that only when international students make a positive evaluation of a host country's values and social system after returning to their own countries does the attractiveness that characterizes soft power actually manifest itself as the power to affect sympathetically opinions of the former host. An increased number of international students is not in itself a manifestation of soft power, but a potential source of such power which may or may not be realized successfully.

Furthermore, it is crucial to remember that, although the Chinese government may wish to attract students as a means to enhance its soft power, the vast majority of these students are themselves likely to be driven by other concerns, most notably the desire to gain valued educational experiences and credentials. This will be particularly true of those on degree-bearing rather than short, language programs. Thus, their primary interest will be different from that of any soft power agenda, and their level of satisfaction with the country will be largely determined

by the extent to which this primary interest is met, particularly among self-funded students. Thus the provision of a high-quality education is the first and most important consideration in any attempt to use higher education as a soft power tool. Many questions as to whether Chinese universities can help 'win hearts and minds' were raised by Shambaugh (2015) and generally evaluated negatively. His questioning and evaluation are backed up by the observations that Chinese universities lack capacity to innovate and are known for 'cronyism, false credentials, plagiarism, and intellectual property theft' and the universities' educational practices are marked by rote learning and traditional teaching (*ibid.*). Although Shambaugh's doubts over Chinese universities' academic capacities can themselves be questioned, his expression of these doubts does raise our concern over the relationship between Chinese international education and the realization of China's soft power in practice. Haugen (2013) also reports how many African students in her study were dissatisfied with their studies and actually abandoned them in favor of engaging in business.

Our focus in this study, therefore, is to seek evidence of the actual impact on international students' perceptions of and attitudes toward China of their experiences as visiting students. We were intrigued by a statement by the deputy director of the opening ceremony at the Beijing Olympic Games which we feel encapsulates the aims of soft power in a way that opens them up to the sort of investigation that we wished to engage in: 'I really hope that the people of the world can get to know the Chinese culture … to get to know China, to understand China, to love China, and to desire China' (Zhang Jigang 2008, cited in Callahan, 2010, p. 4). This statement points out that successful soft power strategies are intended to have both cognitive and affective impacts on the individuals, with knowledge leading to empathy and ultimately to 'love' and 'desire'. Somewhat more modestly, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2010b) has set the overall aim of the 'Studying in China Scheme' as cultivating 'international graduates who know China and are friendly to China'. Our research aim, therefore, is to explore what knowledge international students gain about China through their experiences in the country, how they gain it, and what affective responses this knowledge engenders.

Methodology

Focus

The research on which we draw explores the educational and social experiences of international students in China. Its scope extends beyond the specific focus of this chapter, but we use it here to address the following questions:

1. How do the participants interpret their educational and wider experiences during their time in China?
2. Do these experiences help them to know China, understand China, and love China?

Research Site

The fieldwork was conducted at a single, high-status university in Xi'an (henceforth referred to as CU). Xi'an has particular significance here as it was the starting point of the ancient Silk Road connecting China to Central Asia and to Rome from about 100 BC. It is now expected to play an important role in the country's new 'Silk Road Economic Belt' initiative by, among other things, attracting overseas tourists and building research collaboration between local and international universities (Mackay, 2015). The city, however, is economically less advanced than Beijing, Shanghai, and most Chinese coastal cities. International students studying in this city may have experiences that differ significantly from those of students in economically more developed areas (Li, 2015). CU started to enroll international students in the late 1950s and to take international students for the bachelor degree in medicine in the mid-1990s. In 2011, when our research started, CU hosted over 1400 foreign students from more than 70 countries, nearly 60% of whom were taking undergraduate degrees, particularly the medical degree. CU targets an enrollment of 3000 international students by 2020; on its webpage, CU reveals soft power enhancement to be one of its rationales for internationalization in stating that international student education helps to disseminate Chinese culture and 'expand friendly international influence'.

