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Chinese International Students as a Soft Power Tool

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Student-to-Student Diplomacy: Chinese International Students as a Soft-Power Tool

Ane BISLEV

Abstract: Chinese international students have become an increasingly visible presence around the globe, and interest in these students has consequently increased among universities, researchers, and policy-makers, who often see international students as a source of increased soft power. This article questions the idea of Chinese international students as a soft-power tool. This is done through a critical discussion of the concept of soft power and the rather limited research on educational diplomacy, demonstrating that the analytical vagueness of the concept of soft power leads to an oversimplified understanding of the linkage between international students and soft power. In order to provide a more nuanced understanding of this linkage, the article examines the actual overseas experience of Chinese international students and argues that the linkage between international students and soft power is highly complicated and that these students do not necessarily constitute soft-power resources.

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Keywords: international students, soft power, people-to-people diplomacy, Chinese students abroad

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Introduction

> **Strengthen the Propagation of the Chinese Dream Abroad**
> Harness the patriotic capabilities of overseas students, establish an overseas propaganda model which uses people as its medium and the sharing of personal ideas as its instrument, and create a propaganda effect where everybody plays a role, where every individual acts as a people-to-people ambassador, and where every sentence uttered easily reaches the hearts and minds [of foreign publics]. (Ministry of Education 2016)

In February of 2016, the Chinese Ministry of Education published a new directive on how to strengthen patriotic education in the Chinese educational system. Towards the end of the document, the directive suggests creating a network integrating domestic and foreign students and experts to propagate knowledge about the development of "the fatherland," thereby casting all Chinese overseas students in the role of potential "people-to-people ambassadors." The interest in overseas students as a public-diplomacy tool and soft-power resource coincides with a record number of both Chinese students going abroad and foreign students coming to China. According to data from UNESCO, more than 700,000 Chinese students were studying abroad in 2015 (UNESCO 2016), while just under 400,000 foreign students were enrolled in Chinese universities in 2014 (Institute of International Education 2014).

The idea of using international students to reach the hearts and minds of foreign publics is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it clearly illustrates the Chinese government's increasing interest in using non-governmental elements in its public diplomacy as well as its focus on projecting correct knowledge about China as a way of eradicating potential misunderstandings. Second, while international students are often presented as a source of increased soft power (see, for instance, Nye 2004; Atkinson 2010; McClory 2016), the focus is usually on the benefits accrued by the host, rather than the sending, government. Finally, as the number of Chinese international students around the globe rises, they are becoming an increasingly visible group and consequently the object of intense debates on the potential impact of a large body of Chinese students on academic standards, campus life, and university revenues around the globe.

International students are seen as a source of soft power not only by the Chinese government, but also by host countries. Atkinson, for instance, argues:

> Soft power advocates, US policy makers, and scholars have frequently claimed that US-hosted educational exchange programs might provide one strategy for the United States to effectively engage its ideational adversaries. (Atkinson 2010: 1)

Western academics, politicians, and university administrators often mention potential soft-power gains as a rationale for engaging in internationalising education (see for instance Nye 2004; Paradise 2012; Smirnov 2014). However, concrete studies of the soft-power effect of studying abroad, whether on students or receiving countries (or both), are scarce. Existing studies tend to be based on surveys trying to determine if a stay abroad has made the students more positively inclined towards their host country (see, for instance, Hong 2014; Yang 2015), with limited discussion of whether or not a more positive attitude actually translates into soft power. There is therefore a need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of international students as soft-power resources – whether for the sending or receiving nations.

This article will explore the linkage between international students and soft power and question the assumption that these students automatically constitute a soft-power resource for either the sending or the receiving nation. I will focus mainly on Chinese international students in the West, though Western students in China will sometimes be touched upon in the discussion in order to provide added perspectives on the interaction between Chinese and Western students. I will begin with a critical discussion of the concept of soft power, which is all too often used in contexts where perhaps a concept such as national image would be more appropriate, conflating positive attitudes towards a given country with soft power. The purpose of this critical conceptualisation of soft power is to outline two different understandings of soft power: a broad definition as simply "the power of attraction" and a narrow understanding where the focus is on soft power as a true form of power with real behavioural outcomes in the form of increased support for the government in question. This discussion will be followed by an overview of the existing research on what is often termed "educational diplomacy": the role of students, teachers, and exchange programmes in public dip-

lomacy. As I will show, these studies tend to focus solely on changes in the attitude towards the host country after the stay abroad, and do not provide a nuanced understanding of the linkage between international students and soft power.

In order to provide this nuanced understanding, I will explore three areas where there is an apparent linkage between international students and soft power: the pre-trip decision-making process based on existing imaginaries of the chosen host country; the actual study-abroad period, with a special focus on the interaction between host country and international students; and finally the long-term effects of the period abroad in terms of changes in values and worldview. Even though changed values do not necessarily lead to changes in actual behaviour, we are at least more likely to see these behavioural changes in the cases where the period spent studying abroad has led to a changed worldview and adoption of host-country values.

