

Chinese youth: **Domestic issues and transnational developments**

by Marina Svensson



Young Pioneers of China standing
honour guard at the Monument to the
People's Heroes at Tiananmen Square.

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abstract

The increasing investment in and emphasis on ideological and political education at Chinese universities, and statements, including by Xi Jinping himself, and other policies related to youth and higher education, reveals a growing concern about youth. This article provides a brief overview of developments and policies affecting Chinese youth, including the emergence of new values among them.

KEYWORDS: Political education, Chinese Communist Party, Young Chinese.

It is often postulated in the literature that there is a positive correlation between liberal and democratic values and levels of education.¹ With more young Chinese getting higher education and exposure to liberal societies through study and work abroad, this trend would be expected to become stronger.² However, the picture is complex and authoritarian regimes such as China have many tools in their toolbox, including control over higher education, career advancement, and citizens abroad. The growing emphasis on ideological and political education in Chinese universities, and efforts to reach out to and control Chinese students abroad, indicate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) feels it needs to boost its legitimacy and strengthen control over this important segment of the population. At the same time, Chinese students who may face discrimination and a precarious life situation, could also become more nationalistic and less attracted to liberal democratic values while abroad at a time when democracies themselves are undergoing profound challenges.

This article provides a brief overview of developments and policies affecting Chinese youth, including the emergence of new values among them. The article then goes on to address China's different ways of reaching out to and controlling the Chinese diaspora, including transnational students. There is a growing concern over Chinese "influence operations" abroad among many Western observers. However, they often tend to conflate different types of activities, as well as target groups, overestimate the impact on different groups and the heterogeneity of students, and also ignore the differences between host societies.³

Ideological and political education: Fostering the new socialist generation

Like other communist states, after 1949, the CCP established a range of youth organizations that serve to control, educate and socialize youth into state ideology and with the further aim of cultivating future party members and leaders. The Young Pioneers of China is the first organization that young children from 6 to 14 years of age can join. From the age of 14, students can then become members of the Communist Youth League, and almost all university students are members of this organization.⁴ In 2017, more than 81 million people, i.e. 6% of the population, were Youth League members. It is while they are attending university that young people are recruited into the CCP. In 2019,

more than a third of CCP members were said to be under 40 years of age, while in 2021 student party members accounted for 3% of the total number.⁵

Young Chinese are subject to ideological and political education from elementary school and throughout university. Their education combines Marxist ideology, which these days also includes Xi Jinping's thoughts, with nationalism and pride in Chinese history and culture, as well as a focus on the country's recent economic and geopolitical achievements.⁶ Although ideological and political education has always been a key part of the school and university curricula, for political reasons, it has been strengthened at various times, including after the democracy movement in 1989, in order to counteract the influence of so-called Western ideas on democracy among students and faculty.

The new emphasis on ideological and political education since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013 should be seen as part of the re-ideologization of Chinese society, and the increasing control over higher education as related to the crackdown on civil society, public intellectuals, media and the internet.⁷ Xi Jinping has personally taken an interest in and spoken about the need to strengthen the ideological and political education of youth.⁸ Through various means, including compulsory ideological and political education at all stages of the education system, the CCP has attempted to revitalize its propaganda work in order to make it more attractive to young people, for example, by using social media, rap music and influencers, as well as reforming the existing youth organizations.

Chinese youth today: Diverging conditions, experiences and values

Chinese youth constitute a very diverse group, depending on their family situation and socio-economic circumstances, whether they are born and live in the countryside or in cities, as well as depending on their gender, age and ethnicity. However, young people's lives today differ significantly from previous generations due to the rapid economic growth in recent years, the one-child policy, the expansion of higher education, and the impact of the internet. Overall, the opportunities for young people to take part in global popular culture, learn about the world, make friendships, study, travel and work abroad, have significantly increased. Nationalistic expressions and activities among Chinese youth have received much attention over the years but the picture is complex and nationalistic sentiments quite volatile.⁹ Young people feel a lot of pressure to succeed, not only from the CCP but also from their own families, while they are also experiencing difficulties finding work, even after obtaining a university degree. Many young people have become engaged in various social causes and volunteer activities, and we can also detect a trend of more post-materialist values as for example reflected in the "lying-flat" phenomena where youth have turned the back on striving for material success.¹⁰ In recent years, some young people have also become quite active on women's rights and LGBTQ issues, including the #MeToo movement, although the space for such activism has shrunk considerably in China since 2015.¹¹ Another somewhat contra-



A group of Young Pioneers in Tiananmen Square in October 2007.