Participants

All first-year international students in a five-year medical degree at CU[1] were invited, in 2011, to complete a questionnaire (see below for details). From 118 respondents, 16 (8 male and 8 female) were invited for annual interviews based on principles of voluntary participation and maximal variation. Among them, seven were from Pakistan; this predominance was a deliberate choice because at that time Pakistani students were the largest national group, amounting to over half of the international students taking the degree. Other participants were from Malaysia, Canada, and three African countries.[2] Eight of these participants (fortunately, four female and four male and from six different countries) attended further interviews in 2012, 2013, and 2015, supplemented by four others who each participated in only in one or two of these years. The 'core' eight interviewees gave the research continuity in individual narratives as well as giving us a picture of general developments, which was supported or supplemented by the more 'occasional' interviewees. We also sometimes interviewed students outside the original group of 16. For example, two senior Pakistani students in their fourth year of the same degree were interviewed in 2011, in response to the core group's comments about the influence of these older students on the newer arrivals. In other cases, participants were asked to come for interviews together with their fellow students or friends, and such contributions were always welcomed. The narratives of these additional interviewees were used to provide a form of triangulation with the data from the core group, enhancing the validity of our interpretations. All data discussed in this chapter, however, came only from the original 16, largely because they gave us a clearer sense of a 'starting point' for the developments that we wished to follow, and thereby a clearer sense of a narrative for the cohort they represent. In what follows, we use prefix P1–P16 to refer to these participants.

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[1] The degree was in 'Western medicine' as the students targeted for recruitment largely wished to practice in their home countries rather than in China; some 'Chinese medicine' was included in the curriculum however.

[2] There were few African students taking this degree at CU and identifying the specific home countries of those in our sample might compromise their anonymity.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire given to all first-year students taking the degree in 2011 comprised closed items only, to gather basic demographic information on gender, age, qualifications, family background, first language, and levels of competence in English and Chinese. Further items asked students' reasons for pursuing a higher degree in China, their previous knowledge of China, and their pre-arrival expectations about learning and living in China.

Following the questionnaire, the first round of semi-structured interviews was carried out in October 2011. The schedule for this initial interview was informed by our experience with an earlier study of a group of US students at CU (Tian & Lowe, 2014). These interviews allowed us to explore in greater depth the participants' reasons for studying in China, expectations about their study in China, and their initial experiences since their arrival. The subsequent interviews in 2012, 2013, and 2015 tended to become more unstructured to accommodate diversity in individuals' experiences but also as greater mutual familiarity developed and led to a more relaxed atmosphere. Interviews began with open questions that encouraged students to freely talk about their educational and social experiences. With little existing—particularly qualitative—research on international students in China to guide the interviews, we encouraged interviewees to identify and talk about any issues and concerns they felt were important and relevant to their study and lives. This avoided imposing any pre-conceived notions that we might have had about the possible nature of their experiences and helped us to access better the participants' interpretations of their experiences and construction of meanings. The flexibility in design enabled us to achieve our aim of the interviews being 'done in a situation of mutual trust, listening, and caring for the experience described by the other' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 422), which in turn contributed to the quality of the data generated.

All interviews were carried out in a quiet coffee shop near CU, seen as a 'neutral' ground and providing a relaxed atmosphere. They were conducted in English, recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were coded through open, axial, and selective

coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For open coding, we used broad headings such as 'Reasons for studying in China', 'Academic experiences', 'Social experiences' that we generated from the original research questions. For axial coding, we extracted more descriptive data by forming sub-categories such as 'Difficulties in subject learning', 'Strategies to deal with difficulties in learning', and 'Learning outcomes'.

