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# An Analysis of Factors Influencing International Students' Choice of Education in China

Genshu Lu and Mei Tian

## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a significant trend towards enhanced internationalization of higher education across the world, partly as a response to wider economic globalization. Probably the most visible evidence of such a trend is an expansion of internationally mobile students. Data from UNESCO (2007, 2012) shows that roughly 2.72 million students studied outside their country of citizenship in 2005, and this number had increased to more than to 4.6 million in 2015 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017).

G. Lu (✉)
West China Higher Education Evaluation Centre & Institute of Higher Education, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, China
e-mail: gslu@mail.xjtu.edu.cn

M. Tian
School of Foreign Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, China
e-mail: temmytian@mail.xjtu.edu.cn


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In China international education has developed rapidly. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2015), 377,054 international students studied in China in 2014. The figure increased by 17.43% to 442,773 in 2016 (MoE, 2017). In 2016, China hosted international students from 205 countries and regions (*ibid*). These students were studying in 829 Chinese universities, research institutes, and other educational institutions in 31 Chinese provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities[1] (*ibid*). Table 2.1 presents the breakdown of international student statistics in 2016. It should be noted that compared with the more economically developed cities (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin) and coastal provinces (e.g. Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong), international education in China's inland regions (e.g. Shaanxi) languishes behind.

In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed to co-build "Silk Road Economic Belt" during his visit to Kazakhstan (xinhuanet.com, 2013a). One month later, President Xi proposed to build "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" in his speech to the Indonesian Parliament (xinhuanet.com, 2013b). In 2014, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) released the "Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms", in which the Central Committee required to:

> further open up inland and border areas. Key ports, border cities and economic cooperation zones are allowed to adopt special policies to promote personnel exchanges, logistics and tourism. Financial organizations focusing on development are to be established to accelerate infrastructural construction and the connection between China and its neighboring countries and regions. Efforts are to be made to promote the building of a Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road, so as to form a new pattern of omni-directional opening to the outside world. (CPC Central Committee, 2013)

Since then, One Belt One Road (OBOR), that is, a Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road, has become an important opening-up initiative in China.[2] Promoting and strengthening higher education

[1] These figures exclude numbers of students from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan studying in Chinese educational institutes (MoE, 2015).

[2] OBOR runs though the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. The Silk Road Economic Belt is linking China with central Asia, Russia, and Europe; linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central and West Asia; and linking China with Southeast Asia, South

**Table 2.1** Statistics of international students in China in 2016

| Classification of international students | Number | Percentage of total | Differences between 2016 and 2014 | Year-on-year percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Regions of home countries* | | | | |
| Asia | 264,976 | 59.84 | +39,486 | 14.90 |
| Europe | 71,319 | 16.11 | +3844 | 5.39 |
| Africa | 61,594 | 13.91 | +19,917 | 32.33 |
| America | 38,077 | 8.60 | +1937 | 5.08 |
| Oceania | 6807 | 1.54 | +535 | 7.98 |
| Total | 442,773 | 100.00 | +65,719 | 14.84 |
| *Funding sources* | | | | |
| Chinese Government Scholarships | 49,022 | 11.07 | 12,079 | 24.64 |
| Self-funded | 393,751 | 88.93 | 53,640 | 13.62 |
| Total | 442,773 | 100 | 65,719 | 14.84 |
| *Types of educational programmes* | | | | |
| Degree programmes | 209,966 | 47.42 | +45,572 | 21.70 |
| Masters' degrees | 45,816 | 10.35 | +9940 | 21.70 |
| Doctoral degrees | 18,051 | 4.08 | +5937 | 32.89 |
| Non-degree programmes | 232,807 | 52.58 | +20,147 | 8.65 |
| Total | 442,773 | 100.00 | +65,719 | 14.84 |
| *Top 15 countries of origin* | | | | |
| South Korea | 70,540 | 15.93 | | |
| The United States | 23,838 | 5.38 | | |
| Thailand | 23,044 | 5.20 | | |
| Pakistan | 18,626 | 4.21 | | |
| India | 18,717 | 4.23 | | |
| Russia | 17,971 | 4.06 | | |
| Indonesia | 14,714 | 3.32 | | |
| Kazakhstan | 13,996 | 3.16 | | |
| Japan | 13,595 | 3.07 | | |
| Vietnam | 10,639 | 2.40 | | |
| France | 10,414 | 2.35 | | |
| Laos | 9907 | 2.24 | | |
| Mongolia | 8508 | 1.92 | | |
| Germany | 8145 | 1.84 | | |
| Malaysia | 6880 | 1.55 | | |
| *Top 10 host cities and provinces* | | | | |
| Beijing | 77,234 | 17.44 | | |
| Shanghai | 59,887 | 13.53 | | |
| Jiangsu province | 32,228 | 7.28 | | |
| Zhejiang province | 30,108 | 6.80 | | |

(*continued*)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

| Classification of international students | Number | Percentage of total | Differences between 2016 and 2014 | Year-on-year percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tianjin | 26,564 | 6.00 | | |
| Liaoning province | 25,273 | 5.71 | | |
| Guangdong province | 24,605 | 5.56 | | |
| Shandong province | 19,829 | 4.48 | | |
| Hubei province | 19,263 | 4.35 | | |
| Yunnan Province | 14,925 | 3.37 | | |

Source: Adapted from MoE (2015, 2017)

cooperation and exchanges with OBOR countries are important aspects in this initiative (MoE, 2016). Exchanges in higher education help to create positive images of China in OBOR countries, which in turn become social foundation for regional cooperation between China and OBOR countries, and eventually help to stimulate economic development in China and in OBOR countries (Zhang, 2016). International students have played and will continue playing an important role in China's academic exchanges with OBOR countries (Wang, 2015). These students act as ambassadors linking their home countries with China (Lu, 2015).

