

Examining the state of internationalization of higher education and public diplomacy in China

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Abstract

Over the previous years, China has successfully attracted a huge population of international scholars to its tertiary education system as a response to the global trend of internationalization of higher education. Given this high increase in numbers, this article seeks to explore the trend of China's internationalization of higher education, diving into the interplay of diplomatic relationships shaping the sector and the international student experiences in the country. The article draws on empirical and literature review studies from reputable databases such as Scopus to fill the dearth of knowledge in the area. The findings of the research reveal that language abilities affect the international student's experience in the classroom, including low engagement levels and academic progress. On the other hand, international students are socially disconnected and immersed in the local communities, with the lack of Chinese proficiency being a major driver. Based on the findings, the study calls for mutual understanding between foreign students, local scholars, and Chinese faculty staff to resolve these issues.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Diplomacy, Language of Instruction, China.

Introduction

The sporadically growing flow of international students globally has added a significant volume of research into their learning journey in international higher education. A proliferation of research has indulged in the learning experiences and sociocultural interactions of international students (Han et al., 2020; Knight, 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). The issues of high priority have focused on disparities existing between cultures, pedagogical approaches and communication styles comparing the local and host contexts. While this literature has been enormous, they have been widely investigated in English-speaking states, cutting out non-Anglophone nations like China, which is among the most crucial source states for international scholars.

The incorporation of the Quadruple and Quintuple Helix models (Carayannis & Campbell, 2021) within the internationalization framework of China's higher education

offers not only a dynamic outlook but also an extensive strategy for encouraging innovation in the country (Zhao et al., 2020). These models stress cooperation among academics, industry players, the government, and civil society, with the Quintuple Helix including an environmental component (Carayannis & Campbell, 2021). By developing such multi-sectoral collaborations, Chinese institutions may build a dynamic and creative academic environment that attracts overseas students and improves their learning experiences, in line with China's internationalization and public diplomacy objectives.

The Quadruple Helix concept promotes collaboration across academics, industry, government, and civil society, understanding that innovation stems from integrations between these sectors (Carayannis & Campbell, 2021; Petruk et al., 2018). In China, this paradigm helps to combine public demands and beliefs, resulting in more socially meaningful and sustainable solutions. For example, collaborations between universities and local firms can provide practical training and research opportunities that link academic aims with industry demands, increasing programs' appeal to overseas students. The Quintuple Helix model expands on this framework by incorporating an environmental aspect that promotes eco-friendly activities and solutions to global environmental concerns. This convergence with sustainable development goals makes China more appealing to environmentally conscious overseas students.

Adopting these approaches assures that Chinese institutions' research and instructional programs are in line with practical requirements and real-world implementation. Collaboration with industry provides vital resources and chances for commercialization, whereas government participation fosters an enabling environment through supporting regulations and subsidies (Frezghi & Tsegay, 2019). Civil society should be included to ensure that innovation meets societal requirements while also building social acceptance and support for new technology. This holistic approach fosters a lively academic atmosphere, exposing students to real-world difficulties and multidisciplinary initiatives. Increased research possibilities and worldwide networks boost academic reputations and attract top people. Addressing sociological and environmental issues indicates China's commitment to global sustainability, which appeals to overseas students and academics while also promoting China's internationalization and public diplomacy objectives.

Emerging as a speedily rising destination for global mobilities of scholars, China is the most dominant Asian country with the highest number of foreign students. One of the largest internationalization schemes funded by the government is called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has attracted more than 60% of the international student numbers in the country. In order to continuously attract higher flows of student mobility and cement its position in international higher education, China has developed strategies to meet these outcomes. For instance, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs have been on a sharp rise within Chinese universities in the last decade as governments have given them autonomy to integrate their curriculum towards international standards. Despite the efforts towards internationalization of higher education in the country, much has been left under-researched regarding the experiences of foreign students. This article aims to respond to this gap, seeking to inform on the language of instruction, student experiences and China's changing higher education milestones in the context of internationalization.

Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) What is the rationale for the internationalization of Higher Education (HE)?
- b) How does public diplomacy influence international student recruitment in China?
- c) What are the language of instruction challenges international students are facing in China?

To address these issues, the study has reviewed secondary sources and critically analyzed various research connected to Chinese higher education, internationalization of higher education, recruitment strategy, international students experience, and other related aspects. In addition, we integrated our own experiences since one of us spent at least four years studying in China.