Spread over five years, our research produced a considerable volume of data. In this chapter we consider only those data which address the potential soft power effects of the participants' experiences; that is, we are interested in the developments in the participants' knowledge of and attitudes toward China and the Chinese and not, for example, on relationships among the participants and their fellow students themselves. Our familiarity with the data—from carrying out, transcribing, and subsequent reading and discussion of the interviews—made it clear that data meeting this broad purpose could come from a wide range of the reported experiences, many of which could not have been anticipated in advance. For the purpose of this chapter, therefore we have used further selective coding, applied across all our existing categories and sub-categories, by searching the data for comments that relate to the students' knowledge of China and their attitudes toward China. To make the reporting of these easier for ourselves and the reader, we have categorized the findings under different aspects of students' experiences—notable 'academic' and 'social' experiences—while also keeping a sense of their development over time.

Findings

Our study has generated a considerable volume of data, and in what follows, we are selective in terms of the categories (sub-headings) that we present from the data. In making selections, we have tried to avoid biased interpretations of either the 'larger picture' or students' responses within each category through a process of continuous reflection and critical discussion over our selection and interpretation.

Pre-arrival Perceptions

Pre-arrival Perceptions of China

Questionnaire data show that most of the students in 2011 had little pre-arrival knowledge about China. Respectively, 62%, 84%, 69%, and 53% of respondents reported that they knew 'nothing' or had 'very limited' knowledge of Chinese 'history', 'political system', 'geography', or 'culture'. Those who claimed they knew something about China before their arrival obtained their information from the internet (39%), traditional media (books, film, and television, 29%), friends and relatives (25%).

The first round of interviews showed that the students often arrived with views of Chinese society that were stereotypical, out-of-date, sinister, or just bizarre. The impact of popular public media in shaping their pre-arrival understanding of China was often declared.

> I've watched a lot of English movies. The image they give was very bad. (Laughs) They show China like it's not really. They show there are like … people on bicycles everywhere … very crowded areas. They show it's like a very old place. People are, like … their thought is very old. They are still living in the past. (P16, 2011)

> I saw this one documentary … as soon as people arrived at the airport they were followed by the secret service. So, my image was, I'm going to be followed by the secret service. (P5, 2011)

> My first expectation was that there will be people all over, in the streets, doing *kung fu* and jumping and all that. (P14, 2011)

Pre-arrival Perceptions of the Host University

In comparison, questionnaire data on the respondents' pre-arrival perceptions of the host university were much more positive: 52% believed they knew the university 'well' or 'very well', gaining their information mainly from the university's website (22%), friends and relatives (20%),

and an agency they used to help with the application (14%). Some students complained in the initial interviews, however, that information on the university website was inadequate and that some of the agencies they had used to help them obtain a place were simply profit-oriented and provided them with false information.

Reasons for Studying in China

In 2011 most students reported that they chose to study in China because of lower tuition fees and living costs compared with Europe or America, where some had initially aspired to study. Other reasons included the relative ease of obtaining a visa, the shorter duration of a medical degree program, the good reputation of Chinese higher education, and the opportunity to experience Chinese culture.

> I did my A-levels in Tanzania, and then went to Brazil. Now, I was planning to study in Brazil but then we found out it was too expensive, for a medical degree. The cheapest was eighteen thousand a year, US dollars. And the [cost] of living in Brazil was really high…. So, I thought, hey, why not come to China. And it's not like China's that bad at medicine either, so. (P3, 2011)

The primary reason for the survey respondents' choice of the host university was its international reputation and the international recognition of its degree, which was believed to increase their future employment opportunities (60%). Other reasons included recommendation by family and friends (18%) and being comparatively easier to get admission (14%). Very few (4%) were in receipt of a scholarship.

> Because it [the university] has got a very good reputation all over the globe. The main reason is this university is basically recognized by our country. So when we go back we don't have to [sit] all those medical tests. (P14, 2011)

> One of my relatives [is] studying here. I came through her. … She's doing third year. So, she said that it's kind of good. (P8, 2011)

Academic Experiences

Teaching and Learning

The first round of interviews in 2011 showed a mixed picture regarding the students' evaluation of their first learning experiences in China. Most interviewees believed lecturers had the expertise in the subject they taught and praised the professional attitudes they held.