The discussion will be based on existing research as well as a series of focus group interviews with Chinese and Danish students in Beijing conducted in 2015 and 2016. The Chinese students were from two different universities in Beijing and preparing to go abroad in the following academic year, while the Danish students were MA students in Beijing. The Danish students were not China Studies majors and did not study Chinese language, but were from international programmes within the natural and social sciences with a mixed student body of both Chinese and Western students at a larger university in Beijing. The role of the Danish students in this discussion is primarily to provide extra perspectives on the social interaction between Chinese and Western students. Also, as the Danish students had not chosen to study in China out of a specific interest in the country, but rather for academic reasons or for personal development, they provided some interesting insights into the success or failure of the Chinese government's strategic narratives. I conducted the interviews in Danish with the Danish students and in a mixture of Chinese and English with the Chinese students – according to their preferences and language skills. I had no previous connection with any of the students, but my home university does have an exchange agreement with the two Chinese universities. Please see Table 1 for more details on the focus groups.

Table 1. List of Focus Groups

Group Name	Participants
Focus group 1 (FG 1)	Three female Danish graduate students, spending their first semester in Beijing in a Sino–Danish joint programme
Focus group 2 (FG 2)	Four female Chinese students: three undergraduates and one graduate student, planning to go to Korea, Japan, New Zealand, and Austria in the following academic year
Focus group 3 (FG 3)	Three Chinese undergraduate students planning to go to the United States in the following academic year
Focus group 4 (FG 4)	Five (one female, four male) Chinese undergraduate students planning to go abroad (Canada, Europe, Australia) in the following academic year, but their plans had yet to be finalised

Based on this discussion, I will argue that while international academic exchange does provide increased intercultural understanding, the leap from an international student liking his or her host country to actively supporting its policies is very great indeed, and that a stay abroad may sometimes have the exact opposite effect and strengthen existing worldviews. A much more nuanced understanding of the linkage between international students and potential soft-power gains for either the host or the sending nation is therefore needed.

Softness and Attraction: Conceptualising Soft Power

When Joseph Nye first defined soft power, his intention was to explore non-coercive forms of power suitable for maintaining US influence in a post-Cold War world order. Nye originally defined soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2004: x) and identified the sources of soft power as the culture, values, and foreign policies of a given nation. He later elaborated on the concept as "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (Nye 2011: 20–21) and added the concept of smart power as a combination of soft and hard power.

Despite its current popularity among policymakers and academics alike, soft power as a theoretical construct has often been criticised for being analytically vague. The criticism centres on two issues:

First, the definition of soft power as inherently different from hard power has been questioned. Janice Bially Mattern (2005) argues that as soft power depends on representational force, it is not really soft at all, but simply another form of hard power, while Takeshi Matsuda (2007) demonstrates how the US soft-power efforts in Japan following WWII were closely tied to hard power and military might, and how the Japanese selected those parts of American culture that were suitable for them. Niall Ferguson (2009), on the other hand, claims that soft power is too soft to be considered a true form of power. He provides the examples of Coke-drinking kids in the Middle East hating the United States or anglicised Indians plotting the downfall of the British Empire to illustrate the difference between adopting various parts of a given nation's cultural make-up and supporting that nation's foreign policy.

The second problematic aspect of soft power as a theoretical construct lies in the difficulty of moving from the concept of "attraction" to concrete behavioural outcomes in the form of active support for another nation. Todd Hall (2010) suggests considering soft power not as an analytical category, but as a category of practice and instead breaking the "power of attraction" down into smaller categories such as representational power, institutional power, and reputational power to capture some of the non-coercive forms of power currently relegated to the domain of soft power. Such a distinction would at once recognise the need to discuss other forms of power apart from economic and military might and sidestep both the analytical vagueness of the concept of attraction and the difficulty of making the leap from attraction to a given culture to support for the policies of the nation-state. As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) point out, surveys can demonstrate changes in attitudes towards certain nations, but it is difficult if not impossible to predict actual behaviour based on these surveys.

As the above discussion shows, there are two rather different understandings of the phenomenon normally known as soft power. There is the broader, classical understanding of soft power as "the power of attraction," which assumes a direct linkage between liking and supporting a nation. The second understanding is largely critical of the idea of soft power, and questions the simple assumption of a direct transition from liking to supporting a nation and suggests various alternatives for discussing non-coercive forms of power.

Despite the analytical vagueness discussed above, soft power remains a popular concept among both academics and policymakers. Researchers have become "mesmerized by concreteness" (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014: 71) in trying to measure accurately any given nation's soft-power standing through a detailed tallying of peacekeeping troops, international students, number of visitors to an embassy's webpage, and the like. For instance, the report *The Soft Power 30* (McClory 2016) conducts complicated calculations of 30 nations' soft-power standing and concludes that the United Kingdom has the highest degree of soft power, closely followed by the United States, while China ends up at the bottom of the rankings. One of the many factors taken into account in calculating how much soft power these nations possess is the number of international students they receive each year. In this case, international students are taken as benefitting the host nation rather than the sending nation in terms of soft power. However, as discussed above, it is by no means certain that simply receiving international students and inculcating them with a liking for greasy fast food or *gongbao jiding* is enough to generate a long-lasting soft-power effect. The following discussion will primarily be based on the premise that international students are perceived as a soft-power asset to the receiving nation. However, the arguments presented below are to a large extent also valid for the idea that international students can be used as "little ambassadors" by the sending nation, as this effect would also be dependent upon a high degree of interaction between international students and host-country nationals.

