

International student education in China: characteristics, challenges, and future trends

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Abstract International student education in China has been continuously changing in response to the rapid social transition since the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949. Adopting a historical perspective, this scholarly paper begins with an analysis of characteristics of international student education in China in terms of rationales, role of government, and international students. Several challenges are then identified and this paper concludes with observations on future trends of international student education development, with a special focus on the implications of “the Belt and Road”. This paper contributes to a better understanding of China’s role as an emerging host nation of international students.

Keywords International student · China · International student education · Education policy · Internationalization of higher education

Introduction

In recent decades, the internationalization of higher education in China has made considerable progress and has contributed to transforming the Chinese education system into one of the largest and arguably most promising systems in the world (Yang 2014). China is not only a leading “sending” nation but has recently become an important receiving nation in the global market of international education, attracting a larger number of students from all over the world (Ma 2017). According to the 2016 statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education

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(MOE 2017), a total of 442,773 international students from 205 countries and regions were studying in mainland China; this represents an increase of 45,138 (11.35%) from 2015, making China the top destination for overseas studies in Asia. As an important “receiving” nation of international students from other countries, China’s policies and practices regarding international student education are worth reviewing. Adopting a historical perspective, this article begins with the discussion of the characteristics of international student education in China, including the rationales for international student education, the role of government in international student education, and the characteristics of international students in China. This paper then identifies a number of challenges faced by international student education in China. Finally, some future trends regarding international student education are discussed.

Characteristics

Rationale for international student education in China

Investigating the rationale (e.g., belief) of why it is appropriate to act in a given way is relevant because the rationale importantly affects behaviors and choices (Seeber et al. 2016). The goal and rationale of international student education guide the approach and practice of international student education in China. There were different orientations in international student education policies from phase to phase since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

Over the Pre-reform era (1949–1978), intentional student education was driven by fulfilling political and diplomatic obligations and training talents from countries with which China had friendly ties. Like many Asian countries and regions during the Cold War, China promoted academic and educational exchanges with the Soviet Union, other socialist countries, and some developing countries with the consideration of the political or ideological factors (Knight and de Wit 1997). China described its purpose of accepting international students in *Interim Regulations On International Students Education* adopted by the Ministry of Education in 1962 as follows: “Accepting and training international students is an internationalism obligation that China should fulfil, and it is also an important effort to promote cultural exchanges between China and other countries and deepen the friendship between the Chinese people and peoples of other countries” (Li 2000).

When China adopted reform and opening up as the national policies from 1978, international student education was intended to serve China’s reform and opening up policy and modernization drive. Faced with a desperate shortage of highly educated personnel, the Chinese government decided to send a large number of students and scholars abroad to develop urgently needed talent for China’s modernization goal and promote social opening up (Yu 2009; Huang 2003; Ma and Yue 2015). At the same time, China started to accept an increasing number of international students and promote the exchange of students with developed countries, which in turn contributed to more Chinese students dispatched overseas to study. This orientation was described and reflected in regulations and rules governing international student education and in work reports at important meetings. In May 1979, the Ministry of Education adopted *the Interim Regulations on Education of International Students (amended)*, which was an updated and revised version of the one adopted in July 1962. Article 1 of Chapter 1 clearly states “Accepting and training international students is an important effort to serve to accelerate China’s Socialist modernization”, showing that accepting and

training international students is an important component of China's opening up policy and is an essential effort in implementing the opening up process. This is a major shift from viewing the acceptance of international students as an internationalism obligation China should fulfil.

Promoting international exchanges and cooperation among higher education institutions (HEIs) was the goal and orientation of international student education policies in the 1990s. This new pursuit was reflected in several policies and guided the detailed processes and considerations for international student education. In 1991, the State Council Academic Degrees Committee stated in the *Notice on Piloting in Select Institution of Higher Education the Interim Methods for them to Award Chinese Degrees to International Students*, awarding degrees to international students was intended to “promote international exchanges and cooperation in China's higher education”. In June 1992, the Ministry of Education stated in the *Notice on Issuing Interim Methods for Accepting International Graduate Students* that accepting international graduate students was intended to “conduct international education exchanges and cooperation”. In Jan 2000, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Public Security issued the *Regulations on Management of Institutions of Higher Education in their Acceptance of International Students* (the 2000 Policy in the following for simplicity), which serve as the guideline administrative regulations in directing and managing international student education in the twenty-first century. Article 1 of Chapter 1 identified the purpose and significance of accepting and training international students: “to deepen understanding and friendship between Chinese people and peoples of other countries, and promote international exchanges and cooperation among higher education institutions”. The attitude toward international student education policies during this period was to boost international exchange and cooperation of HEIs, and through select policies and plans, to encourage Chinese institutions to establish relationships with their counterparts in other countries. Guided by this policy approach, there was a notable internationalization trend in Chinese universities, and many universities identified enrolling international students as an important objective of internationalization. Some, especially top-tier institutions, identified the number and level of international students in their development programme.