> But most of them, they know their stuff. They are able to teach and we have … Like my chemistry teacher, this semester, he was really good. He was the kind of teacher that told you, 'If you ever have any problems, just come and find me in my office and I'll explain everything to you from beginning to end, if you need any help. Don't worry about it'. … So, there are teachers like that, that you feel are approachable and they actually really want to teach. (P13, 2011)

On the other hand, the majority of lecturers were described as lacking English oral presentation skills, and language barriers made interactive classroom teaching difficult, which led to frustration and boredom among some students, and a breakdown of discipline in extreme cases. Many lecturers delivered their lectures by reading their slides aloud one after the other.

> They are not explaining anything. They are just reading from the slides, reading and reading and reading. (P16, 2011)

> They have knowledge but they can't give it properly to us. (P2, 2011)

Where teachers did make efforts to overcome their English language deficiency and to show their willingness to help the students, this was appreciated:

> they do realize, they do actually tell out and say, 'I'm sorry, my English is not good.' And I do respect them in that, to give an understatement about themselves and say, I'm not allowed to do [the teaching] in my language, but if you could pay attention, I will help you out. And that is the part where we really feel, 'Thanks'. We have teachers who know their weakness and actually come to a point of trying to work out of it, try to work it out. (P7, 2011)

Over the duration of their degree, however, students observed positive changes initiated by the university to enhance the quality of teaching:

> The school, the administration, sent people to evaluate teachers while they are teaching us. They have been evaluating teaching for about half a month now. This is a new thing… So while the evaluation is going on, teachers tend to raise up their standards. That helps too. The evaluators also talk with us and ask us, what [are] you guys trying to learn, what will help you to enhance your ability of going home to be doctors? (P13, 2014)

University Facilities and University Support

Most of the students expressed overall satisfaction with living and learning facilities provided by the host university. Upon arrival in 2011, complaints concentrated on the 'unbearably' slow internet speed in their dormitory, for which they were charged a high fee. Reliable internet access was considered essential by the students, not only to support their studies but, perhaps more importantly at the beginning of the degree, for social networking and for contacting their families at home, in view of the high cost of international telephone calls.

> As far as accommodation is concerned, we have got just one complaint, that our internet is very slow. (P14, 2011)

> So, like, we have an internet facility in our dorm but it's really crappy, really, really crappy, to the extent that the possibility of loading Wikipedia would take … ten minutes.… A simple mail will go, like, for five seconds [if] you still have contact. (P7, 2011)

Unlike the students' views on teaching, however, complaints about accommodation increased over the years. Complaints about the problems of getting hot water and the low availability of single rooms in the dormitories recurred in each year's interviews. There were further complaints about financial matters such as confusing changes of fees CU charged for renting accommodation, for electricity, the internet, and other services, a source of complaints also recorded in Haugen's (2013,

p. 328) study of African students in China. To make the situation worse, some of the administrators to whom the students took their complaints were accused of procrastination or simply unwillingness in dealing with them, leading to severe frustration and dissatisfaction:

> So, … I was telling the *Laoshi* [teacher], could I get from the outside? Like get outside facility internet? And he said I can't because I'm with a … school [CU] contract. So we said, OK, and I asked him when are we getting [improved internet]. He said there's a new internet coming in. I went, OK, I'll wait for that. When will that be? Hmmm, end of October … actually November. And he gave me a deadline, November. November, I went up to him, it was like, Laoshi, when is the internet? End of November. And I did prepare myself for the third attempt … December. (P7, 2011)

We asked students whether they ever felt their treatment by the administration was 'racist', and most were quick to dismiss this possibility. Some did feel that the office staff operated with a hierarchy of nationalities in mind, however:

> You can't say racism. I don't know what do you call it, but, for example, if … they know you are not from Pakistan or India or Nepal, if they think you are from Europe or America, they really respect you and they listen to you really carefully. (P12, 2011)

Other comments suggested that this treatment was perceived less in racist terms and more in terms of perceived wealth of the individual's country of origin. By 2014, for example, large numbers of students from an oil-rich Middle-Eastern country were enrolling on the degree and were felt to be offered much better treatment and greater respect than many of our interviewees had received. This was firmly attributed to the perceived wealth of the newcomers.