PHOTO: BROKENSPHERE

dictory development, increasingly gaining scholarly attention, is the spread of alt-right ideas and values on Chinese social media, which also testify to a degree of disillusionment with liberal and democratic values in the West among some segments of the Chinese society.¹² For the CCP leadership, young people are crucial for the task of national rejuvenation and expected to work hard and embrace socialism.¹³ This was also reflected in the State Council White Paper on youth published in 2022 on the occasion of the centenary of the Chinese Youth League.¹⁴ In other words, we see some divergence between the CCP's expectations on youth and young people's own diverse aspirations and experiences.

Chinese transnational activities: Targeting youth abroad

The CCP's main priority is to secure its own legitimacy and domestic stability, while also attempting to increase China's influence globally and among Chinese communities overseas. Since 2017, Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive and there have been concerned reports in different countries about its "influence operations", which not only target Chinese communities but also foreign citizens and institutions.¹⁵ Andrew Chubb

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has tried to nuance the description of the CCP's political activities abroad as they encompass a range of different activities, some overt and legal, and others more covert, and also target different groups including both Chinese in the diaspora, as well as local political and business elites in different countries.¹⁶ The CCP has different ways of reaching out to the Chinese diaspora, using financial incentives, for example, favorable treatment regarding exit/entry regulations and investments, as well as cultural and educational programs that aim to create stronger bonds with China, in addition to political pressure and

repression.¹⁷ The work is administered by a number of institutions such as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the united front system under the United Front Work Department (UFW). The latter has received more attention in recent years.¹⁸ It operates under the Central Committee of the CCP and works with all groups in Chinese society outside of the CCP to ensure support for its policies. It also reaches out to overseas Chinese communities in order to mobilize their "patriotic" feelings and prevent dissenting ideas from spreading among them. The most visible UFW organization is the Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China, which operates in most countries and is led by the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National



PHOTO: SCREEN SHOT, WWW.USU.EDU

The Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), has sub-branches in different countries and at local universities, and gathers students and scholars abroad. Here at Utah State University.

Reunification. It has become more active in recent years and networks with local Chinese organizations, organizes demonstrations against pro-Tibetan or pro-Hong Kong demonstrations, as well as convenes study sessions on important speeches by the CCP leadership. Another important organization is the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China, which manages official relations between the CCP and major political parties in other countries.¹⁹ Chinese diaspora organizations are one of the targets of the UFDW and some receive financial support but are also subjected to political pressure. The Chinese state thus also engages in what has been called transnational repression that targets ethnic minorities, including in particular Tibetans and Uighurs, political dissidents, human rights activists, journalists, and former government officials and others accused of corruption. The tactics used ranges from renditions, co-opting other countries to detain exiles, to digital threats and harassments, use of spyware, and coercion by proxy, for example threatening relatives in China.²⁰

China has been very active in sending students abroad since the reform period began in 1978 when it realized that there was a need to catch up in science and technology. In 2017, some 600 000 Chinese students went abroad to study, meaning a total of 1.4 million students enrolled abroad that year.²¹ In order to avoid a brain drain, in 2008 China started the Thousand Talents program to attract students and scholars back to the country. The official view is that overseas study benefits China, although there is also concern about students being exposed to different ideas and values, so that preparing students ideologically before they leave China, maintaining close contact with them while they are abroad, and encouraging them to return home are crucial. Thus, students are seen as ambassadors and are expected to propagate and defend Chinese interests.²² In 2015, Xi Jinping designated students abroad as a “new focus” of United Front Work as they play such a key role in China’s future.²³