The distinctively Chinese rationale for international student education become more salient when compared with those in developed countries. Since the 1990s, the education of international students in many developed countries has been increasingly driven by a commercial and entrepreneurial spirit, especially in Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA (Huang 2007; Altbach and Knight 2007) Economic rationale is focused on efforts aimed at developing the human resources needed for a nation to remain internationally competitive and/or efforts geared toward generating income by attracting more international students (Kreber 2009). The USA and Canada regard international student education as a global talent acquisition strategy (Trilokekar 2015) by recruiting international students who they may attract as future immigrants. An economic rationale is the dominant driver behind Canada's international student education, which largely serves as fulfilling the needs of its domestic labor market (Trilokekar 2010, 2015). In addition, there is an obvious political rationale for international student education in the USA, where international student education is closely associated with foreign policy, as reflected in the term “national security” (Trilokekar 2010).

Differing from these developed countries, the main value of recruiting international students in China is to make good impressions to the world, to make more people think well about China, and to promote mutual understanding. Another important rationale is that recruiting international students will help achieve the policy goals of internationalizing universities, which ultimately makes Chinese universities more globally competitive. As Altbach and

Knight (2007) mentioned, developing countries seek to attract international students to their universities to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body and gain prestige. Chinese universities are now eagerly engaging in the quest for world-class universities and competing for a better ranking in the international university league (Mok 2007). The internationalization of China's higher education sector has been an important element of national policy as the country seeks to develop world-class research universities. (Huang 2015; Rhoads et al. 2014).

In summary, the attitude toward international student education in China has shifted from serving national political and diplomatic mandates, fulfilling obligations of internationalism and training talent from countries with which China has friendly ties, to serving the national modernization drive, boosting student swaps, dispatching more Chinese students overseas by accepting more international students to train urgently needed talent for modernization and deepening social openness, and to finally now serving the development of education and promoting international exchange and cooperation among HEIs.

Role of the Chinese government in international student education

The role of the Chinese government in international student education gradually shifted from a micro-manager to strategy designer, regulator, and supervisor at a macro-level. The government gradually delegated power, and HEIs became responsible entities for international student education.

From the first batch of international students arriving in China in the 1950s to the end of 1970s, the Chinese government was engaged in the management of all aspects of international student education, a natural fit under the highly centralized planned economic system. The Chinese government was the responsible entity for accepting international students through inter-governmental agreements. Students were then assigned to multiple institutions to study. During this process, HEIs were at the receiving end, enjoying no autonomy with respect to recruitment, teaching, or management. Issues such as accepting, suspending/quitting, promotion/unpromotion, and disciplinary action against international students all needed approval by the Ministry of Education. Education of international students in universities had to serve Chinese political and diplomatic interests, and training international students was a prestigious political task handed down by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the government to be properly executed.

Entering the 1980s, the government gradually delegated the power of recruitment, management, and teaching to institutions. From the 1990s in particular, the government adopted a series of laws, regulations, and overseas study policies for international student education to develop on its own within the framework of law. In Oct 1985, the Ministry of Education and other agencies adopted the *Methods for Management of International Students*, stipulating that “various universities and colleges...can accept international students through interscholastic exchanges or other means”. HEIs can now recruit international students on their own, which is not only permitted but even strongly encouraged. In 1986, the Ministry of Education issued *Select Provisions on Study by International Students in China*, noting that “the Ministry...encourages Chinese institution of higher education to establish interscholastic contacts and swap students”. In March 1989, the Ministry of Education submitted to the State Council *Proposals on Education of International Students in China in the Future* to “establish a China Scholarship Council and to assign acceptance and management of international students gradually to the non-government scholarship council. The government shall not be

involved anymore”. The proposals were endorsed and were put into practice through subsequent reform plans. Establishment of the China Scholarship Council was a great opportunity and mechanism for further reforming international student education. When the scholarship council, a non-governmental legal entity, assumed responsibility for routine operations, the conditions were ready for the government to shift its functions to strengthening macro-level management. In the same year, the Ministry of Education issued *Regulations on Recruiting Self-funded International Students*, further noting that HEIs with favourable conditions can obtain approval in recruiting self-funded international students, and local HEIs can obtain approval from local authorities to recruit and enroll international students, further delegating authority in international student education to the schools.

