

EU student mobility in Chinese higher education: people-to-people discourse of the “other”

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不闻不若闻之，闻之不若见之，
见之不若知之，知之不若行之；
学至于行之而止矣

*"When you hear something, you will forget it.
When you see something, you will remember it.
But not until you do something, will you understand it."
- old Chinese proverb -*

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Presented at the second conference on Europe-China Relations in Global Politics in Beijing, this paper is to provide in-depth insights into people-to-people exchanges of European university students spending a semester at a university in China. Studying abroad is widely promoted in higher education as a means of developing intercultural understanding among students and host countries. For centuries, China has been stigmatized in the West as the other pole of human existence (Robinson, 2009:57). Breaking through the physical barrier of distance, Western students in China have a chance to put aside inertia rooted in Western historical beliefs and construct their own image of China.

Chinese higher education today is attracting international students to its universities at an unprecedented rate. This article sets out to explore what specific factors for EU students contribute to shaping a positive perception of China after having spent one semester at Xiamen University (Fujian province). Data for this paper has been collected from primary sources through participatory observation and qualitative interviews. Amongst many, three major factors contributing to a positive perception of China were repeatedly mentioned by Xiada students, being (i)safety, (ii)freedom and (iii)a sense of home. Contrary to their own expectations, a lot of European students feel more safe in Xiamen than in their home country. They feel very free on a day-to-day basis and quite a few students feels that Xiamen has become a new “home”.

1 Introduction

Studying abroad for European students is widely promoted as a means of developing a desirable intercultural understanding among students. It is widely accepted that the majority of students studying abroad gain interpersonal skills from the need to communicate with people from countries with different backgrounds, cultures, and languages (Woolf, 2006: 39). Intercultural exchanges can lead to mutual understanding and building a cultural “bridge” between China and Europe that can create awareness and understanding in order to learn from each other. Creating cultural bonds between nations states and societies has the potential for a greater impact than economic exchanges. More regular exchanges between civil society, students, scholars, writers, travelers, filmmakers, artists, journalists and business leaders are certainly crucial in understanding a rapidly changing China in a globalized world.

A 2011 report from the European Commission (EC DGEAC, 2011: 18) on student mobility roughly indicates that for every 5 Chinese students that study in Europe, one EU student goes to China. This rate is being leveled out fast as the number of EU students in China has nearly doubled in the past five years,

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increasing from 11,700 to 22,600 from 2005 to 2009, and is expected to further increase even faster. Western international students are increasingly spending time abroad in Chinese universities and experiencing China through their own eyes. This paper sets out to explore how Western students perceive China after having spent one semester at Xiamen University, located in a Special Economic Zone in coastal Fujian province just across from Taiwan.

First, the central theory of this paper is introduced. The “Theory of the Other” is used to clarify why Western perceptions of China have been so polarized through past centuries to the present day. Second, a clear picture will be drawn of the history of internationalization of higher education. Third, this paper moves on to investigating its central research question: does a semester in China fully allow foreign students to immerse themselves in an independent way that allows for discovery of positive elements when shaping an image of China? When breaking through initial cultural stereotypes and misperceptions, three factors for contributing to a positive perception of China were repeatedly mentioned by Xiada students, being their (i) safety, (ii) freedom and (iii) sense of home.

Data for this paper has been collected from primary sources through participatory observation and qualitative interviews. The research documents the study abroad experience from a participants’ perspective. Through participatory observation, qualitative interviews were conducted. Student interviewees were chosen to vary in terms of country of origin, major, age and gender. All interviewees had spent maximum 2 months in China before the start of the semester and thus were still ‘green’ in China with very limited Mandarin skills. Their perception of safety, freedom and sense of home came out to be crucial and have been chosen as independent variables for this paper. From the 10th of September to the 4th of January, classes with interviewees were shared in order to create a bond as a fellow student in China. A first quantitative form was filled out by the students. The goal was to break the ice and to gather basic data on the students such as age, gender, major and duration of the stay in China. Based on this information, more classes were attended on a weekly basis in order to maintain and improve the participant role while remaining a scientific observer. From experience, acceptance as a fellow student resulted in a massive increase in the quality of data. In a final stage, from December 18th to January 4th, data collection took place in the form of the qualitative interviews that serve as raw data for this paper.

