



International student recruitment campaign: experiences of selected flagship universities in China

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Abstract

Along with the significant improvement of Chinese universities' visibility in the global higher education field, the Chinese government has been actively branding "Study in China" in recent years to market itself as a prevalent destination for international education. International enrolment has gained increasing importance and become a key component of the internationalisation discourse in China. Borrowing the theories of field and capital, this study aims to obtain a more nuanced understanding of China's position as a leading host country for international students. Using a multiple-case study design, this study investigates the motivations for selected flagship universities in China to campaign to recruit international students, and in what way these are nested with the national priorities, as well as the key recruitment strategies and technologies they have employed. The findings help reveal the distinctiveness of the Chinese model of international student recruitment. A shift in priorities is also noted as well as controversies and tensions in respect to the employment of various recruitment strategies. The lessons of leading universities in China offer insights both for researchers and policymakers in many countries to rethink their strategies to increase their nations and universities' presence in the global landscape.

Keywords Global higher education field · International student recruitment · Rationales · Strategies and technologies · China

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Introduction

As the largest source country of international students, China also has marketed itself successfully in recent years as a prevalent destination for students who wish to pursue study overseas. China's market share of international higher education students globally was negligible in 2001, while in 2018, the number of tertiary students inbound to China exceeded 490,000, more than double that a decade ago (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China 2019), and represented a 10% share of the entire market (Institute of International Education 2018). China's strong performance in attracting international students has made it a significant competitor with traditional market leaders, such as the USA and UK. A closer look at the data on the international students in China reveals the distinctiveness of China's achievements. Of the 492,185 international students, nearly half were enrolled in non-degree programs, which indicates a pattern distinct from that of other major host countries. Moreover, among the top seven host countries that occupied over 5% of the global market share individually, China is the sole non-English-speaking country with no colonial history. China's success in attracting international students cannot be separated from the government's unremitting promotion of the Chinese language, which has made it a popular second language people in different parts of the world study and speak.

Both the particularity of China's achievements and the profound effects of its increasing popularity as a destination for overseas study make the country's experience an interesting and worthy case both for researchers and higher education practitioners to study carefully. Although some studies have focused on this important issue, little empirical work has been conducted to understand the motivations for universities in China, particularly its flagship institutions, to campaign to recruit international students, and in what way these are nested with the national priorities, as well as the key recruitment strategies and technologies they have employed. This study's goal is to fill the gap in our current knowledge to obtain a more nuanced understanding of China's position as a leading host country for international students. By doing so, Bourdieu's (1969, 1986) field and capital theories as well as Marginson's (2008) extensions of these are employed to conceptualise the investigation, given their power to interpret agents' position and their imagination and will in developing position-taking strategies in a relatively independent domain.

The global higher education field and structured student flow

According to Bourdieu (1969, 1971a, b), a field is a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of function and institutions that are specific to it and that defines the relations among its agents. To construct a field in empirical work, its key elements need to be defined, including the major agents (particularly the producers and receivers), its specific logic, and the forms of specific capital that operate within it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Higher education is a field to which Bourdieu applied his theories extensively (see Bourdieu 1988, 1993, 1996). However, as Naidoo (2004) claimed, Bourdieu's arguments developed in the context of a relatively stable compact between higher education, society, and nation-state, which is substantially distinct from the contemporary highly interconnected globalised context. Hence, Marginson (2008) extended Bourdieu's theories to incorporate the global dimension in the higher education field. According to his construction of the field, the major agents are HEIs with cross-border activities as producers and international students as receivers. The specific

logic that distinguishes this field from other social domains is the “...credentialing of knowledge-intensive labour, and basic research” (p. 314). Given such a logic, the most crucial capital specific to this field is knowledge. Within the global higher education field, elite American universities, as well as a select group of research universities in the UK, occupy the dominant positions, in which their authority derives from their knowledge and selectivity. These institutions’ hegemony also is manifested in English’s role as the sole global language in research (Lomer, Papatsiba, and Naidoo 2018; Marginson 2008), and consolidated further by the world university league tables.

