

# Chapter 10

## Tied to the Family and Bound to the Labor Market: Understanding Chinese Student Mobility in Japan

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### Introduction

The globalization of higher education is accompanied by global student mobility. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012),<sup>1</sup> in 2010, 3.6 million students were studying at higher educational institutions abroad, an 80 % increase from the previous decade. Not only are the numbers of students on the move increasing, but destinations are also becoming more diverse. While North America, Western Europe, and Oceania remain attractive destinations, since the mid-1980s, Japan has become a major study abroad destination for students in East Asia and the Pacific, attracting 12 % of the students from this region in 2010 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2012). Meanwhile, while aspiring to improve their own higher education institutions and global competitiveness, many traditional student-sending countries such as China, Korea, and Malaysia have also become education exporting countries, actively recruiting students from abroad. These emergent trends give rise to the intra-regional mobility of students.

For most countries, international education is tied to the development of their knowledge economies. International students are considered an important source of skilled labor for the host society. Both individual students and the states recognize that international education is an important channel of labor migration (Liu-Farrer 2009). In fact, the OECD (2001) treats student mobility as “a potential flow of qualified workers, either in the course of their studies or through subsequent recruitment. . . .” (p. 93). The Australian immigration law explicitly links international student mobility with skilled migration and encourages students to stay in

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<sup>1</sup> See “Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students,” UNESCO Institute for Statistics, <http://www.uis.unesco.org/education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>, last accessed on August 11, 2013.

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Australia by giving them qualification points for permanent residency (Ziguras and Law 2006). The Japanese government has also stepped up efforts to recruit international students for its labor force. In 2008, the Fukuda cabinet proposed a plan to accept 300,000 international students. One of the five cores explicitly states that the purpose of this aggressive recruitment plan is to retain these international students in Japan's work force.

With heightened interest in attracting and retaining international students, many education exporting countries are eager to know why students choose or do not choose to study in their higher educational institutions. A growing body of research, therefore, has been devoted to investigating the motivations and decision-making processes of international students. Theories such as linkages through previous colonial ties (Madge et al. 2009), strategies for positional goods (Marginson 2006, 2008), and social network influences (Brooks and Waters 2010; Cubillo et al. 2006; Pimpa 2005) found their evidence in many case studies. A more policy- and management-oriented "push" and "pull" framework is sometimes used to catalogue the range of factors that affect students' decision making in terms of school and country (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

Since most studies of student mobility situate themselves within the confines of international education, such studies focus more on entry than on the processes and outcomes of mobility. In other words, more attention is paid to how and why students choose a particular country or a specific institution than to how students experience their international mobility and where and how they enter the labor market afterward. However, as many countries' immigration policies indicate, the outcomes of mobility matter immensely not only for individual students who move but also for the institutional stakeholders who make efforts to attract them.

This chapter aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that affect the whole process of student mobility. Because China sends out the largest number of international students and Japan is one of the main destinations for these students, this case study of Chinese students currently studying at a second-tier private university in Japan sheds light on the mechanisms that facilitate student mobility and create diverse outcomes of international education. Based on student narratives, this study points out that labor market conditions, educational brokers, and the support from as well as the duty toward the family are particularly important factors that shape students' mobility. International education has become an integral part of life's course for many young people in China. Their educational choices and mobility outcomes are necessarily complex, often going beyond being a form of strategy out of utilitarian concerns.

## **International Student Mobility: Motivations, Choices, and Outcomes**

Sociological research on international education frequently adopts an instrumental approach, considering such education a means to obtain human and cultural capital for labor market competition. With shifting world rankings and uneven development of educational institutions around the world, a global educational hierarchy has taken shape in people's imaginations (Marginson 2004). International education has become both a form of status or positional goods for garnering social distinction and a strategy for alternative educational opportunity. Waters (2008) observes that Hong Kong Chinese students and their families use international education as a form of transnational capital accumulation. The instrumentality of international education also has other applications. Liu-Farrer (2009, 2011a) and Wakabayashi (1990) have shown that some of the Chinese student migrants in the 1980s and 1990s used studying in Japan as a channel for entering Japan's low-wage labor market. A large number came primarily for the purpose of working to accumulate cash. Among the early cohorts of Chinese migrants entering with language student visas, a large number never went to language schools or considered higher education (Liu-Farrer 2011a).