Chinese students who travel abroad for their education are

quite a diverse group. They study a variety of topics ranging from the humanities and social sciences to natural sciences and medicine at BA, MA and PhD level and beyond. PhD students might be funded by the official China Scholarship Council (CSC), although currently, most Chinese students living abroad are privately funded or receive scholarships from foreign universities. The CSC scholarships come with expectations to return home after one’s studies, require financial guarantees from relatives in case a student does not finish her/his studies, as well as put demands on students to not do anything that would be harmful to the Chinese state or violate the host countries’ laws.²⁴

There is an official association, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), with sub-branches in different countries and at local universities, which gathers students and scholars abroad.²⁵ At Chinese embassies, the Department of Overseas Chinese Affairs (*Qiaowu chu*) also maintains contact with this association and other overseas Chinese associations, whereas the embassy’s Education Section (*Jiaoyu chu*) oversees and provides funding to the CSSA. The education section supports cultural events, for example, during the Chinese New Year, and reaches out to or visits universities for other social events. While most activities seem to be of a more general, cultural and supportive nature, providing support during, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, some activities are more political in nature. For example, the CSSA has welcomed visits by CCP leaders, including Xi Jinping himself, and also posts news from the embassy, including political information, in its social media groups on WeChat.²⁶ There have also been a number of reports of Chinese students setting up CCP branches since CCP members are expected to have groups in units and institutions when there are at least three members. This would appear to have mainly taken

place when groups of exchange students or visiting scholars travel abroad together for brief visits and have been under the direction of their home institution’s party committee, as well as when their home institutions are able to control and check them when they return home.²⁷

IN THE LAST couple of years, warnings have been raised about China’s growing global influence, not only in the field of politics and economics but also in the

field of higher education and scientific collaboration.²⁸ Some of this concern is more about issues of intellectual property theft or espionage, such as when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) sponsors Chinese students and scholars to study abroad.²⁹ However, there is also growing concern about the Chinese government’s control over Chinese students abroad and some accounts that they are being subjected to pressure and intimidation, being asked to inform on each other and to voice criticism if any teachers or universities address what the Chinese government regards as sensitive topics, such as developments in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong.³⁰ Thus, there have been clashes between mainland Chinese students and supporters of the Hong Kong protest

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Protesters in Yau Ma Tei on November 18, 2019 as they attempted to breach the police's cordon line to break through to protesters trapped inside Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

PHOTO: STUDIO INCENDO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

movement, for example, in Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK. These developments however also highlight the divergent views among Chinese students themselves and an increasingly vocal student body that criticizes universities, individual teachers, as well as fellow Chinese students.

The evidence of Chinese influence over students abroad or attempts to inform or interfere in events or teaching on campus is often more anecdotal in nature than based on any systematic studies. A survey of American higher education institutions published in 2018 identified ways in which Chinese diplomats and students infringed on academic freedom in the US. However, it emphasized that the negative examples that had been documented were very few in number.³¹ Likewise, a report by the Leiden Asia Center in 2018 found no evidence of concerted political influencing activities by the Chinese government toward Chinese overseas students and researchers in Europe.³² Nevertheless, other reports have found growing evidence of attempts by the Chinese embassy and consulates in the US to exert influence over students, as well as students turning against each other.³³

A recent 2021 study by Human Rights Watch found increased fear among Chinese students in Australia when they were critical of Chinese politics or took a stand in support of protesters in Hong Kong.³⁴ There was evidence of direct harassment and intimidation by classmates, including threats of physical violence and attacks online. Also, students' critical views and activities were reported to the Chinese authorities back home and in

some cases led to students' relatives being contacted as a way to pressure them into silence and compliance. The Human Rights Watch study also found that there had been a marked increase in expressions of nationalism among students since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, and more recently, due to developments in Hong Kong. However, other academic work has shown a much more complex picture, as Chinese students also might act without the blessing of the embassy, in fact, against its wishes, and thus be perceived as negatively impacting relations with the host country.³⁵