A major source of student dissatisfaction, from the beginning of the degree, was the lack of activities available to them on campus:

> That's a thing that they're lacking here. We don't have any extra-curricular activities. (P13, 2011)

This situation seemed not to improve over the four years. The students were repeatedly disappointed by the administration's response, which apparently showed little interest in addressing their social needs, and decisions again seemed arbitrary or unexplained:

> I wish I have something at least interesting to do here. Okay we go to class, that is what brings us here, to study. But we don't have [anything] other than that. We don't have life. We need something else. (P2, 2014)

In particular, students were unhappy about the way in which this absence of activities deprived them of relatively easy ways of getting to know Chinese students, something which many had hoped to do before they arrived in China. Language was undoubtedly a hindrance to establishing any sort of friendships with Chinese students, but this was exacerbated by the strict separation of living spaces for Chinese and international students, the absence of shared classes that led to different timetables, and the general lack of organized shared activities.

> Even, we feel like we have been isolated from the Chinese students and community. We have no interaction between the foreign students and the Chinese students. … We should have some special activities, so we will get to know each other. (P10, 2011)

Learning from Experiences Beyond the University

Throughout their stay in China, almost all of the students declared that they found the Chinese people they encountered outside the university to be 'friendly', 'polite', 'helpful', or possessing other similarly positive traits. They were, however, irritated by certain habits in the local population, notably the persistent staring that they were subjected to and the taking of photographs without their permission. Most of them came to accept such behavior as being good-natured curiosity rather than hostility and gradually became more tolerant or found their own ways of dealing with it.

> We went to McDonald's at night for ice cream. And then while we were there, a couple of other students and our Indian friend from Malaysia, a lot of the Chinese people in McDonald's were staring. It's not like they stare

and [imitates staring then quickly looking away], they go like this [stares intently and persistently]. … They don't walk and look and just keep walking. They stop and they stare. (P12, 2011)

My other friend, the Sri Lanka friend … Whenever he sees someone trying to take his picture, he smiles, so the girl would get really embarrassed. He will purposely do this. (P12, 2013)

Similarly, almost all international students declared that they had no sense of racist attitudes toward them from the local people. One compared China with his experience of the USA in this respect and declared, 'I love this country for this reason'. One of the Africans and one other student who had African friends did suggest that black people might experience some racist treatment, but this was not widespread. One student did warn, however, that foreigners must be careful not to get into any sort of altercation with a Chinese person as other Chinese will always take their compatriot's side, but this comment was made with particular reference to 'places which have trouble', such as bars and nightclubs.

The large number of Muslim students in our sample generally agreed that they had not experienced discrimination on religious grounds, although an issue did arise with the university administration when they asked for a specific prayer space rather than being obliged to pray in dormitory corridors. One Muslim student was in fact influenced in his choice to study in China by his feeling that he would be better received there than in the UK or USA. Their reception was probably helped by the long historical presence of a Muslim community in the city, so that, for example, halal food is easily available. There were clearly official limits to this tolerant attitude, however, as some students pointed out. For example, praying in any public place is not allowed, and although some Chinese people did ask questions about Islam, the Muslim students were warned strictly against any action which might be interpreted as proselytizing. Their religion was tolerated as long as it remained a private affair.

The experience of staying in China prompted some Christian students to question images of attitudes to Christianity among Chinese people that they had held before arrival.