After 1990, the Chinese government delegated recruitment of international students to HEIs, permitting them to be responsible for recruitment, development, and routine management of international students. Cashing in on this opportunity, the number of international students recruited by Chinese universities soared, and institutions quickly assumed the responsibility of accepting international students. The 2000 Policy prescribed that institutions not be subject to the quota imposed by the government student enrollment plan when they recruit international students and that they may recruit interscholastic exchange international students and self-funded international students. The rights and roles of institutions in recruitment, admission, teaching, and management of international students are now formally established.

The above overview indicates that the government conducts macro-level management by setting overall policies and guidelines, conducting quality assessment, and entrusting non-governmental organizations. The government accepts some number of inter-governmental international students but, more importantly, adopts indirect management of international student education by setting policies and providing information and financial grants. Institutions eligible for accepting international students can make their own annual plan based on their own conditions and the national policies governing international student education; thus, their interest and enthusiasm have increased significantly. As the government adjusted its policies governing international student education, its role shifted from a micro-manager to a macro-level decision-maker, and as the management authority was delegated to lower levels, local governments began to exercise approval of local HEIs in their applications for accepting international students, and the number of schools accepting international students increased. HEIs have also enjoyed higher autonomy and enthusiasm in accepting and training international students, thus propelling the development of international student education. At present, there are three levels of management: The Ministry of Education sets the policies; provincial government agencies are responsible for coordination; and HEIs are responsible for international student recruitment, enrollment, teaching, management, meeting their life needs and service, and keeping in touch with those who choose to stay in China after graduation.

International students in China

In addition to the rationale for and the role of the Chinese government in international student education, changes in the number of international students' enrollment and the countries of origin also demonstrate certain patterns, which are largely influenced by the shifts in the two characteristics previously discussed.

Number of enrollments Statistics show that from 1950 to 1965, China accepted a total of 7259 international students from 70 countries, with an average annual increase of 20.18%.

(Cheng 2012, p. 31). During this start-up phase, the international student population was small, and growth was slow. This was mainly because China was at a low economic and scientific development level; the higher education system was just being replaced with a new one, resulting in a small number of enrollments and education awaiting development. The low higher-education level posed a bottleneck on the ability to accept international students. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out. On September 19, China notified foreign embassies in China that all education activities would be halted in Chinese HEIs and that all students would pause their studies for 1 year (Li 2000, p. 360).

Entering the 1970s, China established diplomatic relations with countries in Europe among others, and regained its seat at the United Nations, but the Cultural Revolution greatly disrupted education of international students, putting it on hold for 7 full years (1966 to 1972). Compounded by economic stagnation and political turmoil, the fledgling international student education programme saw hard days. In 1973, enrollment of international students resumed. From 1973 to 1977, China accepted 2066 international students from 77 countries, with an annual enrollment of merely 413 international students (Cheng 2012, p. 32).

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping made a major decision to resume dispatching Chinese students overseas to study. In the same year, the Third Plenary Meeting of the Eleventh Session of the CPC decided to adopt reform and the opening up of national policies, and CPC work priorities shifted to socialist modernization. Reform and opening up policies were a catalyst for the development of Chinese higher education. In 1985, the government released *CPC Central Committee Decisions on Reform of Education System*, which expanded the autonomy of HEIs in running their affairs. *Instructions Sought on Charge Standards for Enrolling Self-funded International Students in China (1979)*, which was approved by the State Council, opened the way for enrolling self-funded international students. Some HEIs began to recruit self-funded international students, and their number began to increase rapidly. From 1978 to 1989, China enrolled 58,847 international students from 124 countries, including 32,325 scholarship students and 26,522 self-funded students (Yu 2009, p. 284). After that, self-funded international students became the mainstream.

In 1989, due to the political climate in China, Western countries led by the USA halted education exchanges and cooperation projects with China, causing international student education in China to rewind. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping toured South China and gave important speeches, encouraging reform and the opening up programme to be accelerated, and international student education gradually returned to normal (Wei 2015). From 1990 to 1994, the number of international students soared by an average of 49% per year. In the 1990s, China launched Project 211 (creating 100 top universities entering the twenty-first century, announced in 1995) and Project 985 (creating a few world-class universities, announced in May 1998) to revitalize the country through education and promote development of high-caliber universities. From 1999, HEIs dramatically increased enrollment, and the gross enrollment ratio reached 15%, making higher education more accessible. As Chinese higher education prospered, international student education in China also continued to increase in scale.