The global field allows students to cross national boundaries to seek the best opportunities worldwide to acquire more educational capital that may endow them with positional power. Nations and their HEIs are positioned hierarchically within the global higher education field. This asymmetry determines that students’ global flow within the field also is uneven. As not all degrees confer the same value on their holders, the dominant HEIs provide education that leads graduates to advanced careers almost anywhere in the world, which make them extraordinarily attractive to students (Marginson 2008). Although the student flow within the global field remains highly structured because of different universities’ hierarchic positions, “...the changing political architecture of the world”, the “...increasing confident assertion of knowledge traditions other than western scientific rationalism”, and “...the recognition of non-economic value of the international knowledge network” (Rizvi 2011, p. 700) have created the space for different nations and universities to deploy their imagination in developing recruitment strategies and technologies.

Rationales for international student recruitment

There is no single rationale for a nation or university to recruit international students, but instead, a combination of aspirations and motivations. Rationales underlying international student recruitment have been situated historically and the shift in priorities throughout history has been observed well. In light of existing studies, rationales that motivate the effort to recruit international students are related to four aspects at both the national and institutional levels: political, economic, educational, and cultural (e.g. see Altbach and Knight 2007; Bolsmann and Miller 2008; Lomer 2017; Marginson 2011a; Maringe and Foskett 2010). Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptual language of ‘capitals’ serves as a powerful tool for interpreting the motivations to campaign for international students. Nations and universities compete for international students because they are the source of various forms of capital that could yield tremendous benefits to the host country. International students’ most striking contribution is economic. Full fee-paying international students bring not only immediate income necessary for universities’ financial stability and health, but also strong support to national economies. International students contributed USD\$42 billion to the US economy in 2017,¹ injected AUD\$31.9 billion into the Australian economy in 2018,² and are worth £20 billion to the UK economy.³ International students in themselves are important human capital as well (Harris 2009; Knight 1997; Lomer 2017). Many countries use higher education to attract and retain highly skilled immigrants, particularly those that face a decline in their workforce, such as Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and the majority of Europe (Douglass and Edelstein 2015).

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, 2018.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018.

³ Higher Education Policy Institute, 2018.

In addition, governments have viewed foreign student recruitment as a form of international development policy or a tool of public diplomacy to project a nation's soft power (Byrne 2016; Lomer et al. 2018; Nye 2004; Paradise 2012). International students are seen as young ambassadors with greater sympathy for the economic and political interests of the country where they studied who assume the role of representatives who forge connections between host and source countries (Papatsiba 2005; Rizvi 2011). With respect to the educational rationale, recruiting foreign students contributes to competitiveness, reputation, and brand building (Bolsmann and Miller 2008; Marginson 2011b). There is a strong emphasis on universities' 'visibility' in efforts to attract students (Stier and Borjesson 2010). Moreover, research plays a determinative role in defining universities' hierarchy in national and global systems of status rankings, as it creates the key capital in the fields—knowledge. International students pursuing research degrees contribute to the university's academic viability by assisting in research projects and co-authoring papers with their supervisors (Bolsmann and Miller 2008). Finally, international students possess cultural capital, and therefore, are positioned consistently as a source of quality by bringing diversity and a variety of worldviews to courses and campuses (Bolsmann and Miller 2008; Gök 2018; Lomer 2017).

International student recruitment strategies

Given the considerable capital international students bring, it is unsurprising that many governments around the world brand their national higher education sector to attract more and better international students. Current literature (e.g. see Choudaha, Chang, and Kono, April 28, 2014; Gök 2018; Kuwamura 2009; Mazzarol 1998; Özturgut 2013) suggests diverse strategies universities in different countries employ to attract international students and increase their share in the market, including the creation of an academically and socially supportive campus atmosphere, participation in international education fairs and recruitment events, possession of international strategic alliances or coalitions, the use of recruitment agents, and provision of transnational programs and outreach activities. The role of current enrolled international students and alumni, as well as social media and other information technologies, also have been highlighted in universities' advertising and marketing. For non-English speaking countries, offering more programs in English and seeking franchise opportunities to operate onshore or offshore programs are used increasingly to compete in the market (Knight 2011).