The first part of the study explores the concept and rationale for the internationalization of higher education. Secondly, we analyse the concept of internationalization of higher education in China and the public diplomacy rationale for student recruitment in Chinese universities. Then, we discuss the challenges of language of instruction in Chinese universities and its impact on learning and teaching and overall students' experiences. Finally, we conclude the study and provide some policy implications.

Internationalization of higher education

Over the last decade, the need to establish international higher education has skyrocketed beyond the aspect of transboundary participation. One of the critical strategies universities are increasingly adopting is internationalization strategies, given the rise of internationalization indicators, for example, the number of international scholars and lecturers. These statistics, including rankings, have entered and cemented themselves in higher education, which has driven higher education towards a logic of maximization (Leutwyler et al., 2017).

The internationalization of higher education is increasingly becoming crucial and one of the fundamental and indispensable components within the global educational landscape. Many scholars have defined internationalization differently; however, the most widely accepted definition of internationalization is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education”. An alternative definition of internationalization is provided by (De Wit & Hunter, 2015) as follows:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (p. 3)

Higher education institutions (HEIs) exhibit various aspects of internationalization, such as student mobility, research endeavours, and knowledge transfer. They incorporate various activities within their educational structure, including sending students abroad, encouraging faculty exchanges, and fostering collaborative programs and policies. The internationalization of higher education varies from country to country, with different countries placing various emphases and expectations on international higher education.

According to (Leutwyler et al., 2017; Zayed, 2020), internationalization is defined as a procedure that concentrates on programming activities in institutions of higher learning on teaching and research aspects. The process is conducted by pooling foreign students, enhancing collaborations with foreign institutions, and creating branch campuses across

nations worldwide. In the work (Knight, 2012, 2021), three core areas define internationalization's classical fields:

- Mobility of scholars and staff. The dimension focuses on the level of freedom of movement of staff and scholars to foreign countries to pursue academic aims.
- Program and developer mobility. The focus is on the availability of joint programs or double degrees between global partners and the purposes fulfilled.
- Campus internationalization. The aspects focus on the level of diversity of teacher education across international and intercultural dimensions.
- Curriculum internationalization. The cross-cutting aims of educational programs are evaluated against global and intercultural dimensions.
- International Cooperation. The aspect of global cooperation is emphasized in its connection to educational programs and purposes fulfilled.

A nation's approach to and interconnection with other countries is shaped by its historical path, cultural aspects, resources, and prioritization mechanisms (Knight, 2012). Therefore, to fulfil the requirements of global collaboration between societies and labor markets, it is crucial to possess multilingualism and intercultural competency. Several countries have emphasized the role of internationalization in higher education, taking into account historical, regional, and cultural distinctions. According to the work (Wu & Gong, 2020), an essential element of a country's internationalization of higher education is the manner in which it expresses its national identity. The responses and interactions of a country are influenced by its distinctive historical background, indigenous cultures, available resources, and national goals. Moreover, national identity and culture have a substantial influence on the internationalization of higher education.

The understanding of internationalization in higher education can be investigated from two distinct perspectives. The primary purpose of higher education is fundamentally based on its academic function. Specialized fields of research and development necessitate focused endeavours and broad international cooperation due to their complex nature and substantial budgetary requirements. Furthermore, the extent of internationalization in higher education involves a broader objective focused on maintaining its global aspect. This entails reorganizing and enhancing the operations and offerings of higher education in order to successfully address the difficulties arising from

globalization and adjust to changing demands.

Internationalization of higher education in China

In recent years, China has become an important destination for international student mobility, comprising both inbound and outbound movements, in global higher education integration. Looking back, international student education in China has gone through different phases. Historically, the first major reform to manage international student movements was in the 1950s. Most of the overseas scholars during this period originated from the social countries, including Africa, Asia, and Latin American countries. Driving towards the 1990s, the internationalization agenda and world standard university development took root in China's internationalization of higher education. The Ministry of Education provided Chinese provinces the power to analyze universities' qualifications for managing inbound international students. In 1998, there were over 43000 foreign students in China, which increased to 300,000 in 2012 as a result of more universities receiving the authority to host international students.

