

CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION AS SOFT POWER?

ZHAO Litao

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Executive Summary

1. The “internationalization” of higher education accelerated in the 1990s and particularly in the 2000s, with international student mobility growing more rapidly than world tertiary enrollment, and on a scale unprecedented in human history.
2. Developed countries dominate the competition for international students. Their global share has been stable at about 80% over the years. Among developed countries, the United States and the United Kingdom are losing their share to more aggressive countries such as Australia.
3. China is part of the global shift in the destination for international students. It has grown from an insignificant player to a major destination in less than a decade. By 2008, China had become the only developing country with a higher than 2% global share.
4. While China lags behind other major hosting countries in important aspects, it has made efforts to increase the percentage of degree students so as to raise the standards of its intake of international students.
5. Increasingly, China’s growing attraction for international students is seen as new evidence that China’s soft power is on the rise, is gaining in higher education, and is spreading in the region and beyond.
6. Chinese government officials have stressed that higher education has a role to play in diplomacy as international students are “not only interested in Chinese culture, but also in China’s development model.”
7. China has used government scholarships to foster better relationships with other countries. In recent years, African students on Chinese government scholarships have more than doubled since the 2006 China-Africa Summit.

8. International students on Chinese government scholarships are a minority at 5-6%, however. The majority are self-financed students. Most of them are attracted by the economic payoffs of receiving higher education in China.
9. Over the years, the share of international students studying the Chinese language and Chinese medicine has declined, while the interest in Chinese history and philosophy remains extremely low. Other fields, which are less “Chinese”, such as western medicine, economics, and management, have gained in relative terms.
10. Thus far what attracts international students to China is not its Chinese culture or the Chinese model. It is primarily China’s economic rise, not its cultural rise, that makes China a new popular destination for international students.