Different universities' ability to deploy these technologies varies. Universities in such market-leading countries as the USA, UK, and Australia have been engaged in brand building and marketing for a long while and developed sophisticated skills using different techniques. For example, three decades ago, "...large bureaucracies were created at all Australian universities to recruit international students...Marketing initiatives of international offices at universities came to occupy a central place within the administrative structure of Australian universities" (Rizvi 2011, p. 696). In contrast, there is enormous scope for emerging competitors in the market to develop their capacity to use these strategies and technologies creatively and effectively. Professional staff who specialise in the areas of international student advising, immigration matters, cultural exchange, event planning, and program management are in great demand in international operations in the higher education sector (Kuwamura 2009). A number of factors influences universities' recruiting strategies, including national and local policy frameworks, institutional leadership and organisational structure, the university's status, heritage, and tradition, and financial resources available. In particular, institutional strategies are nested within the national higher education sector's branding initiatives, as Mazzarol and

Soutar (2002) argued that most students choose a particular host country before they choose an institution.

Branding ‘study in China’

Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has invested substantially in building its own universities’ capacity, which has led to significant growth of the key knowledge capital its universities possess and their ability to generate that capital sustainably. Chinese universities’ position in global higher education has increased considerably. In 2003, when the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) published its global university ranking first, no Chinese universities reached the top 200, and only nine ranked in the top 500. In contrast, in the latest 2018 ranking, one Chinese university ascended to the top 50, another two entered the top 100, and 51 ranked in the top 500 globally. In this context, the Ministry of Education introduced the *Studying in China Plan* in 2010, which set a specific target for overseas student recruitment: to enrol 500,000 international students, including 150,000 tertiary degree students, by 2020 (Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China 2010). Then Director of the International Department of Ministry of Education, Ms. Xiuqin Zhang, elaborated the primary objective of developing international study in China and the major measures taken to promote the national brand in an interview with the Xinhua News Agency (2013)⁴:

At present, facing a new international environment and development opportunities, international graduates from China are a force to be reckoned with, which enables China to create a friendly international environment, develop soft power, and realise the Chinese Dream. According to the deployment of the *Plan*, several measures will be taken, including the development of flagship degree programs in English and degree programs with Chinese characteristics and international competitive advantages; further improvement of the diversified scholarship system built jointly by the Chinese central and local governments, educational institutions and social organisations; the update and reform of advertising and marketing venues at both the national and institutional levels, and the establishment of international graduate and alumni networks.

Overseas returned scholars’ role in developing high-quality degree programs both in English and Chinese is notable. The central and local governments have introduced policies to encourage scholars who trained overseas to return and work at HEIs in China. For example, the central government has implemented the *Thousand Talents Plan* since 2008 to return high-level overseas Chinese home. These academics have become the leading scholars in their fields and contribute to integrating Chinese HEIs into the global field further. The central Chinese government has established seven scholarship programs in which a total of ¥3.92 billion has been invested (Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China 2019). International collaboration, particularly Sino-foreign cooperation in operating schools and educational programs, also plays an important role in branding China’s higher education sector.

⁴ China’s official media.

The study

A multiple-case study design is employed in this work, given that it allows a detailed examination of the subject of study in its real-life context. A major strength of the case study approach is the opportunity to use multiple sources of evidence that allow the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin 2014). Thus, any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate because it is based on several different information sources that follow a similar trajectory (Yardley 2009). Three top-tier universities in Beijing were selected as the research sites for this study because of their location, global ranking, and the number of international students on campus. Given the unequal distribution of international students in China, who are concentrated in prestigious universities in developed metropolises (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China 2019), the selected universities' strong academic performance and location in China's capitol guarantee that they have a relatively large number of international students. This implies that these universities' professional and academic staff have more opportunities to engage with international students, which makes them 'good informants' for this study (Patton 1990, p. 169).

According to the ARWU, the universities selected ranked among the top 50, 201–300, and 401–500, respectively, in 2018 with over 48,000, 32,000, and 28,000 full-time students on campus. International inbound students in China are categorised into two groups in very broad terms: degree students, who are enrolled in degree programs at different levels, and non-degree students, including exchange, visiting, and language students. The number of international students enrolled in the three universities were 5847, 2590, and 1991 respectively, of whom 3479, 1492, and 1030 were degree students. In-depth semi-structured interviews were employed as the main method of data collection to elicit the 'lived experience' of six professional staff who are responsible for international student recruitment and management, as well as four faculty members who have been engaged extensively in teaching international students (see Table 1) to determine the meanings that participants attribute to their actions, including their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive world (Marshall and Rossman 2006). Institutional policy documents on foreign student recruitment that provided necessary contextual information to understand institutional rationales and strategies also were reviewed and analysed to supplement the interviews (Table 1).

