
Title	Commentary: International students in China—what we know, what we don't, and what next
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Source	In F. Dervin, X. Du, & A. Härkönen (Eds.), <i>International Students in China: Education, Student Life and Intercultural Encounters</i> (pp. 249-255). London: Palgrave.
Published by	Palgrave Macmillan

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Citation: Yang, P. (2018). Commentary: International students in China—what we know, what we don't, and what next. In F. Dervin, X. Du, & A. Härkönen (Eds.), *International Students in China: Education, Student Life and Intercultural Encounters* (pp. 249-255). London: Palgrave.

Commentary

International students in China: what we know, what we don't, and what next

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While China is often noted for being the world's largest source of international students, it has in fact in recent years also emerged as one of the top *destinations* for mobile students globally (Hvistendahl, 2008). As the editors point out in the introduction to this volume, in 2015, China hosted close to 400,000 international students from more than 200 world countries. This represented a remarkable growth from a modest number of 14,000 foreign students in the country in 1992 (Kuroda, 2014, p. 448). Furthermore, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2010) has set the target of hosting up to 500,000 international students by the year 2020 – a target that seems well on its way of being realized. Thus, there is now an increasing need for more research attention to be paid to international student flows into China. Despite evidence of emerging scholarly efforts at this – to which this volume represents the newest addition – there is still a dearth of research on China-bound student mobilities when compared with the Anglophone literature on international student mobility (ISM) in general which remains largely focused on 'West'-bound forms of study-abroad (see Brooks & Waters, 2011). In this brief commentary, thus, I hope to sketch out some general contours of this nascent research field of international students in China, focusing on what we already know, what we don't know yet, and what could be on the research agenda next.

What we know

We know first of all that a majority of tertiary-level international students in China hail from Asia – in 2015 Asian students accounted for 60 per cent of the total (CAFSA, 2016). At the same time, slightly less than half, or 46.47 per cent (*ibid.*), of international students are on fully-fledged diploma-awarding programmes in China, whereas the rest are so-called 'non-diploma students' (*fei xueli xuesheng*), such as students on short-term language/culture or exchange courses. Among the diploma-students, an even higher percentage is made up of Asian students.¹ Understandably, because of China's status as an 'emerging' power not yet on par with the developed countries in the 'West', as a destination for obtaining full academic credentials it tends to appeal more to students from countries that are of similar or lower global standing. Meanwhile, as a destination for immersion into the Chinese language and culture, the country continues to attract a significant number of students from all over the world who tend to stay for shorter stints, as a number of chapters (e.g. chapters 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9) in this volume illustrate.

We also know that for international students seeking or considering obtaining full academic credentials in China (e.g. chapters 2 and 10 in this volume), oftentimes the affordability of studying in the country is an important reason, as is the lack of higher education opportunities in the home country. In my own recent study on lower-middle/working class Indian youths pursuing medical education (MBBS) in a provincial Chinese university (Yang, under review), I found the significantly lower tuition costs in China and the lack of educational options at home to be respectively the chief ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors underlying the Indian students’ choice. On the other hand, regarding international students whose objectives for studying in China are more language/culture-focused, existing research has mostly investigated their experiences of intercultural encounter, intercultural competence, cultural learning, language acquisition, and so forth. These lines of inquiry generally fall under the approach of interculturality and/or intercultural education – an approach that the present volume exemplifies.

From such existing scholarship on international students in China, we have also come to know about a number of problems and issues faced by both international students and their Chinese host. Firstly, superficiality of interaction, surface learning of culture (see chapter 5), and persistent culturalism continue to be observed. While scholars like ourselves may have become increasingly mindful of the pitfall of culturalism and essentialism and are ready to implement what Dervin (2011) has termed the ‘liquid’ approach to culture, actors on the ground may not always be well equipped to do so. This means that intercultural contacts may also be potential occasions for further stereotyping and misunderstandings to develop. Secondly, the quality of the programmes offered by Chinese institutions to international students is not always adequate, and can vary greatly depending on location and institution. As illustrated in chapter 10 in this volume and also evidenced in my own research, quality becomes a possible concern especially for English-medium diploma programmes (such as medical degrees and/or business degrees) targeting developing-country students. Chinese institutions are sometimes attracted to the prestige and the rhetoric of ‘internationalization’, but may not necessarily have the level of commitment and resource to back up their programmes. In some cases, poor management/coordination, inadequate infrastructure/resources, and un-/under-qualified teaching staff on the part of the Chinese host can leave international students with a negative educational and overall experience in China; sometimes they may even end up resentful. Obviously, this not only spells failure for both the students and the hosting institutions, but it also undermines the Chinese state’s broader objective of projecting soft power and creating international good will. Finally, the readiness of Chinese institutions and society in general to play host to diverse types of international students must not be taken for granted. While the Chinese often pride themselves on being a hospitable nation and culture, the reality is that international students of diverse ethnic/racial, national, cultural-linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to encounter differentiated treatments or reactions by the host society/people and even by host institutions; issues such as discrimination and racism do occur.