Most governments make concerted efforts to enhance their soft-power capabilities by communicating with foreign publics through public diplomacy or people-to-people diplomacy. China is no exception and has increased its efforts in recent years with the establishment of the first Confucius Institutes in 2004 (Hartig 2014) and the attempts to reach non-Chinese audiences through major international sport events, English-language TV channels, and other means (Tse 2014). The effect of these efforts is often questioned, especially the ability to reach the hearts and minds of Western audiences (Tse 2014; Manzenreiter 2010), because of both cultural differences and the Chinese style of public diplomacy, which is often directed just as much at the domestic audience as at an international audience (Blanchard and Lu 2012). While there is a growing understanding of the crucial importance of domestic audiences in public diplomacy

(d'Hooghe 2014), in the case of China there seems to be an added challenge in balancing the messages for domestic and international consumption. In addition to this, Wang Yiwei (2008) further outlines four major barriers to Chinese public diplomacy: the many actors involved in shaping Chinese foreign policy; Western hegemony in international affairs; the conditioning of Chinese diplomats towards secrecy rather than publicity; and cultural and linguistic impediments, which mean that certain Chinese concepts do not translate well (Wang 2008: 268). These barriers all point to the wisdom of trying to engage non-state actors in public diplomacy in an attempt to eliminate some of the potential misunderstandings by bypassing the government-led diplomatic efforts – hence, the increased focus on international students as soft-power resources.

Yet, the question of whether soft power is a meaningful analytical category remains. In response to the lacking explanatory power of the soft-power concept, Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin suggest studying governments' ability to project strategic narratives and to get foreign publics to support these narratives (2014), thereby mirroring at least part of Joseph Nye's later definition of soft power as agenda setting (Nye 2011). Soft-power projection through international students can consequently be understood as one of two processes: either the increased ability to garner support from international students for narratives projected by the government of their host country, or, in the case of the Chinese overseas students acting as student ambassadors, the ability of international students to get their classmates to support strategic narratives of the Chinese government, be it the "Chinese Dream" or the peaceful rise of China. Both these processes would entail frequent and intensive contact between host-country nationals and international students as well as a certain shift in values among the target group.

However, existing research on educational diplomacy tends to focus on measuring attitude changes rather than value change among former international students, thereby staying firmly within the broader understanding of soft power as simply "the power of attraction." Yet, a more positive attitude towards the host country reported in surveys completed right after a stay abroad tells us little more than that the students enjoyed their time abroad, regardless of whether we are dealing with Chinese students in the West or Western students in China. Conversely, a shift in their belief system, in their support for,

for example, democracy, human rights, and the belief in individual opportunities – the universalistic values which Joseph Nye describes as deeply seductive (Nye 2004: 34), would mean that their positive attitude towards the host country was more likely to translate into behavioural outcomes. However, as the review of existing literature on educational diplomacy below will show, there are few studies that successfully avoid a simple conflation of soft-power gains with positive attitude changes.

Educational Diplomacy: International Students as Soft-Power Tools

Internationalisation of higher education is often linked to the potential positive soft-power effect of hosting foreign students, but the concrete objectives vary in each case. While the European Erasmus programme was initiated with the goal of "reinforcing European unity through academic mobility" (Carnine 2015: 14), international students in the United States are seen as an important tool in "supporting the development of liberal values and practices in authoritarian states" (Atkinson 2010: 19).

The amount of literature dealing directly with the linkage between soft power and international students or educational institutions is relatively limited and tends to focus on descriptions of existing exchange programmes, enumerations of the number of exchange students, or surveys on the attitudes of international students after their period abroad (see, for instance, Hong 2014; Yang 2015; Paradise 2012). In the following, I will begin by discussing the European Union's educational diplomacy in relation to China, as the European Union has included this as a major part of their people-to-people diplomacy in the so-called "third pillar" of the EU–China strategic partnership. Consequently, the European Union's efforts at educational diplomacy have been relatively well documented. Natalie Hong defines educational diplomacy as

> the practice of utilizing education as a means to facilitate the achievement of the foreign policy goals of reshaping perception and cultivating goodwill, thus improving international relations. (Hong 2014: 156)

While the objective of educational diplomacy may be the creation of soft power, Hong also recognises the oft-discussed challenge that soft power is easier to generate between similar cultures (Hong 2014).

Hong's study finds that slightly more than 50 per cent of the students from both EU states and China return with a more positive impression of their host country, while around 40 per cent return with an unchanged impression and less than 10 per cent find that their attitude has become more negative as a result of their stay abroad (Hong 2014: 166). In addition, unsurprisingly, the vast majority of returnees find that their understanding of the host culture has increased. However, the survey is based on self-reported impressions after the stay abroad and does not include attempts to measure attitudes before going abroad, nor does it demonstrate how the attitude change can be translated into behavioural outcomes. The expectation is that, as Nye states, former exchange students will more or less automatically turn into a "reservoir of goodwill" (Hong 2014: 162).

