

Integrating international student mobility in the belt and road initiative

Integrating
international
student
mobility

From state-dominated to state-steering?

33

Xuan Wu

*Department of Social Work, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, and
Wing Kit Chan*

*Centre for Chinese Public Administration Research/School of Government,
Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China*

Received 4 March 2019
Revised 9 May 2019
Accepted 16 May 2019

Abstract

Purpose – Before the turn of the century, taking overseas students was more about a diplomatic issue dominated by the state in China, for which reason this section is relatively independent within the higher education system. However, evidence from a series of new policy documents and their impacts suggests that international student mobility (ISM) has been intensively shaped by the central government in the desire to promote its national strategy, namely the belt and road initiative. ISM policy, although with a significant proportion marketized, was introduced for a clear purpose of cultural diplomacy. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Looking beyond the debate of market-driven vs state-dominated, this paper attempts to provide a thorough understanding of this changing pattern based on examination of key changes of policy statements along with official data analysis.

Findings – This paper argues that the new pattern must be understood against a context of a hierarchy of higher education institutes in contemporary China: a sector led by a small number of prestigious universities generously funded by the central government with a large number of ordinary universities underfunded and eager to generate income. Prestigious institutes enroll international students to satisfy performance indicators listed by policies like “Double First-rate”; other universities, benefiting from the reputation and momentum generated by the top ones, take self-funded students for profit.

Originality/value – By making good use of both performance indicators and market motives, the country managed to move a state-dominated ISM policy in the twentieth century into the existing state-steering marketization model and made China a major destination for overseas study.

Keywords Higher education, Belt and road initiative, International student mobility, State-steering China

Paper type Research paper

Internationalization apart from marketization?

In 2016, the number of overseas students studying in China reached 442,773, among which 209,966 were on a degree program (Ministry of Education, 2017). A recent news report from the Ministry of Education[1] suggests that these two figures increased to 489,200 and 241,500, respectively, in 2017. While Beijing was generously offering scholarships to 43,186 students studying for a degree in 2016, it represented only 20.6 percent of the group, which

© Xuan Wu and Wing Kit Chan. Published in *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

This study is a product of a research project titled as “Social Policy Innovation and Shared Development” (Project No. 16JJD630011) which is funded by a Key Research Unit led by the Ministry of Education.



means that the majority were self-funded. Before drawing any conclusions about the Chinese way of internationalizing its higher education system, marketization had taken place while intensive state intervention was witnessed. In sharp contrast, before the turn of the century, higher education in China was a sector dominated by the state in which universities were given enrollment quotas domestically and internationally, home students were assigned a job upon graduation, and all universities were public by the mid-1990s. Its process of marketization for home students and then their international peers is nevertheless impressive in the past two decades.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, China's higher education system went through a process of rapid changes featured by marketization and internationalization. Domestically, the marketization of higher education was introduced to tackle socio-economic issues like low domestic consumption and massive unemployment, results of the privatization in the 1990s and shocks from the 1997 financial crisis (Chan and Ngok, 2011; Chan, 2015). With the rapid expansion of higher education, domestic consumption was stimulated because of parents' increasing willingness to invest in children's education, and pressure on employment was temporarily released by sending more young people to university (Pan and Xiao, 2008; Chan, 2012). Annual enrollment has increased from merely one million to around eight million in 2018. With an ever-expanding sector as a whole since 1999, the section on international students has been granted increasing space to grow: an institutional context for the changes in international student mobility (ISM). However, Yang (2010) argued that the internationalization of the country's higher education began a tendency to export the Chinese knowledge during the same historical period and it was independent of the marketization logic. It was observed that during this period a range of ISM policies was introduced by the Chinese Government as part of the nation's diplomatic, economic and cultural strategies aiming for soft power projection (Kuroda, 2014).

Under the influence of both marketization and state-dominated logic, which accordingly being applied in the area of domestic education and international education, a unique mechanism formed in higher education system of China. There was a clear segmentation during the beginning stage of marketization and internationalization. But the overall context of higher education development has been reshaped because of two significant changes in recent years. The first is the 2016 education action plan based on the belt and road initiative (BRI), which claims the function of higher education to communicate and cooperate with countries alongside the road, and requests improvement of quality in international students' education (Ministry of Education, 2016). Another change is about the deepening progress of domestic higher education marketization, China will soon enter the universal stage of higher education development. From 2012 to 2018, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) has maintained a rapid increase of about 3 percent[2] every year on average, which is even faster than the beginning years of expansion. In 2018, higher education GER has reached 48.1 percent[3]. The domestic situation can reflect the influence of marketization logic among universities in China.

These two changes bring up new research issues. Given the new context of diplomatic strategy, China is set to play a more important role in ISM and through students it teaches, the country will exercise more influence over the global community. Then what changes would be expected in ISM policies? As the key executive sector of higher education policy, is it possible of universities to keep the segmentation between the domestic and international education? How would they coordinate the contradictions between the goal of serving national strategy and their own economic motive as part of a marketization system? A thorough understanding of ISM model becomes a prerequisite.

Following the introductory section, this paper attempts to examine the changing pattern of ISM by reviewing relevant government policies and employing second-hand analysis within the hierarchy of higher education in China. The BRI involves new

requirements about universities and colleges training professional and international talents for more cross-border cooperation. If seen from both the perspective of ISM diplomatic function and the perspective of higher education financing, Chinese ISM is a dual-oriented structure, which will be examined in the second part. On the one hand, the high quality and highly influential contents of ISM are still state-dominated, which largely serves the purpose of the BRI. On the other hand, after decades of knowledge exports to the third world countries, the value of studying in and obtaining a qualification from China has been well recognized, which paves the way for the practice of the marketization logic in higher education financing.

