

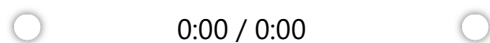
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For China's elite, studying abroad is de rigueur

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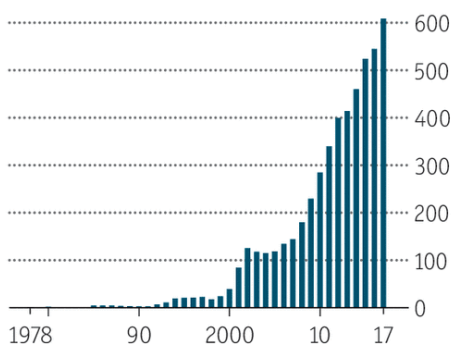


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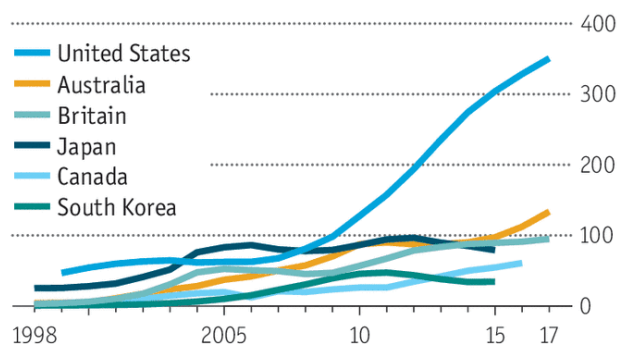
Learning curve

Chinese students abroad

Total number
'000



In tertiary education, by host country
'000



Sources: Ministry of Education, China; UIS; IIE; HESA; Australian Trade and Investment Commission

Economist.com

IN MANY WAYS Zhang Dayin, a 30-year-old doctoral student of finance at the University of California, Berkeley, is living the American dream. He grew up in a small town in the eastern Chinese province of Jiangsu, the son of a disabled seller of lottery tickets. A decade ago he became the first person in his family to

go to university—Renmin University in Beijing, one of the country's best. The capital's affluence impressed him.

Five years later, having embarked on a master's degree in Beijing, he got another break: a chance to study for a spell at Berkeley. "It was a dream for every kid," he says. "You have to go to America." He toured the icons of American culture: Hollywood, Wall Street, the statue of Abraham Lincoln in Washington, DC. He liked it all so much that he decided to apply to do a PhD at Berkeley, where he has been since 2014.

Mr Zhang is one of more than 5.2m Chinese who have gone abroad to study since Deng Xiaoping launched his "reform and opening" policy in 1978. The numbers are surging. In 2017 more than 600,000 Chinese headed abroad to university, four times the figure a decade earlier, bringing the number studying at that level outside China to nearly 1.5m.

The main destinations are English-speaking countries, with America way ahead. Between 2006 and 2016 the number of Chinese students at universities there increased fivefold, to more than 320,000. They make up nearly one-third of foreign students at the country's universities. And they contribute more than \$12bn annually to its economy, according to America's Department of Commerce.

The demand in China for education in the West, and the ease with which wealthier Chinese can secure it, has been a boon for many educational establishments. In America, cuts in state-government support have made public universities increasingly reliant on foreign students who pay the full fee. At Berkeley that is more than \$45,000 a year for undergraduates.

The number of Chinese students enrolling at Berkeley, as at many other American universities, has climbed steeply. Last year there were nearly 2,300 of them, more than six times as many as in 2007. They accounted for well over one in three of the total number of foreign students, up from less than one in seven a decade earlier. About one in 11 new students at the University of California's campuses is now from China, and that does not include those born in China but permanently resident in America when they applied.

Soft power personified

On the face of it, this should be a windfall for American soft power. Well over 300,000 of the brightest young minds in China are spending a good proportion of their formative years enjoying the freedom of campus life in America, with ready access to all the information that censors once denied them.

