Chapter 9
International Students in Chinese Higher Education: Choices, Expectations, and Experiences by Region of Origin

Claire Hu
Tsinghua University, China

Christine Min Wotipka
Stanford University, USA

Wen Wen
Tsinghua University, China

ABSTRACT

The authors examine the choices, expectations, and experiences of international students in China, aiming to understand emerging reverse student flows and the role of political, economic and cultural factors in international student mobility. Data were drawn from survey responses by 1674 international students from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and North America studying at eight Chinese universities. Findings suggest significant differences among students’ choices, experiences, and expectations by their region of origin. In a broader context, this research addresses the important role of developing countries as not only senders but also receivers of international students, and demonstrates ways that political, economic and cultural structures influence international students’ choices, experiences and expectations. This research on international education in China contributes to the study of regionalization and internationalization of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a reverse mobility trend among international students in higher education. Countries traditionally considered “suppliers,” such as Singapore, Malaysia, and China, have allocated significant resources to develop “world-class” education systems and have begun to actively compete with their Western counterparts for receiving international students (Chan & Ng, 2008). In the case of
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China, the increase in the influx of international students was exponential, soaring from 1,236 in 1978 to 328,330 in 2012 (Luo, 2013). The population of international students in Chinese higher education continues to rise annually, yet little is known about them. Research in this area is imperative, as prior findings from a Western context are not necessarily generalizable to the situation in China (Biggs, 1999).

A greater understanding of international student choice, expectation, and experience in China can serve as the basis for future research on international students studying in China, as the current body of literature on developing host countries is limited. In this study, international students include individuals who are studying at institutions of higher education in China and who do not speak Chinese as their primary language. This study explores the factors that drive them to study in China and their perceptions of their academic and social life. It also looks at the students’ ambitions and how studying in China fits into their future career aspirations.

The increasing international student enrollment not only reflects China’s growing importance in the world economy, but is also the result of a concerted governmental push to enhance China’s appeal as a study-abroad destination (Hvistendahl, 2008) and an education hub (Knight & Morshidi, 2011). The Chinese government, which considers international education to contribute to internationalizing its higher education system and legitimizing its “soft power,” will benefit from an improved understanding of the behaviors and needs of international students. Additionally, Chinese higher education institutions will be able to better respond to the increasing number of international students through strategic international student marketing, recruitment, and retention.

This study also examines how student choices, expectations, and experiences differ by their region of origin, and how these regional differences are associated with political, economic, cultural, and educational structures of students’ region of origin (Chen, 2007; Lee, 2008). For example, China is closely connected with East and Southeast Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, not only through geographical closeness and economic cooperation but also through cultural proximity, as demonstrated by the term “Confucian Asia” (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004). Thus, in terms of cultural context, students from certain Asian countries may have decision-making factors, adaptation, satisfaction levels or future plans that distinguish them from students from other regions.

To explore these topics, this study used data drawn from the Survey of International Students’ Experience and Satisfaction (SIES), which was completed by 1674 international students at eight universities in Beijing in 2012. These data were disaggregated by students’ geographical region of origin and compared along a number of variables that explored students’ choices, expectations, and experiences while studying in China.

BACKGROUND

The impetus for students who choose to attend universities in developing countries is often overlooked in research. As a result, we have a poor understanding of the decision-making processes, expectations for studying abroad, and actual experiences of these international students. However, it is important to note that China is recognized as one of the four largest developing economies known as the BRIC countries (Carnoy et al., 2012), thus it may not be possible to analyze international students who go to China to study in the same way as those who chose other developing countries as their study abroad destination.