The complexion of ISM: state-dominated or market-driven?

Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2016) identify three discourses for ISM in the world, namely, cash, competition and charity. Among these three discourses, a market-driven model is likely to be associated with the cash one (see Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016; Lo, 2018). Internationalization of higher education in this context includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions to cope with the global demand for qualifications. The most important stimuli include profits, access provision and demand absorption (Altbach and Knight, 2007). The key word “profits” here summarizes various motives of higher education institutions in generating income by taking overseas students, while “demand absorption” refers to students of sending countries that lack domestic capacity to fulfill their educational demands. When both are available, access is the last step with which a business becomes feasible.

As a classic marketization logic, the process of higher education internationalization begins with the identification of overseas educational demands by institutions with a financial motive. However, the story of the internationalization for a developing country would be very different due to the lack of qualified higher education services. Developing countries seek to attract foreign students to their universities to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body, gain prestige, and, if possible, earn income (Altbach and Knight, 2007, p. 294). Back in the twentieth century, as noted by Yang (2015), China’s higher education internationalization started with cultural and diplomatic purposes rather than profit. Such an approach consists of features from the competition as well the charity categories identified by Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2016), but since the state is in charge of all major aspects of the sector, it is a state-dominated model. Universities in this model are an executive branch of the system and enrolling overseas students from specific countries for specific programs is a role they are supposed to play. And the reasons why universities are willing to or have to play this role relate to the mechanism of higher education financing in China. Elite universities receive the largest education funds from central and local governments (Li *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, policy goals about higher education internationalization could be achieved by setting administrative performance indicators of enrolling overseas students. Relevant discussion will be elaborated in next section.

To understand the recent evolvement of the ISM in China, apart from the role of higher education institutes, the motive behind overseas students’ pursuit is also a key element to explore. Studying abroad is after all an individual or family decision: only through shaping an environment meeting the individual needs could government and higher education institutions fulfill their profit or non-profit purposes. In a qualitative study about the decision-making process of international students in China, the interviewees share various motivations in choosing their study country (Jiani, 2017). At the macro level, China’s future development, the bright prospect of learning the Chinese language, and generous financial supports are emphasized; while at the individual level, international students’ core concerns are associated with their career development,

exploring a different culture, and, for some overseas Chinese in particular, to return to China in search of cultural identity (Jiani, 2017).

During the Maoist China, ISM had been positioned as a section of the higher education to articulate the superiority of the new socialist regime in the global community (see Ren and Liu, 2017, pp. 91-106). A state-dominated model was consistent with its tight budget and limited number of prestigious institutes to offer places for overseas students. However, by the time China expanded its higher education sector and became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) at the turn of the century, the heritage of the previous decades turned out to be a facilitative factor for a marketization process of its higher education for overseas students due to the fact that the cultural diplomacy in the past few decades had managed to make China attractive to many prospective students from the developing world. As a developing country, to some extent, China had established a great-nation image among other third world countries, enabling international students to identify the future development value of China (Jiani, 2017). Relatively speaking, compared to the expensive tuition fees charged by universities in the developed world, courses in China are value for money. On this basis, the practice of market-oriented logic in ISM became feasible and higher education institutions were faced with an opportunity to consider their profit purposes. As this evolution emerged as mainly a result of government intervention, a retrospect on policy changes during this period is necessary to understand this changing context.

Marketization and hierarchy

The higher education system in China is very different from that of the UK or USA, where universities are free to compete without intensive intervention from the state. Universities in China, on the contrary, are labeled and categorized into different groups and tiers for student enrollment and public resources allocation. Before university expansion in the late 1990s, China used “key university” as a label to sort a small group of top universities into a basket for special treatment: preferential policies alongside abundant public resources. This mechanism continued after the expansion using labels like “211 project” and “985 project,” which will be elaborated later. China furthered this approach in the past two years by introducing the “Double First-rate” policy to concentrate its resources for just a small number of top institutes, 42 in the latest case (Ren, 2016; Song, 2018). Therefore, marketization or internationalization does not mean the same thing to institutes sorted into different groups or tiers.

Marketization of higher education emerged in the 1990s as a domestic issue influencing university places for home students only. The rapid development of higher education was witnessed as a result of state planning: the decision to expand was announced in May 1999, whereby the core measure taken in relevant reforms was marketization, requiring private sectors to share the cost of higher education, and labeled as “educational expansion as an economic necessity” by researchers following the economic approach (Wan, 2006; Wu and Zheng, 2008). The number of university places rises as the tuition fees level rises, followed by the setups of private universities (see Figure 1), which charge students much more than public ones.

One of the goals in this marketization is expanding the sector using private resources while concentrating public resources to turn a small number of prestigious institutes into “world-class universities,” articulated as “to cradle high-quality researchers with outstanding creativity, the frontier of scientific research, an important force to transform research and innovation into higher productivity, and finally, a bridge for international academic and cultural exchange (Levin and Xu, 2005, p. 37).” Another important criterion for recognition includes “cultivating well-qualified graduates” who are international in origin and in high demand in the international labor market (Choi, 2010).