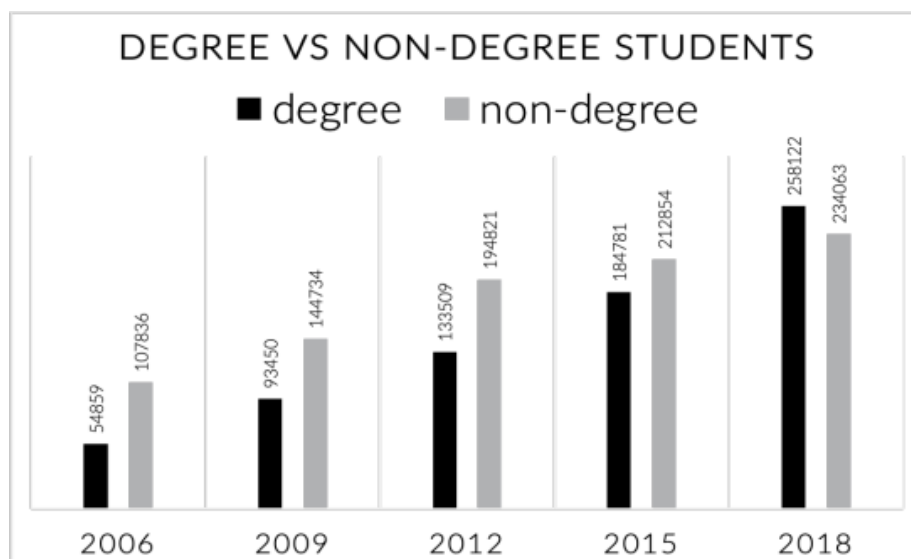
Figure 1: Number of International Students per Continent Source: (Biney & Cheng, 2021)

Continent	Number	Percent
Asia	295,043	59.95%
Africa	81,562	16.57%
Europe	73,618	14.96%
America	35,733	7.26%
Oceania	6,229	1.27%

The higher education sector currently has a large number of institutions, including 2,663 public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and 750 private HEIs. According to the

Ministry of Education's reports in 2019 and 2020, there are 1,004 institutions, mostly public, that accommodate international students. The total number of overseas students studying in China in 2018 was 492,185, with more than half of them enrolled in degree programs. Subject areas like engineering, management, and medicine have become popular alternatives for study due to their competitiveness. A great number of international students are observed to undertake degree programs as compared to non-degree programs, as depicted in Figure 1. These patterns imply China's tendency to attract more degree-seeking international scholars, who are way more favoured for post-graduate programs. In 2018, the number of degree-seeking students surpassed non-degree-seeking students, while only a quarter of those students were undertaking postgraduate level studies (Wen & Hu, 2023).

Figure 1: Degree Vs. Non-Degree Students Source: (Wen & Hu, 2023)



In 2019, the Ministry of Education in China stated that around 13% of international students in the country get government scholarships. China's strong institutional structure and large number of international students highlight its important position in the global landscape of internationalizing higher education. In terms of international students, the population of overseas students has significantly increased, rising from 2 million in 2000 to around 5.3 million in 2017. Prominent contributors to this upsurge encompass nations such as China, India, France, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and South Korea. The movement of

international students is a significant aspect of the overall worldwide changes in the internationalization of higher education (Hodzi & Amoah, 2023).

Moreover, key elements that define the development of internationalization in higher education include increased mobility and collaboration among academics, encompassing research, teaching, seminars, and conferences. In addition, there has been a noticeable rise in the sharing of academic materials and resources, the creation of joint programs through collaboration, the introduction of various funding schemes, the expansion of international campus branches, and an increased level of collaboration between governments, universities, and markets to drive significant changes. The complex interplay of these changes highlights the diverse and comprehensive nature of internationalization efforts in the field of higher education in countries like China (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

As a result of educational reforms and China's opening-up policies, higher education institutions (HEIs) initiated international programs and partnerships to cultivate proficient human resources suitable for the rapidly globalizing market. Concurrently, HEIs promptly commenced training skilled individuals to address the nation's needs and propel China's socio-economic progress. The economic progress in China enabled significant financial investments in its higher education institutions (HEIs), empowering them to provide substantial grants for a wide array of research initiatives and international programs. The Chinese government is playing a significant role in influencing the expansion of international students through measures such as increasing international cooperation and providing partial and complete scholarships (Wu & Gong, 2020).

The fast advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been critical to China's internationalization of higher education. The Chinese institutions can use ICT to provide remote teaching alternatives, allowing overseas students to attend education without incurring the financial burden of relocation. This move toward distant education makes higher education more accessible to worldwide learners by utilizing virtual classrooms, online resources, and digital collaborative spaces (Tang & Tsui, 2018). These technologies enable students from all over the world to engage in Chinese higher education from their native countries.

