

Beyond the West: Student Mobility — Brazil and China

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Despite China's emergence as an economic and technological power and its increasing positioning as an international education hub, its potential to attract students from outside Asia remains largely untapped. This article identifies the perceptions, motivations, and barriers that shape Brazilian students' attitudes toward studying in China. The results demonstrate that expanding South–South international student mobility requires strategies that address the linguistic, cultural, and symbolic inequalities inherent in the global higher education system.

One of the clearest effects of globalization within higher education has undoubtedly been an increase in the international mobility of university students. However, this development has not occurred evenly throughout the world. Higher education has itself globalized in an unequal manner, one which reinforces global hierarchies of knowledge production, institutional prestige, and academic mobility, with opportunities remaining concentrated in a limited number of countries and institutions. International student mobility therefore reflects unequal global structures, reproducing distinctions between central and peripheral destinations in the global higher education landscape. This article uses the Brazil–China mobility context as an analytical lens to examine how emerging destinations are positioned within global hierarchies of international higher education.

Uneven Globalization of Higher Education

Despite the expansion of international mobility and universities' efforts to attract international students, critical analyses stress that globalization in higher education is highly uneven. Globalization has not overcome established hierarchies between institutions, regions, and languages to the point where students systematically consider destinations outside the academic mainstream.

Knowledge hierarchies persist, which reflect the widespread perception that knowledge produced in the Global North is more legitimate and widely applicable. They also perpetuate the predominance of English as the primary language of academic recognition. As a result of these entrenched hierarchies, citations, funding, rankings, and symbolic prestige remain concentrated in a limited group of countries. The evidence shows a similar imbalance within mobility statistics, with a small number of countries attracting many foreign students.

Brazil–China Student Mobility

In recent years, China has emerged as a prominent receiving destination, suggesting that these entrenched dynamics in global higher education may be shifting. Nevertheless, despite the distinguished positions of several Chinese higher education institutions in international university rankings and China's status as Brazil's leading trading partner, the country has attracted few Brazilian students to its universities. In 2020, only about 3,000 Portuguese-speaking students were enrolled in Chinese universities, and in 2023, only around 3.3 percent of Brazilian outbound students selected China as their study destination.

A recent study of Brazilian university students sheds light on the dynamics underpinning these figures. Although most students surveyed had no previous travel experience or substantive cultural knowledge about China, nearly half expressed interest in studying in China. This finding indicates that students' interest is not mainly based on firsthand experience but on representations of China as an emerging academic and economic center. Furthermore, students largely indicated that their primary motivations for studying in China were “cultural experience and global exchange” and “academic and technological excellence,” whereas direct monetary factors occupied a less prominent position. This suggests that cost considerations do not primarily drive interest in China. Although scholarships are seen as essential, their secondary role suggests that material incentives alone may be insufficient to overcome entrenched symbolic hierarchies.

The students who would not study in China mainly indicated that this was due to “language barriers,” with cultural differences and travel costs also playing a role. Students did not see security as an issue. The prominence of language barriers points to the structural role of English as symbolic capital within global knowledge hierarchies. Language here seems to operate as more than a communicative tool; it also serves as a gatekeeping

mechanism that forms access to internationally recognized academic spaces, confirming the argument on linguistic imperialism.

When combined, the findings suggest that any interest in studying in China originates from intangible motivations, such as scholastic status, modernization, and global recognition. But language barriers show that the mobility of international students is still linked to consolidated language hierarchies and English as their currency. This dynamic seems to be embedded in unequal globalization, even if new and emerging educational centers (such as China) are somewhat visible, and even if limited by cultural asymmetries. Within this context, the limited interest of Brazilian students in China should be interpreted not simply as a matter of individual preference but as due to uneven globalization, in which linguistic capital, scholarly reputation, and symbolic recognition remain hierarchically structured. Despite China's rise as a regional education hub, its capacity to attract students remains largely concentrated among Asian students because there is little available knowledge about academic practices, student life, and the value placed on acquired knowledge, which increases perceptions of uncertainty, even in the absence of high risks. This situation indicates that China remains outside the symbolic US–Europe axis and points to the persistence of a global hierarchy of knowledge in which student mobility continues to reproduce centers and peripheries.

Conclusion

This study was motivated by the lack of empirical research on the factors influencing Brazilian higher education students' decisions to study in China. China was selected as a potential

destination not only because of its economic and technological growth but also because its expanding academic capacity coexists with persistent symbolic hierarchies that continue to shape international student mobility. Despite limited cultural knowledge and a lack of prior mobility, a substantial proportion of participants expressed interest in studying in China. At the same time, language barriers appeared as a central deterrent, indicating not individual linguistic difficulty but structural inequalities embedded in the global higher education system. Although grounded in the Brazil–China case, the patterns identified reflect broader dynamics of uneven globalization in international higher education.

The study generated several important recommendations. First, Chinese universities interested in attracting Brazilian students would benefit from strengthening partnerships with Brazilian universities through double-degree agreements, exchange programs, and summer schools. They should also create programs with dedicated classes and reception periods to facilitate the cultural adaptation of Brazilian students. They should further offer degree programs fully taught in English, given that Mandarin Chinese is widely regarded as a high-difficulty language for speakers of Indo-European languages. In addition, Chinese universities should provide clear and targeted information to prospective Brazilian students regarding academic routines, study workloads, and the cost of living. Moreover, the Chinese government could introduce scholarships specifically targeted at Brazilian students, simplify student visa procedures, and promote educational fairs and academic events in Brazil to reduce information asymmetry between Brazilian students and Chinese higher education institutions.

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