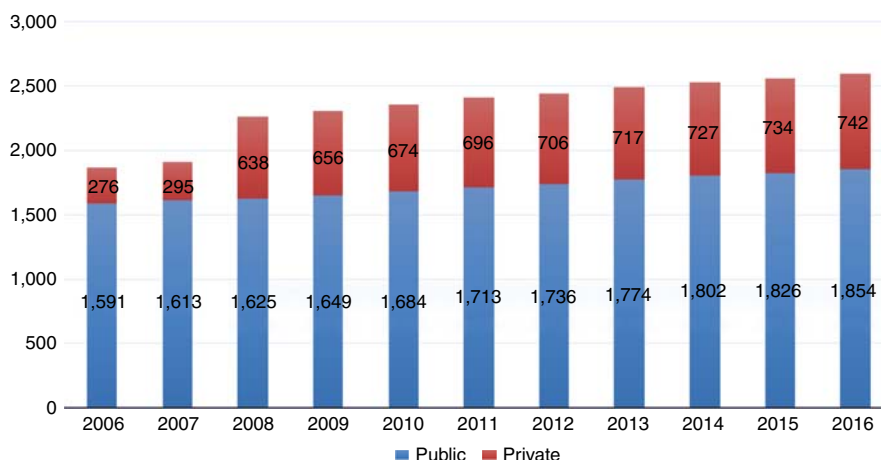


Figure 1.
Higher education
institutes in China
(2006–2016)

Two major governmental projects, the “211 project” and the “985 project,” were brought up in this context (see Figure 2). In total, 107 universities were selected by the 211 project with extra resources to improve teaching, learning and research. In addition, 39 prestigious universities (all included in the 211 project) were further selected for the 985 Project, launched by the declaration of then Chinese President Jiang Zemin that “China must have a number of first-rate universities with an advanced level internationally” in May 1998, for further investment from the central government (Zhang *et al.*, 2013). For most of the Chinese higher education institutions, the promoting of internationalization began with a strong motivation to serve the national needs (Huang, 2015). After all, for the top universities, to remain in this elite group of extra resources is in their ultimate interest, while for outsiders, or the ordinary ones, to demonstrate capacity in doing the job might enhance their chance of squeezing in. Meeting the performance indicator is therefore a strong incentive for any public university.

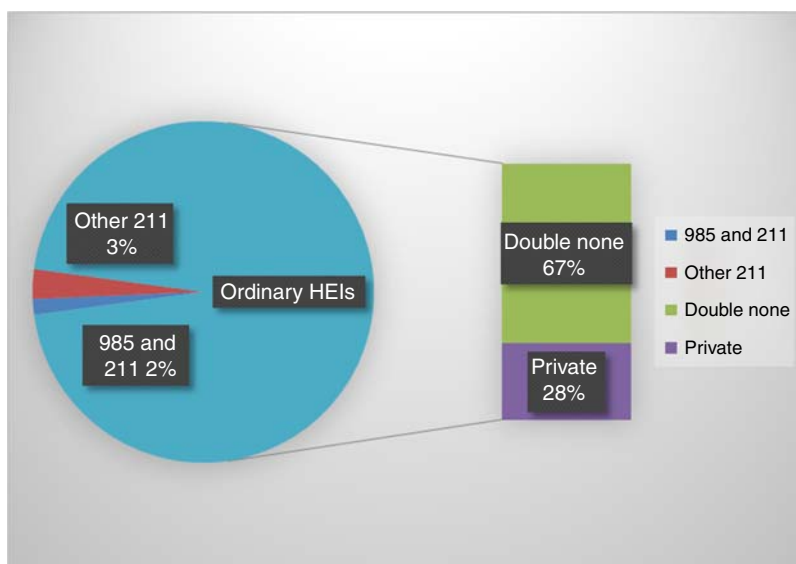


Figure 2.
Hierarchy of
higher education of
China (2016)

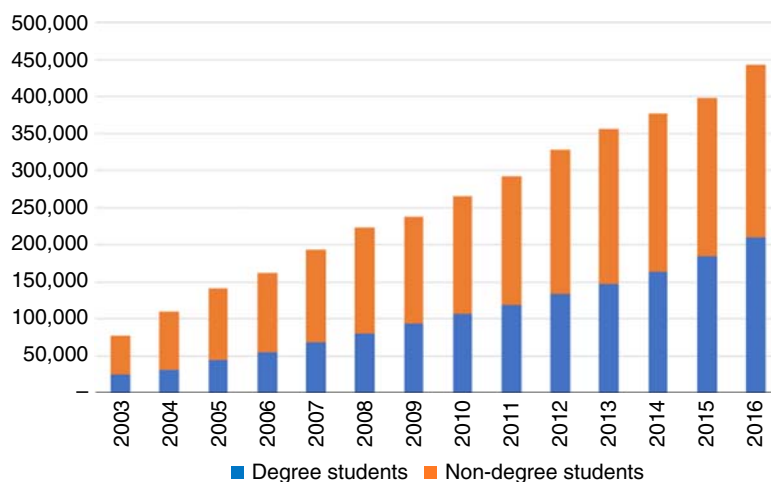
ISM in China since the early 2000s

The goals of ISM policies became more explicit and often stated in state planning documents for the education system in the 2000s. After entering the WTO in 2001, inspired by the new opportunities it presents, the Chinese central government introduced policies and provided national guidance to expand inbound international students in two government documents: the 10th “Five-year Plan for National Education Development” promulgated in 2001 and the “2003–2007 Action Plan for Reinvigorating Education” promulgated in 2004 (Wen *et al.*, 2018). These two documents can be treated as the beginning of ISM as a cultural diplomatic tool. The internationalization of higher education was driven by the state and serving a superior strategy to promote the national image.

