



Will China Remain a Top Player in the International Education Market?

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Until recently, China was a top source country in the international education market, with hundreds of thousands of outbound students headed for Western universities. In some countries, universities rely on admissions of Chinese students as a major source of revenue. With the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on China's economy, and with shifts in geopolitical currents and China's ideological left turn, it is legitimate to wonder whether China will remain a major sending country of international students—at the undergraduate level in particular.

Chinese Students Are Still Motivated to Study Abroad

In a 2011 article, "Study-Abroad Fever Among Chinese Students," I mentioned the following important reasons behind this phenomenon: escaping overheated competition, ushered in by the steep hierarchy among Chinese universities and the concomitant inequality of learning experience and outcomes; seeking to optimize educational returns, which boost both human and career development, rather than merely obtaining a credential; and blindly "following suit," especially among China's social elites and government officials, who since the 1980s have set the model of sending their children abroad.

Arguably, these motivations have to do with dissatisfaction with the overall quality of Chinese higher education and seeking to achieve better educational returns—or perceptions of those aspects. Chinese higher education might have improved since my article was published, but it has not gone through fundamental changes. Nowadays, the "double-first-class" initiative has replaced Projects 985 and 211, and the number of elite universities that receive support has grown to nearly 150 (from around 110 under Projects 985 and 211). Yet, they still constitute only a small portion of China's 1,270 universities, and are thus extremely selective. The resource gap between elite universities and other institutions is no less than in the past. Among other universities, approximately half have been founded since the 2000s, with many still building up their pathways and hardly able to provide quality education. Social Darwinism continues to prevail in China, and graduates from elite universities are extraordinarily privileged in the job market. Many local governments put in place preferential policies and seek to attract elite university graduates with incentives, which in turn boosts the economic and symbolic capital of having graduated from an elite university.

A Changing Employer Landscape for Returnees

Major changes have been observed in China in recent years, mostly aligned with economic concerns. One is that returnees are losing their competitive edge in the domestic job market. On the one hand, domestic employers prefer hiring Chinese elite university graduates over returnees, as they often seem to better adapt to work styles and expectations in the Chinese context and bring with them extensive social networks from their *alma maters*. On the other hand, foreign university degrees and returnees no longer enjoy the reward of scarcity. In 2021 alone, over 820,000 returnees sought jobs in China. They are often offered salaries far below expectations, not likely even to pay off their study abroad expenses.

Meanwhile, study abroad has become a burden for an increasing number of Chinese households. Wage-earning families (those making the equivalent of USD 15,000–45,000 annually) now constitute the largest group (40 percent) sending their children abroad. Middle-income families (earning USD 45,000–75,000 annually) make up the second

Abstract

Chinese students are still motivated to study abroad, yet, in five years or so, their motivations might weaken. This is primarily due to economic slowdown, changing domestic conditions, and geopolitical decoupling.

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largest portion (16 percent). Altogether, wage-earning and middle-income households form the bulk of sending families, and they manage on a budget (many on a tight one) to finance the studies of their children abroad, in a context of rising tuition fees everywhere for international students. These households tend to be sensitive and vulnerable to economic slowdowns or downturns, and right now feel a greater burden. In the long run, Chinese families are expected to have two or more children as a result of a lift in the family planning policy—which will further weaken their capacity to finance studies abroad for their children.

The Undermining Facilitators of Study Abroad

Most of those “blindly” following study abroad fads are likely to lack genuine motivation and strong qualifications, and may require extra/external support, such as language training and application preparation counselling provided by professional agencies like New Oriental—which are now going through a decline and cutting down their services. Interestingly, those agencies are not only essential facilitators for many students studying abroad, but also popular employers of returnees. As such, their business downturn may have an impact on Chinese students studying abroad.

The same applies to international schools in China, which have been booming in the past two decades and fast growing to 900 or so, with a constant enrollment of 600,000. These schools form an alternative schooling track to regular schools, preparing students exclusively to study abroad from as early as middle school. They are now required to undergo reforms, which involve being converted into regular private schools and not being allowed any longer to use “international” in their names and prepare students exclusively for study abroad. Those registered as educational/training agencies (which used to be practiced as a fast track or a detour to setting up international schools on Chinese soil) are being suspended. And the use of foreign curricula and textbooks in these schools is submitted to control. Following a severe shortage of foreign teachers (owing to China’s strict COVID-19 policies), international schools are expected to wither as well, which in turn will affect those preparing to study abroad from a young age, who are arguably the most determined.

The Influence of Geopolitical Tensions

Shifting geopolitical currents are likely to influence the disposition of Chinese students to study abroad. Amid rising tensions between China and the West, a Pew Research Center survey revealed that negative views of China hit historic highs in many countries. Notably, the following main destination countries for outbound Chinese students record a high percentage of unfavorable views about China: Japan (87 percent), Australia (86 percent), the United States (82 percent), Canada (74 percent), Germany (74 percent), the United Kingdom (69 percent), and France (68 percent). Such negative opinions aggravate latent Sinophobia (or anti-Chinese sentiment) in those societies, which in turn exacerbates the already existing segregation and ghettoization of Chinese students and deteriorates their learning experience and outcome. The US government has now taken steps to prevent Chinese students from pursuing graduate degrees or research programs presumably relating to sensitive technologies, on national security grounds. Those programs are generally in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and promise better returns in the hegemonic STEM knowledge-based economy. Allies of the United States are likely to follow suit. While the ripples of such “push factors” may spread slowly, Chinese parents and students may start reflecting on the value and risks of studying abroad—amid fears of an overall decoupling between China and the West.

Concluding Remarks

Chinese students are still motivated to study abroad—the fever may still last for a while—but as explained above, their motivations may become weaker. A research report by China International Capital Corporation indicates that there are now approximately 8.5 million Chinese households earning an annual income of USD 30,000 or more, constituting the backbone of the study abroad phenomenon. Benchmarked against 1.6 million Chinese students currently studying abroad, and a cumulative sum of 3.8 million returnees in 2009–2019, there is still room for growth. At least, those who prepare to study abroad

from a rather young age are likely to go ahead. The study-abroad fever is expected to reach a turning point in five years or so. Some might argue that China's current harsh COVID-19 policies could prompt people to flee the country, but this would probably be a short-term trend. What could make the turning point come sooner is China's economic downturn. ▲

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