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization, and China's integration into the global economy accelerated, which greatly facilitated the internationalization of Chinese higher education. International student education then entered a fast track. In 2010, the Ministry of Education introduced the *Study in China Program*. According to this programme, by 2020, the number of international students enrolled in HEIs, and secondary and primary schools in mainland China should reach 500,000 persons per year, including 150,000 receiving tertiary

education. In 2016, there were 442,773 international students from 205 countries and regions who studied in 829 universities, colleges, research institutes, and other types of teaching facilities in 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and provincial-level municipalities. This represents 45,138 more students than 2015, an increase of 11.35%.

Country of origin When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, its foreign policy was heavily tilted toward the then Soviet Union. As Huang (2007) mentioned, from 1945 to the 1980s, internationalization of higher education in China was influenced by the Cold War, and the individual countries were divided into two major groups. China belonged to the group that followed the former Soviet Union. China and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of friendship, alliance, and mutual assistance. The primary mission of Chinese foreign policy was to establish and develop relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries (Li and Tang 2015). From the end of 1950 to early 1951, the first batch of 33 international students from five East European countries—namely, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary—arrived in China and were enrolled in Tsinghua University in a special class for eastern European exchange students to study Chinese language (Li 2000). Since the Bandung Conference in 1954, China had increased exchange with developing countries in Asia and Africa. As an international assistance obligation, China accepted large numbers of international students from third-world countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. From the early 1960s, China began to accept a small number of international students from western Europe, North America, and Japan.

Since 1978, with the implementation of the open-door policy and economic reform, China made various attempts to internationalize its higher education system (Huang 2003). By then, China had normalized its relations with the USA, the former Soviet Union, and Japan, among others, and enjoyed diplomatic relations with more and more countries. In 1999, international students from 164 countries came to China to receive higher education (Ministry of Education 2010), which increased to 205 countries in 2016.

Asia has been the main source of students studying in China. According to the statistics from Chinese Ministry of Education, in the past 17 years (1999–2016), the proportion of Asian students studying in China has remained between 60% and 82%. Since 2000, South Korea has been the largest sending country of international students in China, and its number of students studying in China has been significantly ahead of the second country. Over recent years, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, and Vietnam have grown rapidly in the number of their students studying in China, which has resulted in Germany, France, Canada, and four European and American countries being pushed out of the top 10 list. The number of international students from other continents has increased considerably. The largest growth is Africa, which has grown 44-fold over the past 17 years (from 1384 in 1999 to 61,594 in 2016). In addition, the growth rate of the number of students coming to China from the USA and Russia has been in a relatively stable state for a long time, maintaining its position in the rankings.

The aforementioned three Chinese characteristics of international student education are indeed related to each other. As Table 1 shows, international student education in China before 1978 was primarily politically oriented, meeting the political and diplomatic needs. The central government took charge of every aspect of international student education and as a result, the number of enrollments was relatively small and students primarily came from socialist countries and some third-world countries in Asia and Africa. After China initiated reform open-up policies 1978, the top priority for the country was economic development, and

Table 1 Characteristics of international student education in China

	Rationale	Role of government	International student	Important policy documents
Pre-reform era (1949–1978)	Fulfilling internationalism obligations	Management of all aspects of international student education	A small number of enrollments, primarily government-funded and from Socialist countries and third-world countries	Interim Regulations On International Students Education (1962 and amended in 1979).
Reform era (1978–1990)	Serving modernization construction	Gradually delegating power of recruitment, management, and teaching to institutions	The number increased rapidly, especially the number of self-funded students coming from diverse countries of origin.	Methods for Management of International Students (1985); Proposals on Education of International Students in China in the Future (1989); Regulations on Recruiting Self-funded International Students (1989).
Post-reform era (1990–present)	Promoting international exchanges and cooperation among HEIs	Macro-level management and supervision	The number soared and students come from all over the world	Regulations on Management of Institutions of Higher Education in their Acceptance of International Students (2000); Study in China Program (2010); Regulations on Recruitment and Education of International Students in China (2017).

international student education during that period was also designed to serve that purpose, in line with market reform in the economic sector. The central government gradually delegated administrative power to lower levels of government and individual institutions. The number of international students increased rapidly and an increasing number of self-funded international students came to China during that era. Entering the 1990s, HEIs increasingly enjoyed autonomy in terms of recruiting, managing, and teaching international student, and the government was only responsible for macro-level management and supervision. The basis for international student education returned to educational purposes, and China became one of the popular destinations for international students from all over the world.