The foreign experience: New insights and conflicting views

Studies and surveys, including the Asian Barometer, reveal a high level of satisfaction and support of the CCP regime across the population,³⁶ although other studies show that wealthier and more educated Chinese are more likely to hold politically liberal, pro-market and non-nationalistic views.³⁷ However, a study of the four different rounds of the Asian Barometer showed that although younger Chinese – the post-1980s and 1990s generations – exhibited a higher level of individualistic values, were also less respectful of authority and had a lower level of trust in central government, they still had a low opinion of democracy.³⁸ Thus, the results from these kinds of studies are not conclusive. It might also be assumed that Chinese students who go abroad would pick up new ideas, including democratic values, which is something that is emphasized in work on the importance of

higher education for socialization into political beliefs.³⁹ It should be remembered that Chinese students' exposure to different values and ideas, as well as their integration into foreign societies, vary quite a lot depending on their chosen topics and level of study, personalities and interests, as well as the situation in the host country and also may change over time. Some students have become more nationalistic during their studies abroad, as shown in the run-up to the Olympics in 2008, although some demonstrations were initiated and supported by Chinese embassies. It is also obvious that living in a foreign country exposes Chinese students to negative aspects such as discrimination and other forms of inequality. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Chinese students were victims of discrimination and suspicion due to the pandemic's origin in China. One recent study shows that discrimination may actually make Chinese students more supportive of the CCP.⁴⁰ In this context, it is also worth noting that many Chinese students continue to be exposed to the Chinese news media when they are abroad and many get most of their news from Chinese social media.⁴¹ Some students are also involved in setting up special WeChat groups and public accounts in order to provide and share information, and student associations also forward news from Chinese embassies.⁴² Also, some of the news and values that students may pick up abroad stem from the alt-right, which is also favorably depicted in Chinese social media.⁴³ Not surprisingly, one study showed that the more students were exposed to Chinese media, the lower their support for democracy in China.⁴⁴

There have been no comprehensive studies on Chinese students abroad and their values, or changes in their values over time. Their reasons for studying abroad also vary. One study found that the primary reason for studying abroad was to get a different perspective on their home country, whereas other reasons included the belief that they would get a better education abroad.⁴⁵ Many other studies suggest that career advancement through a foreign degree was the most important reason for studying abroad.⁴⁶ Some studies found that while Chinese students studying in the West gain a more positive attitude toward their host country, they also see themselves as representing their home country.⁴⁷ An early study of Chinese students from Dalian who did not attend the more prestigious universities abroad but often eked out a precarious living doing part-time jobs while studying in Australia, Ireland, the UK and the US, also reveal very mixed views of the host societies and their political systems; in fact, most students were quite apolitical and focused on making money and developing their own professional careers.⁴⁸ A study comprising 186 people, conducted by *Foreign Policy* in 2015, found that 60% of respondents became more positive toward the US after studying in the country. However, at the same time, 53% of respondents reported a more positive view of

China and only 22% said they had become more negative toward their own country.⁴⁹ In 2020, MERICS published a survey of Chinese students in Germany; out of the approx. 37 000 students in Germany in 2018, 367 students responded.⁵⁰ The study found that there were conflicting attitudes about China's political system. Even though most of the students approved of the political status quo as being the best for China, a small minority said they were proud of China's political system as a whole. The majority of students actually became more positive toward China during their stay in Germany, while their views about the West became more diverse and complex. For example, the students were critical of the handling of the 2015 refugee crisis and the Brexit debacle, although they also appreciated the more liberal society in Germany, the social welfare system, and the rule of law.

A STUDY BY Han and Chen showed quite mixed results among Chinese students and scholars in the US.⁵¹ They found that although some 67% of them felt that democracy was positive for China in the long term, the longer they stayed in the US, the less they supported rapid democratization as they also became increasingly aware of problems in the American society. A more recent study from 2020 found that although Chinese students in the US were less nationalistic and more politically liberal than a comparative cohort in China, as well as more likely to have a higher socioeconomic status, discrimination and racism not only led to distress and anger, but also to more support for the CCP.⁵² This shift in views was also much stronger among those students who had been less nationalistic from the start.