China's technology breakthroughs in higher education are also a significant instrument for soft power, helping to improve the country's worldwide image and recruit international students (Tang & Tsui, 2018). Showcasing innovative skills places China as a global education leader, with projects such as sophisticated e-learning platforms and use of Artificial Intelligence cementing a commitment to cutting-edge learning. Digital public diplomacy contributes to this by engaging potential learners through social media and digital channels. Virtual tours, webinars, and interactive online sessions give insights into academic and cultural life in China, increasing its attractiveness. These creative techniques not only make it easier to recruit overseas students, but they also boost China's worldwide impact and reputation, which aligns with its internationalization and public diplomacy aims (Akhtar et al., 2019; Makundi et al., 2017).

The Chinese government has implemented many policies and initiatives through its decentralized departments that have transformed the education and governance systems, to address domestic needs and attain global competitiveness. The overarching objective is to improve the country's attractiveness as a highly competitive destination for international students (Biney & Cheng, 2021). These policies priorities academic quality, benchmark teaching and research against international standards, elevate specific universities to world- class status, diversify funding channels, foster international collaborations, establishing international branch campuses in China, and broadening English-language programs.

In 2018, the government established a formal objective of reaching 500,000 international students in China by 2020, a goal that was temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Knight, 2012). However, it now seems achievable within the coming years. The implementation of reforms in Chinese higher education institutions, along with government backing in the form of finance and other forms of aid, has resulted in a significant shift in the internationalization of higher education in China. China's higher education internationalization has shifted from the practice of sending students and staff overseas to the establishment of international programs and the growth of institutional collaborations (Zhu et al., 2023).

China's intention to dominate Asian nations in foreign student hosting is inextricably linked to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a strategic program established in 2013 with significant ties to internationalization and student mobility. A huge majority, comprising of more than 60% of China's present foreign student population, comes from BRI nations, demonstrating the BRI's enormous effect on China's international student environment. Despite these advances, there remains a significant lack of study on the experiences of international students in China, including their educational pursuits, everyday lives, and social connections.

The public diplomacy rationale for international student recruitment

In the context of the current global transformations in higher education, governments, state institutions, and non-state actors are increasing their endeavours to promote internationalization in higher education (Knight, 2021; Wan & Gao, 2019). This is attributed to a substantial increase in the number of international students, with a predominant portion hailing from China, India, France, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and South Korea.

Another crucial factor driving the growing internationalization of higher education is the financial advantages gained from the presence and involvement of international students in academic institutions. Therefore, to maintain competitiveness in the global pursuit of attracting foreign students, the process of internationalization has evolved into a market-driven strategy, establishing the foundation for the pervasive adoption of neoliberal governance methodologies within higher education institutions (Sun et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023).

The rapid development of information and communications technology (ICT) serves as the foundation for the internationalization of higher education. By adopting ICT, universities can engage in remote teaching, enabling students from abroad to access learning without the budgetary constraints of a physical campus. Distance education has become a feasible option for individuals who want to pursue higher education without having to physically move.

Finally, states regard higher education as a potent source of "soft power," strategically utilized for public diplomacy and bolstering national image and reputation on the global stage. The utilization of internationalization within higher education institutions as a mechanism to augment "soft power" towards peripheral states stands as a significant contributor to the escalating globalization trends within higher education from. "Soft power", as defined by Joseph Nye (1990) refers to a country's ability to influence the preferences of other nations by portraying its culture, values, and political, social, and economic progress in an attractive manner, thereby motivating these nations to want to pursue similar objectives.

Due to their global nature, universities act as strongholds of multiculturalism and serve as a conduit for spreading a nation's culture, values, and traditions beyond its borders. Although internationalizing higher education was formerly linked mostly to developed countries, even developing countries, like China, are now considering it a diplomatic tactic. (Yang, 2010; Knight and de Wit, 2018). China and its academic institutions are playing crucial roles in the global higher education setting. The Chinese government is investing heavily in the recruitment of international students to study in Chinese universities, However, one of the main objectives of this strategy is to improve the relations between China and students' respective home countries (Biney & Cheng, 2021).