Given the significance of international education in China's OBOR initiative, there is inadequate research on international students in China. The study reported in this chapter focused on students from OBOR countries and aimed to explore the factors influencing these students' choice of Chinese international education. Data came from a survey performed at two universities in Shaanxi province. The national OBOR initiative has opened up new opportunities for this Chinese inland province, which used to be the start of the ancient Silk Road and has been positioned as a starting point of the new Silk Road Economic Belt. Based on the discussion of research findings, suggestions are given for China to further develop its international education.

Asia, and the Indian Sea (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is connecting China's coast with Europe through the Indian Sea, and connecting China's coasts to the South Pacific Sea (*ibid*). The OBOR initiative is open and welcomes participation of all countries, and international and regional organizations (*ibid*).

## Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Higher Education

Salisbury, Paulsen, and Pascarella (2010) once commented on the similarities between students' domestic college choice and their choice of foreign education. Following Salisbury et al. (*ibid*), in this section we review the studies on the factors influencing students' college choice in their home countries. We then review the research on the factors influencing international students' decision to pursue education abroad.

### Factors Influencing Domestic College Choice

The factors influencing individuals' choice of domestic higher education can be roughly categorized into four groups, that is, social/family-related factors, personal/psychological factors, economic/career factors, and institutional/structural factors. Specifically, studies have revealed a significant correlation between family socioeconomic status and students' choice of higher education (Guppy & Pendakur, 1989; Hayden & Carpenter, 1990). It was reported that parents showed different levels of willingness to pay for education for their children with different academic abilities (Becker & Tomes, 1976). Family structure, such as number of siblings and gender of a child, was also reported to affect parents' investment on their children's education (Blake, 1986; Parish & Willis, 1993). Since Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) proposed the concept of "social capital", research has been exploring the influences of social capital variables, including parents' social networks, on students' success in schools (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Yan, 1999). Other studies have found that teachers, friends, and career mentors were likely to influence students' demand for higher education (Menon, 1998).

Secondly, personal/psychological factors can influence individual choice of domestic higher education. For example, studies found that students' academic abilities had significant influences on their decision to pursue higher education (Chung & Lu, 1999; Kodde & Ritzen, 1988; Psacharopoulos & Soumelis, 1979). Gender, motivations, expectations, and self-efficacy were also reported to motivate them to pursue further education (Harris & Halpin, 2002; Menon, 1998; Williams & Gordon, 1981).

Since the proposal of human capital theory in early 1960s, it has been widely recognized that economic factors can significantly affect domestic demand for higher education. Human capital theory assumes that people choose the levels and types of higher education according to its labour market returns; that is, students and their families make their educational investment decisions based on a comparison of educational costs and expected incomes, as well as a comparison of rates of return to education and rates of return on other investments (Becker, 1964). Human capital theory also uses future employment prospects to explain individuals' decision to pursue higher education (Jimenez & Salas-Velasco, 2000).

Fourthly, studies have investigated institutional/structural factors, such as early separation of more promising students from less able ones (Yuchtman & Samuel, 1975; Tsang, 1991), course types (Borus & Carpenter, 1984), and availability of crucial information, on students' choice of higher education. The influences of institutions, however, have been considered less significant than the influences of individual/psychological factors, family involvement, or economic variables on students' college choice (Borus & Carpenter, 1984).

## Factors Influencing Choice of Foreign Education

Research has referred to "push" and "pull" factors to explain international students' decision to study abroad. According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), push factors functioned in students' home countries that motivate them to undertake international study, whilst pull factors were dimensions within specific study destinations that draw students into particular destination countries. Genetic push factors identified by early studies included the lack of higher education opportunities, limited academic freedom, less favourable economic conditions, unattainable job security, and stability of home countries, while pull factors related to the educational, political, social and financial advancement of host countries that attracted students worldwide (Altbach, 2004a; McMahon, 1992). Later research extended the push-pull model to cover a wider range of factors, including parental influence, costs, geographic proximity, attractiveness of natural environments, climate, lifestyle, security, racial dis-

crimination, employment prospects, and availability of scholarships (e.g. Bodycott, 2009). Internal factors, such as family background, academic characteristics, and perceptions, were also proposed (Li & Bray, 2007).

