

“Rich Kids Who Never Work”: Media Misrepresentation on Chinese International Students

I graduated from Hangzhou Foreign Languages School Cambridge A-Level Center (HFLS CAL), a department that teaches A-Level courses to students who do not take Chinese Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) but apply to college overseas. During my sophomore year, I once hung out with my roommates at a hotpot restaurant near campus. On the table next to us was a family whose daughter was going to high school soon. The girl was talking to her parents about possible schools that matched her academic performance and interest, and suddenly she said loudly: “I don’t want to consider HFLS CAL. Those studying-abroad students are rich and they do not work at all. They wear strange clothes, expensive jewelries and makeup...” We stopped eating and looked towards that table; then, realizing that this was impolite, we silently looked at each other: none of us were indigenous, but we stayed over during the weekend as going back home took long and some of us had tutoring sessions in Hangzhou; this hotpot was the only relax after a long school week, and we chose this restaurant partly because it offered special discounts for students. However, without knowing any fact of HFLS CAL students right next to her, that girl denounced us as rich and lazy kids who were unacceptable future classmates in public.

This incident reflects that people around us have inaccurate images of us — Chinese students who pursue higher education abroad. This can be attributed to media misrepresentation: TV shows, news, and social networking exaggerate and overgeneralize our privileges, ineptness, and the ease of our educational pathways. However, these wrong images cause social alienation in our home country and even insult. This essay will analyze reasons behind this misrepresentation, how it hurts perspective and current Chinese international students (especially during the global Covid-19 pandemic), and my personal feelings as a Chinese international student towards this issue.

Firstly, Chinese international students are indeed privileged. Except for those sponsored by government or school exchange programs, their families can afford expensive tuitions, personal

expenses and traveling costs — usually without any financial aid. This academic year (2020-2021), the estimated cost of USC is \$79,063 (¥538,466) for students living on campus (USC Financial Aid, 2020), while in my hometown Ningbo, a second-tier coastal city with 8 million population in East China, the annual average disposable income was ¥56,982 (\$8,393) per person in 2019 (Ningbo Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2020). This means that even in a big city of the wealthiest part of China, it is impossible for most households to afford international higher education. Apart from financial support, Chinese international students also enjoy higher flexibility in their studies. In contrast to most Gaokao students, who aim to compete with millions of peers on a single big test for college, students going abroad can choose the courses that intrigue them, develop skills through activities, and write their distinct personal traits into college essays.

However, their favorable family financial conditions and academic flexibilities are exaggerated in media — sometimes in derogative ways. For example, in 2019 Chinese TV series *Over the Sea I Come to You* (《带着爸爸去留学》) about several families sending their kids abroad for preparatory and undergraduate schools, a girl said to another whose father was a businessman: “...even if you cheated or got expelled, your dad can immediately find you a better and more expensive school.” This statement is untrue: academic dishonesty is a very serious violation; transfer requires application, transcript and usually recommendations from the original school; plus, despite admission scandals, these “undeserved admissions” are totally unrelated to most “common students”, especially international students who are less likely to have connections to elite colleges than domestic students. This claim is, nevertheless, suggesting that Chinese international students have parents so wealthy and powerful that they can misbehave and still go to good schools. This TV series also depicts main characters as incapable and irresponsible playboys and playgirls. There is little plot related to academics; rather, these kids dated and only thought about cohabiting — even, when one girl was spotted having sexual intercourses with her boyfriend (a behavior not accepted very much in Chinese culture) by her

parents, she lied that she did not know what had happened to her and shirked all the blames to her boyfriend. These plots may be fun to watch, yet audiences may overgeneralize images of main characters to all Chinese international students. In fact, most college students have intensive schoolwork; when they have fun or be in romantic relationship, most of them are responsible young adults. As a result, *Over the Sea I Come to You* leads to negative and fake stereotypes on Chinese international students. Furthermore, *Over the Sea I Come to You* ranked at the top of the audience share chart and was on trending of Weibo (a Chinese social media platform, similar to Facebook) for 22 times when it was broadcasted initially (Zhejiang TV Station, 2019). This popularity reveals that the stereotype it brings may have influenced significant amount of audience. Among the audience, perspective international students may fear that studying abroad will make them as “bad” as these characters, and other viewers may conclude from the series that Chinese international students are not well-behaved.

