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# Internationalization, Face and Place:

a critical investigation into Chinese Higher Education, through the analysis of foreign students' life and perspectives at Shandong University

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## Introduction

Over the last 25 years, the realm of education has undergone enormous transformations around the globe, with the internationalization of higher education being one of the most debated changes. Although an ambiguous notion (Yang, 2016), the most acclaimed definition was developed by Knight (2004) - i.e. the "process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution" (p. 7). In this context, while many have acknowledged China's role in world economy, few have stressed its parallel achievements in the field of human capital investment, education and, especially, internationalization of higher education (Constant et al., 2013). When debating this last process, researchers have widely preferred two interpretations: as an instance of Soft Power, or even more, of economic, market-driven modernization (Yang, 2016; Slethaugh, 2007). To show these trends, some scholars have narrowed their range of analysis to a set of individuals or institutions (Schmidt, 2016; Song, 2017), with a few adopting an ethnographic approach (Zhao & Postiglione, 2008; Yuan et al., 2019). Nonetheless, they have focused on a narrow set of examples[1], leaving out other options from their scrutiny.

In this regard, I do not wish to oppose nor challenge the accuracy of those explanations pointing to Soft Power or to economic development. On the contrary, my aim is to shift the focus to under-analysed themes, like local culture's paradigms, which also shape and filter both the implementation and the trajectory of the internationalization process.

The findings of my research, which combines interviews, questionnaires and ethnographic observations with my background in Chinese culture and language, are multiple. Firstly, they show that foreign students from different background hold a moderately positive evaluation of their educational experience in China. However, many reconsidered this position after the break out of an on-line summer scandal, whose consequences affected them greatly. Secondly, the study demonstrates that foreign students consider Chinese - thus, "cultural-specific" - concepts like *Mianzi* (Face) as important players in the internationalization process of the university. Thirdly, this consideration poses a challenge to the mainstream, linear view of the field which considers Internationalization as a global, active force passively employed

[1] Chinese students, foreign teachers and top-tier globally renowned universities

by Chinese universities to reach specific - and mainly national - goals. Finally, interviewees' responses suggest an additional consideration, i.e. the possibility of re-categorizing Chinese HEIs'[2] internationalization away from top-down approaches, and closer to those who are primarily involved in the process (foreign students, foreign professors, university's staff).

[2] Higher Education Institution(s)

## 1. Literature review

The internationalization of higher education has been a much-debated topic over the last two decades. Knight (2004) proposed a definition which, despite later remodelling[3] - with a shift from "international" to the sub-category of "transnational" during the years - has been regarded as the most renowned in the field. Although contested by Yang (2014) and Hu & Willis (2017) for the difficulty of employing it for China's peculiar context in TNE[4], it has widely been applied to China too. Nevertheless, researchers debating the motivations for the internationalization of Chinese higher education can be divided in two main macro-groups, according to their explanation of the process.

### *1.1 Internationalization: Soft Power and economic modernization*

Some scholars have adopted a framework that parallels the theories of critical thinkers in other subjects. Consequently, they have brought attention to the connection between the internationalization of higher education and the notion of Power or, in China's case, "Soft Power" - i.e. "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2005).

Substantial work has been written on China's Soft Power and its manifestation through Confucius Institutes (CI) or through CSC's[5] scholarships. Schmidt (2016) and Song (2017) have investigated the practices of CIs in different areas of the globe, addressing them as hybrid manifestations of internationalization and Soft Power. Moreover, even though never mentioning the idea of Soft power, some have come to the same conclusions. In his attempt to critically investigate Chinese HEIs' connections with Africa as a South-South win-win cooperation, King (2013) has opted for a case study on Chinese teachers working in Africa. By doing so, he has fruitfully demonstrated the effectiveness of CIs as a medium for the spreading of Chinese language, culture and influence. However, only few, like Yang (2012), have tried to shed light on the linkage between Soft Power and internationalization beyond the Confucius Institutes.

[3] See Knight, J. (2016). "Transnational education remodeled: Toward a common TNE framework and definitions". Journal of Studies in International Education, 20(1), 34-47.
[4] Transnational (higher) education
[5] China Scholarship Council, i.e Chinese Government Scholarship

The other prevalent interpretation has indicated the economic motivation as a primary need for internationalization (Yang, 2016). Altbach (2013) has proved Chinese universities' necessity for internationalization and English to activate the process. Slethaug (2007) has tried to assess the level of adoption of "American", market-oriented models in China through a study on specific programs and comparisons with American universities. Authors like Tan & Reyes (2016) and Zhu et al. (2017) have studied the development and challenges of TNE in China from either a general top-down approach or by focusing on the strategies of top-tier universities.

### *1.2 Other accounts of the process*

Several researchers have tried to tackle the issue from different angles. Law (2016) has started by recounting Chinese HEIs' transition from a socialist to a multi-layered context, and has pointed to the importance of internationalization for the beginning of this process. In addition, he has shown that the Chinese Communist Party's focus on education and the recovering of traditional culture worked as a substitute for the lessening of socialist ideals[6]. Zha et al. (2019) have adopted a glonacal framework - i.e. a heuristic that considers the concurrent presence and importance of global, national and local levels or forces - to highlight the shortcomings of previous analyses. They have demonstrated that the internationalization behaviour of Chinese universities is very different on a global, national and local level. Lastly, they have undertaken and advocated for new analyses on what they consider key assets - i.e. reputation, academia, human resources - omitted from previous works. This point has also been stressed by Li & Liu (2013), who have investigated experts' four main explanations for the rise and evolution of Chinese HEIs' internationalization - i.e. as an economical, political, cultural or academical-related instance. They argued that previous analyses have all failed to grasp the existence of a fifth motivation that, in China's case, would be human-relation and culturally oriented.

Trying to avoid the misleading consequences of generalizations, or to prove one of the most acclaimed interpretations, some have also focused their investigations on the viewpoint and experiences of those primarily involved in the process. Many, like Shi

[6] Some like Zhao (2004) have argued that CCP's embrace of nationalism and traditional culture was an instrumental reaction to the lessening of communist ideology and that it was used to construe the party's legitimization in the reform era.

& Lin (2016), have chosen foreign professors as the main target of their analyses; others have opted for students and their own experience. When approaching the theme from the latter's viewpoint, the vast majority of publications have delved on the perspective of Chinese students living abroad (Dervin, 2016; Yan & Berliner, 2017); or even if including sections on foreign students, they have studied the general data from a mainly quantitative and national angle (Constant et al., 2013). More recently, scholars have started to target the frictions connected to international students' presence in a few countries (Varrall, 2017). Song (2018) has proved that while the admission of international students has become a way for Chinese universities to go up in the rankings, at the same time, it has triggered the protests of Chinese students towards their fellow foreign peers. Cheng (2011)'s analysis of Chinese internet users' nationalism and racism towards Africans has effectively demonstrated how campus racism towards African students reflects the persistence of a pre-revolutionary socio-hierarchical thought. The theme of "irritation" towards foreign students is also one of the key findings of Yuan et al. (2019) in their study on Chinese students' identity paradoxes in the internationalization process at Chinese mainland HEIs. In addition, although academics like King (2013) or Ma & Zhao (2018) have analysed case studies on foreign students' experience in Chinese universities, they have either narrowed their range to one specific set of students (King, 2013) or vaguely focused on the issue to analyse it from a broader national perspective (Ma & Zhao, 2018). Wang (2009) has focused on the internationalization of Shandong University. Although interesting for the historical recount, the author has only considered the viewpoint of the university and its staff. Finally, Liu & Metcalf (2016) have "selected an ideal single-case design for [their] examination of the effects of academic culture on Chinese internationalization from a glonacal perspective" (p.402). They conducted a series of interviews with staff members and personnel at a selected "211 university"[7] in Shanghai. The main findings of their paper show how local culture's practices and national forces are both related to the internationalization process in China. Moreover, as they briefly stated in their abstract: "[w]e found *[that]* two local conceptions [...] were used by local actors in relation to the inbound and outbound flows of scholars and disciplinary norms that influenced the global and national reputation of the department.*"*

[7] For the meaning of the label, see Song (2017:731)

### *1.3 The Chinese cultural concept of Mianzi (Face)*

Chinese cultural concepts play an important role in the understanding of the internationalization process: authors researching the broader context of the Chinese educational system and its implementation have known this fact for a while. In this regard, some have tried to assess the influence of *Mianzi* (Face) on educational practices. Others have instead focused only on the peculiarity of this notion in Chinese traditions. When doing so, they have analysed it from three perspectives: the definition/boundaries of *Lian* and *Mianzi*; the distinction between the two; or from cross-cultural categories (Zhou & Zhang, 2013). In the following chapters, I show how *Mianzi* or "Face" is perceived to be playing an important role in the trajectory of internationalization at Shandong University. But what is *Mianzi* and why might it be relevant to the China's HEIs?