Previous studies also demonstrated the connection between students' interpretation of quality of domestic and foreign education and their decision to seek education abroad. For example, Park (2009) reported that Korean students' perceptions on the images of universities in the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and Australia influenced their choices of destination countries for outward mobility. Liu and Fang (2011) pointed out that Chinese students expected that they would receive better education, have access to richer educational resources, and acquire more practical skills and professional knowledge in foreign universities. Liu and Fang's (2011) research reflected a lack of confidence in the quality of domestic higher education which tended to push students to choose foreign education.

It should be noted that the above-reviewed studies are on international students from "peripheral" countries to study either in developed, English-speaking, "central" Western countries, such as Austria, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, or in emerging economies, such as Hong Kong and Macau. Little has been known about the factors influencing the recent flows of international students to China and other "newly emerging educational hubs" (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017).

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the "three-phase" model proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and the "push-pull" model proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), this research presents a comprehensive model to explain students' choice of higher education outside their home countries and factors influencing such choice (see Fig. 2.1).

This model suggests three stages of the process in which students choose international education: that is, making the decision to continue their education abroad (Stage 1), choosing specific destination countries (Stage 2), and choosing specific institutions (Stage 3). In most cases, a student who is willing to continue her/his education would first decide

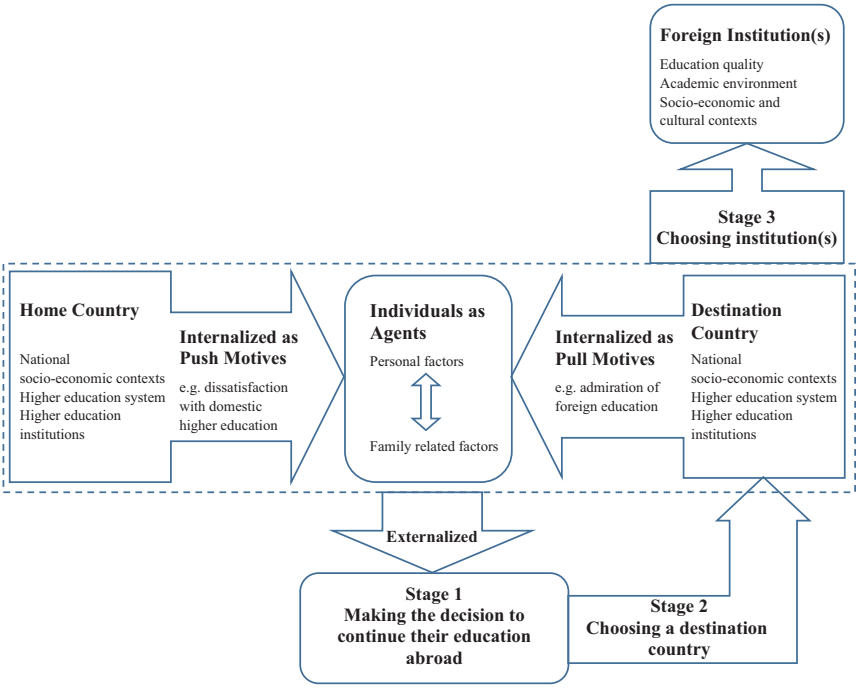


**Fig. 2.1** Students' choice of foreign education

whether to stay in the home country. Upon deciding to study abroad, she/he would then choose one or several preferred destination country/countries. Following this, she/he would choose one or several educational institution(s) in the desirable destination country/countries. It is also possible that she/he, after deciding to study abroad, directly selects a preferred foreign educational institution. The research reported in this chapter explores possible factors influencing students' choice at Stage 2.

At Stage 2, we propose that an individual student's selection of a destination country is a result of "engagement" between personal and contextual factors. Based on the literature reviewed in the previous section, we propose that personal factors include perceived academic abilities and proficiency in target foreign language(s). Contextual factors include those from both adjacent contexts, including family background, parental support and expectations, and broader institutional/national contexts, such as

political, economic, and sociocultural situations of their home and destination countries, reputation and quality of education provided by their home and destination countries and costs and potential gains of foreign education. We perceive that individual students are not passive but capable agents, who can reflectively make their choice based on their interpretation of personal abilities, and on their internalization and interpretation of contextual resources and constraints. For example, students' dissatisfaction with domestic education or better impression of a foreign education system can lead to their choice of pursuing education in that country.

## Research Design

### Research Focus and Research Setting

This chapter reports findings from a survey study, which aimed to analyse the factors influencing OBOR students' choice of Chinese international education. Two full-time higher education institutions in Shaanxi province, that is, Shaanxi Normal University and Chang'an University, participated in this study. Both universities are research-centred, comprehensive, national Project 211[3] universities. The two universities provide international students with non-degree programmes of the Chinese language and English-medium degree programmes in various disciplines at under- and postgraduate levels. The two universities have no strict, standard Chinese proficiency requirements for students applying for non-degree Chinese programmes. Applicants for undergraduate degree programmes are required to reach the official Chinese proficiency test (HSK) Level III, and students applying for postgraduate programmes have to reach HSK Level V[4] (see hanban.org, 2016).

[3] Project 211 is a project initiated in 1995 by the Chinese Ministry of Education. So far 116 universities have been designated as Project 211 institutions. National funding is distributed to these universities to promote their research quality.