Acquisition of political and symbolic capitals

When asked about universities' primary motivation to champion international student recruitment, the professional staff members interviewed stated unanimously that Chinese universities play an important role in serving national strategic needs. Universities in China bear the responsibilities to foster talent, conduct scientific research, inherit culture, and communicate with the international community. The Chinese central government exercises strong regulation and authority over HEIs. Although universities have begun to enjoy more autonomy in recent years, university operations' political attributes never have diminished (Huang 2007; Yang 2004). Universities are China's windows, through which people from different parts of the world can experience and understand multiple aspects of the country, including economic, environmental, educational, political, social, and cultural, as well as explore the challenges and opportunities that China and the world face (Interviewee-PS-1). The *International Student Cultivation Strategy* of one participant university states explicitly:

Table 1 List of interview participants

Participant	Institution	Position
Interviewee-PS-1	T University	Section Chef of International Student Recruitment
Interviewee-PS-2	B University	Section Chef of International Student Recruitment
Interviewee-PS-3	T University	Deputy Director of International Office
Interviewee-PS-4	B University	Deputy Director of International Office
Interviewee-PS-5	I University	Section Chef of International Student Recruitment
Interviewee-PS-6	I University	Deputy Director of International Office
Interviewee-AS-1	B University	Professor of Software Engineering
Interviewee-AS-2	I University	Associate Professor of Transportation Engineering
Interviewee-AS-3	B University	Lecture of Biomathematics
Interviewee-AS-4	T University	Associate Professor of Information Science

In the new century, China's rise and its status as a responsible large country have attracted worldwide attention. Projecting national soft power and expanding neighbouring diplomacy have become an important part of the national development strategy. As a vital component of foreign affairs, international student education plays an increasingly prominent and unique role. Since the beginning of the new century, our university has embarked on strengthening educational exchanges and cooperation with neighbouring countries. In 2005, we launched the *Development Plan for Foreign Students from Neighbouring Nations*, which focused on the training of high-level talent from these countries. Since then, the number of international students from neighbouring countries has increased significantly.

Serving national strategy is not only a commitment on paper, but also is implemented clearly in practice, and both the administrative and academic staff interviewed are fully aware of its importance:

Training international students indeed requires intensive commitment from the university. From a cost-effect perspective, recruitment of international students may not even be a smart choice for us. However, fostering foreign talent has far-reaching significance and influence on China. The benefits cannot be measured in the short-term. Overseas youth who received education in China become important ambassadors. They know China better and may encourage people around them, like family members and friends, to be interested in understanding China (Interviewee-AS-4).

The state assigns universities different quotas for international students through bilateral aid programs. Most of these students come from less developed countries with overall lower educational quality. These students' academic capability may not be satisfactory. To help them meet the academic requirements throughout their studies, our academic staff invest significant time and effort. Providing education to these students is an important part of national policy. China, as the largest developing country, bears important international responsibilities. As a flagship university in China, we are duty-bound to cooperate and complete the task successfully (Interviewee-PS-3).

In addition to serving the state, interviewees from two universities suggested that international students are an indispensable component of university internationalisation. Foreign students on campus contribute to their national and international reputations, global presence, and their

aspiration to become world renowned universities (Interviewees-PS-1, 2, 4). Unlike the third university, which has entered the top 50 in global ranking, these two universities are striving for a more prominent position in both national and international systems. Given this, foreign students become vital symbolic capital for them. Symbolic capital, designated commonly as prestige, authority, and so on, yields the profit of distinction (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013), which is associated directly with the search for recognition. As Interviewee-PS-2 indicated:

Many HEIs in China are keen for international students; however, only prestigious universities can have them. Because our university is in the first-tier, we never experience a shortage in international students' applications. Recruiting international students is vital to our internationalisation and international reputation. They also contribute to our global ranking. More importantly, our goal is to become a world-class university and an international and diverse student profile is a must.