The concept of Face in Chinese culture was first analysed by Hu in 1944 (He & Zhang, 2011). In "*The Chinese concept of Face*" (Hu, 1944), the author defines it as "the desire for prestige *[which]* exists in every human society". However, she follows, "the value placed upon it and the means for attaining it vary considerably [....]. Very often this difference in conception is reflected in the vocabulary [...]" (p. 45). Thus, she investigated the various linguistic expressions used to convey the idea, expressions which are correlated to the use of two words: *Lian* and *Mian(zi)*. *Lian* is defined as the appreciation that people have for a man with good fame; it operates as both a social and an internalized sanction that implements moral standards (Hu, 1944). On the other hand, *Mianzi* is reputation reached by success and ostentation; it is the kind of appreciation that is gained through personal means and clever tactics. In *Mianzi*, the ego is always reliant on the external surrounding environment (Hu, 1944).
Following Hu's research, Hwang & Han (2010) have analysed the role of Face and Morality in Confucian Societies. Firstly, they have redefined Hu's dichotomy as a division between a "social" and a "moral" Face. Moreover, drawing a parallel with Confucian tradition, they have showed that *Mian* is a more variable concept than *Lian:* each individual has only one *lian* or "personality", but may instead possess many *Mian* or "titles" (Hwang & Han, 2010). Consequently, they have argued that the real motivation behind foreigners' lack of understanding of the Chinese concept of Face is that they are not familiar with the prescriptions of Confucian morality. This close

relationship between Face and Morality is also shown by the fact that any behaviour that goes against Confucian sexual morals can be the origin of "*diu mianzi"* or "loss of Face". Finally, they have stated that "*lian* and *mianzi* cannot be fully differentiated on the basis of involvement with *[Confucian]* morality*"* (Hwuang & Han, 2010, p. 5). This ambiguity in the distinction between *Mian* and *Lian* does not only apply to their moral realm. Authors in the past have proved how this dichotomy may barely be applied to northern China, where Mandarin is the main language in use (Hwuang & Han, 2010). Moreover, in modern day Chinese, the two expressions seem to be often used in an ambivalent, interchangeable way (Zhou & Zhang, 2013), as also shown by the use that many authors make of them in their papers. Nonetheless, whether this duality exists in modern-day Chinese language, it is not relevant to this particular study: all the foreign students interviewed, as well as myself, have not only considered the terms interchangeably, but have also used them according to the definition that previous authors attributed to *Mianzi.*

One might argue this choice to be influenced by an Orientalist approach to Chinese culture. Although acknowledging my bias - as a foreign student who never really delved into the field of analysis before the writing of this thesis - and the one of other foreign students, I still consider the point to be valid. Chinese authors have also opposed the distinction. Moreover, the context we live in shapes the way we interpret ideas. For this, I argue that the main reason behind the use of the "negative connotation" of Face, expressed through *Mianzi,* is a clear result of the context it was associated with, which was the on-line summer scandal that involved the university. Since the scandal was perceived as a negative phenomenon, the idea of Face related to it followed a similar interpretation.

Coming back to the discussion on the Chinese concept of Face, some authors have adopted different approaches. Krys et al. (2017) have demonstrated that withdrawal is the main reaction of people coming from "face cultures" - like China - as a consequence of "loss of *Mianzi"*; Liao & Bond (2011) have shown how Face loss is considered a bigger threat by people from Hong Kong than from the United States. Other scholars have instead investigated the influence of Face on the broader context of Chinese International Relations. In his analysis of *Mianzi* and nationalism, Gries (1999) has stated that Chinese *Mianzi* culture is like "a code of honor", but is also "an issue of authority. One who "loses face" loses status and the "social credit" necessary to pursue instrumental interests" (p. 67-68). In a later paper, he has also shown how

Face works as both a facilitator and a barrier for social interactions in China, as people may sacrifice relationships to defend their face. Finally, he has described the existence of a "group face" in social interactions (Gries, 2004).

Other scholars have approached the subject by analysing popular TV-series and the behaviour of their main characters. In this regard, He & Zhang (2011) have proved that, in China, individuals tend to become particularly sensitive to Face when it entails social relationships ranging from personal interactions to the ones affecting social groups connected with close acquaintances. Thus, they divide Face into individual, relational and group *Mianzi* (He & Zhang, 2011). Zhou & Zhang (2013) have instead investigated the reasons why the concept of Face tends to be expressed "explicitly" in China, in contrast with an alleged "implicit way" of the West. Their study shows that the "explicit manifestation of *Mianzi"* is linked to three sociocultural subject matters: "Morality", "Dignity" and "*[making a]* Favour", and that it is more explicitly exhibited in people with low education and status or in female/male interaction. They have also linked the practice to the Confucian concept of *Li* ["rituals, etiquette"] and to Confucian morality, which considers women as submitted to men. They have demonstrated the existence, in some cases, of a connection between gender discrimination and the explicitness of *Mianzi*: in male/female interaction, the latter has to "give Face" to the former. For this reason, they argue that the explicitness of the concept represents the embodiment of the cultural influence of Confucian morality and of its theorized gender unbalance (Zhou & Zhang, 2013).

Finally, very few have focused their research on the implication of *Mianzi* on Higher Education. Guan & Ploner (2020) have tried to assess the role that this practice plays on mature students' choice and selection of their future institution of higher education. Their research demonstrated that *Mianzi* is one of the two key aspects which leads parents to encourage their children to attend university.

### *1.4 A different approach*

Some options have been left out from academic analyses. First, a big section of the investigation on Chinese HIEs appears to be partly disconnected from the present Chinese sociocultural background. More specifically, key contemporary themes

connected with the overall process of internationalization in China[8] have been omitted from previous studies.

Secondly, few have stressed the question of how the process actually gets implemented. Most of the literature has theorized the social framework and assessed the motivations of the country's internationalization of higher education. On the other hand however, the actual trajectory of implementation at a specific university or at a set of institutions has been less scrutinized.

Third, when assessing the instance of foreign students in Chinese universities, foreign students' own perspective on the topic represents an often-overlooked issue.

Finally, many researchers in the field have either implicitly adopted China's own labels, or have overlooked the differences between institutions for the purpose of portraying the overall picture[9]. However, these differences do exist, and actively inform the trajectory of internationalization of single/groups of universities (Zha et al., 2019). Consequently, I propose a shift in focus. I contend that to define China's HEIs and their internationalization, one should be doing it by adopting the perspective of those undergoing the process - students, professors, university's staff - instead of assuming top-down approaches.

[8] For example: the new trend towards a more economic "self-reliant" China (Tang, 2018); the alleged increasing difficulty of getting worker or student visas; the internal divisions between universities and the national "211", "985" and "C9 Group" internationalization labels; partly, the contrast between local and national layers.

[9] For example, Slethaugh (2007) or Tan & Reyes (2016)

## 2. Methodology

### *2.1 Research Questions*

My investigation concentrates on foreign students' life at Shandong University - in Jinan, Shandong Province, PRC - in order to try to understand how the process of internationalization worked for them and how it shaped their experience in China. I conducted a series of interviews with selected foreign individuals who have been studying at Shandong University for at least one year; I also integrated a questionnaire that, prior to the interviews, had been handed to a restricted group of students too.
The two questions moving my research are the following:

1) How do foreign students currently undergoing the process of internationalization in China perceive and evaluate their experience ?
2) How does local culture impact such process? In particular, are Chinese cultural concepts like *Mianzi* at stake?

There are several reasons why it is necessary to understand students' own perception of these issues. First, far too long has their viewpoint, as well as what I label "active recipients [10] " of internationalization, been neglected in favour of top-down investigations. Moreover, if ever achievable, I argue that the best and most direct way to get a "real picture" of the phenomenon is through the analysis of the experiences of those undergoing it. Furthermore, I contend that students' perspective might prove useful for two additional reasons: 1) their opinions are quantitatively easier to collect compared to the other "active recipients" [11] ; 2) as they are not necessarily (economically) dependent on the institution for working, students are comparatively more free to express their viewpoint on their university than professors or the university's staff.
By adopting this approach, I wish to reach two major goals. In the first place, I hope to escape the errors of previous analyses and shed light on overlooked motivations and perspectives. Secondly, I wish to understand the perceived and actual role of local

[10] By this I mean all those participants whose presence is necessary for the process - i.e. foreign students, foreign professors or the institutions' staff - and who are involved both actively and passively in the process of internationalization
[11] Since both the university's staff and foreign professors are generally less; the latter might also be visiting lecturers coming to China for only a short period of time

culture's notions in the implementation of the process, and especially if *Mianzi* is at stake in the internationalization of a second-tier university like Shandong University[12]. In this context, local culture's practices and perspectives have long been disregarded, as if not relevant. Without overlooking the complexities of defining "culture" or the possibility of Orientalist false-steps, it is nonetheless fundamental to consider local culture's influence, in order to fully understand the actual implementation and students' own perception of it.