[4] Students who successfully achieve HSK Level III are expected to know 600 Chinese words and to manage everyday life in Chinese (hanban.org, 2016). Students achieving HSK Level V are expected

At Shaanxi Normal University, the annual tuition fees for non-degree language students are RMB16,500; tuition fees for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes range from RMB16,500 to RMB28,000 (iscs.snnu.edu.cn, 2014). At Chang'an University, the annual tuition fees for language students are RMB14,000; tuition fees for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes range from RMB20,000 to RMB30,000 (ies.chd.edu.cn, 2016). The average accommodation fees charged by both universities are around RMB10,000 per year. Accommodation costs vary depending on the facilities and room sizes. Both universities support prospective students' application for Chinese government scholarships (csc.edu.cn, 2015). The Chinese government scholarships, that is, bilateral programme and Chinese university programme, cover tuition fees and accommodation costs. Scholarship recipients also receive medical insurance and a monthly stipend ranging from RMB2500 to RMB3500 (*ibid*).

## Sampling

At both universities, all first-year international students, regardless of the programmes they register in, are required to take Chinese lessons. In January 2016, the authors randomly selected five Chinese classes for the first-year international students at the two participating universities and invited the students in the classes who came from OBOR countries, loosely defined as countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa, to fill in a questionnaire. A total of 109 questionnaires were distributed, and all copies were returned. Table 2.2 presents main characteristics of the research participants.

## Research Instrument

The questionnaire that the participants filled in was named as "Questionnaire of International Students' Experiences in China".

to know 2500 words and are able to "read Chinese newspapers and magazines, enjoy Chinese films and plays, and give a full-length speech in Chinese" (*ibid*).

**Table 2.2** Characteristics of participants

| Category | Number | Percentage | Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Universities* | | | *Nationalities* | | |
| Shaanxi Normal University | 15 | 13.8 | Congo | 40 | 36.7 |
| Chang' an University | 94 | 86.2 | Kazakhstan | 34 | 31.2 |
| *Gender* | | | South Korea | 6 | 5.5 |
| Male | 78 | 71.6 | Yemen | 6 | 5.5 |
| Female | 28 | 25.7 | Uzbekistan | 3 | 2.8 |
| Missing | 3 | 2.8 | Pakistan | 1 | 0.9 |
| *Majors* | | | Kyrgyzstan | 1 | 0.9 |
| Engineering | 58 | 53.2 | Laos | 1 | 0.9 |
| Economy/ Management/ Law | 22 | 20.2 | Rwanda | 1 | 0.9 |
| Chinese/English | 10 | 9.2 | Mongolia | 1 | 0.9 |
| Missing | 19 | 17.4 | Namibia | 1 | 0.9 |
| *Types of courses* | | | Sudan | 1 | 0.9 |
| Non-degree Chinese | 14 | 12.8 | Thailand | 1 | 0.9 |
| Undergraduate degree | 63 | 57.8 | Italy | 1 | 0.9 |
| Masters' degree | 13 | 11.9 | Missing | 11 | 10.1 |
| Doctoral degree | 2 | 1.8 | Total | 109 | 100.0 |
| Missing | 17 | 15.6 | | | |

Questions in the questionnaire were drafted based on the following instruments, that is, a self-designed questionnaire investigating Chinese students' learning experiences in Chinese higher education institutions (see Lu, 2013; Lu, Hu, Peng, & Kang, 2013; Lu, Hu, & Yan, 2013; Lu, Peng, & Hu, 2014), a self-designed questionnaire investigating the factors influencing Chinese students' choice of domestic higher education (Chung & Lu, 2005; Chung, Lu, & Wen, 2005; Chung & Lu, 2006a, 2006b; Lu, Liu, & Chung, 2009), and a self-designed questionnaire investigating the factors influencing Chinese university students' choice of foreign postgraduate education (Lu, Tian, & Lai, 2014). Other studies on the factors influencing students' choice of domestic and foreign education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and on international students' experiences in China (Li, 2015; Tian & Lowe,

2014) were drawn on to revise the drafted questions so as to better investigate characteristics of the students choosing Chinese education, factors influencing their choice of Chinese education, and their experiences in China. The questionnaire consists of five parts, as shown in Table 2.3. It took around 45 minutes to complete a questionnaire. This chapter focuses on the participants' responses to questions in the first four sections. Descriptive statistics and factor analysis were used to analyse the influences of personal factors, family-related factors, and broader institutional and national factors on the participants' choice of Chinese education.