Overall, adapting to China seems to be challenging and long process (Zhu, 2007: 6). To categorize students’ initial destination images per country of origin and determine the influence of local Western media would only result in

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questionable results with limited scientific value. This paper does not intend to cover the wide range of factors that impact students' changing image of China. It is argued that shaping an image of a host country is a very personal and interdependent process. A lot of factors influence the process in which students change their image of China, but whether it actually leads to demystification of that image at all stages or not is irrelevant in this research. This paper does not aim to investigate the accurateness of the Chinese image of Western students; it focuses on the change of it. Therefore, rather than providing a complete understanding of this change in perception, this paper investigates three relevant factors that strike the most and that can be powerful weapons for China to shrug off old preconceptions.

In demythologizing China as the myth of the Other, the myth disappears but not the beauty (Longxi, 1988:131). Having witnessed developments themselves and without a doubt cross-fertilized ideas, perhaps some students will build on their experiences to proudly share their perceptions of the variety of our worlds that colors the totality of what we may call the heritage of human culture.

2 Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization of Chinese higher education is not a new phenomenon. Zhao (Zhao, 2011: 2) states that the amount of college students choosing to study abroad started to increase mainly in the 1990s and particularly in the 2000s but goes back further than that. For decades, many students have migrated to other countries to obtain higher education and today they continue to do so in increasing numbers (Kritz, 2006: 4).

Zhao (Zhao, 2011: 6) distinguishes three different waves of international mobility in higher education. From the 1930s, the US led the first wave recruiting students and faculty from Europe and other parts of the world and would remain dominant in attracting international students ever since. A second wave took place when West European countries were making substantial efforts after World War II to foster mutual understanding among European students in order to harmonize European academic, political and cultural ties. A third wave took place in the 1990s when universities realized they were able to charge higher tuition fees taking full advantage of their global reputation. And the more international a university is (in terms of students, faculty, curriculum, research, agreements and network memberships), the better its reputation would be.

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Future pathways of international mobility among students are changing. OECD countries are still attracting the greatest amount of international students. Over the last 8 years their global share has been stable at about 80% of international students globally (Zhao, 2011: 2). However, the US and the UK have recently seen their lion's share decrease to the benefit of new countries attracting more foreign students such as Canada and Australia. But China is also becoming a popular new destination. The emergence of China attracting more international students is an unprecedented development, as it is neither native English speaking nor Western, and still a developing country.

3 Theory of the other

Western perceptions of China are said to occur in a cyclical pattern (Robinson, 2009:59). As positive and negative representations of China have been dancing around the clock for centuries, one constant factor remains. In the West, from the 13th to the 18th century China has been continuously perceived as what Robinson calls "the other pole of human existence"(Robinson, 2009:59). At best, China has been depicted in the West as a fantastic dreamland of perfected morality and happy living. At worst, China was seen as a backward ponytailed non-civilization of chaos. But whether the West associates China with a pony-tail or a fairy-tale, a more crucial question comes to mind. What is the main reason for this Western emphasis on cultural differences rather than cultural similarities?

The recurring alarmist image in the West of China as an alien and unfamiliar space can mainly be attributed to the Western philosophical desire to classify all phenomena in logical categories and recognizable self-contained systems (Zhang, 1988: 110). The Western need to differentiate the self from what is alien has left China with a stigmatized fictional label of the ultimate "Other". By doing so, the Western intellectual failure to recognize the universal similarities has moved perception of China further from reality. China somehow became the ultimate projection screen of all (positive and negative) major achievements and shortcomings in Western societies. Defining our own Western identities through differentiation, the use of the image of China has become mainly concerned with learning about the Western "Self". In this process of Western self-understanding, China has primordially been stereotyped as a fictional image of the ultimate "Other" as an alien civilization (Zhang, 1988: 114). Indeed, the contours of the exact image of the "Self" can appear more clearly through the mirror contrasting against what we call the