### *2.2 Methodology and Methods*

Quite surprisingly, very few scholars in the field have tried to assess the validity of their theories by analysing the viewpoint of those subjects primarily involved in it - i.e. international professors, foreign students or the universities' staff. Although touching on multiple theoretical frameworks, my research uses ethnography as its main methodological core. In particular, I think that, despite the primacy of quantitative analysis in social sciences due to an over-positivist trend present in the field (Strauss, 2013), the use of a qualitative approach - like ethnography - might be extremely helpful to move beyond generalizations and focus on under-researched aspects. This point has been perfectly explained by Strauss (2013) in her study on Sino-African relations:

> *"Quite unlike other approaches, ethnography systematically restores the value of individual experience, and takes seriously the notion that how individuals perceive the world, what they understand to be their choices, and how they express their hopes and fears are all things that matter, and matter before they explode into the realm of a journalistic event [...]. This effort takes as its sine qua non the effort to ground contextually the voices, perceptions, and experiences of those who are not habitually advantaged by the kinds of wealth, influence, or government position that are frequently given outlets in the press or through policy networks, or taken seriously by other governments or powerful business networks" (p. 162).*

Other than relying on my background on Chinese culture, language, and history, or on studies on concepts like Soft Power and *Mianzi*, all considerations to follow are based on a combination of ethnographic observations, together with the methods of the

[12] For the explanation, see chapter 3

"interview schedule" and of the questionnaire as defined by Angrosino[13] (2007). Let us now understand what this entails.

Firstly, my research can be defined as adopting a complete, on-site participant approach (Jorgensen, 1989). I conducted my observations while studying at Shandong University in a period going from February 2019 to January 2020, and I was part of the group of foreign students which this research focuses on. Moreover, having lived in the place for nearly a year, I interacted with other foreign and Chinese students of the university, so as to observe their reactions and understand their ideas on multiple matters related to their educational experience. In this regard, even though the observations were mainly collected through the interviews and questionnaires and at specific times, my engagement with the people that I wanted to observe was not limited to that set of time. The interaction was also not confined to the asking of questions, since I was completely integrated in the population of study beforehand (Jorgensen, 1989). Lastly, the analysis was always overt because I explained to the students the reason why I was interviewing or giving them the questionnaire in advance (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955)

Secondly, the merging of interviews and questionnaires - both media had similar sets of questions, with only few exceptions - wasn't simply the result of a stylistic choice. Before moving to China in February 2019, thanks to the suggestions of my supervisor, I had already considered the possibility of integrating questionnaires into my research, in order to widen the audience of respondents. Moreover, during the year spent at Shandong University, I became aware of the possibility of sending questionnaires to contacts through Wechat[14]. However, I discovered that the creation and spreading of on-line surveys in China is rigorously restricted to holders of a Chinese Identity Card. Consequently, I switched to print questionnaires, which were personally handed to a very restricted group of respondents.

Thirdly, both media were held in Chinese or English, depending on the preference of each participant. Except for two students whose mother tongue was English (S7) and Chinese (S8), both idioms did not correspond to participants' nor the writer's mother tongue. The mediums consisted of similar questions, with one main theoretical exception: direct inquiries on *Mianzi* were not present in the questionnaires. This

[13] that is that "the questions are asked verbally by the researcher, who fills in the answers; this approach differs from that of the questionnaire, which is distributed to respondents who then fill it out by themselves"(p.4)

[14] See https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/04/what-is-wechat-china-biggest-messaging-app.html (last access 04/04/2020)

differentiation is not accidental. It stems from the fact that questionnaires were especially created to gather a surplus of information on students' perceptions and evaluations. In other words, they acted as a quantitative and tentative basis for the grounding of the analysis on *Mianzi*, that was carried out through the interviews.

### *2.2.1 The questionnaires*

The questionnaires were distributed to foreign students attending the same Chinese language class during the first week of January 2020. They were divided into three subsections - on participants' personal background, on their experience as international students of Shandong University and on the summer scandal involving the university[15]. The first section consisted of six open-ended questions regarding respondents' level of Chinese, their time of arrival, their status, and the reason for which they decided to study at Shandong University and in China. The second section on their experience as students undergoing the process of internationalization was divided into two branches - see Table 3 and Table 4 in the Appendix. Both parts were formed by multiple-choice questions, in which the participant had to select the degree of evaluation of a certain matter or the agreement to a specific statement. However, if the second part only entailed a choice based on a pure numerical scale going from one to five[16], the first segment was also adding an explanation for the five possible answers - all ranging from "it was very difficult" to "it was very easy"[17]. Finally, the last portion of the analysis on the on-line summer scandal and its implications fused some open-ended questions into a majority of multiple-choice inquiries, which adopted the same structure as the ones in the second part of the previous section.

### *2.2.2 The interviews*

The interviews were conducted in a period going from January to March 2020 with selected students whose opinion I deemed to be particularly relevant. This evaluation was based on their knowledge of the international environment of the university or on their ability to connect with other students. Moreover, I tried to select individuals

[15] For this, see chapter 3.2
[16] Where 1 amounted to the lowest level of approval/satisfaction and 5 the highest
[17] Each degree of answer (1. It was very difficult; 2. It was difficult; 3. Normal, as expected;4. It was easy; 5. It was very easy) contained a sub-explanation of its meaning.

coming from different backgrounds and holding different views on topics of my knowledge, so as to widen the scope and authenticity of my analysis. Although seemingly an issue, it was not a difficult task to achieve at Shandong University, since, "there are people from [...] more than 150 countries gathered here at Shanda" (S3). Then, all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; those in Chinese were translated into English. Their structure followed the one previously described for the surveys.

### *2.2.3 Participants' background*

The two mediums differ in their pool of respondents, especially in terms of their background. For this reason, I decided to organize data on the matter in the following two tables - Table 1 for the interviews; Table 2 for the questionnaires.

The questionnaire was distributed to all the students of the class, but a few preferred not to participate: what I sum up below represents only the share of those who decided to be involved in the project.

| **Respondent** | **Continent** | **Time of arrival** | **Level of Chinese** | **Typology of student** | **Reasons for coming to China** | **Reasons for choosing ShanDa** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| R1 | Asia | Fall 2018 | HSK 5 | Undergr. | study | To attend my undergraduat e programme |
| R2 | Asia | Sept 2018 | Advanced | Undergr. | Because I like China | My older brother told me so |
| R3 | Asia | Sept 2018 | HSK5 | Undergr. | Cultural interest | I wanted to come here to study Chinese culture |
| R4 | Asia | Fall 2018 | HSK 5 | Undergr. | scholarship | I like here |
| R5 | Africa | Fall 2018 | HSK 5 | Undergr. | Pure interest in learning a language | My teacher recommende d this school to me |
| R6 | Asia | Fall 2018 | HSK 5 | Undergr. | Attend my undergraduate programme | Because ShanDa is quite famous and I heard that the education is also very good |
| R7 | Africa | Sept 2018 | Not answered | Undergr. | Cultural interest | N.a. |
| R8 | Asia | Fall 2018 | HSK 5 | Undergr. | Scholarship, the academic development is far better than in my country | The ranking of ShanDa is very high |

Table 1 - respondents to the quetionnaire

Some considerations can be drawn from Table 1. In the first place, the fact of being all members of the same class is reflected by the common time of arrival, by possessing the same level of Chinese and by being all undergraduate students. As for the composition of the pool of respondents, it seems to reflect Liu & Liu (2016)'s findings about the importance of regionalization for the internationalization of Chinese HEIs: six came from Asia and two from Africa. When talking of the reasons for coming to China, two (R4; R8) specified the gaining of a scholarship as the main motivation; four said that it was out of a personal (R2), cultural (R3; R7) or linguistic interest (R5); and two (R1; R6) maintain it was due to a general "to attend my undergraduate programme" (R6). As for the motivation to study at ShanDa[18], two (R2; R5) were suggested by a teacher or a relative; two (R6; R8) were influenced in their selection by the high position of the university in the rankings; the rest said it was because they "like[d] it here"(R4), because they had to "attend an undergraduate programme" (R1) or because they "wanted to come here to study Chinese culture" (R3).

| Student | Continent | Time of arrival | Level of Chinese |
|---|---|---|---|
| S1 | Africa | Sept 2017 | Advanced |
| S2 | Africa | Fall 2017 | HSK5/HSK6 |
| S3 | Asia | 2010 | HSK6 |
| S4 | Asia | 2017 | HSK5 |
| S5 | Europe | Fall 2018 | Advanced |
| S6 | Europe | Fall 2018 | HK5 |
| S7 | Africa | Mar 2014 | HSK4/HSK5 |
| S8 | Asia | Mar 2019 | Mother tongue |
| S9 | Africa | Feb 2017 | N.a. |
| S10 | Asia | Sept 2018 | HSK6 |

Table 2 - the interviewees

Table 2 shows a corpus of respondents formed by ten foreign individuals who have all been studying at Shandong University for at least one year. Of them, four came from Africa (S1; S2; S7; S9); four from Asia (S3; S4; S8; S10); and the remaining two from Europe (S5;S6). A quick comparison of the continents and the time of arrival of each student suggests that the corpus of respondents is in line with Zhao & Postiglione's (2008) findings about an increasing presence of African students in Chinese universities. With the exception of three participants, students came to Shandong University at a time ranging from February 2017 to September 2018, and

[18] Abbreviation of *Shandong Daxue*, i.e. Shandong University in Chinese

they all possess an advanced (HSK5/HSK6)[19] level of Chinese. The most striking exception is represented by S8: they arrived in Jinan on March 2019 and, although retaining a foreign passport, Mandarin corresponds to their mother tongue[20]. The second exception is represented by S3 who, although complying with the general language level, came to Shandong University much earlier (2010) than everybody else. The third one is a participant from Africa (S7). They arrived at the university on March 2014 and think to "be able to pass HSK4 and even parts of 5", even though they haven't "taken any proficiency test" (S7).