**Table 2.3** Questionnaire contents

| Sections | Contents |
|---|---|
| *Part one*: Background information | Participants were invited to indicate his/her nationality, gender, university, and programmes registered in China, perceived levels of Chinese proficiency, family socioeconomic status, and parents' educational experiences outside their home countries |
| *Part two*: Family influences on students' choice of Chinese education | Nine items were designed to explore the influences of family financial support, information provided by family, and family expectations on students' choice of Chinese education |
| *Part three*: Dissatisfaction with domestic education and its influences on students' choice of Chinese education | Seventeen items were designed to explore students' perceived dissatisfaction with domestic education and its influences on their choice of Chinese education. The 17 items relate to the perceived educational opportunities, educational quality, and career prospects in their home countries |
| *Part four*: Other factors influencing participants' choice of Chinese education | Thirty-three items were designed to explore other factors influencing participants' choice of Chinese education. The 33 items relate to students' knowledge and awareness of Chinese society and Chinese culture, physical environment, costs and returns of Chinese education, information sources, academic environment, quality of education and admission requirements of Chinese universities |
| *Part five*: Expectations towards Chinese education and learning experiences in China | Twenty items were designed to explore students' expectations towards Chinese education. Seventy items were designed to explore students' learning experiences in China |

# Research Results

## Chinese Proficiency

The survey invited the participants to indicate their perceived levels of proficiency in Chinese. The results showed that less than half of the students perceived their oral or written Chinese as very good or good (see Table 2.4). That is, more than half of the participants reported their oral or written Chinese as average, poor, or very poor. Prior research on non-English-speaking international students in English-speaking countries has indicated that language problems could result in learning difficulties and lack of confidence in participating in class activities (e.g. Erlenawati, 2005; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). In this research, inadequate Chinese proficiency might not have affected the participants' academic studies, as the degree programmes offered to them were instructed in English. The lack of Chinese proficiency, however, was likely to cause problems in the students' daily interactions with teachers and school administrators, discourage them to communicate and socialize with local people, and increase stress levels in their adaptation to the host culture and the host society (see also Yeh & Inose, 2003; Li, 2015).

## Family Influences on Students' Choice of Chinese Education

In the questionnaire, we invited the participants to indicate their parents' education experiences outside their home countries. The results showed

**Table 2.4** Self-reported Chinese proficiency levels

| | Oral Chinese | | Written Chinese | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proficiency levels | Number | % | Number | % |
| Very fluently | 10 | 9.2 | 9 | 8.3 |
| Fluently | 26 | 23.9 | 33 | 30.3 |
| Average | 46 | 42.2 | 53 | 48.6 |
| Poor | 12 | 11.0 | 4 | 3.7 |
| Very poor | 7 | 6.4 | 5 | 4.6 |
| Missing value | 8 | 7.3 | 5 | 4.6 |
| Total | 109 | 100.0 | 109 | 100.0 |

that fathers of 71 participants had overseas education experiences, accounting for 65.1%; mothers of 56 students had overseas education experiences, accounting for 51.4%. In other words, over half of the participants reported that their mother or father had received education abroad. The results were consistent with those of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study; that is, parents who had received education outside their home countries and had benefited from such experiences were likely to support their children to pursue education abroad.

Furthermore, the questionnaire included a list of statements to investigate how three family-related factors, that is, family financial support, information provided by family, and family expectations, had influenced the participants' decision of studying in China. Each of the factors was investigated with respect to their choice of the host city, the host universities, and the educational programmes they registered in. The participants were asked to indicate the levels of agreement from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with the given statements. As shown in Table 2.5, respectively 23.9%, 28.4%, and 20.2% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that family financial support, information provided by their family, and family expectations had significantly influenced their choice of the host city; respectively 29.4%, 27.5%, 34.9% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that family financial support, information provided by family, and family expectations had significantly influenced their choice of the host universities; and respectively 32.1%, 34.0%, 33.0% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that family financial support, information provided by family, and family expectations had significantly influenced their choice of the educational programmes. Hence, family was an important factor influencing the participants' choice of Chinese education. The result echoed the findings of the studies on family involvement and students' choice of domestic colleges (e.g. McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005) and those on parental influences and international students' choice of foreign education (e.g. Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

**Table 2.5** Family influences on students' choice of Chinese education (%)

| Items | Strongly agree | Agree | Slightly agree | Slightly disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Missing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Family financial support has significant influence on my choice of the host city | 4.6 | 19.3 | 15.6 | 27.5 | 4.6 | 22.0 | 6.4 |
| (2) Family financial support has significant influence on my choice of the host university | 9.2 | 20.2 | 21.1 | 21.1 | 5.5 | 16.5 | 6.4 |
| (3) Family financial support has significant influence on my choice of the educational programme | 13.8 | 18.3 | 21.1 | 16.5 | 4.6 | 18.3 | 7.3 |
| (4) Information provided by my family has significant influence on my choice of the host city | 10.1 | 18.3 | 17.4 | 19.3 | 5.5 | 20.2 | 9.2 |
| (5) Information provided by my family has significant influence on my choice of the host university | 5.5 | 22.0 | 23.9 | 12.8 | 7.3 | 18.3 | 10.1 |

(*continued*)

**Table 2.5** (continued)

| Items | Strongly agree | Agree | Slightly agree | Slightly disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Missing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (6) Information provided by my family has significant influence on my choice of the educational programme | 14.7 | 19.3 | 15.6 | 17.4 | 6.4 | 14.7 | 11.9 |
| (7) Family expectations have significant influence on my choice of the host city | 10.1 | 10.1 | 27.5 | 19.3 | 4.6 | 19.3 | 9.2 |
| (8) Family expectations have significant influence on my choice of the host university | 11.0 | 23.9 | 12.8 | 19.3 | 5.5 | 19.3 | 8.3 |
| (9) Family expectations have significant influence on my choice of the educational programme | 17.4 | 15.6 | 21.1 | 12.8 | 7.3 | 16.5 | 9.2 |