In recent years internationalization of higher education in China has shifted from an 'inward- oriented' to 'outward-oriented', strategy. However, this 'outward-oriented' shift is mainly inspired by the notion that recruiting many students and providing them with financial assistance to study in China will improve China's diplomatic relations with the countries where the students come from as well enhance China's image in their respective countries. The 'inward-oriented' strategy internationalization of higher education involves learning foreign knowledge, cultural elements, and higher education models and norms. In contrast, 'outward- oriented' strategy of higher education internationalization involves exporting domestic knowledge, cultural elements, and higher education models and norms to the outside world (Zhu et al., 2023).

The latter, however, has been regarded as a means for using HE internationalization to promote and reinforce soft power. China's strategy of attracting a larger number of

international students with the goal of "educating potential scholars, technicians, and political leaders from various countries" can be considered an aspect of public diplomacy aimed at enhancing soft power (Wu & Zheng, 2023).

As the cornerstone guiding the advancement of internationalization within Chinese higher education, the strategic emphasis rests upon harnessing soft power and refining image enhancement strategies. As a result, China has initiated several policies and initiatives to restructure the governance and educational systems in order to meet domestic needs and improve its competitiveness in the global market through its decentralized branches. For instance, China has significantly increased its funding for international students studying in Chinese universities. Between 2012 and 2019, the allocation of scholarships for international students more than doubled, reaching USD\$560, marking a 20 percent increase. Specifically, in 2018, China funded 63,041 international students.

According to the Plan for Study in China formulated by the MOE, China planned:

... to produce a number of highly qualified teachers, to build up ... a number of high-standard disciplines for study in China, and to generate a large number of graduates who both understand China and contribute to connecting China to the rest of the world. (MOE 2010, para.2)

China has achieved significant success in drawing international students, positioning itself as a leading destination for higher education-level studies abroad, primarily with the "outward-oriented" strategy. However, there remains a critical gap in understanding the tangible impact of this shift. There is a shortage of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of Chinese university graduates in enhancing China's image and facilitating improved diplomatic relations between China and their home countries. The lack of research in this area necessitates a thorough investigation and evaluation of the role and impact of Chinese university graduates in enhancing China's soft power and its image. Addressing this gap is crucial for comprehensively understanding the outcomes and implications of China's 'outward-oriented' higher education strategy.

Language of instruction

The development of the Georgian science, technology and innovation system

The growth of programs in transnational higher education in China has been spearheaded by the establishment of English as an instructional language. These has also taken root in bilingual degrees offered by Chinese universities that attract many international students. However, there exist several Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) programs that a number of international students enroll in but are not of high interest and attractiveness towards foreign students given the difficulties of the language. Before the end of 2018, it was recorded that over 40,000 programs were provided through the Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI), while there were 7000 English Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs. On the other hand, China is also introducing bilingual programs and they have 500 such programs offered to foreign students. Even though most of the programs provided are through CMI, China has been growingly expanding the EMI as well as bilingual programs to boost international student flows by including these alternatives and also relaxing Chinese proficiency entrance requirements.

There are several reasons China is increasingly investing in English as an instructional language in the country to drive internationalization agendas. First, the fast development of neoliberalism in institutions of higher learning globally and the intensified demand for English in programs has in part influenced the medium of instruction in China. Furthermore, these developments have pushed institutions to transform their systems to become world universities. With the advent of university rankings, the Chinese institutions are directing their efforts to become top universities and establish their foot in the global space, building upon the status of the university and prestige. The performance indicators are also of high importance to Chinese universities to improve performance and achieve its mission and vision.

The uptake of English as a medium of instruction has become advantageous to China's Higher Education. The widespread acknowledgment and use of English as a prominent academic language has significantly facilitated China's strategic integration into the internationalization of higher education. Despite potential controversies and challenges, the adoption of internationalization initiatives and the widespread use of English as a

Medium of Instruction (EMI) have greatly impacted China's position and significance in the global higher education sector. The incorporation of English into academic discourse not only aligns with global educational norms but also serves as a vital catalyst for China's increased importance and status in international academic circles. Chinese universities have increasingly and intentionally chosen to use English in order to participate actively in international scholarly exchanges, collaborative research projects, and global academic networks. This has fostered a conducive environment for facilitating intercultural comprehension and the exchange of information.