Since the beginning of the second decade of this century, with the economic rise of the country, Beijing started to find more space for it to exercise its muscle in international education and more strategic documents were introduced. In 2010, another two government policies refer to further expansion and development of international student education, which includes “The National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” and “The Study in China Plan (liuxue zhongguo jihua).” Under the title of “Further Opening China’s Education” in the national outline, the government stressed the importance of continuing to implement educational reforms, promoting international educational collaboration, and advancing internationalization to enhance the nation’s global position, influence, and competitiveness in the field of education (Kuroda, 2014, p. 448). The Study in China Plan is a guide for implementing international student education following the national outline. The overall goal includes four aspects: to expand the scale, optimize the structure, guarantee the quality and improve the management. The term “commensurate with China’s international status” is used to describe the optimal international student education system, and the document indicates cultivated international personnel should be well-versed in Chinese and friendly toward China (Ministry of Education, 2010). There are some quantitative indicators being mentioned. The “scale” refers to making China the largest study abroad destination in Asia by 2020, and the ultimate goal is to host 500,000 international students. The “structure” involves a goal of recruiting 150,000 overseas students on degree programs, betterment of the composition of sending countries, and a larger proportion on degree programs. Besides, the document proposes to ensure a steady increase in Chinese government scholarships for international students.

Under the guidance of these documents, outputs are impressive. According to the Ministry of Education of China (2017), there are 442,773 international students from 205 countries/regions enrolling in 829 Chinese universities, colleges and other educational institutes. Given the fact that the total number of international students was only 77,715 in 2003, it has increased by about 5.6 times within 13 years. The goal of hosting 150,000 college students on degree programs in the “Study in China Plan” was achieved in 2014. Although the proportion of non-degree students has always been a majority, the proportion of degree students has been slowly rising to 47.4 percent in 2016, from merely 32 percent in 2003 (see Figure 3). This trend is consistent with the Chinese government’s policy goal of widening the section on degree programs and adjusting to a structure of international student education with more students from some specific sending countries.

Public perception of ISM, attitudes toward oversea students in particular, has undergone some profound changes in recent years. As more policy favors have been given to overseas students while home students are shouldering a heavy burden of university costs, the ever-increasing number of international students in China has become controversial. Criticism has sprung up through social media that accuses the so-called “ultra-national treatment” for international students in universities and colleges of being unequal for local students[4]. Extreme cases are revealed in the media one after another: home students are asked to move out of their dormitory to make room for international students in schools in



Source: Brief statistics of international students in China, Ministry of Education (2004-2017)

Figure 3.
International students
in China by type of
program, 2003–2016

Wuxi and Nanjing; exclusive seats in the university library are reserved for international students in a school in Shenyang. There are even doubts pointing out whether top universities are relaxing the admission criteria for international students; for example, Tsinghua University canceled the written test for international undergraduate students' admission in 2017[5]. A fiercer dispute lies in the financial funding for domestic postgraduate students and international postgraduate students. A recent example also comes from Tsinghua University, whose scholarship offered to international students was commented on as "too generous"[6]. As quoted from the latest enrollment guide for IMPA-BRI in the School of Public Policy and Management, in addition to full tuition supported by a foundation, there is a monthly allowance of 3,000 yuan for accommodation and 3,000 yuan for living expenses for each international student[7]. At the same time, the basic subsidy standard for domestic master's students is 6,000 yuan per year, and the subsidy for doctoral students is only 12,000 yuan per year[8].

While there is evidence to support a perception that Beijing has continuously increased funding for international students in absolute terms, it is actually another case in relative terms (see Figure 4). In 2015, the ratio of sponsored students reached over 10 percent for the first time. But another important fact is that self-financed students are still the main components among all international students, which means local universities are benefiting financially from this change. Furthermore, it might also imply the significance for meeting individual motives in the future development of ISM in China.

As a handful of top universities are singled out by "key university" label alike, they are often the attention of the society. The public perception of overseas students being unnecessarily well treated by Beijing has a lot to do with the fact that most of the scholarships are allocated to students studying in prestigious universities. Table I demonstrates that nearly 90 percent of the scholarships went to students on degree programs and Table II shows that more than two-fifths of the scholarships are concentrated in 39 "985 project" institutes only. To note, there are over 800 universities taking students from overseas, and actually most overseas students studying in non-key universities are self-financed. Such a pattern implies Beijing's strategic emphasis on high-quality degree programs for elites from these countries.