[19] Chinese proficiency Test. See http://english.hanban.org/node_8002.htm (last access 06/04/2020)

[20] The interviewee comes from a family of Chinese descendant and was brought up in a mainly Chinese-speaking context

## 3. Case study: Foreign students' experience at Shandong University

In this third section, I am using students' responses to shed light on key topics, which appeared in both mediums and are closely related to the research questions. My investigation is organized as follows: 1) a section discussing the evaluation of their experience as students undergoing the process of internationalization at Shandong University. This part will be further divided into sub-sections, each dealing with a specific, recurrent issue; 2) one describing the context and themes related to the on-line summer scandal; 3) a final section on *Mianzi*, where I analyse its influence on students' experience.

At this point, it is important to briefly illustrate the environment of Shandong University, why I label it as a "second-tier" university and what this definition entails. Shandong University is a mainland Chinese university that comprises eight campuses in Shandong Province, six of which located in the provincial capital of Jinan. Since its foundation in 1901, the institution has always been considered one of the most important HEIs of Mainland China (Wang, 2009), as also demonstrated by its inclusion in both "Project 211" and "Project 985". At present, it hosts a full-time population of 60,000 students, of which 3,791 are international[21].

There are a few reasons why I consider it as a "second-tier university" in the broader context of the internationalization of Chinese higher education. In the first place, let us consider its role in the national realm. Although part of two important (internationalization) programs like "211" and "985", the institution wasn't included in the following "C9 Group" (Song, 2017). Thus, if we were to list Chinese HEIs from the national viewpoint, those participating in the "C9 Group" would be labelled as "first-tier", whereas Shandong University - being behind by a minor step - would belong to a "second-tier" category. Secondly, adopting a global perspective, Shandong University represents a "second-tier" university too. Indeed, even though very renowned in the China Studies circle of my background, the institution cannot be compared to globally renowned Chinese universities like Peking, Tsinghua or Fudan. For example, the few academic studies analysing the strategies of implementation (of internationalization) at single/a group of universities have all selected these

[21] See the self-description of Shandong University on their website at https://www.en.sdu.edu.cn/About_SDU/Introduction.htm (last access 06/04/2020)

institutions[22]. More generally, as shown by foreign students' responses, the internationalization level of cities like Beijing, Shanghai and of their renowned universities is higher than the one of Jinan and Shandong University.

But why the need for this label in the first place? The need for this personal label does not stem from a necessity to extend the results to other "second-tier" universities. On the contrary, it helps single out this particular case from other studies. In other words, it shows that, even though the conclusions of my analysis could be fruitfully applied to other cases, these might also not work in contexts that are very distant or different.

To sum up, what I propose is to recalibrate the focus from top-down approaches to the perspective of those undergoing the process - students, professors, university's staff. Some might think it irrelevant, as both the national and global perspective bring to similar labelling or conclusions. However, thinking so would mean mixing cause and effect, in that it would entail misunderstanding a (randomly) common conclusion as the result of similar viewpoints.

### *3.1 Student's perspective on the Internationalization of Shandong University*

International students' ideas on the quality of their stay in China has often been neglected, as if not relevant (King, 2019). Without underestimating the bias they also possess, I argue that their opinion is one of the most relevant to anyone investigating the matter. Firstly, our general understanding of the notion of "university" entails the vital presence of two (or three) human components: a body of professors and one of students[23] - as well as the institution's staff. Secondly, although maybe not central at the beginning, these components, who both withstand and model internationalization, are becoming the focus of growing academic interest[24]. Finally, I argue that the most direct way to penetrate the field and get a "real picture" of the phenomenon is through the analysis of the experiences of those involved in it. Fortunately, ethnography proves to be particularly useful to achieve such an aim, as it allows researchers to give an audience to the views of those actors whose voice is not central to the more widespread top-down discourse (Strauss, 2013). So how did international students at Shandong University evaluate their stay?

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[22] Tan & Reyes (2016); Zhu et al. (2017);
[23] See the definition at https://www.britannica.com/topic/university (last access 19/04/2020)
[24] See Chapter 1

### *3.1.1 A generally positive evaluation*

On a general level, respondents seemed to hold a moderately positive evaluation of their experience. Multiple answers show this trend.

In the first part of the questionnaire, no participant deemed any of the instances asked to be worth a "1. It was very difficult"; the average evaluation of these same issues was 3.19/5.

Furthermore, all but one student believed Shandong University to be "quite internationalized" (S8), thanks to its foreign population coming from "more than 150 countries" (S3). In the questionnaires, a similar inquiry about Shandong province, although generating very diverse evaluations[25], eventually resulted in a 3.0 average. As for the interviewees, they believed that the international flow outside the institution was "much less so than *[at]* the university" (S7). Nonetheless, many thought that Shandong province was "becoming [...] international", since "you can find international students in every city *[here]*" (S6). However, the situation cannot be compared "with cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or probably Guangzhou" (S1) and their globally renowned universities. This is because "Shandong province is a place *[imbued]* with ancient, traditional Confucian doctrine and thought" (S3), that "even in China is regarded as a very traditional province" (S7). Even though increasingly filling the gap, it still lacks "different international platforms and services": for this reason, "it still cannot reach such an international background *[like the university]*" (S3).

Thirdly, the two questions on their impression of the Chinese educational system suggest a similar conclusion. The responses to the survey prove that, both on average and for half of the single participants, the positive evaluation of the system hasn't changed during the years. In the interviews, students stated that they either "didn't have any idea" (S10) at the beginning of the programme or that the structure was "very efficient, in the sense that they didn't waste any minute during the classes" (S5). With time, they began to feel that the system, although still widely praised, was "really different" (S1) from the one in their countries of origin. This was especially true for what concerns "how they arranged the classes" (S6) and that "attendance counts for marks" (S7). In addition, the interviews seem to suggest a directly

[25] see Table 3 in the Appendix

proportional relation between students' appraisal and the duration of their study period at the university. For example, S3 and S7 held a more positive opinion than those with a shorter academical background there. Both of them expressed the idea of a system that is "actively altering [...]" itself, to "better suit the international students" (S7). The invention and use of new "technological aspects"(S3) is central to this improvement. S3 said that in 2010 they "were writing characters on the blackboard with chalks, but now they *[the professors]* can use a lot of systems" (S3) and tools to better prepare the classes.

However, the good appraisal remains moderate. As previously reported by Wang (2009), ShanDa still has a few flaws that prevent it from becoming even more internationalized. One student effectively highlighted them in their comment:

> *"[T]he teachers are very shy. Now, that mixed with their English or some being doctors [...] [who] don't really wanna teach but need that for promotion, so they take upon their role and [...] might not teach properly [...]. They'd get up and read a PPT, repeat that word for word [...] [and] they will give [it to] you [...]. Then you do the work and you memorize that. So I feel like it's less individualized [...]. They are used to very large classes, so the teacher can't stop and ask questions. That being said, some teachers did stop and say: "Do you have any questions?" [...], but there is a difference between asking us "Do you have any questions?" and asking and then getting the information across properly". (S7)*

The passage also suggests another recurring issue: the educational method of the university is mainly based on "learn[ing] everything by heart" (S6) and it is not very individualized. This pattern is shown by the presence of "some teachers [...] who speak non-stop" and don't stop to "ask the students about their opinions" (S10).

### *3.1.2 Language and Socialization*

Most students considered language and socialization as the main - or one of the most - prominent issue. Some viewed it from a positive angle. S3 quoted a Chinese popular saying "学好中国话，朋友遍天下" (S3) [Learn Chinese well, and you'll find friends everywhere][26] to stress the neutral-positive nature of the theme. The interviewee framed it as a "problem" of "cultural differences [...] that of course results in [...] some misunderstandings, [...] because we [...] come from different [...] cultural

[26] Author's translation

backgrounds" (S3). However, most respondents held an opposite viewpoint, with S1 and S5 even thinking it represented the "biggest" (S5) of all problems.