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“Other”. However, examining this inadequate image of the “Other” can teach us a great deal about our own Western ignorance and arrogance. As misconceptions of civilizations live long and die hard (Dawson, 1964: 13), it is perhaps time to investigate these misconceptions of China that are still present today.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, China’s remarkable success in economic development has without a doubt increased the Chinese global presence. In the West, China is increasingly perceived as a rising superpower. Today, cohorts of foreign exchange students are embarking to the new promised land of China. Discovering China one day at the time, it will be increasingly hard for them to take myth for reality. Without a doubt, initially students will be unable to deny the alien nature of such a distant culture. But soon enough, as students get their bearings and subconsciously mind map their new environment, they will piece together their own image based on real rather than imaginary differences. If the West needs to differentiate itself from what is alien in order to define its own identity, then China will be perceived as the Other by the West.

China, the chaotic contrast just next door, people will only understand when they see it. Each person will see it in a different way. (Spanish, Mandarin)

Sometimes in the morning I’m on my bicycle and I feel things are messed up. ...China is so different from everything I know. (Belgian, Mandarin)

I do think that people have a totally wrong picture of China, just due to the fact that Facebook and internet sometimes is blocked. But in fact I can understand the context and see why they do it. ...People start to assume that things are wrong and then find confirmation of that. I don’t think it will be easy to explain this at home as I have seen things for myself. (Belgian, Business)

Although spending one semester in another country might not be sufficient for a flawless intercultural understanding of the host country, the short-term mobility for some students can be an interesting lens for shifts in perception before and after having spent a semester in China.

China’s growing prominence in the global economic sphere has sparked scholars to revisit the theorization of the “Other”. If China is becoming a global rival superpower, then it is easier for the West to perceive China as the “Other”. The idea of China as a rival superpower increasingly challenging the West can be considered a perfect feeding ground for readjusting China’s fictional image.

From a Western point of view, it makes sense to keep a close eye on China growing its already prominent role in the global arena. Considering China as a potential threat to Western development also seems viable. According to Leonard (Leonard, 2008:23), China has become so integrated into the global economy that its prospects have immediate effects on Western everyday lives: simultaneously doubling the cost of the London Olympics while halving the

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cost of our computers.China might be keeping the US economy afloat, but at the same time it is sinking the Italian footwear industry. Does that allow for the West to maintain its image of China as a dictatorship and a nationalist empire that threatens global peace? In the end, if China is becoming a global rival superpower, then it is strategically convenient and politically desirable for the West to perceive China as the Other.

Today, there is more reason for the West to be afraid of China. From a political economy perspective, it would only be logical to see an increase in perception of China as a potential threat. But to go as far as perceiving China only as a threat (and not an opportunity) and to stigmatize China as the ultimate other pole of human existence seems a bit harsh. Obviously, a threat (especially one that would imply a profound change in Western lives) always has an intimidating effect, and it is only human to take a step back from a potentially dangerous situation in order to further analyze it. But the outcome of the analysis of the global rise of China needs to be correct. It is argued herethat that is not always the case when the West looks upon China. Western identities continue to be built through differentiation and the use of the image of China is mainly concerned with learning about the Western “Self”. If China uses globalization as an opportunity to increase its global presence by presenting itself as an alternative to Western culture, then it is easier for the West to perceive China as the Other.

4 Western students’ perception of safety in China

Jumping continent is considered a true challenge for most people, especially those planning to spend a few months in a new country that can be stereotyped by its rapid change and the stigma of foreign communist regime. When preparing yourself for a life on the other side, it seems only natural to evaluate your daily safety. Naturally, many travelers are concerned about safety when traveling abroad. Although a recent Australian study indicated that the risk of dying abroad was probably similar to that at home (Legatt, 2001: 46), individual responsibility remains a key factor in guaranteeing one’s future safety abroad. Coming out to China with the purpose to spend time in Chinese higher education can be considered one of the safer options, but having settled in and spending a semester in China, how do students perceive their safety in China?