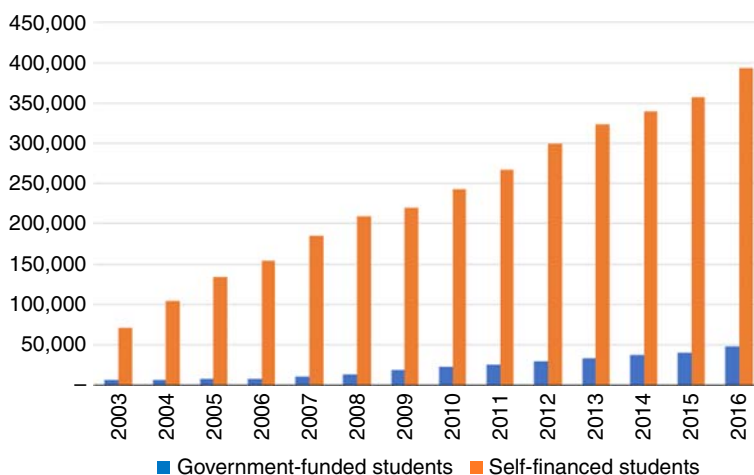


Figure 4. International students in China by type of funding, 2003–2016

Source: Brief statistics of international students in China, Ministry of Education (2004–2017)

Types of international students	Student numbers		
	2015	2016	As % of all in 2016
<i>Degree students</i>			
Undergraduate students	8,674	9,246	18.9
Postgraduate students	27,613	33,940	69.2
Sub-total	36,287	43,186	88.1
<i>Non-degree students</i>			
General visiting students	3,817	5,385	11.0
Senior visiting students	456	451	0.9
Short-term students	40	–	–
Sub-total	4,313	5,836	11.9
Total	40,600	49,022	100

Table I. Types of sponsored international students, 2015–2016

Source: Brief statistics of international students in China 2017, Ministry of Education

The two latest policies related to ISM were issued by Ministry of Education in September and November of 2018, respectively, aiming to address the issue that excessive focus has been placed on international student education while internal fragmentation of the whole higher education system was left unresolved. One is the “Standards for the quality of higher education for international students in China” (Ministry of Education, 2018b), which is the first comprehensive official document addressing the issues of the teaching quality of programs admitting international students. The standards focus on four areas: faculty, admission and prep education, educational and teaching activities, and administration and services. The attention paid to the faculty concerns their specialties and knowledge in the subject area with proper understanding of China, language ability, and cross-cultural and global competence. The idea of quality control is reflected in a complete process including enrollment, teaching and learning, campus life and graduation. Students from both Chinese-medium and English-medium programs should meet Chinese proficiency level requirements accordingly, and courses of general

Institution	Degree students	Non-degree students	Total
Peking University	667	312	979
Renmin University of China	271	50	321
Tsinghua University	742	166	908
Beihang University	566	44	610
Beijing Institute of Technology	547	94	641
China Agricultural University	222	5	227
Beijing Normal University	568	68	636
Minzu University of China	206	13	219
Nankai University	230	53	283
Tianjin University	526	43	569
Dalian University of Technology	496	19	515
Northeastern University	381	37	418
Jilin University	403	35	438
Harbin Institute of Technology	893	114	1,007
Fudan University	456	278	734
Tongji University	638	164	802
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	515	196	711
East China Normal University	353	134	487
Nanjing University	275	97	372
Southeast University	491	27	518
Zhejiang University	717	181	898
University of Science and Technology of China	340	1	341
Xiamen University	439	68	507
Shandong University	780	26	806
Ocean University of China	182	13	195
Wuhan University	618	72	690
Huazhong University of Science and Technology	1,156	50	1,206
Hunan University	456	2	458
Central South University	540	13	553
Sun Yat-sen University	311	42	353
South China University of Technology	362	19	381
Sichuan University	236	39	275
University of Electronic Science and Technology of China	206	2	208
Chongqing University	390	36	426
Xi'an Jiaotong University	512	32	544
Northwestern Polytechnical University	230	8	238
Northwest Agricultural and Forestry University	240	1	241
Lanzhou University	314	5	319
Total amount	17,475	2,559	20,034

Table II.
Numbers of
government-funded
international students
among "Project 985"
universities in 2016

Source: Brief statistics of international students in China 2017, Ministry of Education

introduction to contemporary China are made compulsory in all programs. Besides, the administration about alumni has been brought up as a special section, which does not only refer to the registration information of a student. In addition, universities are required to systematically collect and maintain contact information for international students in China, and to use the internet and other information technology for maintaining contact with alumni (Ministry of Education, 2018b).

Another document is named "the action plan of university science and technology innovation serving the Belt and Road Initiative." It specifies a series of roles universities are supposed to play in the construction of the Belt and Road. International students are regarded as critical human resources in the field of innovation and entrepreneurship in China. Promises have been made to strengthen funding for international postgraduate students from countries involved in the Belt and Road (Ministry of Education, 2018a).

The impact of the BRI on the ISM in China can be demonstrated visually from the structural change of the sending continents of international students. Asia has always been the main source of international students in China, but from 2003 to 2016, the proportion of Asian students dropped from 81.9 to 59.8 percent. The proportion of students from the Americas and Europe began to shrink from around 2012. Only the proportion of African students has been growing steadily at a rate close to one percent per year (see Figure 5).

At present, an obvious shortcoming of international student education in China lies in the professional structure. It can be seen from Figure 6 that the number of international students studying social sciences and humanities in China is the largest, which is not consistent with the key areas of cooperation in the BRI. According to the latest action plan, key topics and industries include green agriculture, ecological environment, energy utilization, demographic health, food security, information network, ocean protection, cultural heritage protection and so forth, while strong support would be given to frontier research areas like digital economy, artificial intelligence and computer science (Ministry of Education, 2018a).