Untapped cultural, economic, and educational capitals

Participants from all three universities acknowledged the contribution that international students can make to their university's diversity. The presence of students from different backgrounds on campus offers students and staff the opportunity to acquire cross-cultural experiences. However, they admitted that foreign students' potential as bearers of cultural capital has not yet been exploited fully, and creativity and innovation are required to make a better use of their cultural and social resources. There are many reasons for the limited achievements in this respect, and resources are one of the major constraints. Interviewee-PS-5 emphasised further the tremendous potential of international exchange students to contribute to campus life socially and culturally:

One-third of foreign students come through exchange programs. Unlike those enrolled in degree programs, the majority of whom are from neighbour Asian countries that share similar cultural origins with China, there is a substantial number of exchange students from Western nations with distinctive cultures. These exchange students normally face less academic pressure and engage better with domestic students, both in and out of the classroom.

A key finding of this interview is that none of the participants mentioned either an economic or academic rationale as a motivation for their university to recruit international students. When asked whether international student recruitment has become the core of university operations, Interviewee-PS-6 indicated:

It is a vital part of our university internationalisation, but its importance may be far less compared to that in universities in the UK or Australia, which adopt the commercial approach to foreign student recruitment.

One possible reason for this is that the central and local governments subsidise public universities in China substantially, and thus, their financial stability does not rely on the revenue international students bring. Although inbound students are charged higher tuition fees compared with their domestic counterparts, universities invest extensively in managing and adjusting curricula. As Interviewee-AS-3 put it, "The preparation time for lectures delivered to international students could be four times that for domestic students". The direct financial benefits international students bring to the university are seen as insignificant and not a primary objective.

When asked whether they think foreign students contribute to their universities' research capacity and knowledge production, all of the participants reported that the benefits are limited currently. One explanation for this is the gap between domestic and international students' academic competence in these universities. As all three universities rank in the top 30 of the 2600 HEIs in China, their admission scores for domestic undergraduates are in approximately the top 0.08%, 0.83%, and 1.38% of all candidates, respectively.⁵ In contrast, the admission requirements for international students are not as selective and the acceptance rate is much higher, reaching 36% to 57%.⁶ Faculty members have observed keenly the challenge international students face in their study:

Foreign students' skills in mathematics and physics commonly are inadequate and weak. However, our domestic students are selected from the best. Top international students will not come to China for degrees. China does not have such [foreign] students. In class, many international students show that they are completely unable to understand the lecture and can hardly express their views or ideas (Interviewee-AS-1).

In addition, all of the academic staff interviewed indicated that international students' lack of proficiency in Chinese impedes their intellectual engagement in class. The Ministry of Education requires students to pass HSK⁷ level 4, which participants perceived is insufficient, as students who pass this level can use Chinese only for basic communication, far from the requirement for academic purposes.

Institutional strategies for international student recruitment

All three universities employ three major strategies to attract international students, including the development of programs in English, scholarship provision, and targeted support services. Participants acknowledged that having more programs with English as the instruction language gives them advantages in recruiting international student, particularly degree students. However, they expressed contrasting perceptions of these programs' usefulness and effectiveness. Most academic staff interviewed held a sceptical attitude toward investing in such programs:

International students' English proficiency varies, and the teachers' mother tongue also is not English. With abundant preparation, it is not a problem for us to deliver the lectures in English. However, it is a challenge for us to understand the students' English because of their heavy accents. In some cases, students have to rely on gestures or simple words to express their ideas. In science courses, formulas are more reliable than words (Interviewee-AS-2).

We are encouraged to develop courses in English; however, this is very demanding given the existing heavy workload for teaching and research. To offer programs in English is a tremendous commitment for us, but the performance evaluation fails to take this into account (Interviewee-AS-4).

⁵ The figures were provided by the interviewees according to their institutional statistics

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Chinese language proficiency test, grading from levels 1 to 6.

Professional staff were more enthusiastic about this strategy, as some of them believed that programs in English are a key component of university internationalisation and could benefit domestic students as well (Interviewees-PS-1,3,4,5). However, not all of them agreed with this strategy; as Interview-PS-6 argued:

A primary objective for China to develop international education is to cultivate graduates who know China well and thus, are friendly to the country. Language plays an irreplaceable role in fostering foreign students' affection for the host country. I know this well from my own overseas study experience. In this regard, I don't think offering programs in English serves our national strategy best.

