

The Study-Abroad Fever Among Chinese Students

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With respect to Chinese higher education, two phenomena have been widely discussed recently. One is that the age of the Chinese students who choose to study abroad is increasingly becoming younger. Most Chinese students went abroad to study in graduate programs in the 1980s, then in undergraduate programs from the late 1990s, and now a rising proportion in high schools. It is estimated that high school students now account for half or even more of the Chinese students who choose to study abroad. Understandably, these high school students make this choice so that their access and transition to Western universities will be easier and smoother. The other notable phenomenon is the heightening call for improving and assuring the quality of higher education in China, evident in the emphasis laid in such milestone policy document as the *National Outline for Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (or *2020 Blueprint*), and most recently a national working conference on higher education quality control and assurance, held March 22-23, 2012 in Beijing. A discussion of these two phenomena together may shed some light on why more Chinese students choose to study abroad, even though access to higher education in China has been hugely expanded in recent years.

THE DETERIORATION OF CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY AS A FACTOR IN STUDYING ABROAD TRENDS

While the world has been stunned by China's efficiency in moving to mass higher education on a short timeline, why are Chinese students increasingly drawn to studying abroad? Now the access to universities and colleges in China is much broader than a decade ago. In 2011, among participants in the national higher education entrance examination or *gaokao* (mostly fresh high school leavers), some 78 percent on average across the country had the chance to go to a university or a college. Yet an increasing proportion of Chinese high school students now choose Western universities instead. Overall, Chinese higher education enrolment grew at an annual rate of 17 percent between 1998 and 2010, while the volume of Chinese students studying abroad increased by over 25 percent annually in the same time span. The number of Chinese students studying in the US increased by 80 percent from 1999 to 2009. In 2011 the number of Chinese students who went to study abroad hit a record of 339,700. This figure is expected to rise to 550,000 to 600,000 by 2014. This group is also getting younger in age. In last five years, the number of Chinese students attending private high schools in the US grew by over 100 times, from 65 in 2006 to 6,725 in 2011. If this tendency continues, it may threaten student supply in Chinese higher education in the long run, combined with China's demographic change (a projected reduction of 40 million in the 18-22 age group in the population over the next decade). Since 2008, the population of *gaokao* entrants shrank by 1.4 million, for which these two factors are cited as being directly responsible. As a more immediate consequence, Chinese students are now estimated to contribute over \$15 billion a year to the economies in their host countries (with \$4.6 billion

going to the US alone), equivalent to almost one half of China's total higher education appropriations in 2008. The fact that more and more Chinese households are becoming well-off could be a factor behind the scene, yet this single factor wouldn't be sufficient to explain the reasons behind an ever growing study-abroad fever among Chinese students and parents. Indeed, there are few cases like China, where the domestic higher education supply and the study-abroad volume are growing dramatically side by side.

In the rapid massification process, Chinese higher education suffered a serious decline in quality. This might be another fundamental reason responsible for the rising study-abroad fever. Ever since the huge expansion of Chinese higher education enrolment started in 1999, concerns and criticism over deteriorating quality in teaching and learning have been heard. After 2005, the enrolment expansion was slowed down considerably, while attention and resource were gradually shifted to addressing issues and problems associating with quality and equity. This process was fuelled by the famous question raised by the influential veteran scientist, Qian Xuesen (or Hsue-Shen Tsien): why have Chinese universities failed to engender innovative minds? Thus, with respect to higher education, the *2020 Blueprint*, officially unveiled in July 2010, placed a focus on aspects improving and assuring quality, aiming to nurture creativeness among Chinese students and create a batch of "world class universities." The working conference on higher education quality explicitly announced a policy of stabilizing enrolment in Chinese universities (with future increases targeted at vocational education programs, professional graduate programs as well as

private institutions), while pressing for immediate actions to address the higher education quality issues.

CHINA IS POURING EFFORTS AND RESOURCES INTO ASSURING THE HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY

Just before this working conference, the Chinese government unveiled two more important policy documents signaling concrete efforts and more resources to be brought in for this endeavor. One is the *Higher Education Strategic Plan* (promulgated by the Ministry of Education, as an implementation plan for the relevant parts in the *2020 Blueprint* relating to higher education), which ranks assuring higher education quality as the top priority, through implementing a number of large scale projects organized around such tasks as university teacher and curricular development, gifted student creativity education, innovative professional program development, graduate program transformation, and the furtherance of Projects 985 and 211 that aim to create a batch of universities and disciplinary areas on Chinese soil with global competitiveness. The other policy document, namely *Opinions on Implementing the Program of Upgrading Innovative Capacity of Higher Education Institutions* (released jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance), launched the Project 2011(coded perhaps after Chinese leader Hu Jintao's remark at Tsinghua University's centennial ceremony in Spring 2011) that pushes for integrative collaborations among Chinese universities, between universities and research institutes, between universities and industry, and between universities and regional development needs, for the sake of drawing on and advancing Chinese universities' innovative capacity, in light of "nation developmental priorities and world-class standards."

In a typical Chinese way, the State has put aside some funds to facilitate and support such integrations.

WILL THESE EFFORTS WORK TO EASE THE STUDY-ABROAD FEVER?

These policies may serve, to a certain extent, to retain some Chinese students. Yet, these policies and programs are largely derived from a human capital vision, which sees higher education as the deliberate (and utilitarian in the sense of State instrumentalism) investment in exchange for global competitiveness (on the part of State) and social status (on the part of individuals). This vision envisages Chinese universities as the State's educational and research arm for national development, and articulates knowledge production and transmission closely with a national development agenda. With massification of the Chinese system, this articulation demonstrates a vertical differentiation. Now on a steep hierarchical structure, the top echelon universities are handsomely supported by the State, in exchange for their knowledge and student output to secure China's continuing success in a knowledge-based economy, while a majority of low tier institutions are left to survive on market forces. This approach, in turn, intensifies the tensions and competitions existing in contemporary Chinese society, where a kind of social Darwinism that stresses struggling for existence and the survival of the fittest has taken over and tends to dominating social life. University credentials are crucial to individuals in terms of gaining a competitive edge, and the perpetuating meritocratic tradition certainly has a big role in it. If one fails to get access to an upper tier university, one may risk losing the competition at the starting point. Naturally, when financial conditions permit, one would turn to the opportunity of studying abroad as an alternative strategy,

believing an international degree would help raise one's competitiveness. More recently, Chinese students start to be drawn to universities in Hong Kong, where the number of mainland undergraduate students registered a 129-fold increase over the last decade, from 36 in 1997 to 4,638 in 2010. Arguably, universities in Hong Kong take advantage of their liberal learning environment and international faculty.

Essentially, higher education plays a role not only in building human capital, but also in broadening human capability. Unless Chinese higher education provides an environment in which students are enabled to develop their full potential, and lead productive and creative lives in accord with their own needs and interests, there will always be many who seek an escape from the ever growing tensions and competitions. It seems an increasing number of people are now on their way to such an escape. With the growing size of this group, brain drain remains an issue for China, despite its economic success. Since China opened its door to the world in 1978, close to 2.3 million Chinese students and scholars went to study abroad. As of the end of 2011, over 1.4 million remained abroad.