Challenges

Despite the great achievements that have been made, international student education also faces a number of challenges. First of all, despite the increase in number, international student education remains at a low level in terms of educational structure. In 2016, there were 209,966 degree-oriented international students, accounting for 47.42% of the international student population. Among them, postgraduate students represent a small portion (30.4%, including 21.8% at the postgraduate level and 8.6% at the doctorate level), and they represent an even smaller portion if all international students in China are considered (14.4%). There is still a considerable gap in the education level of international students between China and developed countries. For example, international students accepted by the USA are mostly at the post-graduate level. In 2015, the USA accepted approximately 975,000 international students. Degree-oriented students accounted for 78%, and about half of them were at the postgraduate level. The number of degree-oriented international students in the USA was over five times greater than that of China, and the number of postgraduate-level international students was almost seven times that of China (IIE 2016).

Majors chosen by international students are unevenly distributed. In 2014, there were 10 majors that received more than 5000 international students, including Chinese language, Western medicine, engineering, economics, management, Chinese medicine, literature, law, education, and art, in order of the number of international students. Chinese language major students alone accounted for 51.5% of all international students in that year (including both degree-oriented and non-degree-oriented students; Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, Ministry of Education 2015). International students who choose to study other majors make up only a small portion. First, China's international student education started off with the teaching of Chinese language, especially during the start-up phase. After a few decades, much experience and many skills have been accumulated in this major. Second, there is not a sufficient number of international students applying to study other majors in China and to increase the size of the international student population, such that HEIs had to open their doors to language major students. Third, there remains a gap in training of science and engineering talent between China and advanced countries. Science and engineering majors, especially fundamental sciences, natural sciences, and engineering sciences, are not internationally competitive enough. Teaching and course design are not yet international enough, and thus, most HEIs are unable to offer more majors that stand out or possess the strength to attract high-caliber international students. Furthermore, majors and subjects that possess competitive advantages remain few (Chen 2012). Nevertheless, as more effort is put

into building world-class universities and majors in China, international students will find other majors more attractive in the future.

Furthermore, the size of the international student population remains small, as there is still a considerable gap between China and developed countries. According to data from Project Atlas (IEE 2016), international students accounted for only 0.9% of China's total higher education population, much lower than the UK (21.1%), Australia (20.7%), Canada (12.9%), Russia (5.4%), the USA (5.2%), and Japan (4.2%) in 2015. Additionally, there are more Chinese students going overseas to study than international students coming to China. According to Ministry of Education statistics, since 2010, the difference between outbound and inbound student populations has been widening. In 2016, Chinese students going overseas to study outnumbered international students coming to China to study by 101,500 people, which is a considerable deficit.

Second, quality assessment and assurance systems need to be established. "Ensuring quality" has been an important requirement for international student education since 2000. This was emphasized in the 2000 Policy and the *2003–2007 Education Revitalization Action Plan* adopted in 2004. Subsequently, the government adopted further policies to ensure the quality of international student education. In 2007, the Ministry of Education issued *Interim Regulations on Quality Control Standards for Bachelor's Degree Education in Medicine for International Students (taught in English)*, and identified 30 universities that can recruit international students in the clinical medicine major and teach in English. In 2009, the Ministry of Education issued *Notice on Providing Prep Education to International Students on Chinese Government Scholarship for Bachelor's Degree*, requesting that international students on a Chinese government scholarship that will receive bachelor's degree education in Chinese language should receive 1 to 2 years of prep education. The adoption of these policies indicates the Chinese government is paying attention to the quality of education and the importance of "ensuring quality" in the development of international student education, as well as the size of the international student population.

However, the set of indicators measuring the internationalization of HEIs focuses on the number of international students; thus, the schools pay more attention to the number rather than the quality of international students. As long as an international student can present a study record, transcript, Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (HSK) certificate, reference letters, interviews (online and visa), study plan, and physical check-up form, they can apply for a Chinese government scholarship to study in China. The access threshold is very low. Furthermore, the only required test, i.e. The HSK, which measures an applicant's Chinese proficiency, is also becoming easier to pass. Some Chinese students even change their nationality to be admitted to Chinese universities and colleges as an international student and avoid the challenging entrance exam as a native. The admission criteria for non-degree-oriented international students are even lower (Tan 2016). An "easy in and easy out" approach in international student education has compromised education quality (Wang 2014). The 2000 Policy stipulated that "institution of higher education should review, test or verify the eligibility of applicants wishing to study in China, and those who are to receive a degree-oriented education in Chinese language should take the HSK test". However, it is unclear which majors require admission tests and how such tests or verifications should be organized; this testing is thus difficult to enforce. At present, with the exception of medicine, there are no quality control standards for other majors. It is important to adopt teaching quality assessment standards for bachelor's degree education of international students to ensure and improve the overall quality of international student education in China.

