

Chinese Public Attitude towards the Treatment of International Students Studying in China: Reality and Recommendations

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Abstract

International student education is an important aspect of China's higher education opening-up. However, in recent years, negative incidents about the treatment of international students in China have appeared on the internet, and the Chinese public's negative attitude towards the treatment of international students in China has become increasingly prominent. Therefore, from the perspective of social conflict theory, this article analyzes the reasons for the Chinese public's attitude towards the treatment of international students in China, and proposes the specific path for the adjustment of Chinese public's attitude towards the treatment of international students in China.

Key words: Public attitude; International students; China; Higher education Opening-up

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

International student education has become a crucial part for China's higher education as an important means to open up to the world. According to statistics, over the past 40 years of China's Reform and Opening Up, both the number of Chinese international students and their origin countries have shown a trend of continuous growth, and China has become one of the world's leading countries

for studying abroad. Looking back on the development of international student education in China from scratch and from weak to strong, the government has played an indispensable role. The Chinese government attaches great importance to international student education, they have issued a series of policies including *Measures for the Administration of Recruiting and Cultivating International Students*, *The Regulation of Higher Education Institutions of Receiving International Students*, *Study in China Program*, *Quality Standards for International Students' Higher Education (Trial)*. Government departments at all levels and institutions of higher education have also responded positively to attract international students to study in China by lowering the enrollment threshold, providing a number of special scholarships and setting up academic counseling systems. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the series of measures with a certain level of 'Super-national treatment' have greatly enhanced the international appeal of China's higher education, attracted more international students to choose to study in China, and provided a practical boost for the development of China's higher education opening up to the outside world. On the other hand, the 'Super-national treatment' that foreign students have in China has also aroused much public debate.

The internet has become the largest space for the public to express their attitude in the information age. According to the 47th *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, as of December 2020, the number of Chinese internet users reached 989 million, more and more individuals began to talk about social hot spots through the Internet. In this context, the Chinese public's negative attitude towards the 'Super-national Treatment' of international students is fully reproduced and refracted in the modern internet society, which leads to a number of group abreact events on the internet, and shows a trend of increasing in number and scale. Taking the 'student partner project event of university S' as an example, which caused strong public repercussion, the network public

opinion monitoring analyzed that from July 9th 2019 to July 15th 2019, a total of 1,416 leading media including news, forums, WeChat and Weibo participated in the coverage, and there were 90,600 pieces of relevant information on the Internet. Affected audience of 2.755 billion and within the data, real users were accounted for 99.89%. The news provoked in 34 provinces in China, and speakers online were widely differed from social identity, including from social elite to grass roots internet users. Further analysis showed that 75.33% comments are tend to be negative, and the word with high frequency of the event were also mostly negative words. In recent years, social incidents with the theme of ‘Super-national Treatment’ of international students have been frequently reported in the newspapers, and also triggered mass group abreact events on the internet online, which should not be underestimated.

Therefore, in the context of continuously opening up of higher education to the outside world, how to keep expanding the scale of international students and prevent negative public repercussion towards ‘Super-national Treatment’ are the key issues for Chinese international student education development in the new era. As a result, this article has two goals: One is to make an in-depth analysis towards what’s behind the public’s negative attitude of ‘Super-national Treatment’ and try to form a correct understanding for the public. The second is to explore the prevention and control measures of Chinese government in those online conflicts around international students’ ‘Super-national Treatment’, and provide suggestions for the government to choose corresponding strategies. In order to achieve these goals, this article is structured in four parts. Firstly, the conceptual and analytical framework is further elaborated. Secondly, an overview of the reality of international students’ ‘Super-national Treatment’ in China is offered. Thirdly, a discussion on the issue is concluded. Finally, ending with the policy recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Social conflict theory emerged widely in the United States in the 1960s. Lewis Coser attributed the generation of social conflict to ‘the difference in values, the demand for rare status, and the struggle between power and resources’. Social conflict theory analyzes social problems from the aspects of nature, cause, structure and function, and explores ways to alleviate social contradictions and promote social development from the perspective of social conflict (Zhong & Jiang, 2020). Mainly includes the following three views:

Firstly, social conflict is a normal phenomenon and general trend of social operation. According to social conflict theory, conflicts inevitably exist in the process of social operation, that is, due to the limitation of social scarce resources such as value, status and power, all parts

of the society compete with each other for a long time, and social conflicts arise from this. According to different reference standards, social conflict can be divided into realistic conflict and non-realistic conflict, constructive conflict and destructive conflict, implicit conflict and explicit conflict, in-group conflict and out-group conflict, etc.