China's adoption of English as an academic language and its deliberate utilization of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) are integral components of its broader efforts to globalize higher education. The alignment of language not only fosters academic collaboration but also positions China as a formidable contender in the global higher education arena, fostering cross-cultural academic exchanges and bolstering its impact on the worldwide platform. The diplomatic and soft power endeavors have been strengthened by its efforts to internationalize and its acceptance of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), alongside its importance in academic development. Beyond academia, these projects serve a pivotal role in showcasing China's commitment to global development, fostering foreign partnerships, and projecting its ambitious drive to augment cultural and political influence.

The adoption of internationalization and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) aligns with China's broader diplomatic objectives, which seek to position the country as a prominent global player. China showcases its dedication to cultivating global partnerships and making significant contributions to global advancement through active participation in international academic collaborations and the promotion of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). Moreover, these programs play a pivotal role in shaping China's soft power, enabling the nation to project a positive image on the international stage. The deliberate efforts to engage with global academic communities, as highlighted by scholars such as (Biney & Cheng, 2021; Makundi et al., 2017; WEI Liqing, n.d.), underscore the varied impact of internationalization and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) as diplomatic instruments.

In essence, there are a variety of causes of the high increase of international students and the attractiveness of China as an education destination. The wide availability of scholarships and financial aid initiatives makes Chinese education an attractive choice for financially disadvantaged students. Furthermore, China's appeal as a global education hub is bolstered by its economic living expenses, widespread availability of English Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs, and streamlined and straightforward admission processes (Akhtar et al., 2019; Makundi et al., 2017; Wan & Gao, 2019; WEI Liqing, n.d.).

In addition to the financial and logistical considerations, other crucial variables greatly contribute to the attraction of international students to China. The compelling narrative that positions China as a preferred destination for international students is supported by the rigorous academic standards and prestigious reputation of Chinese universities, the significance of the Chinese language, the dynamic educational environment in the country, and China's escalating global influence as a dominant force, particularly in terms of economic advancement, innovation, and technology. The aforementioned components emphasize the complex nature of the decision-making process for prospective international students and offer an understanding of the varied factors that contribute to China's increasing attractiveness as a hub for higher education.

The challenges of EMI and CMI

Despite the availability of English-instructed programs in Chinese universities, studies show that mechanisms and policies for language are lacking. International students enrolled in Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) programmes often possess a fundamental level of Chinese language competency. This hinders their capacity to obtain resources and comprehend information conveyed in Chinese, resulting in their scholastic difficulties for them (Makundi et al., 2017; Wan & Gao, 2019). Consequently, international students often opt for courses and programmes that provide a higher proportion of English-language material, choosing an English Medium of Instruction (EMI) whenever available.

However, a significant barrier arises in EMI programmes due to a considerable number of Chinese teachers who lack the necessary English proficiency and expertise to effectively communicate content information in the English language. The convergence

of these two deficiencies, along with the frequently restricted Chinese language proficiency among international students, generates substantial apprehensions regarding the academic benchmarks and assistance offered in both CMI and EMI courses and programmes.

Furthermore, Chinese higher education institutions primarily use the Chinese language for their administrative operations, leading to inadequate institutional assistance for overseas students, especially those enrolled in English-based programs. Moreover, a significant number of university websites predominantly present content in Chinese, particularly in critical areas like the library page and many other services. This limitation in access to essential information impedes the assimilation process for international students.

The challenges related to language proficiency and instructional expertise have important consequences for the internationalization of higher education in China. The limitations faced by overseas students in accessing and understanding the Chinese curriculum pose difficulties for their academic success and integration into the Chinese educational environment. This circumstance not only impacts the overall quality of education for international students but also contributes to the broader discourse on the challenges and complexities associated with internationalization in higher education settings. The existing research on international students in China primarily examines the difficulties they face. This highlights the significance of implementing comprehensive strategies and support systems to enhance the academic experiences of international students in both Chinese-medium instruction (CMI) and English- medium instruction (EMI) programs.

According to a study on the educational experiences of international students in China, the lack of incentives to study Chinese despite the intensifying role of China and Chinese language was a demotivating factor. For instance, student participants of the research find the lack of usage of Chinese language outside China not helpful. In addition, other participants found it useful to have English-speaking lecturers for the Chinese class beneficial. It is important to note that the restriction of students in working part-time jobs reduces the motivation of students to increase their Chinese mastery. Besides that, it is common for international student classes, excluding the enrollment of Chinese students.

