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Migrating Students, Globalizing Education China in the Global Race for Talents

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Summary

China's economic development in the past three decades has given rise to massive flows of migration in and out of China. Among them, international student migration has become a prominent migratory flow in terms of its scale and importance to China. Since the first group of students left China to study in the United States in the 19th century, student migration has been closely associated with China's development. However, before the economic reform, outbound international migration from China is very limited due to the strict government regulations, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Studying abroad is even out of questions during period of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Under the open-door policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping, Chinese government has established educational exchange programmes with industrialized countries, liberalized overseas education policy, to encourage Chinese students to study abroad with the aim to acquire advanced knowledge and technology know-how. Started as a state-sponsored study abroad programme, the first few groups of students who left for studying abroad are predominantly funded by Chinese government or other public means in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The landscape of international education changed significantly by mid-90s, due to the rising amount of self-financing students from China. This emerging trend of student migration has become an important social phenomenon, as individuals and families save their money for studies in foreign countries. This migration wave is also associated with the internationalization and commercialization of education in Western countries, as their universities now actively recruit foreign students, who often pay a higher tuition fees than home students. While the same time, the fierce competition of entrance to universities at home also pushes Chinese students to go to foreign institutions instead. China's entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 further accelerates this trend since foreign qualifications are viewed by many Chinese as a key step in securing a high income position in China. In 2007 alone, China sent around 144,000 students abroad, 167 times of the 1978 figure (860) (Ministry of Education 5 April 2008). This makes China the largest source country in the world for international students, with Chinese students spread over 100 countries across five continents. More than 85 percent of the students study in North America, Europe, and Asia. The most popular countries are the USA, UK, Germany, France, Australia, and Canada.

Until recently, many Chinese students have remained abroad after their studies, thus causing concern in China over a 'brain drain' arising from student migration. As the sending country, China is concerned about the enormous outflow of students, which could result in huge potential outflows, in terms of both financial and human capital. The foregoing account has shown the important accumulation of different forms of capital throughout the migration process. When self-financing became the main channel for studying overseas, the Chinese government shifted its policy focus from direct, all-encompassing control to indirect and selective intervention. New policy methods include providing scholarships, working with student associations, and most importantly, national and local governments are offering generous incentives, even symbolic rituals and political gestures to attract graduates back to China. Fuelled by China's growing economic importance and decline of economy in some hosting countries, we have witnessed a growing tendency of reverse migration to China as thousands of Chinese return to China to look for employment after their studies abroad. These returnees even receive a special nickname called *Haigui* (sea-turtles) by Chinese media.

At the same time, Chinese universities are also encouraged by the government's 'Go Global' strategy to compete internationally and capitalise the education export sector. Many universities have developed international offices and set up English taught programmes and to attract students exchange and degree seeking students. Chinese government has also provided various incentives of scholarships and language trainings to establish China as the new hub for international education and a talent magnet, as well as to enhance the country's soft-power. Statistics have confirmed that since 2005 there have been more students going to China than Chinese students going abroad, and more foreign students are undertaking specific educational programmes rather than studying Chinese language alone. It is now impossible to treat China as a sending country alone and ignore the two-way traffic of international student migration in and out of China.

This presentation therefore examines the emerging circular student migration between China and other parts of the world. It will also analyse the impact of recent financial crisis on international student migration in the Chinese case. By looking into Chinese student migration to Europe, it will illustrate the importance of student migration on both sending and receiving countries. Furthermore, this presentation will question on the effectiveness of government policies on encouraging the return migration in the case of China and discuss the current situation of globalization of education system and development of international education in China.