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As studying abroad has evolved into an integral part of many students' experiences (Scharman, 2002:69), safety aspects have moved beyond the immediate academic programs. Although research (Evans, 1991: 266) suggests that institutions must take precautions to ensure student safety abroad in areas such as transportation and supervision, students should also take their own precautions in areas such as self-awareness, contingency plans, contractual relationships, and extracurricular activities.

In this chapter the complexities of creating safe environments for students at Xiamen University in this chapter will not be focused on by looking into all procedures and processes for both students and administrators to consider. Nor will further details be overrun on precautions that could have been taken home in order to maximize health safety such as health and travel insurance, and finding medical assistance abroad (Legatt, 2001:46). Instead, this article will investigate foreign students' perception of personal safety when studying at Xiamen University.

As it turns out, most students felt very safe in China. But what is more remarkable is that most interviewees found that during their stay in China they felt somehow safer than in their home country or hometown.

I never felt unsafe, you can perfectly walk on the street at night and feel perfectly safe...something you cannot do in Belgium (Belgium, business)

- Here in Xiamen you don't have troubles... I don't think about problems here. In Germany it could be that you are alone and if they (other people) are drunk you would be in trouble. My city is also safe, but China is safer. (Germany, business)

In my hometown (in Germany) there are 30,000 people. When you pass by the train station at night you need to watch out or they will beat you up. Here this will never happen. [Germany, business]

Maybe it's because I'm from a dodgy place in England but I would definitely say I feel more safe here than back home. Why? (In the UK), there's a lot more stabbings you hear about, a lot of people being attacked and mugged and you don't hear about that here, I don't know if that's maybe so because I tend not to read the news here that often but at least you don't see it around.... you don't have that problem here, And I have never really seen (anything) where other people put us in a bad situation. Back home just walking around at night you have to be careful. Obviously you walk around very naively here but you don't need to take all these precautions. (UK - Mandarin)

I never felt unsafe, and you need to consider that I've never done anything extreme. Well I live in London, In London (emphasized) sometimes I thought I was not safe (laughs), in China I stayed in a lot of different cities but never felt unsafe no (Italy-Mandarin)

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Another interesting fact is that female students in particular feel very safe. Lots of times, female interviewees when being asked about safety mention the specific scenario how they feel safe walking down the streets at night time.

I felt safe here, even more safe than back home. (Belgium – Hannelore)

I never felt more safe in any place than in China. Not even one second have I felt threatened, not even as a girl. (In Belgium) walking alone back home 20 minutes (at night) you'd be looking around just to make sure (everything is fine) but here it's nothing like that. As for theft, I never had the feeling somebody was trying to pick pocket, nobody(I knew) saw that (happening) or told me (about it). Worst case the taxi drivers will take a detour but I'm unable anyway to tell them how to drive (laughs). (Belgium)

I feel safe in China. I met somebody who told me that Xiamen is one of the most foreign-friendly cities in China, people don't hate foreigners here. (- The Netherlands, International Relations)

...You can perfectly walk around here, nobody will ever annoy you, I don't know why. I live in Brussels (in Belgium) and I must admit I am somebody that never feels unsafe (in Brussels), whatever happens must happen, if I have to hand over my stuff than I just would do that and see what happens. Here I think things are just less risky in some way. In Brussels, I always scout out the area a bit, and I know where to go and where not. But here you can perfectly walk around anywhere in middle of the night and nothing can happen to you. (Evy, Belgium)

Because it is home you are more used to it so you are safe. There are a lot of countries where I would feel less safe than here. Here at night you can go out, you don't have to be safe, even as a girl. You can probably do the same in Germany but I would not take that risk. (Germany, business)