Previously we heard a lot of stories that China is not that open-minded about Christianity. … Because of that, we try to keep it … down low and try not to tell anyone. But later I find that Xi'an is actually very open-minded in that sense. They are very OK with whoever you actually are. So if people ask me "Are you Christian?" I will say "Yeah, I'm a Christian." I don't feel scared to tell them now. Before I think I shouldn't say anything. If they ask, I will say I'm not. …. Now I don't care. (P13, 2013)

Despite dissatisfactions with the degree and university, over time we observed among participants an emotional attachment and in some cases even a sense of belonging, emerging from their growing personal knowledge of China, but also from a sense this was the place in which they themselves had 'grown up', become more independent and mature.

But we feel like now we belong here. This is us, like China, we are comfortable here, we keep growing. It's comfortable being here. (P3, 2013)

The surprising thing is I am happy I am here. I am happy that I take that chance [i.e. the scholarship to study in China]. I think this place teaches me a lot. … When I came here I was young. I did not know how to start. I used to call my dad I wished to go home. But now one month home is too much for me. I asked my dad why they booked the ticket for me. Could I just go back home for two weeks and go back China? (P2, 2014)

Conclusions and Implications

We have suggested that soft power has cognitive and affective components: 'knowledge about' and 'feelings for' a country. These are not entirely separable, of course, in that one has to be aware of an object to have feelings for it, but the distinction is helpful in looking for evidence of the effectiveness of soft power. To judge the soft power effectiveness of these students' experiences in China, we must evaluate the extent to which the students have come to 'know China' better and whether or not they admire or even 'desire' it as a result.

That they knew more about China after living and studying there for four or five years than they did when they arrived almost goes without saying, if only because most of them arrived with very limited information

about China or information that was so seriously distorted that even a short time there must correct it. We must also recognize, however, that some of these students did not choose to study in China in order to find out more about it and did little to seek knowledge of it much beyond that which they needed for their everyday living. Their interest in coming to China was primarily in gaining a qualification that would be recognized and therefore eventually help them to practice medicine in their own or another country. Significant attractions of China in helping them to achieve this goal included, for most, the relatively low cost and ease in obtaining admission to the degree. Nonetheless, there were many who were culturally or politically attracted by the country and hoped to learn more about it. Cultural attractions included anticipation of a public morality that was not so liberal as in 'the West' and of less discrimination against Muslims. 'Political' attraction, among the Pakistani students in particular, arose not because they admired or even knew much about China's political system, but because China and Pakistan were seen as strategic allies and they expected Chinese people to extend friendship to them as a consequence.

The knowledge that they gained from their experience was generally not the same as that which might be made available through Confucius Centers, the other arm of the 'soft power through education' approach. It tended not to be the 'high' cultural or historical knowledge that defines the long civilizational history that China sees as its global mark of distinction. Our students gained practical knowledge for contemporary everyday survival in a Chinese city: knowledge of shopping for daily needs and how to bargain, of how to get about, knowledge of where and what to eat (particularly important for the Muslim students). In a sense this is 'authentic' knowledge of China and contemporary Chinese life, largely free of any attempt by Chinese authorities to present only that which they see as desirable for the 'foreigners' to know. It was gained through experience and interpreted through the cultural and experiential filters that the students brought with them, rather than being pre-packaged in terms of a national cultural heritage. This culturally mediated interpretation meant that individuals might respond differently to similar observations and experiences, sometimes evaluating them against their own culture, and arrive at different affective conclusions. For example, individuals who

came with previous experience of materially more advanced countries and cities—Canada and the UAE were cited—tended to be less impressed with the degree of modernity of both infrastructure and human behavior that they encountered in Xi'an than those who came from materially less developed locales.