Secondly, social conflict has a positive function on the operation of social system. While admitting social conflict is universal, social conflict theory constructively think that conflicts have positive functions for social system such as integration, innovation and balance. A certain degree of conflict is a basic element of social groups to survive and sustain development. Only by the existence of social conflict, new social order can be found and the society can progress.

Thirdly, Social conflict requires dynamic adjustment. Social conflict theory argues that social conflict shouldn’t be blindly evade or allow it develop without regulation. Instead, people should be objective on the interpretation of fair value of the existence of social conflict. Take more care about social conflict’s function to strengthen the ability to adapt between the various groups, organizations and individuals in the society. And properly use relevant means to adjust social conflict so as to lead social conflict to play its positive function.

Social conflict theory takes social conflict as the research object and regards maintaining the harmony and stability of social system as its ultimate goal. It emphasizes that social conflict should be alleviated by means of rational communication, active guidance and stratification management, so as to promote the operation and improvement of social system. This study focuses on the negative attitude of the Chinese public towards the ‘Super-national Treatment’ of overseas students, which is fully reflected in a number of related group abreact events on the internet. Group abreact event on the internet refers to under certain social background a number of unorganized internet population using specific incident in reality to manipulate public opinion online, which could be a reflection of real or potential social systems’ problems. Most of the participants had no direct interest with the event itself, they mainly tried to express a certain kind of dissatisfaction with society. It’s a kind of ‘venting conflict’ and thus belongs to the category of non-realistic conflict in social conflict theory. Therefore, social conflict theory constitutes the analytical framework to examine Chinese public attitude towards ‘Super-national Treatment’ of international students studying in China.

OVERVIEW OF THE REALITY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ TREATMENT IN CHINA

International student education is not only an important part of the internationalization of China’s higher

education, but also the inevitable pursuit of building a high-leveled educational system of China. It also plays an irreplaceable role in serving the national strategy of 'The Belt and Road' and building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind (Lin & Chen, 2019). Since China's Reform and Opening up entering the new era, the Chinese government attaches great importance to the international students education, and *Modernization of Chinese Education 2035* clearly put forward that 'imply the Study in China policy, establish and perfect the international students education quality assurance mechanism, comprehensively improve the quality of the students' (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). To be more specific, one is to continuously develop the publicity of China's support on international student education, 'create a government leading, society participating form of scholarship system with various funders and means.' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010) Continue to expand the scale of oversea students and optimize their learning structure to promote international student education into a new level. 'increase the intensity of brand major's and courses' construction, build service system for the international students' socialization and specialization.' (Xinhua News Agency, 2016); Second is to establish a positive sorting mechanism for overseas students, build a preparatory education system for overseas students in China, and 'establish and improve the education quality guarantee mechanism for overseas students, and comprehensively improve the quality of overseas students.' (Xinhua News Agency, 2019); Third is to focus on oversea students' crucial needs. Improve both the laws and regulations on visas, off-campus accommodations, work-study opportunity and social security. Improve the efficiency of services for overseas students and provides follow-up support for the graduates (Zhang & Liu, 2020). Thus, it's clear that in the present and the future, Chinese government will adhere the basic principle of 'expanding and optimizing the structure, the management, and quality' towards international student education.

Super-national treatment refers to the civil treatment accorded by a country to a foreign natural person, legal person or merchant ship in a manner superior to that accorded to a domestic natural person, legal person or merchant ship (Li, 1986). In the era of globalization, facing the global higher education system and the international study market dominated by western developed countries, Chinese government intends to stand out and build a new highland of international higher education with strong appeal. On the one hand, it should focus on building an high-leveled education system and enhance the international influence of Chinese higher education. On the other hand, it is undeniable that compared with western developed countries, China's higher education is still lacking the support of cultural dividend in opening up to the outside world. Therefore,

at the present stage, in order for Chinese government to reconstruct the international study order and attract a large number of international students, they must apply policies, which have a strong appeal for the oversea students, including high grants, low entrance threshold, academic tutoring system, specialized management to make up for the dividend they are lack of. There is no doubt that those preferential policies enjoyed by the oversea students have make their study resources significantly superior to the ordinary college students and that creates the public perception of 'Super-national Treatment'.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the social conflict theory, conflicts are caused by the uneven distribution of social resources and people's disappointment. The dissolution of the legitimacy of the distribution system is the key inducement factor. In other words, when faced with the uneven distribution of scarce resources, people will first be aroused psychologically and emotionally. From questioning whether the inequality of distribution is reasonable to denying the legitimacy of its existence, people's sense of relative deprivation and injustice is increasing (Feng, 2011). As mentioned above, there is no denying that in order to attract more oversea students to study in China, the Chinese government and institutions of higher education provide oversea students with learning and living resources that are significantly better than those of ordinary college students. For the 'Super-national Treatment' enjoyed by oversea students, the public will inevitably feel relative deprivation and injustice and therefore the negative attitude formed.