On the one hand, many emphasized the struggle of communicating with local people, since "very few can speak good English"(S9) or that "here [...] in Shandong they speak only Chinese [...] or Jinan dialect, so it's hard to adapt if you don't know any Chinese" (S6). One student (S1), even though not mentioning language at first, then stated:

> *"most students that come here [...] take their courses in medicine, and they gotta do premedical courses [...] at Shandong University before they head to their respective universities. [...] [T]hey are expected to study everything in a single year, and [...] take the course with Chinese as the language of instruction [...]. So they have really a lot of pressure" (S1)*

On the other hand however, the issue of language and socialization also emerged from the discussion on students' interactions with Chinese peers on campus and with locals outside the university. In this regard, responses to both mediums suggest that Zhao & Postiglione (2008)'s idea of an "invisible separation on campus" - i.e. a non-interaction between Chinese and ethnic minority students - applies also to this case. Indeed, the two survey questions on the frequency of respondents' interactions with local students (9.a) and with locals outside the university (9.b) show how participants communicate more with Chinese people outside campus - see Table 3. As for the interviewees, more than half of them, even though living on campus and possessing an advanced level of Chinese, reported to find it easier to interact with locals outside the university. The feature is even more surprising if one considers that S8 - the only participant whose mother tongue was Mandarin - said to prefer to relate to Chinese university students rather than locals. The reason for their preference comes from the fact that Shandong Province "still has a lot of people who can speak dialect", a characteristic which they "can't really stand [...], because I don't understand *[it]*" (S8). All in all, the idea was fruitfully summed up by S5: "[i]f you're talking about meaningful interactions, [...] they are pretty difficult, mainly because of the language. But then, even [...] *[when]* your level is good enough, [...] it is really complicated to find some cross-cultural middle ground" (S5).

This result is not that surprising if one considers Yuan et al. (2019)'s analysis of Chinese university students' identity paradox. For them, Chinese students'

self-consciousness is torn between two coexisting but conflicting identities - i.e a "global citizen" and a "proud Chinese" identity. The latter is particularly interesting as it emerges when interacting with foreign individuals, and more specifically with international students. In those circumstances, Chinese university students reported to have gotten irritated by foreigner's "free style", and demonstrated to be more under the influence of traditional culture (Yuan et al., 2019).

Students' evaluation varied even more when debating the university's influence on the matter and on the institution's socializing activities. For example, according to S5, the institution's contribution was mainly useless, because although they try to "organize some sort of events [....], they are too rigid" and "are mainly based on ceremonies [...]" (S5). S1 shared the perspective of other respondents, but added that the issue of socialization "has been caused more by the school, [...] because of the curfew, of what happened [...] during summer"(S1). In this regard, Yao (2014) has proved that, other than relying on governmental funds, Chinese HEIs have to find their own sources of funding. In recent years, this need has led to a growing competition on the market between schools, which use internationalization and the presence of foreign students to improve their ranking (Yao 2014). In turn, gaining a better position in the rankings means to obtain more funds. However, responses to the questions on language and socialization of this research show that foreign students are widely dissatisfied with the university's socializing activities. For this, we can at least hypothesise that the stress of the university is more on getting new and more foreign students, than on enabling them to create connections with the remaining Chinese students community.

Finally, students' responses suggest a few other considerations. First, a considerable amount of them even declared to "hardly have any interactions with Chinese students" (S2). Two respondents to the questionnaire stated to have no interaction with local university peers (R4; R8) and a third one said it was happening only every two months (R5). On the other hand, four (R2; R3; R5; R8) out of eight students declared to experience a daily interaction with Chinese people outside the university; nobody indicated it as fewer than once a month.

Second, participants tried to give their own explanation for this trend. Some of them quite generically stated that "[*the*] problem is [...] inside the university" (S4) and that

communication outside campus is easier because "[p]eople outside [...] are more friendly" (S4). Others, like S7, gave a more rational explanation. Although certain other factors are also at play, the interviewee explained that the university is a "place where everybody is busy all the time studying" (S7): thus, the sphere of communication there is not only more difficult, but also limited in time and space.

Third, even though only two (R3; R5) decided to answer, R5's response to "Others" gives us further elements of the perceived context of interaction - see Table 3. The participant stated that the "[i]nteractions with locals are a bit difficult, maybe because of skin colour" (R5). The theme of discrimination against African students will be analysed extensively in section 3.2.3. For the moment, let us only briefly consider its implications for the realm of socialization. Cheng (2011) has demonstrated the double faced nature of Chinese nationalism and racism, as they are sensitive to Western Orientalism towards China, but at the same time perpetuate old racist discourses on Africans. Moreover, the author has stressed the similarities between the socio-hierarchical ethnocentrism of Chinese traditional thinking and present day Chinese racism (Cheng, 2011). Taking these few considerations into account, we can now better understand the point made by S10 in the interviews. When asked about foreign students' main difficulties, S10 requested to expand the scope of response to "foreigners in Shandong"(S10). Then, the interviewee declared "discrimination"(S10) to be the most pressing issue. In order to explain the meaning and target of this behaviour, they provided the following example: "there are some Chinese, and not only them, [...] that [...] when they see a black person they can say in a very surprised tone: "Black! A black person, a black person!" pointing the finger and [...] taking photos or videos and such" (S10).

### *3.1.3 The alleged favouritism reserved to foreigners*

The idea of a favourable treatment reserved to foreigners in China gained momentum specifically after the summer scandal. However, such an accusation was definitely not a new one[27], especially on social media. In their study on Chinese universities' push for internationalization and multiculturalism, Zhao & Postiglione (2008) have proved that a big section of China's public opinion believes minorities to "be favoured" by

[27] Cheng (2011) or Yuan et al. (2019)

the universities/state, grounded on the lower entry requirements and the treatment after the enrolment. During the years, more than a few Chinese internet users have extended similar accusations to foreign students. Song (2017) has demonstrated how the practice of admitting foreign students to improve the rankings has lowered the standards of Chinese universities. In turn, the situation has triggered the protests of both Chinese students and of internet users, with the latter charging foreign students of receiving an unfairly better treatment if compared to the one of their Chinese peers (Song, 2017).

Consequently, I decided to ask a few questions on the topic in both mediums, in order to better envision the specific recriminations.

In the interviews, I invited respondents to briefly describe the differences between their life as foreign students and the one of Chinese peers at the university. When compared to Chinese students' conditions, most participants acknowledged the existence of "practical privileges" in their lives, for example, in "only having one room mate instead of five or seven" (S5), in "living *[before the scandal]* without the curfew" (S4) or even in having "permanent hot water supply" (S6) in their rooms. The discrepancies in the accommodation between foreign and Chinese students on campus were the theme attracting the harshest criticism. S8 thus described the situation: "[t]he biggest difference might be the accommodation [...]. [T]heir *[Chinese internet users]* big impression is determined by the fact that international students' dormitories are better, and then, in their view, their *[Chinese students]* dormitories are very bad" (S8). Nonetheless, even though admitting that "[t]here is without a doubt a difference" (S7), the vast majority of participants did not think of it as a sign of unfair favouritism. For example, respondents to the questionnaire showed to moderately refuse this specific account (average of 2.75). Some even declared to be "just given exactly what we should be given. If the exact same thing is not given to [...] Chinese students, that is not our fault" (S2). For them, especially in the field of education, they had to meet "the same requirements on examinations" (S1). These last few sentences deserve further analysis. In the first place, it is necessary to report that they were said by two students who demonstrated to have been particularly affected in their experience by the summer scandal and by the alleged accusations. If unaware of this notion or the interviewers' experience, one might think that they were so presumptuous to completely take their advantages for granted. However, as many pointed out, foreign students do not deny the existence of such a discrepancy in treatment; what they do

oppose is the idea of being held responsible for it. In other words, they refuse to be used as scapegoats or vents by Chinese internet users to deflect attention from the mistreatment of Chinese university peers.

### *3.1.4 Campus life*

Another issue that was often raised was "campus life", i.e. "rules that have been set concerning foreigners, the accommodations, the dorms and all of that" (S2) - especially after the summer scandal. To better envision students' responses, let us remember the presence of an "invisible separation on campus", as described by Zhao & Postiglione (2008) concerning the interactions at the institution. However, there also exists a physical separation between Chinese and international students, who live in separated dorms with different rules (Cheng, 2011).

Respondents drew a clear distinction between the situation in the past, which "was ok" since there were "no problems, [...] you could spend your time wherever you wanted, [...] there was no curfew" (S6), and the ongoing one. After summer, and "ever since the introduction of the curfew", foreign students felt that "everything [wa]s very different" (S2). However, the changes did not stop there: "they scan you always" (S6), and at the same time, the staff started to "ask [...] questions"(S6) every time students wanted to go out. Participants felt that they had "always to say to the administration what you're going to do" and that they had "no private life" (S6). In turn, this situation led to growing anger and dissatisfaction on the students' side, as shown by one respondent:

> *"It was very difficult to accept, it's still not being accepted until now [...]. The issue is that these rules are being made without our consent, they don't ask [...] for opinions before they file out these rules, even though they affect us directly and determine how we live. It's pretty depressing [...]. Ever since the passing of the 11.30 pm curfew, [...] you feel you are not involved in the decision-making. It's very overwhelming [...] because apparently we just don't matter!" (S2)*

The comment highlights a connection between the issue of "campus life" and participants' perception of not being involved in the decision-making process of the university, due to the inflexibility of the institution itself. This conception was expressed in very different ways by participants. One student pointed to the inflexibility in the carrying out of "rules", as demonstrated by the "problems with the

dorms", i.e. "the strict" implementation of the new facial recognition system" (S9). S7 provided an account that is particularly useful for understanding the point. Drawing from their experience as "a passed *[student]* representative, [...] *[an]* intermediary between any student-related issue and the university" (S7), the interviewee reported that many international students don't understand that "in China [...] your superiors tell you what to do" (S7). As a consequence, when "students were trying to make a petition [...]" (S7), the university, although understanding their concerns, was often refusing any concession.