For some, life as a student in Xi'an was attractive because it presented opportunities for new experiences that were unavailable 'at home'. Among the Pakistani young men in particular—both from their own accounts and from those of others—opportunities were taken to go to nightclubs and other venues (which might or might not include drinking alcohol) and to mix with female company to the extent of having a local girl-friend. Perhaps just as important as the availability of such opportunities, however, was the absence of direct parental supervision and prohibitive social norms. This observation draws attention to the fact that it is not only the place that influenced the students' affective responses to their experience but also the time in their lives at which this experience occurred. For most students this was the first time they had lived away from home and been responsible for their own daily lives. It was a time for rapid 'growing up', something which was obvious to us as we interviewed them over the years and something which they themselves commented on. It is likely, therefore, that an 'alumnus effect' will figure in the years after they leave China: a positive nostalgia for a place and people that is linked to a significant time in their lives in which they had exciting new experiences and made new friends (even if few of these were Chinese). Unfortunately, for practical reasons alone, we shall be unable to follow our participants in their future lives beyond their Chinese university experience to examine whether this effect will be observed and will positively influence their attitudes to China. We anticipate occasional contact in the future with one or two of the students, but more systematic research than we can currently manage is certainly needed to explore the validity of the soft power rationale for recruiting international students, not only in China but more widely.

There is considerable interest in China as it has emerged onto the center stage of world politics and economics. This interest may offer fertile ground for soft power to work on, but it would be cultural arrogance to assume that 'success' is assured simply as a consequence of exposure to

Chinese society and culture. Nonetheless, government policy statements on recruiting international students (e.g. MoE, 2010b) and commentaries on these policies (e.g. Wen, 2015) that we have reviewed above focus exclusively on the numbers and origins of the recruited students and provide no guidance on or expectations of the nature of their experience in China. From an empirical perspective, our study suggests that this particular university showed very little concern until recently over the quality of the students' experiences within the university and offered little opportunity for cross-cultural contact, or even inhibited it. Similar findings have been reported by Ding (2016) from a study in Shanghai, suggesting that even in one of the most internationalized and cosmopolitan cities in China, the effectiveness of the soft power agenda for universities must be worked on rather than left to chance. Even Wen's opinion piece for the *Global Times*, which largely treats the recruitment of international students alone as leading to enhanced soft power, admits that 'China needs to do more to make this virtuous circle more constructive' (Wen, 2015).

The least positive responses among our participants were to the degree and the university itself, particularly in terms of poor teaching and the lack of contact with Chinese students. Oddly, therefore, it was aspects of the university itself—their very reason for coming to China—which were most likely to threaten the soft power impact of their experience in the country. Many students did appreciate the attention they received from some teachers—notably the teacher with particular responsibility for the welfare of the whole class, whose commitment and warmth were praised by many—and they recognized that some did their best for them despite the language barrier. The university administration—both those with whom the students came into direct contact when seeking practical help and those at higher levels making strategic decisions—must take much of the responsibility for the negative experiences these foreign students reported. We gained the impression that this degree program for foreign students, taught in English, had been introduced by the university without much thought for the students who were enrolled on it, at least until very recently. Perhaps it was a response to expectations from central government that Chinese universities should 'internationalize'; perhaps it was seen primarily as a source of additional funds and little more. We do

not know the rationale for the degree, but it is clear that better selection or training of staff is required: development of English language skills among teaching staff and 'customer service' skills among administration staff. Greater transparency in regulations and administrative procedures and consistency in their application would make a significant difference to the international student experience. Perhaps most of all, serious attempts should be made to develop a more inclusive campus in which Chinese and international students have opportunities to engage with and learn from each other; but the same could probably be said for many university campuses around the world which claim to be 'international'.

In the spirit of small-scale qualitative case studies such as this one, we must state emphatically that we do not make any attempt to generalize from our findings to other Chinese universities' internationalization programs. Indeed, we would not even propose that our findings necessarily apply to students taking other degrees in CU. We see our study as a critical exploration of the 'soft power effect' on the particular sample of students we studied. We hope that there are cautionary lessons to be learned from these findings for other Chinese universities which recognize similarities with their own provision for international students. We also hope that there are many universities that are already ahead of us and are aware of the need for providing a high-quality educational experience for their international students, whether or not they subscribe to a soft power agenda in attracting such students in the first place.

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