At a deeper level, the negative attitude of the Chinese public towards the 'Super-national Treatment' of overseas students can be seen as a reflection of the main contradiction in China's social development at the present stage. Since the Reform and Opening up, Chinese government has focused on expanding the number of international students and provided many preferential policies for oversea students studying in China. However, why the 'Super-national Treatment' of international students has gradually attracted public attention and criticism in recent years is closely related to the transformation of the main contradiction in Chinese society. At present, the main contradiction in Chinese society has been transformed into 'the contradiction between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development'. The "needs for a better life" are not only embodied in the 'practical needs' but also showed in 'emotional needs' including people's engagement, a sense of fairness, security, happiness, and acquisition (Huang, 2017). In the new era, 'the people's ever-growing needs for a better life' is expanded from the material life to the political, social and ecological parts, but due to the current situation of unbalanced and inadequate development, Chinese public's

needs for a better life cannot be fully satisfied. In the context of this reality, Chinese way of providing a series of preferential policy in order to attract more high-quality overseas students will inevitably lead to the public to form a psychological imbalance of tension. And with the help of 'user friendly and spreading widely' internet they tend to criticize the 'Super-national Treatment' that most overseas students enjoyed. It's a way for the public to vent tension and anger to what's behind the phenomena. In other words, the 'Super-national Treatment' of overseas students only plays a role as a fuse, and the public expresses their unrealistic emotions due to their unsatisfied "needs for a better life" through negative attitudes towards the series of events related to the 'Super-national Treatment' of overseas students, which belongs to the category of unrealistic conflicts.

Public's negative attitude towards 'Super-national Treatment' of overseas students is essentially a social conflict, which contains a relatively profound conflict and contradiction. But we should also recognize that social system has its own complexity and dependency, conflicts are inevitable within the operation of it. Venting of some conflicts with high frequency and low intensity will not arise contradictions excessively, instead it may improve the stability of social system after releasing those negative energies (Zhang, 2021). According to social conflict theory such conflict commonly referred to as a constructive conflict, which in Coser's opinion will boost the development of society, organization and individual. He believes that conflict does not always show the characteristics of anti-function but also has its constructive function. Only in the place of conflict can there be behavioral consciousness and self-consciousness, and rational behavior comes after them. The existence of constructive conflict is a sign of a healthy society. 'Conflict acts as a 'motivator' in social systems, inspiring the establishment of new norms, rules and institutions.' (Coser, 1989)

Throughout Chinese international student education, although there is no denying that Chinese government has taken 'regulation' as an important standard for a long time, issued a series of policies to develop international student education, including *Measures for the Administration of Recruiting and Cultivating International Students and Quality Standards for International Students' Higher Education (Trial)*. However, we should also realize that 'For the macro and broad comprehensive policies formulated by the government, the specific implementing agencies often lack the ability, confidence or willingness to implement these policies, resulting in a certain degree of deviation in the implementation process.' (Pan et al., 2015) We have to admit that because of the deviation of the policy implementation China's international student education, especially in the standardization of the treatment of overseas students have a certain kind of flaws. But the public's negative attitude towards the 'Super-

national Treatment' of overseas students through online channels has aroused the attention, alarm and action of Chinese government departments, universities and even all sectors of society. Taking the 'student partner project event of university S' as an example, after the provoke of the event, the Chinese Ministry of Education continuously issued a mass amount of notice such as 'Further promote the assimilation in management and service between overseas students and Chinese students, and urge the education administrative departments at all levels and the universities to implement policy' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019) 'Strictly carry out the regulations in both the *Measures for the Administration of Recruiting and Cultivating International Students and Quality Standards for International Students' Higher Education (Trial)*, stop blindly pursuing international standard and the scale of overseas student.' (Party Group of the Ministry of Education of the Communist Party of China, 2020) Furthermore, in *Modernization of Chinese Education 2035* they specifically points that 'To establish and perfect the international student education quality assurance mechanism, improving the quality of the overseas students in an all-round way.' (Xinhua News Agency, 2019)