The Chinese and European students in Hong's study have widely different motivations for choosing, respectively, Europe or China as a study destination. Chinese students often believe the academic quality in Europe and the United States is higher than in China. They usually rank the United States higher than Europe in terms of academic quality, but going to the United States is seen as difficult and expensive. Their top motivations for coming to Europe are the opportunity to travel in Europe and the availability of scholarships, making a European education affordable. On the other hand, Europeans going to China most often go there with a specific interest in China, learning the Chinese language, and gaining a better understanding of Chinese culture. Academic quality does not rank high on their list of motivations. This could change as the increasing number of English-language programmes in Chinese higher education and joint degrees with Western institutions leads to a rapprochement between Chinese and Western academic standards. However, the dominant picture now is that Western students going to China actively choose China because of an interest in the country, while Chinese students often choose Europe due to a general interest in going abroad and travelling and not because of a specific interest in their eventual host country (Hong 2014; Jæger and Gram 2015).

The European Union's educational diplomacy strategy is not limited to student exchange, but also includes, for instance, the Jean

Monnet Programme, which supports local scholars with an interest in European affairs. In a study of this programme, Yang Yifan (2015) found that the scholars themselves are positively affected by the programme and that more than 70 per cent of their students in China report having a more favourable attitude towards the European Union after following their classes. However, once again the surveys are based on self-reported changes in attitude after taking the class. Yang concludes that having Chinese professors teach European affairs is an efficient way of influencing public opinion, as in the view of Chinese students a Chinese professor's favourable attitude towards the European Union will have more credibility than that of a European professor.

The studies discussed above all point to a very definite expectation of positive soft-power outcomes of internationalisation of higher education and the educational diplomacy efforts of the European Union. However, both of the surveys are based on self-reported changes in attitude and do not take into account students' attitudes before they left their home country – if expectations are really low beforehand, then it is relatively easy to report an attitude change towards a more positive attitude. As one of the Danish students from the focus group interviews (FG 1) said when asked why her attitude towards China had become more positive: "My expectations before coming to China were really low. So every time something actually works out OK, I'm positively surprised." She had been prepared for many practical challenges in her academic and daily life in China, and expected to meet a number of institutional challenges while living in China.

These institutional challenges form one of the major barriers to the internationalisation of higher education. While the European Erasmus programme is a well-established and well-known exchange programme, there are many institutional stumbling blocks on the way to internationalisation of education – especially with the rapid growth in Chinese international students putting pressure on the most popular host nations and joint ventures between Chinese and Western educational institutions struggling to overcome cultural and bureaucratic challenges. Trilokekar (2010) points out that "internationalization is often confused with globalization [... and] while globalization may be unalterable, internationalization involves many choices" (Trilokekar 2010: 144) and concludes that institutional hindrances in

the form of lack of academics in policymaking circles and a shifting foreign-policy focus form major obstacles to true internationalisation of universities. This is borne out by, for instance, James Paradise's study of Chinese internationalisation efforts in higher education (2012). Paradise discusses some of the many difficulties on the road towards internationalisation, especially when it comes to the foreign campuses being built in China:

> All is not well on the implementation front. Delays are quite long. Rules and regulations may not be transparent, and a variety of players – at the many different institutional and governmental levels, often with conflicting interests, are involved. Negotiating international agreements is never easy, and the combination of China's bureaucracy and the inherent complexities of academic collaboration add up to a highly complex situation. (Altbach (2012) quoted in Paradise (2012))

These complexities mean that the effect of a study-abroad period in China is quite varied in terms of soft-power effects, although his final conclusion is that the students will return with at least a "measure of goodwill" (Paradise 2012: 203) towards China. Smirnov (2014) also discusses this linkage between practical institutional issues and potential soft-power effects in an analysis of Russia's lack of success in attracting international students. He sees a huge untapped potential for Russia in its neighbouring countries where young people today speak English rather than Russian as their second language. He puts this down to the successful efforts of the United States to attract the best and brightest from among the young generation and regrets that Russia has no similar approach. However, he also points to the practical difficulties in imitating the United States, which include but are not limited to the lack of infrastructure for the internationalisation of higher education and the fact that conditions for students in Russia are so unfavourable that international students might return home with a negative impression of the country (Smirnov 2014).

The studies discussed above demonstrate the institutional hindrances to internationalisation of higher education and the consequent barriers to soft-power generation, but do not question the soft-power effect of international exchange once a country succeeds in attracting foreign students and creating a benign framework for their stay abroad. In a rare study that goes beyond asking about attitude changes during a stay abroad, Atkinson (2010) discusses the soft-

power gain of US-hosted educational exchange programmes and concludes that these programmes do play a role in developing liberal values among the participants (Atkinson 2010). However, she also outlines the circumstances under which such soft-power gains can be expected to be realised, setting up three conditions that have to be met in order for this change in values to occur: a depth of social interaction while abroad, a shared sense of identity or community between participants and their hosts and, finally, the attainment of a position of influence upon returning home (Atkinson 2010: 2). These conditions are best met in programmes targeting certain professional groups – for example, military officers being trained at US military bases and "living democracy" while sharing a professional identity and having already obtained an influential position in their home country. However, in her study the soft-power effect of "normal" international student exchange is less clear, as the relatively isolated foreign students do not necessarily have intensive social interaction with host-country students, experience a sense of community, or gain powerful positions upon returning home.