Some interviewees specifically mention a feeling of safety springing from the possibility to walk on broad well-illuminated boulevards in China

I come from a small village in Holland, and if you go home at night, the lighting in the small streets is really bad and I really don't dare to go home by myself, it's just scary. Here there are always people on the street. In Holland there is always police on the street and that makes me even feel more unsafe, yeah I think I feel more safe here.(in China) (The Netherlands)

Oh yeah it is safe. On a grand total of 3times that I have been afraid or worried, 2 times out of that I turned the corner I saw an old lady dancing (on the street) which completely threw that fear out of the window. I do feel safer here (than back home). (UK, business student)

Another interesting fact is that interviewees seem to make a difference between safety in China for Chinese people and safety in China as a foreigner, which some perceive as a very particular scenario:

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Actually no I haven't felt unsafe; I've never really heard any bad stories (here in China). The first week in my class a girl told me Chinese girl people in Xiamen are very honest and not dangerous, don't really steal. I would say it's a bit funny almost that in China I feel more safe than back home, maybe... I don't really know what could really happen ...in Germany I know I cannot do this or that but here maybe I am (being) a bit more naïve in that sense: "ah yeah, I'm a foreigner (and thus), nothing can happen", but until now I have not been in a situation where I could sense any danger. (Germany, Law student)

I was surprised that I never felt like... oh it's gonna be tricky. Usually when you go to a foreign country you prepare as this or that could happen, but here you don't need to care, it feels like you have an anchor, really nice! (Germany, Mandarin)

I found the people have this nice attitude towards foreigners, most of them (people in Xiamen) make you feel safe and warmly welcomed by the people, this is something I did not know before coming out here ... this relation between Chinese people and the foreigners. (Italy, Mandarin student)

5 Western students' perception of freedom in China

Studying abroad can be considered an intensive adventure for students. Being free of over-attachment to dominant ways of thinking, students are naturally encouraged to engage in critical thinking and to generate creative, new ideas. What does freedom mean to them in China? (Savicki, 2013 :68). For students going beyond one's home cultural framework, this chapter will investigate the social relationship between a foreign student in Xiamen University and the student's positive intercultural understandings of their freedom in China within the context of his daily life in a study-abroad opportunity. The cheap cost of living, the well-organized public transport and the abundance of job opportunities for foreigners all seem to contribute to a daily feeling of freedom.

On a day-to-day basis I feel completely free (Italy, Mandarin).

Coming to China you feel super free, you can perfectly walk around here, nobody will ever annoy you. (Belgium, Business student)

When I see all the guys do sport and dance in the park, that is good. (Germany, Business student)

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...Here I realized the power of the masses and how rumors can be misleading. ...you need to find a right balance. In Xiada, I was frustrated sometimes because sometimes I could not attend some events because I was a foreigner. ...But now I understand, this is the rule. I feel completely free and do what I want but not completely free because I'm (living) in a (foreign) bubble. (Belgium, Mandarin)

I can do all things I can do in Germany. I don't feel more free here than in Germany but it (the feeling) is different, life is cheap here, you can take taxis, yeah I feel the same here. Here I feel more satisfied than in Germany, I don't know. I got to know so many good guys, this pushed me really (Stefan, Germany)

I was getting bored of the foreign students in my class. I get frustrated just living in an international bubble, what's the point of coming to China? (Belgium, Business Student)

I would say I feel quiet free here, generally I don't do things where I need to be careful but I don't feel any restriction until now, and I can do whatever I want.... The opening hours of the shop make me feel free, the little convenient shops are quite good, if you need something now(at any time of the day), you just go and get it, public transportation is cheap, you don't need to worry if something is far, traffic, cabs ...public transportation and going out. Shopping however is expensive, like H&M and Zara is more expensive and Chinese shops are hard to shop in, they have a different style... Maybe life is a bit more easy here, going out getting in clubs for free, stay as long as you want, take cab home again,...in the beginning I would not know how drinking worked really, but apparently Chinese people drink too and everywhere, nobody really cares.