Over the years Chinese students and scholars living abroad have been very active in various democratic movements. Some of them fled China after the crackdown on the 1989 democracy movement, and then established different kinds of organizations and media.⁵³ Many of this group have however been marginalized over the years as they have been unable to reach out to more recent diaspora and become out of touch with developments in China. A new generation of Chinese students and scholars have a better education and many have received positions in foreign universities. Many of them are also engaged in different topics and contribute to various debates in both the diaspora and in China. Although it is rare for Chinese students and scholars to speak out about more direct political

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issues, this does occasionally happen. When it was announced that the presidential term limit would be removed, enabling Xi Jinping to remain in power indefinitely, some Chinese students created a Twitter hashtag, #stopxijinping, and some of them also put up posters on American campuses criticizing this development.⁵⁴ The #MeToo movement in China was strongly linked with the global movement and Chinese students and scholars living abroad were heavily involved and influenced the domestic debates.⁵⁵ When protests against the zero-Covid policy took

place in China in November 2022, spurred by a deadly fire in Urumqi, university students also became involved on campuses across the country, the first time students became involved in any large-scale protests since 1989, and Chinese students abroad also organised several vigils in different countries. While most of these demonstrations focused on the immediate issues at hand such as ending the lockdown and releasing protesters in China, others also called for Xi Jinping's resignation.⁵⁶ Some people in the diaspora have become involved in different NGOs and have created new networks, thereby finding new opportunities for civic engagement abroad when the opportunities in China are shrinking. Young Chinese scholars have also been active in providing reliable news and information about both global events and developments in China through translations, academic debates and podcasts for people living in both China and abroad.⁵⁷ However, some studies have found varied and conflicting views among young Chinese who want to continue their civic engagement and activism while they are abroad, including within the feminist and Black Lives Matter movements. In some cases, they appear to have become disillusioned with these movements and their ability to influence politics in democracies, which may also reflect new challenges in the democracies themselves.⁵⁸

Conclusion

How capable is the CCP of influencing Chinese students abroad and fostering support among them for its authoritarian system? First of all, it is obvious that the CCP feels that Chinese students abroad, and their return to China, are important for both the party's survival and China's future prosperity. The increasing investment in and emphasis on ideological and political education at Chinese universities, as well as official statements, including statements by Xi Jinping himself, and policies related to youth and higher education, reveal a growing concern to ensure that young people contribute both to the CCP's future and to the national rejuvenation. However, it is also obvious that young Chinese people both at home and abroad are quite a heterogeneous group and exhibit changing and different values, ideas and identities, which may make such education and policies less effective. Some of the CCP's recent policies, for example, targeting celebrity culture and gaming, might also serve to alienate (some of) the youth. Young middle-class Chinese who have the opportunity to travel and study abroad are also influenced by other more individualistic and civic-minded values. It is obvious that although the Chinese government engages in transnational repression, most keenly felt by the Uighur community abroad, there are less opportunities for the CCP to actually control young people abroad and their views.⁵⁹ Its ability to control or impact Chinese students abroad also seems to vary depending on their circumstances, such as level of study and whether or not the students are self-funded or receive an official scholarship, as well as the host country in question. The general perception is however that attempts by the CCP to control the Chinese diaspora, be it students or other groups, as well as influence foreign institutions, have increased in recent years. China is more powerful and also stands out in comparison with many other authoritar-

ian states due to its economic influence and the number of organizations involved. This development requires some vigilance and more in-depth studies, but it is equally important not to panic, and suspect or discriminate against all Chinese citizens and students and scholars abroad. Mikael Wigell has argued for democracies to develop stronger mechanisms of democratic "deterrence" and strengthen democratic values and institutions through transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and reliance on civil society.⁶⁰ The problem today might partially be that democracies and their values are not only, or exclusively, under foreign authoritarian threat but also threatened from within, leading to less open and welcoming societies that themselves undermine democratic values. The pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine, and China's position, have fueled increased polarization, disinformation, and hostility, at the same time as the space for public debates and different kinds of exchanges has shrunk. It is very much up to the democracies and their institutions, including universities, to prove to Chinese students and others that democratic values and human rights are respected and upheld as well as provide safe spaces for them during their time abroad, and thus at the same time also strengthen their democratic "deterrence" capabilities. ✖

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