It's not hard to see that by the provoke of public's negative attitude towards overseas students' 'Super-national Treatment', Chinese government carried out new series of regulations upon international student education. It also promoted relevant policies' and laws' perfection and alerted relevant facilities to come up with a more understandable treatment towards overseas students, accelerated the optimization of China's international student education. Therefore, in a sense, the negative attitude of the public towards the 'Super-national Treatment' of overseas students belongs to the category of constructive conflict, which has become the motivator to boost the overall optimization of the international student education ecology of China.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a strong internal connection between constructive conflict and destructive conflict. The two are not contradictory, and will transform into each other under certain conditions. For constructive conflict, if we blindly choose to avoid it, it will develop towards destructive conflict, this requires us to objectively interpret the nature of conflict, strengthen scientific management of conflict, and properly use the positive meaning of conflict to serve society, organizations and individuals.

The Chinese public's negative attitude towards "super-national treatment" of international students is a constructive conflict, so it is crucial to scientifically manage it through effective means. For conflict management, Cosser creatively proposed the concept of "safety valve mechanism", which pointed out that

negative emotions, including dissatisfaction, are first generated from the operation of the social system. If the budding state is not eliminated in time, it will form pressure that destroys the normal operation of the social system. If the pressure exceeds the limit that the social system can bear, the social system will suffer losses (Qian, 2014). And in order to avoid this situation, it is necessary to establish the “safety valve mechanisms” in the social system as a means of resolving conflicts, so as to provide normal channels for members of the society or groups, and will accumulate negative effects based on certain conflicts. Emotions and even resentment among members are vented or eliminated, thereby maintaining the stability of the social structure. Under the strategic background of “continuously promoting the scale of international students”, it can be foreseen that with the increasingly diverse channels of public participation in politics and the increasing extremes of “hatred of officials and injustice”, the public’s negative attitude towards “super-national treatment” of international students will further intensify without dredge and make adverse effects. Thus, Chinese government should construct a “safety valve mechanism” for dredging public attitudes; construction can be started from four aspect.

Firstly, the public administration should change the traditional administrative posture and urge the change of work consciousness. Analyzing the events related to the negative attitude of the public in recent years, the spearhead is mostly directed at the style and behavior of the public sector. On the one hand, in order to maximize their own work performance, relevant administrations have over-understood or even distorted policies, strengthened preferential treatment and neglected management of international students, this directly led to the generation of public dissatisfaction, on the other hand, for public accountability they generally take the method of chilling to handle, lacking of responsibility. To serve the problem, Chinese government can incorporate public attitudes as an assessment item into the performance assessment track, urge the staff of administrations to change their usual “official-based” administrative stance.

Secondly, the Chinese government should implement the public right to supervise the management of international students. “The fundamental cause of social conflict is the rising sense of relative deprivation and injustice of the ruled in unequal systems resulting from social divisions.” When managing international students, the staff will inevitably lead to deviations in policy implementation due to their own consideration, while public supervision can effectively identify and restrain the occurrence of deviations. Thus, the Chinese government should establish a public supervision mechanism for the education and management of international students, thereby to promote the formation of transparency in the international students management.

Thirdly, the Chinese government should build a channel for opinions and appeals of public. The smooth flow of information acts as a lubricant in the communication between the government and the public, and if the public can reflect their opinions, suggestions and interest demands to the government departments and get a response, it will effectively reduce the accumulated grievances. Thus, the Chinese government should build a special information channel for the international students management, incorporate the network interest appeal channel into the regular channel system, thereby transform out-of-system anger into standardized expressions within the system, at the same time, the government also need to highlight the importance of public opinion in the formulation and improvement of international student management policies, widely absorb public opinions before formulating new international student management policy through discussion columns, online hearings and other channels, and publish a response document based on public comments.

Fourth, the Chinese government should improve emergency management capabilities for online mass incidents. Recently, the public’s negative attitude towards “super-national treatment” of international students has often been carried by online mass incidents, and is often exacerbated by the administration’s mishandling. Thus, the Chinese government can set up an online public opinion department to deal with information related to the management of international students, once relevant negative information is found in online public opinion, the department should quickly extract effective information and feed it back to the corresponding responsible department. At the same time, the online public opinion department should make targeted responses to public opinions on the Internet based on existing information, so as to grasp the initiative of online discourse, then the department should mobilize a certain amount of public opinion to achieve proper guidance and intervention in the overall incident, and prevent more non-stakeholders from joining online public opinion.

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