In essence, the language barrier as a major problem is connected to various aspects of an international's student experience including academic integration and socio-cultural adaptation (Han et al., 2020). Limited proficiency in Chinese language often leads to barriers in speaking and listening abilities, understanding the local context and academic writing. The effect of these challenges on self-efficacy, esteem and security have been emphasized in various studies illustrating the difficulties foreign students face adjusting to living in China. Language problems are not only experienced by the students, but it is also driven by the level of proficiency of the lecturers and faculty. For example, foreign students undertaking EMI programs face significant communication problems because their lecturers have a limited English level necessary for teaching. Several studies conducted on communication problems of Chinese lecturers reflect the communication barriers existing between teachers and international students (Han et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2010). On one hand, the teachers' level of English affects the teaching and learning of knowledge from the student's perspective while also the lower the foreign student's level of English proficiency, the harder and more problematic learning becomes. Furthermore, some of the non-native English-speaking nationals speaking in diverse accents, which affects classroom discussions and team projects.

Socio-cultural adaptation is crucial for foreign students studying abroad as it helps them adjust to their environment and develop meaningful relationships with the locals. In China, limited proficiency in Chinese creates difficulties in integrating with the local cultures and making friends. In addition, the differences in interaction methods, cultural stereotypes and discrimination increase this gap between international scholars and locals. A qualitative study conducted among Chinese lecturers teaching international programs found major disparities in socio-cultural adaptation attributed to a lack of adaptation of foreign students towards the prevailing traditions and culture of the country. For example, Chinese teachers are regarded highly in their cultures and have a lot of power over students, however, they feel international students disregard the social hierarchy and disrupt the traditional relationship. In the classroom, students are expected to follow all the instructions a Chinese lecturer provides even if a student feels it is not right. Therefore, several conflicts exist whereby international students challenge the instructions of their Chinese lecturers or raise their own opinions regarding academic issues.

Socialization as an aspect of socio-cultural adaptation of international students is scarce especially between teachers and the foreign scholars as well as with local students. Teachers in China have a common practice of socializing with their students after class, for example by taking dinner with them. However, beyond the classroom, Chinese lecturers rarely attempt to create a space to socialize with international student. There are two major reasons that contribute to this problem, both language barrier and cultural stereotype. The lack of direct contact and student-teacher relationships causes international scholars to be very disconnected to not only the academic community but also to social integration in the community.

Language is of enormous significance in influencing societal integration. Language barriers hinder effective communication and hinder the process of social integration. The existence of a language barrier between Chinese and international students has hindered their capacity to communicate and engage socially, thereby negatively affecting their socio-cultural adjustment. The problem stems from the lack of English proficiency among many Chinese persons, particularly those in institutions and public services (Wan & Gao, 2019). International students are required to acquire proficiency in the Chinese language in order to effectively interact with Chinese people, including their peers. Proficiency in the language is crucial for students to effortlessly engage and assimilate into the local community (Biney & Cheng, 2021).

Discussion

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the internationalization of higher education and public diplomacy in China, focusing on the intricacies of the country's higher education system. It examines the challenges and benefits of language competency, international connections, and the role of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in fostering global engagement. The internationalization of higher education in China is a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon shaped by financial considerations, soft power initiatives, and the strategic use of EMI. This process is crucial for promoting cultural exchanges and enhancing China's global influence (Jin, 2024). English-language higher education programs serve as instruments of public diplomacy, contributing to the nation's image and academic cooperation (Varpahovskis & Monakhova, 2023). However, the

implementation of internationalization policies faces significant challenges that require effective countermeasures (Li & Xue, 2023).

Governments leverage international students to advance their geopolitical objectives, linking international higher education and public diplomacy (Hartmann, 2023). China's ambition to become a leading global education center and attract overseas students aligns with its broader diplomatic goals. The notable increase in international students, particularly from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the USA (Ge & Ho, 2022; Shih & Cao, 2022), highlights higher education's growing importance as a vehicle for cultural exchange, diplomatic influence, and economic competitiveness. Furthermore, the rise of information and communications technology (ICT) has transformed the internationalization of higher education. Enabled by ICT, remote education redefines the traditional concept of a physical campus, offering a viable alternative for students seeking higher education without geographical constraints. This approach aligns with China's efforts to adapt to global trends and accommodate a diverse international student body (De Wit & Hunter, 2015; Wu, 2019). China has actively pursued the development of a knowledge society to drive innovation and growth through science and technology. This proactive stance sets China apart from other countries, such as India, in leveraging higher education for national advancement (Sharma, 2023).