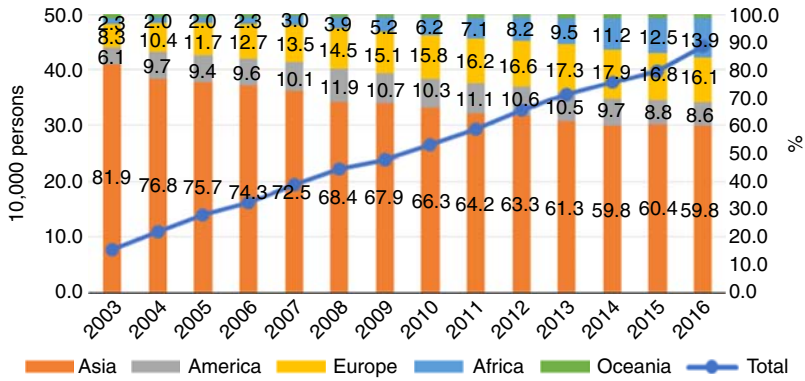


Figure 5.
International students
by sending continent,
2003–2016

Source: Brief statistics of international students in China, Ministry of Education (2004–2017)

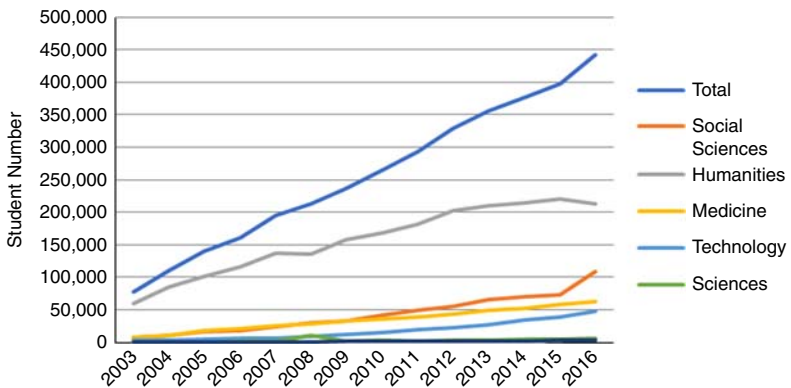


Figure 6.
International students
by area of subjects,
2003–2016

Source: China education yearbook 2004–2017

Meanwhile, efforts have been made to achieve the policy goal of adjusting professional structures. Table III reveals that the proportion of overseas students studying for engineering degrees is the largest among all the sponsored international students in 2016.

Overall, the trend of recent ISM policies is more integrated and more targeted than before. Since the number of international students in China has reached a certain scale, it is good timing to implement an integrated policy for educational quality control rather than some fragmented regulations affiliating to other higher education policies. From this perspective, it could be understood that international student education is no longer a special and comparatively independent sector in the whole higher education system of China. ISM is now a routinized and normal part; it does not only play the role in cultural diplomacy. On the other hand, considering the crucial position of ISM in the BRI, it is not possible to adopt the logic of high marketization in the area of ISM like the expansion of domestic higher education. The government needs to stay dominant in some aspects to ensure ISM could serve the superior goal of national strategy. Apart from setting key performance indicators and detailed requirements for faculties to achieve, the new action plan includes the universities or colleges' contribution to the BRI as a significant aspect for the assessment of the "Double First-rate" strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2018a). This is a core method to ensure the implementation of the national strategy, which also means the existence of the state-dominated part in the ISM policies currently.

Conclusions

Internationalization of higher education took place in China in a very different way from the marketization of the sector. Despite the fact that the expansion of higher education relying on private resources, although controversial, was regarded as a facilitative factor for the country's economic rise in the last two decades, the swift development of international student education with intensive intervention and heavy investment from the state in the first place was initially a state-led process. While the state steadily increases its financial supports for its international education, the section has nevertheless developed much larger wings using market mechanism. Universities in China are now more appealing than ever to many students in the third world for many reasons and the country has benefited from such a structure with which it manages to influence global politics.

Since the BRI, by integrating ISM into the national strategy, China has become an attractive destination for international students from the participating countries. Despite the

Subjects	Total number	Degree students	Non-degree students	%
Engineering	11,950	11,429	521	24.4
Management	7,789	7,456	333	15.9
Economics	5,566	5,197	369	11.4
Western medicine	4,216	4,149	67	8.6
Chinese language	4,007	701	3,306	8.2
Law	3,561	3,366	195	7.3
Literature	3,305	2,777	528	6.7
Science	2,834	2,719	115	5.8
Education	2,146	1,976	170	4.4
Agriculture	1,407	1,386	21	2.9
Chinese medicine	839	790	49	1.7
Art	802	692	110	1.6
History	330	294	36	0.7
Philosophy	270	254	16	0.6
Total	49,022	43,186	5,836	100.0

Source: Brief statistics of international students in China 2017, Ministry of Education

Table III.
Sponsored students
by areas of subjects
and program
type, 2016

fact that, from time to time, orders on undertaking strategic policies in ISM were sent from the top levels, universities, as executive agencies, still have their own agenda to cater for; thus, to follow the logic of marketization in practice anyway. But it is exactly what the mechanism is about: to steer a development by concentrating resources on a few that lead the way, and allowing others to do their business. The educational resources provided by the public sector are mainly concentrated in: elite universities as listed in “985 Project,” “211 Project” or the recent “Double First-rate”; degree education – Chinese Government has been calling for increase the ratio of degree education in international education programs, the government scholarships are mainly provided to international students enrolled in degree programs as well; and key professional subjects closely relating to BRI construction, such as engineering (as shown in Table III). Educational sectors meeting all or part of these characteristics could be understood as “leading the way,” and the way here is indicated by national strategy like BRI. Relying on continuous investment from the government, relatively high-quality education has been cultivated in elite universities, which contributes to the enhancement of overall reputation of Chinese universities and helps to create the space for them to follow the marketization logic – as long as the leading parts are sufficient to complete the work of serving national strategy. Meanwhile, there are evidences about the existence of marketization logic in ISM. Self-financed students are increasing rapidly and consistently constitute a majority in the pool, while among all overseas students the share between non-degree and degree ones is relatively stable. Both make up the structure of contemporary ISM in China and they are very likely to be the delicate balance struck by the state. Thus, this is a state-steering marketization model that is not only ensuring that the national strategy of exercising influence (e.g. among the BRI countries) is prioritized but also generating extra income, compensating many ordinary universities underfunded by the state; therefore a partial marketization driven by national strategy has been witnessed.