What we don’t know

Although we already know a certain amount about international students in China, so far this knowledge seems fragmented in terms of its substantive/empirical foci, and also limited in terms of the theoretical approach and conceptual tools used. Indeed, so far, studies about international students in China tend to be piecemeal works that do not amount to a programmatic effort or contribute to more general theory building. Furthermore, as this volume itself illustrates well, most work in this field has thus far been couched in the intercultural education framework, carried out mostly by researchers who identify as educationalists and/or hosted in education departments/faculties. When compared with the broader Anglophone scholarship on international student mobility more generally, it is clear that there is still much that we don't know about international students in China because of the types of questions that have not been asked yet.

For example, one theoretical framework frequently used by geographers (and scholars of cognate disciplines) of student mobility is the Bourdieusian theory of social reproduction (e.g. Waters, 2012). In this analytical framework, study-abroad is understood as a strategy to realize the conversion between different types of capital (chiefly economic, cultural and social), to the ultimate effect of reproducing class advantage. This analytical framework has been powerfully applied to analyze, for instance, Asian students' quest for education in the English-speaking 'West'. However, when the direction of educational mobility is reversed, or at least altered to a much less common pattern to involve destinations such as China, what are the new dynamics or logics of capital conversion involved? Existing scholarship seems to have little to say on this question regarding international students considering studying or currently studying in China.

Secondly, the recent Anglophone literature has also seen some advances in the theorization of the social constitution of student mobility beyond the individualistic and rationalistic 'push-pull' analysis rooted in neoclassic view of migration (Raghuram, 2013). For instance, recent work has investigated how, instead of a momentary decision seemingly made upon simply weighing pros and cons, one actually *becomes* a mobile student processually over time (Carlson, 2013); how wider social networks such as kin and friendly circles also play crucial roles in influencing the choices of studying abroad (Beech, 2015); and how, in addition to demand-side analysis, supply-side players (Findlay, 2010) such as educational providers and intermediaries should be given equal recognition in analyzing the assemblages of student mobility. Since existing studies on international students in China tend to focus narrowly on the *educational* and *intercultural* experiences for students who are already in the country, these other steps and processes leading to their mobility have been largely neglected.

Thirdly and relatedly, while the literature about international students in Western/English-speaking contexts has for some time conceptualized study-abroad as closely linked to, or indeed often the precursor to, migration (see Robertson, 2013, for the notion of 'education-migration nexus'), we know as yet very little about how studying in China intersects with migration objectives and/or trajectories for international students. This, of course, is to a large extent to do with the fact that China is not conventionally regarded as an immigration destination country, unlike destinations such as the USA, Europe and Oceania. However, as China – now a middle income nation – continues to emerge into the global 'core', it becomes ever more pertinent to ask

what seeking education in China means for international students in terms of migration/mobility options and/or plans.

In short, when juxtaposed with a more extensive Anglophone literature on international students in other contexts – particularly with ‘Western’ countries as the destinations – the research on international students in China remains underdeveloped in both empirical breadth and theoretical and analytical depths.

What next

Having outlined what we already know and what we don’t know yet, what then could future research about international students in China possibly focus on?

In the broadest terms, while continuing with the important work along intercultural lines, future scholars could venture beyond this currently dominant perspective in the field, and seek to develop a more multi-/inter-disciplinary agenda by incorporating theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools and vocabularies from a wider range of social scientific disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and geography. For this purpose, the existing Anglophone scholarship on ISM provides a wealth of theoretical and conceptual resources to tap on. Doing so would help render visible other important dimensions and facets to international student mobility to China as a *sociological* and *geographical* phenomena, and not just an *educational* one.

Specifically, for example, future research could investigate the ways in which studying in China becomes a plausible idea or strategy for *what kinds* of international students, and what the underlying logics and rationalities are. It would equally be worth to examine how studying in China is *made* possible, namely, what the enabling *infrastructural* actors and processes (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) are and what specific roles educational intermediaries (Collins, 2012) and other social networks play therein. Furthermore, it is important to link education to work on the one hand and migration on the other. I suggest that one potentially fruitful direction for future research would be to study the post-education trajectories of international students in China by asking question such as: Does studying in China lead to opportunities for work in the country or elsewhere in the world for the international students? Does educational mobility to China influence the students’ future mobility trajectories, and if so, in what ways?

To sum up, the fact that China is fast emerging as a prominent destination for international students presents scholars with a fresh vista full of exciting research opportunities. An expansion of our analytical focus from *education* per se to the broader conceptualization of *educational mobility* would help us grasp these opportunities more fully.

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Notes:

1. More than 70 per cent, according to *Statistics on International Students in China 2013*; <http://www.zuihaodaxue.com/Article.jsp?id=A6vzX4arM79NeRovibC5UxSTLCWrS4> (webpage now defunct, last accessed 2015).

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