To be honest, there are some stereotypes that exist that are not really true, e.g. how they (Chinese people) look, how they dress with their hair, the shoes, the heels, the fancy clothes, that is the (stereotypical) picture. I think people don't get how Chinese people are relaxed, they don't really care, it seems that everything is possible, you can walk around around in your pyjamas and nobody cares, ... I was surprised how tolerant they are and everything seems to be accepted. It seems that they don't judge each other how they look or how they act. For example in Germany or Europe, people will give you "the look" and you'll know exactly what they are thinking, people are not very tolerant. But here... I did not expect that. (Germany, Law, student)

However, student's freedom seems also to be related to the cultural framework of local people, or the lack of international intercultural understanding.

Here I really feel more free than in my country... just because you are a foreigner, they think it is your custom... wearing flip-flops, I could do or wear whatever I want, they would think this is what I would do back home. (Germany, Mandarin)

I would say I would feel pretty free here. I feel here when I do certain things people just go "ah (he's a) foreigner" (laughs) I think it's down to them expecting us to be different and act different (UK, Mandarin)

As a foreigner, I feel pretty free, Nobody will ask me if I behave in a common way as "my normal way" (to them) is always uncommon, I can do things I could never do in my hometown, dress like I want, nobody will question my responsibilities, the ways I use because they won't understand them anyway I can do whatever I want and justify it because of my culture. I was more expecting this restricted area of life where

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they'd keep me (isolated) on university premises and if I d try to get out ...they'd stop me. Actually it is the opposite, people back home don't know this. (Spain, Mandarin)

When perceiving freedom in China, some students also are very aware that their perception of freedom is based on the fact that they are passengers, foreigners in China with different future outlooks.

People are a lot more free then I thought, people are more happy with what they have.... People (students) stay all day in the library as competition is high, 12hours a day if needed. I could do that but I don't need to, peer-to-peer pressure is enormous here... (Belgium, business student)

6 Western students' perception of a sense of home

Younger migrants tend to often base their identity on affiliations of friendship, and self-attributions, arguing that place identification must be understood within the process of life change and place mobility (Cuba, 1993:547).This chapter will analyze how mobile students construct a sense of home. Research shows a remarkable finding, foreign students start to refer to Xiamen as "home", and increasingly do so after having traveled around (in China or Asia) during the holidays.

Traveling in China (Guilin, Shanghai), coming back to Xiamen feels a bit like coming home yes, that's fun. I have realized that this is an enjoyable place to live, in comparison with other Chinese cities ...this feels nice. Climate-wise, always such a nice weather, nicely developed. The Netherlands is such mini-country, here in China there's always something going on, stuff is happening. I have become less nationalistic and I do feel like I have a link with China now. But I would not come back to Xiamen as (after graduating) my friends will have left.(The Netherlands, International Relations)

I had a great time here, mostly because of the people that are here. It would have been different if I would have been the only foreigner. I think this (Xiamen) is not really China, so many foreigners, out of 5 people on the street, one is Western. You never feel far from home. (Belgium, Business student)

Sometimes I just think I am back home, it does not feel like China most of the time unless you (really) look at the people. There is such a money craze ...I don't see a difference between them and me, I am sorry. (Belgium, Business Student)

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It was the right decision to come, I really like Xiamen, have been to Shanghai and Xi'an but I have to say I still prefer Xiamen, really nice atmosphere on the island, the weather of course. It's a little bit smaller so you can get around (easily), it's quite lively and I am very surprised they sell so much coffee in the cafes, I like the people, now I know a little more about them. In the beginning I did not know so much about them (to know if they were rude to me, now I think they are nice, helpful and they are patient.. Going to Shanghai everything takes a lot of time, I realized that Xiamen is actually very clean, looks modern and nice, luxurious ... I realized how developed Xiamen is, (here I) get everything I need, e.g. I can find liquid for my contact lenses. I am settled already a bit here and feel success as things work out if I organize something or buy stuff. (Germany, Law student)

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