Participants perceived scholarships as a strong incentive for international students to choose China as their destination. The Chinese government scholarships are very appealing, as they cover the full tuition fee and provide each student free on-campus accommodation with a monthly stipend between ¥2500 and ¥3500, which is higher than China's per capita monthly disposable income of ¥2352 in 2018.⁸ The competition for these scholarships is fierce, as only approximately 5 to 10% applications are successful, and priority is given to postgraduates. There are more international postgraduates than undergraduates in two universities. The participants suggested many reasons for the preference for postgraduates, including their ability to contribute to research and the low cost to manage them, as they are more mature than undergraduates are (Interviewee-PS-3, 5, 6). In recent years, the three universities increased their provision of institutional scholarships, which amounted to ¥1 to 3 million per year, to attract more high-quality international students. However, most local government and institutional scholarships only waive the full or partial tuition fee for 1 year and offer no living allowance. Institutional statistics show that in all the three universities, the majority of international undergraduates is self-funded, which is consistent with the national statistics.⁹

The improvement of the service and management mechanism is the third strategy all three universities have adopted. Efforts have been made to create an international campus to help acculturate and integrate foreign students. In one university, free Chinese language and culture courses are provided to degree students who are enrolled in programs with English as the instruction language (Interviewee-PS-6). Another major measure is designed to help students in the last year of their studies find employment opportunities. Interviewee-PS-1 mentioned a successful example:

Getting a job in China turns out to be a preferred choice for many international graduates, and we have done a lot in this domain. Many Chinese firms are now operating overseas branches and prefer students from the country where the branch office is located, as they are familiar with their home country environment and also competent in Mandarin. Last year, we had two students from Africa who obtained job offers from a Chinese manufacturing company.

Although foreign students appreciate employment services highly, as some participants (Interviewees-PS-2,4) indicated, the extent to which universities can help remains limited without the support of national and local policies and regulations on international graduates' work

⁸ National Bureau of Statistics, *Residents' income and consumption expenditure in 2018*, 2019.

⁹ *Statistical report on international students in China for 2018* shows that of all international inbound students, 12.81% received Chinese government scholarships, and 87.19% were self-funded (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, 2019).

rights in China. Further, separate management of international and domestic students, which is referred to as ‘dual tracks’, is a common approach Chinese universities employ. As the number of incoming students has increased, two participant universities show signs of integrative management, which signals that foreign students’ recruitment and management in Chinese universities is evolving and maturing.

Professional staff who are responsible for international student recruitment in these three universities demonstrated their familiarity with all common advertising and marketing tools, including participation in educational Expos and market-oriented conferences, using social media, webinars, and other online programs to brand their institution and broadcast updated admission information, organising outreach activities, building user-friendly online application systems, etc. The universities also have acknowledged current students and alumni’s role as ambassadors, but the exploitation of these resources remains limited. In addition to the national online gateway, each university has developed its own information platform for prospective foreign students to obtain useful information and submit as well as track their applications.

A point worth noting is that all three universities expressed a cautious attitude toward recruitment agents, with which HEIs in many other countries cooperate widely. According to the participants, they used to work with agents in recruitment activities, but have abandoned this practice in recent years to control incoming students’ quality better. Although these universities have employed various technologies actively to brand themselves in the international student market, these tools’ use is neither substantial nor sophisticated, as they entered the market only recently. Moreover, innovation in advertising and marketing techniques is vital for Chinese universities, as they must compete not only with established players from other countries in the market, but also with more than 1000 universities in China that currently host international students. The way to distinguish themselves from other Chinese universities is a strategic issue that even leading HEIs need to resolve, as international students may not be as familiar with them as are domestic students (Interviewee-PS-2).