## Dissatisfaction with Domestic Education and Its Influences on the Choice of Chinese Education

The study investigated whether there was a relationship between students' perceived dissatisfaction with domestic education and their choice of Chinese international education. In the questionnaire the degree to which the participants felt dissatisfied with the given aspects of their

domestic education were measured by their indicated levels of agreement with a list of statements, with 1 indicating strongly agree and 6 indicating strongly disagree. The lower point a student gave to a statement, the more dissatisfied this student felt with the given aspect of her/his domestic education. The results are presented in Table 2.6.

In Table 2.6, the given statements were sorted in an ascending order according to the mean values of the participants' indicated levels of dissatisfaction. As shown in Table 2.6, although the participants had concerns over their domestic education in terms of fewer chances for personal development, fewer opportunities to receive further education, and fewer opportunities to find challenging or creative jobs at home (mean < 3.5, indicating "slightly agree"), they tended to slightly disagree with all other listed statements (3.5 < mean < 4.5, indicating "slightly disagree"). Therefore, different from the prior research on Asian students' intent to study abroad (e.g. Liu & Fang, 2011; Park, 2009), the current research did not reveal strong relationship between participants' dissatisfaction with their domestic education and their decision to study in China. The participants may have decided to study in China to gain better opportunities for personal development, to get further education, which they otherwise could not have received at home, and to obtain challenging and creative jobs upon graduation. However, they were satisfied with other aspects of their domestic education, such as long-term financial returns, diversity of educational programmes, degrees of innovation, opportunities for international exchanges, chances to obtain scholarships, career prospects, recognition of higher education qualifications, teaching methods, research facilities, and faculty expertise.

## Analysis of Other Factors Influencing Participants' Choice of Chinese Education

Were there other factors attracting these international students to China? In the questionnaire we designed 33 items to identify and analyse other possible factors that could have influenced their decision. Those 33 items are related to the participants' knowledge and awareness of Chinese society and Chinese culture, physical environment, costs and returns of

**Table 2.6** Dissatisfaction with domestic education

| Statements | Mean | Levels of agreement (%) | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Strongly agree | Agree | Slightly agree | Slightly disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Missing |
| (1) There are fewer chances for personal development in my home country | 3.23 | 8.3 | 22.0 | 29.4 | 11.9 | 15.6 | 5.5 | 7.3 |
| (2) There are fewer opportunities to receive further education in my home country | 3.38 | 10.1 | 16.5 | 29.4 | 14.7 | 11.0 | 11.9 | 6.4 |
| (3) There are fewer opportunities to find challenging or creative jobs in my home country | 3.48 | 8.3 | 15.6 | 28.4 | 13.8 | 17.4 | 9.2 | 7.3 |
| (4) Long-term financial returns to domestic education are low | 3.56 | 2.8 | 21.1 | 21.1 | 20.2 | 17.4 | 7.3 | 10.1 |
| (5) I cannot find educational programmes that I want to pursue at universities in my home country | 3.56 | 6.4 | 11.9 | 30.3 | 19.3 | 12.8 | 10.1 | 9.2 |
| (6) Innovation is inadequately stressed in my home country | 3.63 | 0.9 | 13.8 | 33.9 | 20.2 | 17.4 | 6.4 | 7.3 |
| (7) There are fewer opportunities for international exchanges and interactions in my home country | 3.64 | 10.1 | 16.5 | 21.1 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 19.3 | 7.3 |
| (8) There are fewer chances for me to obtain a scholarship in my home country | 3.81 | 12.8 | 10.1 | 13.8 | 18.3 | 18.3 | 18.3 | 8.3 |
| (9) University graduates in my home country are faced with uncertain employment prospects | 3.82 | 4.6 | 11.0 | 27.5 | 12.8 | 26.6 | 10.1 | 7.3 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (10) Domestic degree certificates are not highly recognized | 3.82 | 4.6 | 22.9 | 11.9 | 12.8 | 32.1 | 11.0 | 4.6 |
| (11) Book knowledge transmission is overstressed | 3.89 | 5.5 | 11.9 | 15.6 | 23.9 | 18.3 | 13.8 | 11.0 |
| (12) Examinations are so difficult that I cannot be admitted by my desired programmes in my home country | 3.93 | 11.0 | 11.9 | 19.3 | 9.2 | 16.5 | 26.6 | 5.5 |
| (13) I would bear greater pressure in subject study and be faced with fierce peer competition if studying in my home country | 3.96 | 9.2 | 10.1 | 21.1 | 12.8 | 15.6 | 24.8 | 6.4 |
| (14) International reputation of universities in my home country is low | 4.01 | 4.6 | 13.8 | 15.6 | 17.4 | 26.6 | 15.6 | 6.4 |
| (15) Overall quality of domestic education is low | 4.13 | 4.6 | 5.5 | 20.2 | 21.1 | 29.4 | 13.8 | 5.5 |
| (16) There is the lack of adequate research facilities or resources in my home country | 4.18 | 0.9 | 7.3 | 22.9 | 15.6 | 29.4 | 13.8 | 10.1 |
| (17) It is less possible to be supervised by internationally renowned tutors in my home country | 4.41 | 4.6 | 8.3 | 11.0 | 21.1 | 19.3 | 30.3 | 5.5 |