The TV series analyzed in last paragraphs characterizes Chinese international students as “bad kids”, yet its aim is mainly entertainment. One may argue that the story is based on pure imagination, and for the sake of entertainment, fidelity to reality may not be that important. However, those media that “aim to be true” may also distort images of Chinese international students: for example, they study abroad to avoid the tough Gaokao. On the one hand, realistic media overstress the hardness of Gaokao by focusing only on some suffering students. For example, in 2015, CCTV made a phenomenal documentary named *Gaokao* (《高考》). One third (first two of a total six episodes) of the documentary was about Gaokao-retaking students at Maotanchang Middle School in Lu’an, Anhui Province. These students studied endlessly every day, had almost no entertainment, and were supervised 24 hours a day, seven days a week as if they were in a prison. This scene is true — for main characters of these episodes, who came from rural areas and had already failed Gaokao once, this was the one last chance to get into a college and that competition was extremely brutal and stressful. It,

however, does not apply to the general Gaokao students, who do not retake and test and still have some freedom and activities during their senior year, such as sport meetings and clubs. On the other hand, Chinese international students post on social networking, such as WeChat Moments (Chinese social media, similar to Instagram), Weibo and Bilibili (Chinese online video platform, similar to YouTube). Even though their posts reflect some parts of overseas life, they gave people an illusion that international students are having a lot more fun than hard-work. For example, searching “studying abroad” on Bilibili, the mostly-played videos are vlogs on flying in the First Class, dating, shopping and eating delicious food — there is almost nothing about academics, the most important component of college. Also, Chinese students who are to study in the United States have to travel to neighboring countries (regions) or even the U.S. for the SAT and ACT. When they are traveling, they usually post food and some local exploration, not how the test goes. For example, after taking the SAT in Taipei, I visited National Palace Museum, had dinner at a famous night market and posted photos on WeChat Moments. Viewers who have no knowledge about SAT would believe that I was at leisure during others’ school time and had a great time in Taipei. As a result, the stress of dues, tests, papers, and efforts Chinese international students pay behind their college applications are unrepresented and disregarded. Combining the exaggeration of hardness of Gaokao and overrepresentation of “having fun” of studying abroad, realistic media depict studying abroad as an easy path that only advantaged kids can take to bypass the arduous Gaokao.

Overall, media misrepresentation as fortunate, idle and unreliable kids who dodge Gaokao sometimes makes Chinese international students in difficult positions. On the one hand, perspective students may choose to study abroad unwisely as they believe that it requires less effort; however, when they suddenly realize that the “easy life abroad without Gaokao” was a hoax and there are pressures from assessments, using a different language and making friends, they will be overwhelmed (Pan, 2019). On the other hand, current students are alienated (just like what my friends and I

experienced at the hotpot shop), and their talents and efforts are disregarded. When one student from my high school was accepted by Harvard and was on the local news, the mostly liked comment was “...it is all because your parents are rich and are willing to spend money on you...learn from cleaners on the street and be humble...everybody can make your achievement if they have a family like yours” (Qianjiang Evening Newspaper, 2020). It seems that these commentators totally ignored how exceptional and diligent this student is and how difficult it is to be admitted by Harvard. Rather, they made acrid remarks on the internet. It is the combination of their ego and their belief in the media misrepresentation that leads to these disrespectful comments, which are hard for Chinese international students to undertake and could lead to social alienation.

Unfortunately, alienation and disrespect escalated into antagonism during Covid-19. Many Chinese students wanted to go back home, but they were in predicament. While Chinese authorities enacted very strict regulations on international flights to prevent re-introduction of Covid-19 cases (Civil Aviation Administration of China, 2020), these students were criticized as unpatriotic and abused on the internet. There was even a harsh rhyme online to attack them: “when our country needs construction you are not here, but you are the fastest to bring the virus back” (“祖国建设你不在, 千里投毒你最快”) (for example, Sun, 2020). Even though international students traveling back did bring pressure on domestic control of the pandemic, insult like this far exceeds “expression of fear of more cases” and is unacceptable. In fact, these students have the right to go back home anytime as they are Chinese citizens; most of them are cooperating with quarantine regulations; and most importantly, studying abroad does not mean being unpatriotic or even treason. This antagonism is an extreme result of negative stereotypes against Chinese international students: people unleashed their grievance to these “rich and selfish kids” who have “easy opportunities” that others do not possess. As social media play an inescapable role in promoting wrong images of Chinese international students, they should also be responsible for these hostile consequences (May, 2020).

Admittedly, due to the scope of this short essay, the types and number of cases are limited for a complete and objective discussion, but they can still reflect that media are distorting the perception on Chinese international students, which harm them inevitably. As a Chinese international student, I am uncomfortable at this misrepresentation. Once as a perspective student, I felt that studying abroad was tougher than I perceived from media and had a quite hard time adjusting myself to it; now as a current college student, I feel unfairly-judged, isolated and insecure because of massive affront on the internet during Covid-19. Therefore, I personally hope that media can play a fairer role when presenting us on the screen — our advantages, our hardship, our effort to make our dreams come true just like everyone else — so that the public will have less misconception on us and our educational decisions. In my opinion, the elimination of misconception is fundamental to mutual respect and more collaboration among scholars of different backgrounds, and will allow more students to make well-informed and sensible decisions about where to pursue their higher education.

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