The three conditions that Atkinson outlines (social interaction, shared sense of community, position upon return) combined with the discussion of the European Union exchange programme and the institutional hindrances paint a picture of the conditions under which international students can potentially lead to soft-power gains. First, the pre-trip imaginaries are quite important for the actual experience while abroad and consequently for the following impression of the host country. Second, the depth of actual interaction with host-country nationals plays a crucial role in determining the outcome in terms of cultural understanding and potential soft-power gains. Finally, the long-term effects will be determined by both the changes in values and worldview and the future position of the international students. These three phases in a study-abroad experience will be used as the framework for the following discussion of the linkage between soft power and Chinese international students and international students in China.

Chinese Students Abroad / International Students in China

While the discussion below mainly centres on the question of whether Chinese international students can be considered a soft-power resource by either the host or the sending nation, I have chosen to add a few perspectives from a focus group of international students in China. These perspectives mainly serve to illustrate the difficulty of cross-cultural socialising, and thereby add some important nuances to the discussion.

Leaving: Imaginaries and Decision Making

As indicated above, the motivations of Chinese students in travelling to the West and of Western students in travelling to China differ in several important aspects, not least in the pre-trip imaginaries of the potential host country. In her remarkable exploration of the overseas experiences of students from a northern Chinese city, Vanessa Fong (2011) demonstrates how "the developed world" is often held in high regard among the potential international students, who often idealise the countries they aim to visit. These students already perceive themselves as part of an educated elite and strive for developed-world citizenship, something that is more easily achievable through a study period abroad. Fong demonstrates how filial nationalism causes these students to be loyal despite the perceived relative "backwardness" of their own nation, and how most of them tend to wish to return home or to ensure in other ways that their overseas experience will benefit China, though they often express scepticism towards other Chinese students' altruistic/patriotic motives. She also finds a clear ranking of potential overseas destinations with the United States as a clear first choice, the United Kingdom a close second, and Ireland and Australia as acceptable substitutes. Highly developed Asian nations such as Korea and Japan are also acceptable, as it is easier and less expensive to go there, while Singapore is considered "too Chinese." This matches Hong's (2014) findings, insofar as the United States is the preferred destination in terms of perceived academic quality, while Europe is attractive to Chinese students mostly because of the opportunities for travelling to several countries and because of the available scholarships.

The preexisting imaginaries of the West as a highly developed and paradisiacal place often result in disappointment during the actual stay abroad, when privileged college students from China sometimes find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, working as dishwashers or in other menial, labour-intensive jobs that they would never have engaged in back in China. This is perhaps especially true for students who begin by taking language courses in the hopes of improving their English skills to enable them to enter a proper university programme and whose overseas experience is therefore often protracted and insecure (Fong 2011).

In a study of migration decisions among Chinese college students, Gong and Huybers (2015) find that, like any other migration decision, the decision to study abroad is based on both push and pull factors. Push factors for choosing to study abroad include lack of opportunities at home, immigration prospects, and the perceived low quality of domestic education. The pull factors include, for instance, academic reputation, safety, costs, and proximity. Their study shows three predominant factors in Chinese students' choice of a study destination: Safety is the most important factor – students are unlikely to go to a country perceived as unsafe. Educational quality, understood as a combination of overall country reputation and individual university rankings, is an important factor in the decision-making process. Finally, on a more practical note, the expected expenditure for the journey itself, for living expenses, and for tuition is of course an important determinant in the feasibility of the migration decision. While these three factors together create a rational framework for making the migration transition, Fong finds that the actual decision to go abroad is not always based on transparent and logical reasoning:

> At the individual level, migration decisions were based not on a rational analysis, but rather on subjective responses to a series of events that seemed unpredictable to those who experienced them. (Fong 2011: 94)

The decision to study abroad and the choice of a destination country are consequently based on a series of complicated factors that include very concrete issues like costs and educational quality as well as less generalisable elements determined by the concrete background of the potential overseas students and the students' own preconceived notions of potential host countries.

My focus group interviews demonstrate just how varied this preconception can be – and how this impression is often based on communication with friends and family with previous experience of the chosen country as well as on current media stories. For instance, two male students (FG 4) had recently started to focus on Canada rather than the United States or Europe as a potential destination for a very specific reason: the negative discourse on migration in both the United States and Europe. "I don't want to go where I'm not welcome." They knew, of course, that the migration crisis and the consequent scepticism towards migrants in Europe was not directed specifically towards Chinese students, but felt that this was still a very good reason to select a country that was more immigration-friendly. One of the female undergraduate students expressed exactly the same fear when asked about what she saw as the major challenge of her coming stay in Austria: "I'm afraid that the anti-foreign sentiments will influence daily interactions [with local Austrians]." While the other three female students in the focus group all had friends and acquaintances in the countries they were going to, she was alone in relying on publicly available information and university websites to gain knowledge about her chosen destination. In both of these cases, we see strategic narratives projected by the Canadian and Austrian governments as being, respectively, immigration-friendly and immigration-hostile being internalised by the Chinese students and influencing their choice of destination.

Another theme that came up frequently in the focus group discussions especially in relation to the United States and Western Europe was freedom – arguably another strategic narrative projected at least by the United States. In a discussion of the relative merits of living in the United States and China, one student politely praised the academic and personal freedom to be gained by studying in the United States, but was instantly challenged by one of the younger students who believed that "every place has its positive and negative sides," arguing that "you cannot say that one country is better than another." However, most of the students in the Chinese focus groups mentioned personal freedom as well as freedom from social and academic pressure as major reasons for wanting to study abroad. This sometimes came at the cost of added pressure after returning from the semester abroad, but was still considered worthwhile (FG 2).