Chinese education, information sources, academic environment, quality of education, and admission requirements of the Chinese universities. Table 2.7 presents the results of factor analysis (FA). FA followed the principle that only the factors, of which eigenvalues were greater than 1, would be extracted. The principal components method (PCA) and varimax criterion were used to apply rotation and extract factors. If loadings of an item on any two factors were greater than 0.55, the item would be deleted. As shown in Table 2.7, the remaining 18 items were clustered into five factors, respectively named as "information sources", "quality of education", "opportunities to gain admission", "possibilities of living in China upon graduation", and "opportunities for intercultural communication". Cumulatively, these five factors accounted for 78.842% of the variance.

Results of reliability analysis showed that, except for the third factor, "opportunities to gain admission", of which Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach) was slightly lower than 0.500, the internal consistency of other factors were higher than 0.640, which indicated good internal consistency of the factors. The five factors, which had influenced the participants' choice of Chinese international education, matched the factors influencing other groups of international students' selection of their study destinations (e.g. Bodycott, 2009; Li & Bray, 2007).

However, it is worth noting that, different from the previous studies on international student mobility (e.g. Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), in this research knowledge and awareness of the host country were not found to be an important factor influencing the participants' decision to study in China. The result echoed the findings of Tian and Lowe (2014), which revealed that a group of American exchange students embarked on their study in China were largely ignorant of Chinese society and Chinese culture. It also matched our participants' emphasis on the sources of information about the destination country. Given the lack of understanding of China, teachers, family, and friends' recommendations had been the most convenient source of referral for the participants. Websites and university marketing activities also had provided valuable and reliable information of China, prior to making their final decision.

In addition, in the questionnaire we designed four items, that is, "low tuition fees and living costs", "opportunities to gain scholarships",

**Table 2.7** Other factors influencing participants' choice of Chinese education

| | Factors | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Items | Information sources | Quality of education | Opportunities to gain admission | Possibilities of living in China upon graduation | Opportunities of intercultural communication |
| (1) Teachers' recommendations | 0.877 | | | | |
| (2) Family members' recommendations | 0.860 | | | | |
| (3) Websites | 0.796 | | | | |
| (4) Friends' recommendations | 0.783 | | | | |
| (5) Chinese universities' marketing activities | 0.738 | | | | |
| (6) Chinese universities' commercial advertisements | 0.693 | | | | |
| (7) Diversity of teaching methods | | 0.894 | | | |
| (8) Teachers' teaching and research abilities | | 0.878 | | | |
| (9) Quality and reputation of Chinese education | | 0.834 | | | |
| (10) Richness of teaching contents | | 0.801 | | | |
| (11) Cutting-edge research | | 0.614 | | | |
| (12) Admission requirements on Chinese proficiency | | | 0.880 | | |
| (13) Other admission requirements | | | 0.636 | | |

(*continued*)

**Table 2.7** (continued)

| | Factors | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Items | Information sources | Quality of education | Opportunities to gain admission | Possibilities of living in China upon graduation | Opportunities of intercultural communication |
| (14) Levels of internalization of Chinese educational institutions | | | 0.567 | | |
| (15) Immigration opportunities | | | | 0.850 | |
| (16) Relatives and friends in China | | | | 0.782 | |
| (17) Opportunities to exchange and cooperate with universities in home countries | | | | | 0.839 |
| (18) Easiness to obtain a Chinese visa | | | | | 0.793 |
| Eigenvalue | 4.276 | 3.810 | 2.227 | 2.076 | 1.802 |
| Variance % | 23.757 | 21.167 | 12.373 | 11.533 | 10.013 |
| Accumulated variance % | 23.757 | 44.924 | 57.296 | 68.829 | 78.842 |
| Cronbach's alpha | 0.877 | 0.889 | 0.495 | 0.724 | 0.649 |

"university financial aids", and "recognition of Chinese university qualifications in the job market", to explore influences of economic/career considerations on the students' choice. The loadings of these four items were all smaller than 0.55. Hence, economic/career factors had no significant influence on our participants' decision to study in China. This result was different from the previous studies, which had reported educational costs as the biggest "repel" factors (e.g. Foster, 2014), and the previous studies that had identified scholarships and financial assistance as important pull factors influencing international students' selection of their destination countries (e.g. McMahon, 1992).

## Conclusion and Suggestions

China has launched the One Belt One Road initiative to boost the opening-up of its inland regions. Higher education plays an important role in this initiative. By hosting and educating students from OBOR countries, higher education institutions contribute to the building of positive images of China in these countries, which in turn help to enhance the cooperation and exchanges between China and OBOR countries. The study reported in this chapter involved 109 OBOR students who were studying in Shaanxi, China. The research offers insights into the factors influencing these students' choices of Chinese higher education. It provides understanding into international students in China who have been largely unstudied, and has implications for China to further enhance quality of its international education.