### *3.2 The on-line summer scandal and its influence on students' experience*

During the summer vacation of 2019, Shandong University was in the eye of the storm. In a just a few days, the institution had become the prime target of Chinese internet users' criticism: the popular media platform Weibo[28] was flooded with comments about the university, many of which addressed its foreign population. The situation was caused by the outbreak of an on-line scandal over the interactions between foreign and local students at the university[29], and especially over the institution's "Buddy Programme". Using the university's own words[30], the "Buddy programme" was a project established in 2016 to "promote academic development and cultural exchange through the mutual learning between Chinese and foreign students". The policy was aimed at volunteer students - Chinese and foreign - and entailed the formation of small groups, made up of one foreign student and one/multiple Chinese peers, with the intent to participate in official events or casual gatherings. In this context, it was allegedly reported that each foreign student was assigned three Chinese buddies of the opposite sex. The alleged report was grounded on an actual registration form which was handed to Chinese volunteers and that emphasized "making foreign friends of the opposite sex" as one of the main advantages of the activity[31]. Unfortunately, the allegations triggered off a series of

[28] See https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/fashion/china-social-media-weibo-wechat.html (last access: 13/04/2010)

[29] https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-07-15/Privilege-impedes-not-helps-China-s-universities-go-global-IlRptcBW6I/index.html (last access 13/04/2020)

[30] In a post published on Weibo by the official account of Shandong University. Translation by the author; for the Chinese source, see: http://js.people.com.cn/n2/2019/0712/c359574-33138983.html (last access 13/04/2020)

[31] https://shanghai.ist/2019/07/15/shandong-university-apologizes-for-pairing-male-foreigners-with-multiple-female-chinese-buddies/ (last access 13/04/2020)

strong reactions in a portion of China's internet users. The university became the object of a substantial amount of comments, many of which blatantly addressing the female and foreign student population with sexist and racist slurs[32]. Moreover, a list with the names of the students - foreign and Chinese - participating in the programme was leaked and published on Weibo[33]. After a few days, the university eventually issued an apology, which helped re-dimension the case.

The Buddy Programme was not the only motivation driving such anger. Even though not reported by official sources, foreign students were pointing to an alleged video of a former African student of the university having sex with female Chinese peer/-s. Many participants believed that the video, which was allegedly published on the internet years earlier, had been "rediscovered" by Chinese users in that same period. As will be further described in later sections, some students believed the video to be fake; others denied its connection with any former student of the university; some, comparing it to the scandal over the Buddy Programme, implied a voluntary use of both old videos and of old policies.

On this point, most of them demonstrated to be aware of the subject matter, although providing multiple or partial accounts of what seems to have happened. For this reason, I argue that the case and its reports seem to possess what I label as four features typical of "urban legends": 1) the descriptions maintain a general, common trajectory, but each differs in some aspects; 2) it is a topic whose knowledge is well spread and has become the talk of the place; 3) it is short and explosive in both its breakout and decline; and 4) it is connected with what people perceive as "shady spheres" of knowledge - that in this case was sex and pornography, which is censored in China[34]. Nonetheless, I hope that the following explanation will demonstrate that the case was certainly not legendary, and that its consequences were everything but unreal.

The circumstance and its consequences did not reach me until I came back from my summer vacation. At that time, I discovered that a few changes had taken place on campus and in the regulations of the international dormitory. Firstly, in the weeks

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32 https://pandaily.com/shandong-universitys-buddy-program-controversy-is-a-vivid-example-of-why-uncalled-for-altruism-backfires/ (last access 13/04/2020)

33 https://www.weibo.com/5517771876/HDaGHEpBd?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1586795662870 (last access 25/04/2020)

34 See https://www.globalfromasia.com/list-blocked-sites-china/ (last access 25/04/2020)

following the issuing of the formal apology, all gates of the university's campuses were provided with a facial recognition system[35]. Moreover, even though not officially connected to the outbreak of the scandal, new regulations affecting the life of the international students were implemented in those same days. Indeed, all international dormitories established an 11.30 pm curfew modelled on the standard procedure for Chinese students' dorms, which close their doors at 10.50 pm.

Finally, it is fundamental to stress that the implementation of the new measures was not officially connected to the scandal. All the features indicated by the students and by myself in the following chapters have no "official", definitive proof. However, if we were to analyse the situation at the university before and after the scandal, one might easily notice some interesting peculiarities. The new policies were implemented right after the outbreak of such an event, and their influence was far more pervasive than any measure taken before by the institution. For example, let us take into consideration S7's experience, considering that, in the past, they've been an "*[international students]* representative" (S7). The interviewee stressed that:

> *"The [other] foreign students of my years, some of them are terrible, like they've broken the laws, [...] they've been brought to hospitals, so [...] [the] foreign student office has seen a fair amount of shit, but that did not change how they treated us [foreign students]at all." (S7)*

For this reason, it can already be safely inferred that, if the aforementioned measures were to be the result of random or disconnected actions, it would certainly be a very weird coincidence.

It is now time to concentrate on the five main points which emerged in both mediums.

### *3.2.1 Participants' counter-narrative*

Almost all respondents didn't "really trust the versions of how things were told" (S9), or even considered them "fake", since internet users "were just using fake propaganda" (S1). The available responses to the questions on participants' opinion in the surveys - only some decided to answer, see Table 4 - convey the same idea. R2, R5 and R8 all questioned the reality of the case, with R5 proving to be the most suspicious, as can be seen by the comment: "I think the whole stuff is a crap tactic

[35] See http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1158391.shtml (last access 25/04/2020)

[*created*] by some selfish Chinese, who are not satisfied with the treatment the foreigners here are getting". Many interviewees thought that the circumstance was triggered off by the contemporary appearance of multiple factors, i.e. the "Buddy Programme" case (S3) and a video of "an alleged African dude engaging with a Chinese girl" (S2). They also disregarded the idea that "each student could have up to three Buddies of opposite sex" (S4). Instead, what one participant confirmed was that "when filling the form [...] there was [...] written: "Do you wish your Buddy to be male or female?" and you could choose" (S10).

A considerable number of respondents also believed that internet users "had this intention [*of attacking foreign students*] far before this stuff came out" and that the scandal "worked as a catalyst" that "helped them to bring out their intentions" (S1). Regarding this perception, it is interesting to notice that it is very similar to part of the findings that Frazier & Zhang (2014) presented in their paper. For the authors, the cyberspace represents a preferred site used to articulate Chinese anti-black sentiment in China. In turn, this sentiment often builds on "viral" debates, which are actively mobilised for the construction of the overall Chinese racial and national identity (Frazier & Zhang, 2014).

Finally, a few accused the university of playing an active role in the sparking of the debate, as shown by the following two comments:

> *"Chinese people think we were treated better [...], and someone from [...] inside the school, they just made these rumours. A porn video came out, it was uploaded 5 years ago, but they just put these 2 facts in one line, and created a connection" (S4)*

> *"Shanda was [...] not protecting the students: a list of foreigners living at Shanda came out on Weibo. But I mean, how is that possible? [...] [T]he only possible solution [...] is that someone inside Shanda is involved.... [...]it must have been from inside of course!" (S9)*

The alleged involvement of Shandong University's staff is untraceable, and likely not intentional. Indeed, the probability of such an accusation is the same as the one of the videos or the list been leaked by hackers. Nonetheless, these allegations are important as they were placed inside students' wider counter-narrative. Foreign students believed that internet users and the media were using them as scapegoats to discredit

Shandong University, as well as to unload their frustration for the disparity in treatment[36] and - some even said - lack of (political) engagement.

### *3.2.2 A negative influence on the attitude towards foreigners*

Responses suggest a dichotomy between the personal and general impact of the scandal. On a personal level, most participants drew a distinction between a first period, in which the case might have had an influence, and the present one that is "cool off and most people have already forgotten about it" (S9). All in all however, they believed that the circumstance did not inform their individual interactions.

On a general level instead, most considered the influence and consequences of the scandal to be negative. This pattern is shown on both an average and a single participant level by the survey question on the case having a good influence (2.0 average) - see Table 4 in the Appendix. The majority of the interviewees identified a similar trend towards a more negative interplay between foreign students and the surrounding environment. Most respondents told of an increasing amount of "people [...] asking me about the Buddy Programme" (S3) or of "stories of friends [...] saying that [...] they even had to hear some uncomfortable comments"(S5). Others noted a broader difference in the attitude towards foreigners: for S6, locals are "way more serious [...]. Even younger generations are afraid to discuss, they're afraid to meet us [...]. On the streets, you can even find people who will look at you very strangely, or even aggressively" (S6); for S1, a similar behaviour is true "especially *[for]* Chinese girls [...]. [D]uring that period [...] you could feel the terror in their eyes any time they saw you" (S1). We shall see the explanation for this behaviour in the next two sections.