On one point, they agreed: the higher quality of the educational system in the United States. Even though the United States is perceived as a problematic destination in terms of personal safety (FG 2 and FG 3), the students who had succeeded in getting a scholarship to the United States were congratulated by the other students in the group who were going to less prestigious destinations such as Korea and Japan. When asked where they would go if they had complete freedom of choice, the students in FG 2 who were going to countries other than the United States all replied that they would have chosen the United States, had they had the option. However, gaining admission to a good university in the United States was perceived as exceedingly difficult and the tuition fees seen as forbiddingly high. In addition, the positive experience of acquaintances in, for instance, Japan and Korea, and even language difficulties shifted the final decision in another direction. Again, it can be argued that the strategic narrative constituted by international university rankings and the value of a liberal education had been completely internalised by these students.

The above discussion of the motivations and pre-trip imaginaries of potential international students illuminates one aspect of the linkage between soft power and international students: the role of soft power in shaping the decision to study abroad. Soft power in its broader definition as "the power of attraction" is certainly relevant in the germination of the desire to study in a given country and in the creation of the clear preferences for some destinations over others. However, as the focus group interviews demonstrated, the picture is actually much more complicated than a simple ranking in terms of the relative attractiveness of certain destinations would reveal. The students were generally quite well-informed about potential host countries, and while certain strategic narratives – for instance, the value of a liberal education and personal freedom – were broadly accepted, this did not lead to an uncritical support for the United States. On the contrary, many elements of life in the United States, such as lack of personal safety and hostility to foreigners, were drawbacks that had to be weighed against the benefit of a high-quality educational system. Furthermore, if we consider the question of actual behavioural outcomes, though most of the students had at some point dreamed of going to the United States and accepted the idea of American academic superiority wholeheartedly, only a minority had

ended up applying to colleges in the United States, while most of them had applied elsewhere for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the attitude towards a given country certainly played a role in shaping the initial selection of potential destinations, but when it came to the actual process of applying for a period abroad many other factors came into play, not least personal communications from friends, relatives, and acquaintances who had already studied abroad. The concrete overseas experience of these informants consequently played a large role in determining where their friends back home would go.

Living Abroad: The International Experience

As outlined in the preceding section, the intensity of social interaction as well as a shared sense of community are crucial for potential soft-power gains. In the following, I will discuss the actual interaction between Chinese and foreign students inside and outside the classroom and demonstrate how preexisting cultural imaginaries sometimes create a boundary that hinders the development of a shared sense of community.

The remarkable rise in the number of Chinese students going abroad to study has also meant that their backgrounds are becoming increasingly diverse. Studying overseas is no longer only possible for the economic and academic elite but is within reach of lower-middle-class students whose families invest heavily in their children's overseas experience. This diversity means that Chinese overseas students have different expectations of their time abroad and that their preconditions for engaging in student life abroad vary. Yet, Chinese overseas students are often perceived as a homogeneous group that creates a series of very specific problems for their host institutions by not participating actively in class activities, maintaining social segregation, and taking a rather instrumentalist approach to their studies (Ross and Chen 2015).

The Chinese students abroad have to negotiate their own internal group identification and the external categorisation of themselves as belonging to the category of "Chinese international student." The local conception of the Chinese student plays a large role in determining their actual experience overseas and varies between nations. In a study of Chinese students in Japan, Jamie Coates (2015) demonstrates how the negative impression in Japan of young Chinese men, in par-

ticular, contributes to the feeling of social isolation among Chinese students and leads to the desire not to be recognised as Chinese, but to pass as locals, which is of course only possible in non-verbal situations. In the United States, the popular representation and external perception of Chinese students centres on their passiveness and lack of integration with students from other nations. In a study of a large Midwestern university, Chen and Ross (2015) show how the very large Chinese student body has created a parallel version of many of the typical features of American college life in the form of Chinese sports clubs and extracurricular activities. In this way, they create a safe space for themselves to practise college life and become active participants, even though they still do not feel comfortable joining, for instance, a "mixed" basketball team.

These cultural imaginaries also create many potential pitfalls in classroom interaction where lack of familiarity with cultural codes often blocks mutual understanding between Chinese students and Western teachers. Wang Yu (2014) explores Chinese students' encounters with British humour and finds that the misunderstandings created by the self-deprecating jokes from a lecturer actually lead to a heightened tension between the Chinese students and the university. The basis for this misunderstanding is the different perception of the roles of students and teachers – which in this case led the Chinese students to believe that the teacher found them lazy, while his intention was to imply that his classes were boring. This clash of understanding of the roles of students and teachers can be witnessed in US classrooms as well, where Chinese students' polite silence is perceived as a lack of engagement in the classroom and not as a sign of respect for the professor and their classmates (Ross and Chen 2015).

Both in the classroom and in social interactions, language skills play an important role in determining the extent of social integration. According to both the Chinese and the Danish students in the focus groups, true relaxation mainly happens among co-nationals. The Chinese students in FG 2 discussed the different interpretation of the term "friendship" when asked whether they had ever had a non-Chinese friend. Most of them had met foreigners in various social settings at their university, but had found it difficult to navigate the cultural codes surrounding social interactions.