Financial incentives for hosting international students are a critical factor in China's market-oriented approach to internationalization. Integrating international students enhances the competitiveness of academic institutions, reflecting neoliberal governance practices in the higher education sector. International students significantly contribute to the financial health of Chinese universities through tuition fees and living expenses. China's international student education (ISE) is crucial for legitimizing Chinese universities globally (Baik & Kahu, 2023; Wen & Hu, 2023), attracting students from various cultures who enhance academic adaptation and intercultural sensitivity, ultimately impacting their health and academic outcomes (Takyi Mensah et al., 2024). As the number of foreign students in China increases, there is a practical need to improve the quality of education and management of overseas students to continuously attract talent worldwide (Tu & Ibrahim, 2022). International students in China actively engage in employability-related programs to enhance their employment outcomes, contributing to

their home countries while building various forms of capital, thus benefiting from elite universities and internships (Singh, 2022).

The BRI has influenced China's higher education system, creating opportunities for cross-border collaboration among countries along the route, thereby promoting international student mobility and cultural exchange (Zhang, 2023). This initiative aligns with China's foreign policy objectives, enhancing its global presence and influence through educational diplomacy and international cooperation (Aliyev, 2023). Confucius Institutes globally serve as vehicles for promoting Chinese language and culture, indirectly aiding student recruitment. These institutes, established worldwide, are pivotal in disseminating traditional Chinese culture, language, and history (Diana-Elena, 2022; Qu, 2023). By offering language courses and cultural programs, they enhance China's soft power by fostering global recognition and connections (Sun, 2023). Through these initiatives, China strengthens its image as a cultural powerhouse and indirectly supports student recruitment by generating interest in the Chinese language and culture among the international community. The concept of 'soft power' serves as a fundamental basis for China's endeavors to expand its influence on the international stage. Higher education serves as a crucial means of spreading culture and information, significantly bolstering China's influence and reputation worldwide. The intentional approach to appeal to overseas students is not just an educational endeavor but a diplomatic one to cultivate favorable impressions of China and enhance diplomatic relations with the students' respective nations (Wu, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the internationalization of higher education and public diplomacy in China, focusing on the intricacies of the country's higher education system. The study examined the challenges and benefits associated with language competency, international connections, and the role of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in fostering global engagement. The findings underscore the multifaceted and evolving nature of higher education internationalization in China, shaped by financial considerations, soft power initiatives, and the strategic use of EMI. One significant conclusion is that the internationalization of higher education in China is a primary driver of economic growth and academic prestige. International students

contribute financially through tuition fees and living expenses, enhancing Chinese universities' financial health. Moreover, the academic and cultural exchanges facilitated by internationalization enrich the learning environment for both local and international students, promoting a multicultural campus that fosters global competencies and intercultural understanding.

The study also highlights that higher education is an effective tool for China's soft power strategy, enhancing its global influence through cultural exchanges and academic collaborations. International student recruitment, supported by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Confucius Institutes, is pivotal in advancing China's diplomatic objectives. In particular, English-language programs act as instruments of public diplomacy, contributing to China's international image and fostering academic cooperation with other countries. However, language competency remains a significant challenge for international students in China. The need for proficiency in Mandarin, combined with varying English proficiency among faculty and students, poses barriers to academic success and socio-cultural integration. Effective language support programs and faculty training are essential to address these challenges and enhance the educational experience of international students.

To preserve and strengthen China's higher education internationalization, future-oriented initiatives must prioritize continual investment in technology infrastructure and innovative policies. Adopting emerging innovations such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and blockchain can improve instructional delivery, making it more adaptable and accessible to foreign students. These technical developments should be accompanied by policy changes that guarantee that the regulatory environment promotes the use of new technology. Continuous development in policy, technology, and academic programs is required to remain competitive in the global education market. Regular curriculum revisions, technology improvements, and training for educators are required to keep Chinese institutions at the forefront of global education trends.

A long-term strategy for the globalization of Chinese higher learning should promote continuous innovation. This vision should contain specific objectives for technology integration, policy development, and the formation of international collaborations. For

example, educational institutions should strive to become world leaders in certain research fields through international cooperation and financing. Policy suggestions should center on developing a national framework for online education standards, which would ensure that digital learning platforms fulfil high-quality criteria. Furthermore, incentives should be provided to encourage institutions to form international collaborations, such as funding for collaborative research projects or exchange programs. Implementing these methods will ensure that China's higher education system stays dynamic, inventive, and internationally competitive.

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