Every coin has two sides and this case is no exception. On the one hand, it can be said that the overall ISM policy is reasonable, as it is not just a diplomatic tool, but helps to exert essential functions of education; on the other hand, it also reflects the imbalance within international student education, as many universities involved in this business are ordinary ones with much work to catch up. The Chinese Government has obvious policy preferences in allocating resources for degree programs and key subject courses. The issue of the new quality standard documentation for studying in China may be seen as a response from the Chinese government to the internal imbalances in the education system.

Future development of China’s ISM policy will be subject to examination based on its structure and individual motivation, including the country’s strategic motivation, institutional performance motivation (the evaluation of “Double First-rate” universities) and economic motivation (the maintenance of a high proportion of self-funded students), and individual motivation for self-development. It is inferable that the international strategy at the macro level will remain intact for the years to come.

For higher education institutions, given a rising scale of ISM, it would be difficult for top universities to unconditionally subsidize international students to meet the assessment set by policies like “Double First-rate” (Song, 2018). It has become very costly after all. As a result, these universities have to find a balance between performance and economic motivation: how to develop programs following the marketization logic while meeting national strategic goals. The good news is also bad news: reliance on public resources will continue. The BRI includes investment in the development of key industries such as infrastructure construction and high-tech industries along the route, which implies financial supports for students from these countries. In 2014, the Silk Road Fund was set up which announced the allocation of US\$40bn for financing projects along the route; then in 2017, 100 billion yuan was added to the fund[9]. China may hope that more self-motivated

students would come over to China for a degree program for which they pay from their own pocket for good reasons as the country has managed to achieve much so far. But the fact is that most of these countries are not wealthy. Policies designed to meet the need of students motivated by their personal development are necessary in the future.

International students from developing countries put the same weights on educational and economic factors for peer developing countries as potential destinations; thus, countries aiming to attract talents from other countries should pay more attention to attracting international students and encouraging them to seek working opportunities in local employment markets after finishing study (Wei, 2013, p. 105). The main origins of international students in China are developing countries in Asia and Africa. In the future, higher education institutes could widely imagine if it is possible to provide employment support for international students at the level of individual career development. Lessons can be learned from the recent post-study work proposal in the UK, which refers to promoting a favorable position in a long-term talent competition and economic development by improving the immigration system that supports the employment of highly skilled personnel among international students (APPG, 2018). For now, at least we can see definite career opportunities of high-tech key industries in the countries along the Belt and Road according to the latest action plan. The action plan supports universities to conduct three forms of cross-border cooperation, including the construction of national joint laboratories, the construction of industrial technology research institutes, and the support of university staff and students for jointly innovation and entrepreneurial projects (Ministry of Education, 2018a). On one hand, China cooperates with countries along the BRI in technical research which based on local development demand. On the other hand, domestic universities are regarded as an entrepreneurial base to attract international students to carry out innovation and entrepreneurship activities in China. And emphasis has been given to the construction of alumni networks as future talent resources in the quality standard document. The group of international students coming to China is growing. With their knowledge of the socio-economic situation of their home country and China, they should become an important source of talent during the implementation of the BRI. It is possible for higher education institutes to positively seek for new modes of ISM under the scope of the national strategic layout. The education of international students in China is not just a political practice or administrative performance indicator given to the university by the state. National strategy, university construction and personnel training are all long-term development issues belonging to different levels. Given the context that the state encourages the development of international students' education, universities can try to improve their operational mechanisms, improve the quality of education, maintain alumni networks, and broaden the employment opportunities for international students both in and outside China. The logic of marketization is not only about seeking profits through charging fees of non-degree programs. A more comprehensive system is needed to make China's ISM a benign development cycle based on reputation for educational standards and delivery of high-quality talents.

Notes

1. From the Ministry of Education's official website (www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201803/t20180329_331772.html) (accessed February 20, 2019).
2. Calculation based on the numbers in 2012–2017 National Statistical Bulletin on Education, GER from 2012 to 2017 are 30, 34.5, 37.5, 40, 42.7 and 45.7 percent successively.
3. Press release, Ministry of Education, available at: http://big5.www.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-02/26/content_5368916.htm (accessed April 11, 2019).