> I met this girl from Italy who was studying at our university. She wanted us to go out for coffee, though we had only just met, and I

> didn't like that. But later I thought that maybe it was just her habits, her culture which made her ask. (FG 2)

Furthermore, the Chinese students said that they found foreigners' definition of friendship quite different.

> We [referring to Chinese students in general] see friendship as something that can be based on helping each other in class; the foreigners always wanted to do stuff together right away.

This matches Ross and Chen's findings from the United States, where Chinese students find the Americans very open and engaging at the beginning of an acquaintance, but lack the progression from slightly guarded acquaintance to a true and long-lasting friendship that they would expect from a purely Chinese friendship (Ross and Chen 2015).

This difficulty in forming close-knit relationships between Chinese and Western students was often felt by Western students in China as well. The Danish students in the focus group interviews in Beijing had been in China for three months at the time of the interviews. In the first couple of months, they had been strongly urged by the university staff to find activities that they and their Chinese classmates all enjoyed. Nevertheless, after a few months of trying out karaoke bars and arranging parties with no alcohol, they had more or less given up (FG 1). This was partly interpreted as a problem related to differences in social preferences, partly as a question of the Chinese students' extremely limited spare time. Even though the students were part of the same graduate programme, the Danish students had much more spare time, as the Chinese students were expected to do work assigned by their supervisor outside the regular curriculum.

The above examples all point to the challenges inherent in social interaction between Chinese and Western classmates both inside and outside the classroom, and to the consequent hindrances to the development of a shared sense of community as simply students, not always "Chinese" and "Western" students. Language skills play a major role in this as do different cultural expectations of what constitutes friendships and the roles of teachers and students. The students in the focus groups were very quick to relegate differences in social preferences to the realm of cultural difference, as in the case of the hasty Italian suggestion of a cup of coffee. Both the Chinese and Western students had clear ideas of the difficulties of bridging these

differences – having also been repeatedly urged to overcome them by teachers and university staff. In this case, we see certain narratives being perpetuated by both Chinese and Western students, as well as their teachers. Both my focus group interviews and other sources (e.g. Ross and Chen 2015) thereby demonstrate that one of the major preconditions for considering international students as a potential soft-power resource – namely, frequent social interaction – is quite difficult to meet in the case of Chinese international students in a Western context. In the following section, I will discuss the potential for challenging some of these preconceived notions and bringing about changes in values and worldview.

Returning – Changed Attitudes and Values?

"When I left China, I considered myself a liberal. After living here, I have become much more conservative" (Chinese international student at Aalborg University). I began this paper by arguing that in order for international students to be a true soft-power resource, we would need to see a shift in values during their time abroad and not just a more positive impression of the host country. The central theme of the focus group interviews with the Chinese students discussed earlier was their pre-trip imaginaries, and it has not been part of the research design to track the informants while abroad or to conduct follow-up interviews with them after their return to China in order to explore the potential changes in their worldview. However, existing studies tackle the question of the effect of a period abroad on the values and worldview of Chinese international students. While some studies suggest that changing college students' values is difficult (Hollway 2005) and takes a concerted effort, a number of studies from the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate how values among Chinese international students actually did change during their time abroad (see Guan and Dodder 2001 for further discussion of this). However, this shift in values does not represent a unidirectional acceptance of host-country values; rather, it is a bidirectional process. Some values shift towards host-country values, while other previously held values and beliefs become more important during the stay abroad, as the normally invisible cultural rules – the so-called "hidden controls" (Hall 1976) of human behaviour patterns – become exposed through immersion in an unfamiliar environment. This exposure challenges deeply held beliefs and cultural codes and can lead to these beliefs

becoming further entrenched through a conscious defence of familiar values in unfamiliar environments. As Hansen and Thøgersen point out, the unfamiliar is interpreted through the familiar, but the familiar can also be reinterpreted through the unfamiliar. This questioning of the familiar can also be sharpened in political discussions, where Chinese students are held accountable for CCP policies and where the negotiation of intercultural identities is consequently not necessarily a harmonious process (Hansen and Thøgersen 2015).

Gu (2015) has demonstrated how Chinese international students actually become both more firmly committed to their own culture and more understanding towards the host culture during their time abroad. However, as the quote from the Chinese international student at Aalborg University at the beginning of this section illustrates, sometimes the interaction actually leads to defensiveness and entrenchment rather than a greater intercultural understanding. In a study of Chinese international students in Hawaii, Henry Chiu Hail shows how the perceived harsh and unfair criticism of China from American classmates led Chinese students to retract into a defensive patriotic positioning, where they felt the need to defend China against misrepresentation (Hail 2015). This brings us full circle to the quote at the beginning of this article from the Chinese Ministry of Education, speaking of harnessing overseas students as people-to-people ambassadors. The students from Hail's study seem to cast themselves in this role rather reluctantly out of a sense of duty to not let obviously "wrong" statements pass unchallenged. However, his study also demonstrates how classroom environments can actually be conducive to creating a more positive setting for discussion by openly addressing the challenges of intercultural understanding. Without this help in setting the scene, the discussion of China's problems can be quite unpleasant to the Chinese students.