A shift in priority

Many participants reported a strategic priority shift in international student campaign, which manifests itself in the reduced enthusiasm for expanding the scale of international student body and the increasing selectivity in inbound students’ admission. The three universities share certain tendencies in both aspects. Each of them experienced a rapid expansion period in the number of incoming students and since then, the volume has been maintained deliberately without further significant growth. The expansion occurred at different times for various reasons. For example, in one university, the number of international students has been stable for nearly a decade after a rapid increase between 2008 and 2011 (Interviewee-PS-3). In another university, the increase in foreign students on campus occurred in 2014, with a 40% growth compared with that of the previous year because of a change in the recruitment office leadership (Interviewee-PS-5). All participants indicated that the current proportion of international students, which is approximately 10% of enrolment overall in all three universities, fits well with the university’s strategy and is expected to be maintained for a long period. The current spotlight in international student recruitment is on quality rather than numbers. None is facing pressure to enrol targeted numbers of international students. The three universities are implementing a serious selection procedure for international applications, which may distinguish them from other, less prestigious, universities that have very basic requirements for incoming students. The increasing selectivity in international student recruitment observed in

these top-tier universities also reflects the shift in national strategy, from becoming the top destination for overseas study in Asia to improving quality and effectiveness. To maximise scholarships' role in attracting the best students to Chinese universities, Interviewee-PS-1 suggested that "Instead of offering more scholarships, it may be wise to reduce the number of high-status scholarships to make them really selective".

The number of international students enrolled in degree programs in each of the participant universities exceeds that of non-degree students. This pattern is consistent with the current national strategic focus, to increase the number of degree students. Self-applications constitute the majority of degree student recruitment, supplemented by a small number of applications via bilateral or aid programs, while a considerable number of non-degree students is recruited via institutional exchange programs. Although degree students are the current recruitment focus at the national level, universities never have underestimated exchange students' value, as Interviewee-PS-3 claimed that "Short-term exchange programs offer opportunities for foreign students to know our university and many of them apply for degree study afterwards".

Reflections on international student recruitment in China

China's visibility in the global higher education field has improved significantly as a result of the nation's remarkable economic growth, increased national power, and substantial investment in building its HEIs' capacity, as well as the government's vigorous promotion of the Chinese language. Although China cannot yet compete for a dominant position, its spectacular achievements in attracting international students have made it a strong player in the field. These achievements offer valuable experiences both for researchers and policymakers in many countries to rethink their strategies to increase their nations and universities' presence in the global landscape. A close analysis of the rationales for top-tier universities in China to campaign for international student recruitment helps reveal the Chinese approach's distinctiveness. Unlike the American talent-driven model and the British and Australian commerce-driven model, the Chinese model features political capital as the primary pursuit, supplemented by educational and cultural aspirations. Essentially, according to Bourdieu's (1986) typology, the political capital that both the Chinese government and its leading universities crave may be viewed as a sub-form of social capital. In Bourdieu's words, social capital is the actual or potential resources that lasting networks, relationships, or a group's membership generate, which is a product investment strategy, either at the individual or collective level. The goal of this investment type is to establish or reproduce social relationships that can be used directly in the short or long term. For example, the Chinese government scholarships provided as educational aid to targeted nations are helpful in creating alliances or the sense of belonging to a group. Many countries have aspired to obtain this social capital historically and continue to do so. Similar aid programs, such as the Colombo and Fulbright Plans, and programs the Soviet bloc developed alike were implemented widely between the 1940s and 1980s to serve the same purpose (Auletta 2000; de Wit and Adams 2011; Huang 2007; Rizvi 2011). This by no means implies that other capitals foreign students possess are not important to China and its HEIs, but only indicates that they are not the current strategic foci.

Although the volume of international students in China is considerable, the findings of this study show that Chinese universities remain in their initial stage in hosting these students at scale. The strategies the state and individual institutions employ correspond to their current status, to advertise China as a potential destination for students who plan to study overseas. These strategies provide empirical evidence of Marginson's (2008) argument about the power of nations and HEIs' imagination and will in shaping the strategies they use to assume positions in the global higher education field. Unlike Bourdieu's (1993) emphasis on the agent's 'habitus' in mediating the relation between its position and position-taking, Marginson advocated agents in the field's creativity in competing for resources, stature, or other objects of interest, which serves as a primary source of global ontology's openness. Other scholars have observed this openness as well. For example, Hilgers and Mangez (2014) contended that "The knowledge, the language, the authorities, the positions and oppositions that develop in the genesis of a field are never fixed once and for all; their definition and redefinition are constantly contested by the participation of the agents in the functioning of the field" (p. 17).

