

**COLOMBIA-CHINA ACADEMIC MOBILITY:  
A CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC EXPERIENCE**

Icetex\*

\*The Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad “Mariano Ospina Perez” ( ICETEX ), is a Colombian entity that promotes Higher Education by granting and collecting educational credits, either with its own resources or with those of third parties, to the part of the population with limited possibilities and good academic performance. Likewise, it makes access easier to educational opportunities at international levels to raise the quality of life of Colombian citizens and thus contribute to the social and economic development of the country.

Academic mobility processes and the internationalization of education must be understood as processes of development and policy implementation programs that encompass international and cultural dimensions, in order to take advantage of the benefits offered by international cooperation in the academic and cultural fields.

Today, we face the important challenges of globalization, as it has removed existing barriers thanks to technological breakthroughs and the swift expansion of information. As Gacel-Avila (1995) explains, internationalization of Higher Education must be understood as one of the most coherent and important responses to the phenomenon called globalization, since today's professionals shall be able to adapt and act efficiently in the new global reality and be open to all the influences and schools of thought, either humanistic, scientific or technological in nature.<sup>1</sup>

For many years, internationalization in education has become very important, in light of the expansion of student mobility for short and long periods of time, since this practice has created a new teaching model and new concepts such as cooperation, integration and academic mobility, alliances and competition.

Cultural, economic, political and commercial relations that grow as a result of diplomatic relations between States have an impact upon different activities and projects striving for reciprocal development in various areas. Education, as an engine of progress and the core axis for the nations, cannot ignore those processes; with the contributions obtained from this sphere other aspects as the linguistic and the cultural may be acknowledged which will break the ideological and social barriers between countries.

Likewise, the establishment and development of relations among States may not overlook the education and the academic training of their peoples, since it is the only way to understand the differences and generate synergies to benefit every nation. Globalization and world processes for integration, the signing of regional agreements and the possibilities provided by current information communications and technologies have opened education even more to international cooperation and the new methodologies of teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Estrada, M., y Luna, Guillermo. (2004). Internacionalización de la Educación Superior: Nuevos proveedores externos en Centroamérica. Lesalc-Unesco, pp.13.

## **The Establishment of Colombo-Chinese relations**

Throughout these thirty years, Colombia has strived to keep and strengthen the development of relations that enable the establishment of cooperation programs in different fields. China has positioned itself as Colombia's first partner in Asia Pacific, and for that reason exchange and commercial, financial and investment protection agreements with this country have increased satisfactorily. The continuity of the friendship policy between the People's Republic of China and Colombia and the strong relations between the nations allow us to foresee a future where sharing each other's experiences will build lasting and mutually beneficial alliances. In the last thirty years, Colombia and China have witnessed structural changes including political reforms, economic liberalization and industrial modernization leading to the acceleration of economic growth in the two regions and therefore, an ongoing reinforcement of bilateral relations.

## **Icetex as an articulator of academic cooperation**

This year we celebrate sixty years of the creation of Icetex. Its vision of the internationalization of education as the reason for its existence remains current, due to the enthusiasm for the achievements witnessed and the opportunity to serve and contribute to the country. Likewise, Icetex has also witnessed thirty years of relations between China and Colombia: it cannot be isolated from the academic and cultural cooperation.

With the purpose of supporting the organization of academic events oriented towards the construction of exchange fora to foster joint reflection, Icetex has consolidated a portfolio of cooperation programs with different academic mobility activities; the consolidation of work and research networks; exchange among researchers, teachers and specialists, student training in different regions of the world and the promotion of cultural and linguistic exchanges. All these made Icetex a national and international reference to accompany and strengthen internationalization processes of Colombian higher education, as shown by the important relations with the People's Republic of China for the exchange of academic experiences.

The importance for Colombia of the relations with the "Great Dragon" has been traditionally evidenced in the fields of investment, trade and politics; nonetheless, areas such as culture and education have become recent additions to the bilateral agenda between the two nations, reshaping our existing cooperation. Therefore, and according to the strategies of the National Government for the support and development of the insertion policy in the Pacific basin and getting closer to China,

programs of academic cooperation led by the Institute work as a negotiation instrument in this field and the different scenarios as required.

### **Behavior of the Academic cooperation between Colombia and China**

In recent years, the two countries have reached increasing cooperation and an excellent relation within the framework of international fora and in the different bi-national fields in the economic, commercial, cultural and academic areas. This is why Icetex and the People's Republic of China have tied their bonds by creating academic and mobility opportunities for Chinese students to come to Colombia, as well as for Colombian professionals to the different Chinese higher education institutions, as cooperation activities that reflect the excellent diplomatic relations that started on February 7, 1980.

The firm commitment of the two countries, materialized in work plans to formalize academic cooperation activities, has benefitted students and higher education institutions of both nations. Initially, Colombian students traveled to the People's Republic of China to specialize in fields as acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine of known and ancient reputation. In recent years, the Chinese Council of Scholarships, an office of the Ministry of Education of that country has opened opportunities for studies in all areas for foreign students including Colombians, in nearly 390 Chinese universities.

In the past five years many Colombians have traveled to the People's Republic of China to learn Mandarin Chinese, or to specialize in different fields and get to know this ancient culture, almost impossible to decipher for its uniqueness. Knowledge and experiences exchange has led to a better knowledge of our cultures and the possibility to extend our mutual understanding.

Thus, harmony in the relations with China has been one of the great challenges for Colombian foreign policy, by encouraging economic, commercial, academic scientific and technical cooperation between the two nations in order to offer Colombians a horizon beyond America and a nice place in our country for Chinese people. To this purpose, Colombia through Icetex, has contributed to the development of the China-Colombia Academic and Cultural Mobility Program since 2006; with the visit of 21 Chinese students to the country, languages departments of the higher education institutions have strengthened and the two cultures are disseminating.

Today, thirty years after the establishment of the diplomatic relations between Colombia and China and five years after formalizing the Academic Mobility

Program, more than eighty Chinese youngsters have traveled to Colombia within the framework of the program to teach mandarin Chinese, to disseminate the culture and master the Spanish language while experiencing the Colombian reality. This thirty-year economic, commercial and political exchange has brought an important development in cooperation, academic, linguistic and cultural relation fields, allowing better understanding and affirming the will to continue working together in the search of progressive development. The increasing presence of Colombian students in the People's Republic of China and of Chinese students in Colombia are a clear evidence of the good relations that have lasted already thirty years, represented in numerous and unquestionable benefits for one another. Colombia, through Icetex, reaffirms its intention of strengthening this relationship and that of friendship to provide our peoples with a comprehensive vision of the world and our two nations.

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