Only a small percentage of courses are offered in English. Despite the gradual increase in courses taught in English, they represent a much smaller percentage than those in advanced countries (such as Japan, Germany, and France). At present, only a number of top Chinese universities have begun to adopt English as a medium of instruction. Furthermore, the faculty of Chinese HEIs are not international enough in composition. In 2015, foreign teachers hired by Chinese colleges and universities accounted for only 0.67% of all teachers (Department of Development and Planning, Ministry of Education 2016). In comparison, early in 2008, the percentage of foreign teachers hired by Japanese HEIs reached 10.0% (Chen 2010). Lack of competent faculty eligible to teach in English limits the competitiveness of Chinese institutions in the global market of attracting international students.

In addition to improving the technical quality of Chinese higher education, how to establish and maintain a positive academic reputation in a global higher education market is another challenge faced by Chinese universities. Using a discourse analysis approach, Suspitsyna (2015) demonstrated that *Chronicle of Higher Education* publications about China in 2011 and 2012 were predominantly negative and that the most frequent topics covered in the publications were Chinese institutions' lack of academic freedom and integrity. Raising the right to speak and finding appropriate advertisement strategies are essential tasks Chinese institutions need to overcome in order to let more foreign students understand a real Chinese higher education.

Third, some regulations, rules, and policies are no longer applicable to today's international student education. As reform and opening up deepened, notable changes were seen in international student education, such as a shifting of government function, delegation of power, standardization, and rule-based management. As the number, types, and education levels of international students increased, international student management and service issues became more eminent in HEIs, which required urgent solutions. The government adopted policies and regulations to promote a rule-based process in international student management. *The Regulations on Management of Higher Education Institutions in their Acceptance of International Students* in 2000 describe international student education guidelines, management systems, types of students, scholarships, teaching, social management, and stay permits. As the main standard operating procedure, the regulations marked the beginning of rule-based management of international student education. The government also identified "deepening reform, strengthening management, ensuring quality, and steady growth" as the guidelines, and clearly stated that "higher education institutions are specifically responsible for recruitment, education, teaching and daily management of international students and are not subject to the quota imposed by national recruitment plan". In addition, the scholarship system also improved, as evidenced by the adoption of *Notice on Implementing Annual Assessment of Chinese Government Scholarships* (2000), *Methods for Annual Assessment of Chinese Government Scholarships* (2000), and *Regulations on Management of Chinese Government Scholarships* (2001). Effective from April 1, 2017, *Notice on Implementing Work Permit System for Foreigners Working in China* permits outstanding international graduates from Chinese universities and colleges to have jobs in China without previous work experience, paving the way for them to stay after graduation. These should rightly be seen as very positive developments.

However, there are issues to be faced at the level of rules and regulations. Some Chinese researchers (Dai 2016) noted that despite the fact that a series of policy documents such as plans and guidelines that govern international student education have been adopted, these documents remain at a general level and still need concrete incentive policy measures to be adopted by ministries of education, public security, industry, and commerce.

Future trends

Major opportunities await in international student exchange as China promotes the Belt and Road (B&R) Initiative, “improves the quality and effectiveness of the opening up of the education sector”, and implements national strategies such as “revitalizing the country by relying on talent” and “harnessing innovation as a growth driver”. As Marginson (2011) noted, the rise of the Confucian model—strong nation state shaping of structures, funding, and priorities—should be recognized as a distinctive model of higher education that is, in some respects, more effective than systems in North America, the English-speaking world, and Europe. Three trends in international student education in China can be expected in the future.

The Belt and Road Initiative provides new opportunities for developing international student education in China

More recently, China launched the B&R Initiative which sought to tighten the Eurasian collaboration through international trade among 65 countries spanned by a common road, presenting it immediately as a key national concept and foreign policy priority for the years to come. One of the essential elements of the B&R Initiative is to strengthen ties between countries along the land-bound "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "Twenty-first-Century Maritime Silk Road" through education. The policy has significant implications for the country's international education agenda and is potentially transformative in a number of ways, for international students in particular.