In this research, over 50% of the participants were second-generation international students whose parents had received education outside their home countries. The significant influences of parents' educational experiences on children's outward mobility have been reported earlier. Weenink (2008), for example, pointed out that parents who had experienced foreign cultures themselves were inclined to transfer such "cosmopolitan capital" to their children through supporting their international education. Other studies showed that students studying abroad were likely to have well-educated parents and have widely travelled overseas as a child (e.g. King, Findlay, Ahrens, & Dunne, 2011).

The current research also revealed that family financial support, information provided by family, and family expectations were important factors influencing the participants' choice of the host city, the host universities, and the academic programmes they registered in. The findings were in line with findings of studies regarding family influences on domestic college choice (e.g. McDonough, 1997; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009) and studies on parental involvement and students' choices of foreign education (e.g. Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Moreover, the research did not reveal overall dissatisfaction among the participants with their domestic education. However, the participants did complain about "fewer chances for personal development", "fewer opportunities to receive further education", and "fewer opportunities to find challenging or creative jobs" in their home countries. Such concerns may have pushed the participants to seek educational opportunities in China. Other influencing factors included "information sources", "quality of education", "opportunities to gain admission", "possibilities of living in China upon graduation", and "opportunities for intercultural communication". These findings were consistent with the findings of other studies on students' choices to study in Australia (e.g. Chen & Zimitat, 2006), Canada (e.g. Chen, 2007), the United States (e.g. Altbach, 2004b) and the United Kingdom (e.g. Maringe & Carter, 2007), which highlighted the significance of parental involvement, family and relatives' recommendations, students' abilities to gain entry to desired universities, and their perceptions of the quality of higher education system of the host countries in the decisions (see also Brooks & Waters, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Park, 2009).

It is worth noting that knowledge of the host country and economic factors did not have significant influences on our respondents' decision-making to study in China. This finding was not in accordance with the findings of previous research (e.g. González, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011), which indicated that costs of study were a significant determinant of student mobility, while a country's size, climate, and local language could influence its attractiveness to international students. Future research is needed to explore the relationship between international students'

understanding of China, their perceived economic costs of studying in China, and their choice of Chinese higher education.

Theoretically, the research proposed a comprehensive model to explain international students' choice of foreign education. We suggest that it is not the separate "push" or "pull" motives, which are identifiably "out there" but, rather, the synthesized "push-pull" pairs that influence students' destination selection. Such push-pull pairs are exemplified by the students' perceptions of host education systems in comparison with those of domestic education. Second, despite the dramatic increase of international students in China, little empirical research has been conducted on the factors why students choose to undertake their education in higher education institutions in China. The current research redresses the imbalance by focusing on a group of OBOR students in Shaanxi. The findings of the research can assist higher education institutions in other parts of China and in other emerging international students' destination countries to evaluate and further improve their international education.

Practically, it is of importance for Chinese higher education institutions to understand the preferences and concerns of students from OBOR countries and factors motivating them to travel to China for education. The deepened understandings of the choice of international students enable Chinese universities to better design their recruitment strategies. For example, since "information sources", "quality of education", "opportunity to gain admission", "possibility of living in China upon graduation", and "opportunity for intercultural communication" were identified as important factors influencing the participants' choice of Chinese education, in order to attract more students from OBOR countries, Chinese universities need to further enhance the quality of education they provide, make use of various information channels in recruitment, and design various activities to support international students' intercultural interactions. It is worth noting that knowledge of the host country was not found important in the students' decision-making to study in China. We suggest Chinese universities to highlight the country's history, dynamic culture, security, foreign policies, and immigrant opportunities in their future recruitment of international students. Moreover, in this research economic factors did not have significant influence on the

participants' decision to study in China. In the future, we suggest that Chinese universities continue to monitor the costs of its international education and provide more generous scholarships and financial aid. More importantly, China should be aware of the significance of the quality of education for its sustainable development of international education. It is a country's academic achievement and academic reputation that will eventually determine its competitiveness in the global education market in general and its attractiveness for students in OBOR countries in particular.

Methodologically, this research has its limitations. First, this research involved a comparatively small group of international students studying at two universities in one province in China. To further our understandings of the choice of international students, we call for large-scale surveys, which should involve students of different age groups, with different academic backgrounds, at different types of institutions, and in different regions of China. Second, the data were generated from international students across OBOR regions. Future research could focus on the students from specific countries, which would help to identify and prioritize the factors influencing the decision of the students from the specific countries. For example, geographical proximity was not found significant in the current study; it, however, may be an important factor attracting Korean or Japanese students to China. Moreover, the study reported in this chapter was an explorative quantitative research. No qualitative data were collected. The research produced a description of the "landscape" in which decision-making about studying in China took place. The factor analysis reported in Table 2.7, for example, may provide some points at which in-depth qualitative and interpretive research is needed in order to unpack and understand the clustering of these various factors.

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