### *3.2.3 Racism and xenophobia*

The massive and pervasive outbreak of the scandal was intimately connected with internet users' racist and xenophobic beliefs: out of all foreign students, African students were certainly the ones drawing the most "animosity" (S2). Two comments provided in the interviews further advocate this conclusion. The vast majority of

[36] See The alleged favouritism reserved to foreigners, section 3.1.3

participants believed that "[i]f it was a group of men and women from England, Canada, America, it wouldn't have blown up how it did" (S7). Moreover, many explained that Chinese internet users tend to be "really biased when it comes to African[s]" (S1). Unfortunately, at the time of writing, most of the related comments have been eliminated from Weibo, the platform on which the scandal broke out. But I foresaw such a possibility: in a period going from September to November 2019, I gathered some and stored them in my computer. Nevertheless, even without them, a quick analysis of the remaining posts may still convey the idea of the level of racism in the debate. An article from the Global Times dated 2019/7/15 describes an event that happened during one of the regular international press conferences of the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A reporter from a Taiwanese media asked Geng Shuang - deputy director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department - about the racist and xenophobic remarks that appeared on-line following the Buddy Programme scandal. The journalist diligently reported the official statement given by Geng Shuang, in which the deputy said that he had not seen them[37]. A quick look at the comments below may prove my point. For example, the second most popular comment according to the system was: "Black people are indeed the race with the lowest IQ, but the black genes are very powerful. They appear like they are *[always]* joking, and they are gluttonous and lazy; even if you give them assistance, they'll squander it, otherwise it'd be unlikely that they were still poor nowadays. Before, there were some bosses who said to dislike black people, the reason being that they didn't come to work after being paid, and were waiting to spend all their money to come back. [...] I don't discriminate, it's just that I really don't like them [...]"[38].

On the one hand, the case fits in the wider scholarly debate on the on/off-line discrimination towards Africans in China[39]. For example, let us consider Pfafman et al. (2015), who have observed that racism is: 1) often connected with perceived threats to identity, economic stability, and state fidelity; and that 2) the practice lives in a

[37] For more information, see https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/HDBgvFSdo?type=repost#_0 (in Chinese, last access 17/05/2020)

[38] In Chinese "**黑人确**实是智商最低的种族但是黑色基因却很强大. **仿佛在开玩笑**，**而且好吃**懒做，**就算**给**他**们援助也能败光，**要不然不至于**穷到现在. **之前就有老板**说不喜欢黑人，**原因就是他**们发工资以后就不**工作了**，**等把**钱花完了再来，**哪儿有**这样工作的，**我不是歧**视是真心不喜欢，**他**们整天说我们歧视他们却**干着**让人歧视的事", author's translation.

[39] See Cheng (2011); King (2019), etc.

paradoxical relationship with globalization; Cheng(2011), who has discovered that the racial discourse tends to carry very large implications, since it deforms the essence of socio-economic problems and deflects criticism from domestic issues; or Zhang & Frazier (2014), who have showed the central role of on-line discrimination towards Africans in the construction of the modern Chinese racial and national identity. Indeed, all the above considerations also inform our case.

Nonetheless, the situation at the university after the scandal possesses a few other interesting peculiarities. The first revolves around the institution's response to the scandal. After a few days in which the institution and its students were the target of racist and xenophobic remarks, the university issued a formal apology on its Weibo account. One participant thus recounted the situation:

> *"What happened is that [...] [the] university [...] never gave a clear explanation to the whole media [...], [but] rather [...] [took] the whole blow [...]...They did not defend themselves, they did not defend the students, [...] they just let everything blow over [...] and nothing changed! [...] it's a problem of racism, because the problem with that video is that the man in the video was African [...].... They were furious because it was an African!" (S2)*

Secondly, one student denounced the decrease in the numbers of "people from Africa compared to what we had before in the whole city, not just our university" (S4); another stated that "[t]his semester there are 70-80% less African *[students]*" (S9). At the time, the trend was also confirmed to the author by a local professor during a private, informal conversation.

### *3.2.4 Sexism at play*

Gender discrimination was another issue that definitely influenced the sparking of the debate. A number of connections point to such a conclusion. First, even those who denied gender discrimination but agreed on ethnicity - like S8 - said that "[m]any Chinese believe that Chinese girls should only like Chinese guys, and that they shouldn't have any relationship with foreigners" (S8). Thus, they implicitly prove the point.

For further evidence, let us consider Pfafman et al.'s (2015) findings about racism in the Chinese cyberspace. For the authors, racism is often connected with perceived

threats to the collective self-consciousness, and racist comments also widely reiterate discriminatory and sexist attitudes. In this context, we may take into account one of the Weibo comments I collected while still in China. The comment said: "Dean of Shandong University, why didn't you let black Africans play with your daughters first? Or first offer them as a tribute to Western masters, instead of wilfully let foreigners damage other people's girls?"[40].

Third, respondents also argued that "[m]ale Chinese students are not willing to be part of the Buddy Programme for some reason [...]. [B]ut female Chinese students are more curious, [...] [t]hey want to meet people, [...] they want to know the world" (S2). The disparity in numbers led internet users to address the Buddy Programme as "a whole sex network", where "only [*foreign*] male student [...] and [...] [*Chinese*] females [we]re allowed [...] participat[ing]" (S2), the latter being "all prostitutes" (S7).

In addition, some students decided to recount their own experience. S9 reported that during their summer vacation in Yantai, they were approached by random locals "making jokes and asking questions like: "Do you have a *[Chinese]* girlfriend? No? Well, just go join the buddy programme"" (S9). S7 said that they were asked by a professor about the case. When asked back, the professor said "that if people were to ask *[where I was studying]*, [...] [I should]n't [have] sa[id] Shandong University at that moment, 'cause its name [wa]s getting dragged"(S7). Later on, the lecturer reported to S7 that he had "more than an interaction with taxi drivers" in which, when it came down to "him being a graduate of Shandong University [...]" the taxi driver started to say "how his degree [wa]s worthless, and how bad he [wa]s to be from such a university, and that they were dragging down the name of China by having such a place like that" (S7).

### *3.2.5 An inappropriate reaction from the school*

Foreign students widely believed that the school's new measures - i.e. the curfew, the facial recognition system to enter the campus, the alleged decrease in number of African students - and their explanations were inappropriate.

[40] In Chinese: "**山**东大学校长你怎么不先让非洲黑人把你们家女儿玩了？**或者你先把自己的女儿奉献**给洋**大人玩玩**？**却偏偏**让他们去祸害别人家的姑娘?", author's translation.

It is important to stress that the motivations that I will present in later paragraphs were never presented as "official" by the university. Nonetheless, they were "unofficially" provided by the university's international office to all those seeking answers. In my case, I asked a member of the university's staff, who pointed to four main reasons: improving the safety/security of foreign students; avoiding the recurrence of similar situations; improving previously unfair policies; ensuring everybody's rest at night, and inspire good habits in students.

Firstly, respondents to the questionnaire rejected the account on the appropriateness of the policies implemented by the university (2.4 average) - see Table 4 in the Appendix. Moreover, when asked about their impression on the new polices, some said to "not understand" them (R2); R5 instead wrote: "I don't think getting our hostels [*sic*] locked so early will help this entire issue. The university should do more strict work on their media response field and security management as well" (R5). Interviewees shared the same belief. They widely thought that the policies either "can't fully solve this problem" (S3), or that "[t]hey were not appropriate because they had no ground whatsoever" (S2). Moreover, even though the institution "d[id]n't inform [...] that [...] these policies [...] w[ere] related to [...] the Buddy Programme" (S1), foreign students believed that they "were just implemented to keep a good control and to try to influence what was happening on the internet" (S9).

Participants seem to hold a moderately negative evaluation of all explanations. Although small in number, responses to the last question of the survey demonstrate the level of dissatisfaction at the school's explanations. R8 said that previous "improvements" also didn't lead to a fair result; R5, again quite directly, stated that "sleeping time doesn't have anything to do with anybody's academic performance!" (R5). In the interviews, a big proportion of respondents viewed these motivations as "fake" (S9), and that they were made out of a "scramble from the university to keep its relevance" (S7). For them, this comes from the fact that "ShanDa is the holder of 2 government's subsidies, they risked losing" (S7) them. They "had to do something" for "they could not let accusations and such, even if they *[the accusations]* were not grounded" (S7). In this context, S4 provided an account of previous incidents at the university - e.g. "last summer, when a girl stabbed her ex-boyfriend out of jealousy with a piece of glass, and [...] incidents even before, [...] when during the winter vacation some Chinese people came inside the dormitory and there was a fight" (S4) - to prove both the inappropriateness and unbalance of the university's response, if

compared to more serious circumstances. Students especially complained about the curfew, saying that "before [...] Shandong University ha[d] been an outstanding university" and that at "another university [...] in Jinan, i.e Shandong Normal University, they don't have the curfew, but [...] they [...] have [...] [*a*] system that locks the door automatically, [...] you're supposed to have your student number. [...] So, no one who is not a student has access to it. [...] That is safe!" (S2).