American optimism about the power of education to make foreign students more like Americans has a long history. "I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here," said Colin Powell, America's then secretary of state, in 2001. Yet American officials and scholars find it hard to demonstrate any clear diplomatic benefits from having educated some 2m Chinese in America since the late 1970s. Among them have been children of several Chinese leaders of the reform-and-opening period: Deng's son Deng Zhifang, Jiang Zemin's son Jiang Mianheng, Hu Jintao's daughter Hu Haiqing (by some accounts) and Xi Jinping's daughter Xi Mingze (who graduated from Harvard in 2014). Even so, in the past decade relations between China and America have

become ever more distant and strained.

Students who went to America in the 1980s did show promising signs of enthusiasm for Western democracy. After the suppression of student-led unrest in 1986, more than 1,000 of them wrote a letter of protest against their government. In 1989, after the crushing of far more widespread pro-democracy demonstrations, they marched on American streets to vent their anger at the bloodshed. Most took up an offer of permanent residency made by the American government to Chinese studying there at the time. And most reckoned that China was backward and repressive, whereas America was rich and free.

China's economic take-off in the 1990s, however, began to change those views. Students arriving in America since then have voiced mixed feelings about democracy and free markets, and how useful they might be for China. At Berkeley, Mr Zhang has his doubts. "The whole world is getting confused," he says, sitting in a coffee shop in nearby San Francisco. "Which system is good, which system is bad? There's a lot of criticism of democracy in America and Britain. China is doing really well."

Mr Zhang sees much to like: America's tolerance, its respect for disabled people like his father. But he tells relatives that America is no paradise. "China is a big country and has so many people. I know that if it doesn't have a strong government it's very hard to control," he says. "Probably our party is right for China."

The nationalism displayed by Chinese students abroad—sometimes in the form of unquestioning support for their government's policies—has been causing disquiet in the West, on two main counts. The first is that students' objections to views at

variance with the Communist Party's might stifle academic debate. The other is that the party might attempt to tap into this nationalism through Chinese student organisations and mobilise such groups to protest against activities that the party dislikes.

Several incidents in the past year support such concerns. In 2017 the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at the University of California, San Diego, protested against the university's decision to invite the Dalai Lama to the campus to speak at a graduation ceremony. At the University of Maryland, the CSSA posted a YouTube video denouncing a Chinese student who had praised America's "fresh air" and "freedom" in a graduation speech (and criticised the lack of both in China). In Australia, four cases of students criticising their teachers for appearing to slight Chinese people caused a political storm about the spread of Chinese political influence. At Durham University in England some Chinese students, and the Chinese embassy, protested against a debate titled "This House sees China as a threat to the West", and the participation of a supporter of Falun Gong, a Chinese sect that was outlawed by the party nearly two decades ago.

But most Chinese students are not flag-wavers for the party's cause. Many say they have little if any contact with their CSSA branches, and bridle at the suggestion that they might take political direction from them. Most show pride in China's economic growth, but some also express doubts about the way the party rules. Examples include its tight controls over the internet and Mr Xi's recent scrapping of the two-term limit for the presidency. According to the *New York Times*, Chinese students at several university campuses in America put up posters protesting against Mr Xi's decision.

Fifty shades of nationalism

Moreover, the apparent nationalism of Chinese students may be less strong than many suppose. In a paper last year, Alastair Iain Johnson of Harvard University said polling data from Beijing showed a decline in nationalism since about 2009. He also concluded that younger respondents were less nationalistic than older ones.

Fran Martin of the University of Melbourne has been tracking the responses of about 50 female Chinese students to their experiences in Australia since 2015. She is scornful of the idea that they are tools of their government, and describes their patriotism as “ambiguous”. Some of the participants in her study told her they became more patriotic after arriving in Australia. But some students she has met also asked her about the unrest in 1989. “They were really receptive to hearing about it,” she says. “They were clearly open to thinking it was wrong” of the party to crack down in the way it did.

The very presence of so many Chinese students on Western campuses demonstrates that their nationalism is complex. Some are there because their families have little faith in the party. Growing numbers of wealthy Chinese are anxious to secure a foothold abroad and think that sending a child to study there could help. A report in 2012 by Hurun, a Shanghai-based research firm, said that of 2.7m Chinese citizens who made over \$1m a year, 85% intended to send their children abroad to be educated. The West, for all its failings, is seen as a safe haven both for their money and, if necessary, for themselves.

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