The primary strategies adopted by Chinese universities such as provision of scholarships and programs in English share a lot in common with other non-English speaking countries. However, it should be noticed that even similar strategies deployed, they may serve various purposes. For example, as an emerging educational hub, the Singapore government has also provided abundant scholarships to attract international students (Sheng-Kai 2015). Although the same strategy employed, the Singaporean approach to international student recruitment differs from the Chinese one but closely resembles the American talent-driven model. International students are encouraged to stay and work in Singapore after completing their studies so that to fill a shortage of workforce. Likewise, international joint venture in running schools has been a prevalent strategy for boosting international student recruitment. However, the primary purpose of introducing foreign education providers to China is to meet domestic students' needs and build Chinese universities' capacity rather than attract international students to study in these collaborative programs. This is distinct from the franchised or offshore operations universities in some countries adopt, which give foreign students priority. Although there are more than 2000 Sino-foreign collaborative educational programs and institutions in China,¹⁰ the number of international students enrolled in them is marginal. Controversies and tensions also have been observed in this study with respect to the employment of various strategies to enhance international students' studies in China, such as the development of courses in English.

Previous studies also have suggested a shift in strategies for international student recruitment (e.g. Gao 2019; de Wit 1997 1998; Rizvi 2011), which was observed in this study as well. Several participants mentioned that foreign student recruitment is undergoing structural adjustment both at the national and institutional levels, from expanding the scale of incoming students to enhancing their quality, a process to achieve excellence developed de novo. Given the changed priority, participants also speculated that national strategies to brand study in China will be amended, although specific modifications in individual universities remain unclear.

¹⁰ Information Platform for the Supervision of Sino-foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, *List of Sino-foreign collaborative educational programs and institutions*, 2019.

Closing remarks

The rise of China as a major destination for overseas study is a complex phenomenon that is worth careful study. Despite spectacular achievements, uncertainties cloud China's future ability to maintain its attractiveness to international students. For example, the demographics of international students in China shows that nearly half are enrolled in non-degree programs. Many of these rely on bilateral agreements between governments that overseas governments' funding sponsors; further, these bilateral programs' nature makes them vulnerable to political and diplomatic influences. Any tensions between the two partner countries may result in the programs' suspension or termination, and a decrease in the number of students from the partner country.¹¹ In addition, the generous financial support international students receive, and their poor academic achievement has caused social concerns in China regarding equity already. The enormous disparity in the requirements for domestic and international students to enter top universities in China has drawn extensive public attention and engendered heated debate. One limitation of this study is that it included leading universities exclusively. Further studies on different types of HEIs in China will help reveal the complexity to a fuller degree. The three flagship universities' experiences indicate that any oversimplified conclusions about the phenomenon of China branding itself in the international student market may be misleading.

In retrospect, China and its HEIs have approached internationalisation using a variety of strategies, the priorities of which have shifted during different phases. Between the late 1970s and late 1980s, the first decade in which China embraced the modern internationalisation agenda, its primary feature was the growth in the number of state-funded students and faculty members sent abroad for further studies or research (Gao 2019). Since the 1990s, particular attention has been paid to promoting the development of transnational education programs in China (Gide, Wu, and Wang 2010; Hou, Montgomery, and McDwell 2011; Tan 2009). In more recent years, international enrolment has gained increasing importance and become a key element of the internationalisation discourse in China. As a powerful player with numerous distinctive features in the global higher education field, China contributes to the field's dynamics consistently through its positive participation. The field is forming, transforming, and expanding continuously, and thus, provides an interesting and important subject for researchers and practitioners to monitor and study carefully. Subject to available resources, only a small number of cases were investigated in this study. It would be valuable to conduct more studies on the varied and evolving trajectories and strategies various players in the field take to reflect and understand the field's complexity and potential, as well as its vigour.

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¹¹ For example, the program "Study in China" run by the British Council, offers academic scholarships to British students to study in non-degree programs in China. All scholarships cover tuition fees, accommodation, and a monthly living allowance. This program has operated since 2013; however, for reasons unknown, it is not running during the 2019/20 academic year (British Council, 2019).

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