First, the B&R Initiative could contribute to a rapid growth in the number of international students in China. In 2004, a total of 24,896 students from countries along the B&R routes studied in China, and by the end 2016, the number had surged to exceed 200,000, with a 21.6% average increase per year from 2004 to 2014. (Note: *Brief Statistics on International Students* in China was compiled based on data from 2004 to 2014). In 2016, the top 10 originating countries included seven countries along the B&R Initiative, namely, Thailand, Pakistan, India, Russia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and Vietnam. Furthermore, with more government scholarship offered to countries along the B&R, as stated in *The Vision and Action Plan to Promote Joint Construction of Silk Road Economic Belt and Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road*, the size of the international student population from these countries is expected to grow further.

Second, as the cultivation of international talents for the B&R countries is critical to implementation of the B&R framework, the enrollment will include more high-level talent from countries considered in the B&R Initiative. For example, as entrusted by the National Development and Reform Commission, Zhejiang University hosted the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the B&R Initiative Seminar in 2016, which included 22 senior government officials and known businessmen from 9 countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Philippines. As entrusted by the Ministry of Education, Peking University and Tsinghua University hosted Master in Public Administration programs for senior officials from ASEAN countries, among other developing countries. In addition, many Chinese agencies and universities are initiating cultural research centers and ‘the B&R’ think tanks. Recruiting international students from countries along the B&R routes, exchanging faculty and students, and cooperating in research with foreign or overseas institutes are considered important professional exchange and cooperation activities. It

is predictable that these Chinese think tanks and research institutes will open up to international students graduating from Chinese universities, and recruit them as research staff to study education of their home country or region, providing intellectual and talent support to the B&R Initiative.

Third, with the deepening of the B&R Initiative, Chinese companies' needs for international students graduating from Chinese universities has surged. To date, the Ministry of Education has hosted four job fairs for international students from Chinese universities, attracting a total of 88 known employers, 8000 international students, and over 1200 posts. Most of these companies have investments or projects in the countries along routes of the B&R Initiative, and require talented students who speak Chinese, their local language(s), and have expertise. International students are an important source of talent for these companies. Previous studies reveal that improved job prospects, as well as opportunities after graduation (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Chen 2007), are important factors motivating students to study abroad. Therefore, increasing job opportunities after graduation accompanied with the B&R Initiative will be an additional factor attracting international students to study in China.

Improving international student education quality will be a priority

China has made substantial, targeted investments in the quality of its higher education, most recently through a new initiative called “Double World Class Project”, which was initiated in 2015, aimed at building a number of world-class universities and disciplines in the next several decades. The global competitiveness of recruiting international students across the world is considered to be an effective indicator of the strength of a country's higher education system. Thus, vigorously developing education of international students in China and enhancing capacity to develop internationalization are important tasks to make China a strong player in higher education (Huang 2015).

On Feb 10, 2016, the government issued *Numerous Proposals on Opening up of Education in the New Era*, which is the first roadmap document that comprehensively guides the opening up of Chinese education and is also the highest-authority document to review the subject since 1949. The goal is to significantly improve international student education quality, standardization, and rule-based management by 2020, as well as to move beyond blindly increasing the number of students to instead improve quality and effectiveness (tizhizhengxiao, 提质增效). The report suggested greater emphasis should be placed on quality and speeding up the training of high-end international talent. Yanching Academy of Peking University and Schwarzman Scholars of Tsinghua University represent excellent examples of the new type of international student education in the new era, both of which are master's programs recruiting outstanding graduates across the world and designed for the preparation of the next generation of global leaders.¹

A number of measures have been implemented to improve quality of international student education in China. Firstly, since 2010, preparatory programs have been provided to international students seeking a bachelor's degree and funded by Chinese government scholarships in order to help them better fit into their study and living in China. These preparatory programs

¹ For more information about Yanching Academy of Peking University, please visit <http://yenchingacademy.org>. For more information about Schwarzman Scholars of Tsinghua University, please visit <http://schwarzmanscholars.org>

are expected to become accessible for all international students regardless of their funding sources in the future.

Secondly, the Ministry of Education initiated efforts to create an accreditation system in 2015, and introduced the University International Students Education Quality Accreditation Indicators System to assess HEIs' capabilities and outcomes, with a focus on appraisal of their management and service in international student education. The system includes 5 tier-1 indicators, 15 tier-2 indicators, and 36 observation points, and assesses and accredits HEIs in vision and mission, facilities, faculty and curriculum, management, student activities, outcome, impact, and special features. The accreditation process is handled by the China Education Association for International Exchange. The first batch of accredited universities includes 27 institutions, such as Peking University, Fudan University, and University of International Business and Economics.