### *3.3 Mianzi and internationalization*

When inquired on whether they thought that *Mianzi* played a role in the university's reaction to the scandal, nine students out of ten agreed that it was involved "at least on some level" (S5). In addition, two of them also believed that the situation could have been "created [...] as an excuse" because "they r[a]n out of money"(S9). The majority of students however took a more explicit position. They believed that "after the Buddy Programme the university [had] lost face" so they "had to do something" and that they "did [*it*] just to prove that everything was fine [...] at ShanDa, that all the students are equal" (S4). In this context, S7 considered *Mianzi* as the main reason for the university's reaction, as shown by their comment:

> *"I feel it's the biggest reason [...]. So as bad as it sounds, for me, the students' interest was not what made them implement those actions, it was the "saving face", the maintenance of Mianzi. I firmly believe that, if there was no loss of face [...] not much would have been done at all." (S7).*

Nonetheless, this perceived involvement is also suggested by a number of other factors. First, let us recall the intimate connection between Face and Confucian morality, and that any behaviour that goes against Confucian sexual morals can be the origin of "*diu mianzi*" or "lose Face" (Hwang & Han, 2010). Moreover, as shown by Zhou & Zhang (2013), *Mianzi* tends to be exhibited more explicitly in female/male interaction. In addition, let us take into consideration Pfafman et al.'s (2015) demonstration that internet comments targeting African men in China are imbued with socio-hierarchical racial thinking as well as sexism towards Chinese women dating them. As a consequence, I argue that *Mianzi* was definitely involved in the case, for: 1) the debate was intimately related to a topic and a behaviour - sex and pornography - often negatively connected with Confucian morality; 2) it was seen as

challenging (Confucian) morality on a female/male interaction level; 3) furthermore, as described by Pfafman et al. (2015) for racism, it was posing a perceived threat to the collective identity, as it was challenging the socio-hierarchical racial thinking.

As for the particular behaviour adopted by the university, it is important to keep in mind that withdrawal is the main reaction that people coming from "face cultures" - like China - experience as a consequence of "loss of *Mianzi*" (Krys et al., 2017). For this, I contend that the university's behaviour - i.e. apologizing, taking full responsibility and not defending its female/international students - is a clear, standard result of the "loss of *Mianzi*" in front of the general Chinese public opinion.

Finally, let us consider the implementation of the new policies. It is important to stress that they weren't solely the result of a "loss of Face"; a genuine desire to improve foreign students' security was also at stake, especially after "streamers were coming to the campus and saying racist comments to the Africans and the foreigners they were meeting" (S9). Nonetheless, the explanations for them were a clear sign of the involvement of *Mianzi*. The idea of creating "fairer policies", although great in its ideal conception, has very little to do with this circumstance, since the international dorms' curfew was set half an hour later than the one for Chinese students. Moreover, examples provided by multiple interviewees - e.g. S4's account of a girl who stabbed her ex-boyfriend or S7's experience as a student representative - show that the university's policies did not change in more serious circumstances, but were instead altered the one time it directly affected their morality and reputation.

## Conclusions

My investigation has focused on foreign students' perception and evaluation of their experience as active recipients[41] involved in the process of internationalization at a specific Chinese second-tier university - i.e. Shandong University. More specifically, I combined the use of ethnographic observations, interviews and a questionnaire with my background knowledge in China Studies. A few considerations can be drawn from this study.

Firstly, the analysis showed that foreign students from various backgrounds hold a moderately positive evaluation of their educational experience in China, in which socialization and campus life represent the main difficulties. Nonetheless, many reconsidered their positions after the break out of an on-line summer scandal - concerning former foreign students of the university - and the following xenophobic and sexist remarks aimed at them.

Secondly, contrary to the general dismissal present in the field, it demonstrated that foreign students consider culture-specific concepts like *Mianzi* (Face) as important players in the internationalization process of the university. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents believe *Mianzi* to be one of the motivations behind the school's response to the scandal.

Thirdly, the fact that students created this link seems to suggest an implicit challenge to the scholarship's mainstream view on the relationship between national and global layers. Many have read the internationalization step as an active means employed to deliver economic development. These scholars consider internationalization as an active, global force (passively) employed or accepted by Chinese universities for reaching specific goals. However, let us not overlook the idea that students believed *Mianzi* to be involved in the trajectory of internationalization of Shandong University. Indeed, this seems to suggest that the relationship between the previously mentioned active and passive roles, or national and global layers, might be more complicated than how scholars consider it to be.

Fourth, the possibility of a connection between *Mianzi* and the university's behaviour may lead to hypothesize the extension of the concept to institutions or organizations. Nonetheless, the idea certainly needs further, clarifying research.

[41] By this I mean that they both actively influence and are passively influenced by process

Finally, results from this investigation partly differ from the ones of studies on China's top-tier universities. For this reason, I proposed to re-categorize China's HEIs and their internationalization by adopting the perspective of those undergoing the process - foreign students, professors o the university's staff - instead of assuming national, top-down perspectives and their labels.

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## Appendix:

| Part 1<br>1 = it was very difficult; 2 = it wa difficult; 3 = Normal, as usual; 4 = it was easy; 5= It was very easy; N.a = not answered | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **R1** | **R2** | **R3** | **R4** | **R5** | **R6** | **R7** | **R8** |
| 1.a) **Language and the University** *(students, profs, staff,workers on campus „... )* | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 1.b) **Language and surrounding local environment** *(people outside the university)* | 3 | 3 | 3 | N.a. | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| 2.a) **Personal habits and adjusting them to the Chinese context** | 4 | 4 | 3 | N.a. | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| 2.b) **Personal and local habits** | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **3.Customs** [*Adjusting to different customs]* | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| **4.Dorms** | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| **5.Method of studying** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| **6.Teachings/courses** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| **7.Financial issues** *[cost of dorms, scholarships,cost of the canteen, etc.]* | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| **8.Other services provided by the University** *[extra-curricular activities, canteen,...]* | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 9.a) **How frequent are your interactions with local students**? *[ex: daily, weekly, every 10 days, monthly, no interaction,...]* | Every week | Every day | 2 times a week | No interaction | Almost like every 2 months | Every Week | Every 10 days | No Interaction |
| 9.b) **How frequent are your interactions with locals outside the university**? *[ex: daily, weekly, every 10 days, monthly, no interaction,...]* | Every month | Every day | Every day | Every 10 days | Daily | Every Week | Every Month | Every day (prof. & staff) |
| 9.c) **Interpersonal relations at the** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **University** (students, profs, staff,...) | | | | | | | | |
| 9.d) **Me and surrounding local environment** (people outside the university) | 4 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| **Others** *[if so, please write which ones]* | N.a | N.a | See the analysis | N.a. | See the analysis | N.a. | N.a | N.a. |
| **Part 2**<br>*Evaluation expressed through a pure numerical value from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates the minimum level of agreement/satisfaction and 5 the maximum one; N.a = Not answered* | | | | | | | | |
| ShanDa is an International environment | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| My impression of the Chinese educational system at the start of the programme was good | 5 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| My impression of the Chinese educational system now is good | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 5 |
| Shandong is a positive environment for international students | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| Shandong is an international environment | 5 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| *[some Chinese argue there is a special treatment reserved to foreigners]*. I think foreign students are reserved a different treatment than Chinese students | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | N.a | 3 |
| I think foreign students are reserved an unfairly better treatment than Chinese students | 1 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 |

Table 3

| *Evaluation expressed through a pure numerical value from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates the minimum level of agreement/satisfaction and 5 the maximum one; N.a. = Not answered* | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **R1** | **R2** | **R3** | **R4** | **R5** | **R6** | **R7** | **R8** |
| I am familiar with what the scandal of this summer *[the one on the "buddy programme"]* | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Please write in brief your opinion on the matter | N.a | I don't understand, maybe it's true, maybe it's false | N.a | N.a | See analysis below | I don't like it, it shouldn't be that because of this thing they close [everything] | No opinion | It's all a misunderstanding, in reality things weren't this way |
| I think that the ethnicity and gender of the students involved [African,male/Chinese,female] played a role in the sparking of the debate | 4 | N.a | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 5 |
| The case had a good influence on my interaction with Chinese people | 1 | N.a | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| The policies implemented by Shandong university were appropriate to solve the problem *[that is, the elimination of the Buddy programme and the implementation of the curfew]* | 1 | N.a | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| If you think the policies weren't appropriate, please explain briefly why | N.a | Don't understand | N.a | N.a | See the analysis | N.a | N.a | The curfew had no connection with the Buddy programme |
| **On the school's explanations** | | | | | | | | |
| A) To improve the safety/security of international students | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| B) Avoid the recurrence of similar situations | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| C) Improving previously unfair policies *[that were reserving an unfairly better treatment to foreign students if compared to Chinese ones]* | 5 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| D) Insure everybody's rest at night, and inspire students to take up the good habit of to going to bed and getting up early | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 2 |
| If you don't agree, please explain briefly which ones are for you the real reasons | N.a | N.a | N.a | N.a | See the analysis | N.a | N.a | It had already been "improved" and there wasn't any fair result |

Table 4