

Academic Elites to Economic Elites? The Diversification of Chinese International Students

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At an academic conference, I chatted with the Dean of Admissions from a prestigious public university in the Midwest and was struck by a story he told me: A Chinese doctoral student walked into his office one day and blasted him for admitting so many undergraduates from China, saying that this devalued his own credentials, as the qualities of those Chinese undergraduates, in his opinion, were no comparison to his.

The dean narrated this story half-jokingly, apparently feeling it was funny. However, he might not fully understand the roots of this student's complaint. In a test-oriented Chinese education system, students are ranked by test scores, and by test scores only. In this student's eyes, he had been able to score high on the competitive Gaokao, and then was selected by an equally, if not more, competitive screening to study at this famous U.S. university (Liu, 2016). In his view, he had abilities superior to those who were not able to score high on the Gaokao, but instead, paid to study at the same university he had tried so hard to get into. This student's statements may sound crude and cruel, but they are based on the perspective from his world.

However, the larger world is changing and getting flatter (Friedman, 2005). In part, that means an increasing number of Chinese students have access to world-class universities. Despite the massive growth of higher education sector in China, only two Chinese universities are ranked among the top 100 best universities in the world, while 41 out of these top 100 are located in the United States (Times Higher Education, n.d.). With the increasing proportion of upper middle-class families in today's China, more and more Chinese students do not have to rely on American scholarships to study at American institutions. The recent history of Chinese students' dependency on full American scholarships to study abroad was merely a reflection of the economic deprivation and limited education opportunities of the country at that time. This gave rise to the mindset of academic elitism exhibited by this doctoral student, which sees prestigious universities as belonging to the few students who can

outscore the masses. Perhaps, instead, he should feel happy for the younger generation of Chinese students who have the freedom to choose.

This change, of Chinese international students' academic and social backgrounds and their ensuing experiences abroad, has motivated my research over the past 7 years. My book *Ambitious and Anxious* (Ma, 2020) has shown a diverse set of Chinese students in terms of both family backgrounds and education trajectories. Their capacity to pay for the overseas education has often obscured their socioeconomic diversity, the parental sacrifices, and their own academic and social challenges and struggles.

In other words, this freedom to choose and access a wider set of education options overseas is backed by economic resources that are vastly unequally distributed among Chinese students and their families. Perhaps this doctoral student is frustrated partly because American universities often admit Chinese undergraduates who have the resources to study here.

This touches upon a thorny identity issue that American universities, particularly selective ones, have to grapple with. How can they avoid being considered bastions of privilege and wealth? Over the past few decades, American universities have made efforts to recruit students from humble backgrounds. However, these efforts have been almost exclusively limited to domestic students. For many institutions, the tuition dollars of international students are a key revenue source for funding financial aid for domestic students. This logic may help balance the books, but it runs the risk of challenging institutions' meritocratic ideals. The increasing concentration of economic elites from foreign countries may not enter into the diversity metrics of campus administrators, but surely it tacitly reinforces the culture of privilege and wealth that our universities strive to break out of.

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