Thirdly, in the year of 2017, China adopted the latest *Regulations on Recruitment and Education of International Students in China*, which includes several measures to ensure education quality of international students. For example, Article 16 stipulates HEIs should keep a truthful record of international student's test scores and everyday performance. Article 25 stipulates HEIs should appoint international student councilors to respond to the needs of international students in their study and daily life. The ratio for international student councilors should be no less than that for Chinese students. Article 44 stipulates if a HEI provides low-quality education or poor service and causes negative social influence, the education authorities can charge legal liabilities and limit its enrollment of international students according to the Law of the People's Republic of China on Education.

China's international student education policy will be more open

The CPC Central Committee Report at the Nineteenth Party Congress explicitly stated firm resolve to implement a human resources-driven country development strategy and innovation-driven development strategy, to recruit and harness the power of global talents and facilitate their contribution to building a stronger country. Hence, creating an international talent exchange market, building a global talent innovation, startup and development platform, and an international talent exchange hub, improving talent services, and attracting global talents to serve China's social and economic development will be a new principle in international student education.

Recently, China stepped up its drive to attract overseas talent. In March 2016, the CPC Central Committee issued *Recommendations on Deepening Reform in Talent Development System and Mechanism* that explicitly stipulated fully leveraging both domestic and international talents, taking the initiative to compete for international talents, adopting a more open and flexible talent development and deployment mechanism, hiring talents regardless of their origin, developing talents without fearing their departure, and harnessing talents' power in whatever appropriate ways. The recommendations also proposed to relax conditions, simplify procedures, and provide relevant treatment in offering visa and resident permits to foreign talents. Following the recommendations, the Ministry of Public Security piloted new entry-exit policies in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangdong.

In January 2017, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Education jointly issued the *Notice on Allowing Outstanding Foreign Students Graduating from Chinese Universities to Work in China*, permitting qualified outstanding foreign students graduating from Chinese universities with a master's

degree or above to work in China, even if they have no work experience, making further room for introducing outstanding international talents to China. Previously, only international students with foreign degrees having a minimum of 2 years' work experience outside of China were eligible. The new system provides more incentives for foreign students to stay on after they graduate.

In addition, in January 2017, the ministry of public security also announced that from 1 March, foreign students will be permitted to undertake short-term internships, and international students studying in universities in Beijing can take part-time jobs or launch start-ups in the high-tech sector in the capital. The Shanghai commission revealed that in 2016, some 1500 international students in Shanghai interned at some 850 companies and institutions, although it acknowledges this is a small number compared to the 56,000 international students in the city.

These policy changes reveal that China has realized the important role of having more international talents with a global mindset in its development into a more globalized free market. Research has established a positive link between international students as international human capital (familiarity with the language, law, and customs in both locations) and the increased trade between the student host and source markets (Min and Falvey 2017). Many major recruiting countries like Australia, Canada, England, and the USA have introduced multiple policies and programs to attract and retain highly skilled and academically eligible international students (Sá and Sabzalieva 2017). Similarly, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong as education hubs, are actively competing for international students with distinct objectives to attract foreign talents (Lee 2014), in what has been called a “great brain race” (Wildavsky 2012). To some extent, China will need to import either knowledge or people from overseas to retain strong human capital. It can be expected that the new policy of international student education in China will bring vitality to the global market of international education.

Conclusion

By reviewing the historical development of international student education since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, this paper first identified several Chinese characteristics of international student education, such as the rationales, the role of government, and the characteristics of international students in China. From our review of international student education in China, it is clear that international student education has been an important part of Chinese higher education. It was intended to serve, yet was also restrained by, China's political and economic development needs, and it fluctuated with China's political, economic, and cultural development. Each and every major development in the history of the People's Republic of China has had far-reaching impacts on the development of international student education in China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, international student education policies have closely followed and supported national strategies. There were different attitudes toward international student education policies from phase to phase, but in the end, policy returned to serving education in its own right. The policies shifted gradually from being closed to open in nature.

In the last 10 years, especially with the implementation of the Study in China Programme, there have been significant achievements in international student education, with a gradually optimized student mix, an improvement in teaching quality, and a standardization of routine management. Evidence shows that tremendous progress has been made in international student education in China. However, many challenges remain. For example, the diversity and quality

of international students still need to improve, international student education lags behind China's world influence and economic rank, the diversity and level of degree-oriented international student education need improvement, geographic proximity and financial value should no longer be the main considerations for choosing to study in China, and courses and faculty competitiveness should be strengthened.

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