4. DW News (in Chinese), retrieved from http://culture.dwnews.com/renwen/news/2018-07-19/60071850_all.html; China Youth Magazine (in Chinese), retrieved from www.sohu.com/a/248255098_610901
5. Tsinghua Admissions (in Chinese), retrieved from www.join-tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/bzw/7602/2018/20180531162007057207178/20180531162007057207178_.html
6. Guo Yuhua, Financial Times (in Chinese), retrieved from www.ftchinese.com/story/001079532?full=y&archive
7. School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University, retrieved from www.sppm.tsinghua.edu.cn/english/Admission/IMPAN/IMPABRI/Scholarship/
8. Tsinghua University (in Chinese), retrieved from www.wolichina.net/newthu_cnt/education/pdf/subsidize02.pdf
9. Silk Road Fund (in Chinese), retrieved from www.silkroadfund.com.cn/; Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (in Chinese), retrieved from www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyjl/e/201705/20170502577992.shtml

References

- Altbach, P.G. and Knight, J. (2007), "The internationalization of higher education: motivations and realities", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 11 Nos 3-4, pp. 290-305.
- APPG (2018), "A sustainable future for international students in the UK", inquiry report, All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Students, London, available at: www.exeduk.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/APPG-Report-FINAL-WEB-1.pdf (accessed November 14, 2018).
- Chan, W.K. (2012), "Employability does not necessarily lead to competitiveness: an employment gap left by ascribed factors", *Chinese Education and Society*, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 21-38.
- Chan, W.K. (2015), "Higher education and graduate employment in China: challenges for sustainable development", *Higher Education Policy*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 35-54.
- Chan, W.K. and Ngok, K.L. (2011), "Accumulating human capital while increasing educational inequalities: a study on higher education policy in China", *Asian Pacific Journal of Education*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 293-310.
- Choi, S. (2010), "Globalization, China's drive for world-class universities (211 Project) and the challenges of ethnic minority higher education: the case of Yanbian university", *Asia Pacific Education Review*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 169-178.
- Huang, F. (2015), "Building the world-class research universities: a case study of China", *Higher Education*, Vol. 70 No. 2, pp. 203-215.
- Jiani, M.A. (2017), "Why and how international students choose Mainland China as a higher education study abroad destination", *Higher Education*, Vol. 74 No. 4, pp. 563-579.
- Kuroda, C. (2014), "The new sphere of international student education in Chinese higher education: a focus on English-medium degree programs", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 18 No. 5, pp. 445-462.
- Levin, H.M. and Xu, Z. (2005), "Issues in the expansion of higher education in the people's Republic of China", *China Review*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 33-59.
- Li, Y.A., Whalley, J., Zhang, S. and Zhao, X. (2012), "The higher educational transformation of China and its global implications", in Ennew, C.T. and Greenway, D. (Eds), *The Globalization of Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 135-162.
- Lo, W.Y.W. (2018), "Beyond competition: a comparative review of conceptual approaches to international student mobility", *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, September 28, doi: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1525283.
- Ministry of Education (2004-2017), "Brief statistics on international students in China 2016", internal resources, Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, Beijing.

-
- Ministry of Education (2010), "Liuxue zhongguo jihua", Study in China Plan, available at: www.gov.cn/zwgk/2010-09/28/content_1711971.htm (accessed April 24, 2019).
- Ministry of Education (2016), "*Tuijin gongjian yidaiyilu jiaoyu xingdong* (The education action plan of promoting joint development of the belt and road initiative)", available at: www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811_274679.html (accessed April 24, 2019).
- Ministry of Education (2018a), "*Gaoxiao keji chuangxin fuwu yidaiyilu changyi xingdong jihua* (The action plan of university science and technology innovation serving the belt and road initiative)", available at: www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A16/kjs_gjhz/201901/t20190102_365666.html (accessed April 24, 2019).
- Ministry of Education (2018b), "*Laihua liuxuesheng gaodeng jiaoyu zhiliang guifan (shixing)* (Standards for the quality of higher education for international students in China)", available at: www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/moe_850/201810/t20181012_351302.html (accessed April 24, 2019).
- Pan, M. and Xiao, H. (2008), "The changes of structure and system of Chinese mass higher education", *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 29 No. 5, pp. 26-31.
- Ren, X. and Liu, H. (2017), *China's Foreign Aid: Theory and Practice*, True & Wisdom Press/Shanghai People's Publishing House, Shanghai.
- Ren, Y. (2016), "The future development of higher education internationalization under the 'Double First-rate' strategy in China", *China Higher Education*, No. 5, pp. 15-17.
- Song, J. (2018), "Creating world-class universities in China: strategies and impacts at a renowned research university", *Higher Education*, Vol. 75 No. 4, pp. 729-742.
- Stein, S. and de Oliveira Andreotti, V. (2016), "Cash, competition, or charity: international students and the global imaginary", *Higher Education*, Vol. 72 No. 2, pp. 225-239.
- Wan, Y. (2006), "Expansion of Chinese higher education since 1998: its causes and outcomes", *Asia Pacific Education Review*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 19-32.
- Wei, H. (2013), "An empirical study on the determinants of international student mobility: a global perspective", *Higher Education*, Vol. 66 No. 1, pp. 105-122.
- Wen, W., Hu, D. and Hao, J. (2018), "International students' experiences in China: does the planned reverse mobility work?", *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 61, pp. 204-212.
- Wu, B. and Zheng, Y. (2008), "Expansion of higher education in China: challenges and implications", Briefing Series No. 36, China Policy Institute, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham.
- Yang, R. (2010), "Soft power and higher education: an examination of China's Confucius institutes", *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 233-243.
- Yang, R. (2015), "China's soft power projection in higher education", *International Higher Education*, Vol. 2007 No. 46, doi: 10.6017/ihe.2007.46.7938.
- Zhang, H., Patton, D. and Kenney, M. (2013), "Building global-class universities: assessing the impact of the 985 Project", *Research Policy*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 765-775.

Corresponding author

Wing Kit Chan can be contacted at: chanwingkit@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com