When the Chinese students planning to go abroad were asked during focus group interviews whether they thought of themselves as representatives of China when abroad, initially none of them had considered this issue. Their answers typically centred on how their personal behaviour would reflect upon China, but their attitudes were mixed. After discussing the behaviour of foreigners in China and then turning to her own plans to go abroad, one student said:

> Of course I will do my best to behave well when abroad, but I am only one individual and my behaviour reflects mainly on me personally and not on China. (FG 3)

However, after a few minutes of reflection in one of the other focus groups, the students remembered teachers and supervisors urging them to behave well when abroad, telling them, "After you have left the country, whenever you do anything, you have to think of the consequences; remember you are Chinese" (FG 2). I asked them if they had ever considered foreigners' behaviour in China as a reflection on their home countries. Initially they said that no, this was not the case, but after a few minutes of discussion they all agreed that if they did not know much about the country in question, it would of course influence their attitude towards that nation. One student who had visited Korea said that she had met many Korean students in Beijing who were quite lazy, but had discovered that Korean students in Korea worked at least as hard as Chinese students.

This relatively nuanced discussion of the role of foreign students as representatives of their home countries contrasted with the Danish students, who had already spent a couple of months in China and felt quite strongly that they represented "the West." They were acutely aware of the cases where their male Danish classmates had misbehaved towards Chinese female classmates. Additionally, they had themselves become aware of how their own behaviour in, for instance, a crowded subway car could be perceived as reflecting not only upon their home countries but upon the entire Western world (FG 1). This difference between students planning to go abroad and students already in the middle of their international experience may be seen as reflecting the exposure of "the hidden controls" mentioned above (Hall 1976), as the Chinese students had yet to experience the contrast between their home and host cultures first-hand. The Danish students were highly aware of the situations where behaving "Danishly" laid them open to criticism and censure, since they had experienced this personally. While the Chinese students, who were still living in Beijing, were quite aware of the dangers of assuming that one foreigner represented his or her home country on an intellectual level, they sometimes fell into this way of thinking anyway on a subconscious and emotional level.

While changes in values and an adjusted worldview do not in themselves guarantee behavioural outcomes in terms of active sup-

port for the host nation, they do at least signify more profound effects of the stay abroad than simply a lingering fondness for the host country. However, just as the pre-trip imaginaries and the actual overseas experience vary significantly, so does the outcome in terms of changes in values and worldview. The outcome depends on the attitude of host-country students and teachers, as well as on the students' own perception of themselves as informal ambassadors of their country.

Conclusion

Chinese international students have become a major presence in tertiary education around the globe. Consequently, interest in these students has grown. Universities have an economic interest in the revenue generated by accepting them and in trying to create a framework for successfully integrating Chinese students into the general student body. Researchers have dealt with almost every aspect of these students' international experience, from the initial decision-making process to the final life-changing outcomes of their time abroad. Moreover, policymakers from host countries and from China view them as a potential source of soft power. In this article, I have questioned the simple assumption that international students automatically generate increased soft power for either the sending or the host nation. Most Western literature deals with international students as a source of soft power for the host government, but Chinese overseas students are apparently claimed as soft-power resources by both the Chinese government and the host communities.

Answering the question of when international students can be seen as a source of soft power is complicated by the analytical vagueness of the concept of soft power. If we use the broad definition of soft power as merely "the power of attraction" and the simple measurement of soft power as improved attitude towards a given nation, then the straightforward answer is yes, international students do constitute a soft-power tool. Surveys show increased positive attitudes towards the host country following a stay abroad. In addition, we do see evidence that both Chinese students in the West and Western students in China think of themselves as representing their home countries, therefore more or less willingly fulfilling the proposed role as student ambassadors.

However, if we use a narrower definition of soft power as a true form of power, with a definite behavioural outcome, then the picture becomes much more complicated. Existing studies do find that under certain conditions educational exchange programmes can be conducive to soft-power generation. However, as the discussion of Chinese international students demonstrates, some of these conditions are difficult to meet in the case of Sino-Western educational collaboration. Cultural and political differences, preconceived notions of the "other," and structural barriers in the educational system all mean that the long-term outcome in terms of value change and acculturation from a semester or two at a foreign university is quite limited, especially when dealing with Chinese students in a Western setting – or, for that matter, Western students in China.

A recent incident in the spring of 2017 at an American college illustrates the complexity involved in assuming that international students automatically constitute a source of soft power. The college had invited the Dalai Lama to speak at the university's commencement ceremony, but Chinese students protested strongly against this, arguing that the visit would go against diversity and political correctness, as he, in their view, represents an oppressive regime (Horwitz 2017). In this case, the Chinese students had selectively adopted the language and forms of protest associated with liberal values in order to further a Chinese political agenda. The students in the focus groups likewise showed that while they had internalised certain narratives about their future host countries, they possessed nuanced and well-informed opinions that transcended the simplified process of first liking and then supporting these nations. This process is not a straight journey from point A to point B, but involves many twists and turns along the way – and gets longer and more complicated when the difference between the host nation's and sending nation's culture and values is large. There is no doubt that a stay abroad is an important and transformative experience and that most students will gain some measure of intercultural understanding, but in the case of Chinese international students this cannot automatically be translated into soft-power gains. International students can be expected to provide "a measure of goodwill" and increased intercultural understanding. Whether they will actually "want what we want" remains, however, an open question.

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