However, motivations for studying abroad are inevitably complex. Most studies highlighting the instrumentality of education focus on students from relatively less developed countries who migrate to more developed countries. Some recent studies have shown that different stocks of students might have different motivations. Waters and Brooks' (2010) study of UK students who planned to study abroad and those who had overseas education experience shows that international education might not be a conscious strategy for advancing career interests but an end in itself. Studying abroad is considered by these UK students a personal adventure and valued for its excitement. In some cases, studying abroad is used by the students as a way to avoid facing career choices immediately and to delay the participation in the labor market.

Diverse motivations for studying abroad are also manifested among international students in Japan. In a recent study, Tsuchida and Takenaka (2012) investigated international students enrolled at a Japanese national university in the Northeast and found out that many European and North American students arrived in Japan primarily out of an interest in Japanese culture and the desire to have more exposure to it. They regard the educational experience in Japan to be an enrichment of their cultural and social life instead of an integral part of their career design. However, the study also points out that the Chinese and Korean students arrive in Japan with a clearer career design which is based on the plan to have "Japanese credentials+career experience" (Tsuchida and Takenaka 2012).

In explaining the choice of destination and the process of deciding on specific institutions, researchers observe that social networks play a dominant role. For students who are contemplating studying abroad, friends and family may serve as important sources of information and advice on their migration decisions. Whether

there are family members or friends present in a particular country matters in the students' ultimate selection of that country. Support and affirmation from friends and family as well as positive experiences overseas often encourage students to study abroad (Brooks and Waters 2010; Cubillo et al. 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Pimpa's (2005) study on Thai students stresses the influence of family, and especially parents, on student decisions to study abroad and their choices of country, university, and academic program.

Social networks and labor market conditions also help shape student mobility outcomes. Liu-Farrer (2008) showed that up to the early 2000s, Fujian Chinese students had a much higher tendency to become undocumented migrant workers in Japan because of high financial costs incurred in initial entry through migration networks and limited resources within ethnic networks that are conducive to educational upward mobility.

Despite the Japanese government's intention to retain international students in its labor market, only a small number of international students eventually stay in Japan (Oishi 2012). Oishi (2012) argues that an important reason for that is the lack of labor market demand for international students. A survey among 351 Japanese firms done by the HITO Research Institute shows that nearly half of Japanese companies have never hired highly skilled migrants and have no plans to hire them in the near future (Oishi 2012). A closer examination of the survey result indicates that over half of small- and medium-sized companies—those who employ fewer than 300 employees—have no intention to hire foreign employees (HITO Research Institute 2011). However, Liu-Farrer (2011a, b) argues that because of the flourishing transnational economy between China and Japan, Chinese students enjoy positive job market prospects, occupying positions that deal with business with China. The majority of them, however, are employed in small- and medium-sized Japanese firms lacking job security as well as a meaningful career mobility channel.

The organizational characteristics and workplace culture are also named as reasons that make Japanese firms unattractive to highly skilled workers. Oishi (2012) argues that because of language barriers and cultural characteristics of Japanese firms, foreign employees see Japanese firms as unaccommodating and often feel isolated and sometimes discriminated against. Furthermore, employees who are on an internal corporate track do not perceive working in Japan as conducive to future career development. International students in Japan might not experience the severity of linguistic barrier as those directly employed by Japanese firms from overseas. However, Liu-Farrer (2011b) points out that Chinese students who have been employed in Japan also view the Japanese workplace culture as stressful. Although able to find employment in Japan, many complain about blocked upward mobility and ultimately seek to return to China.

In summary, student mobility is a process continuously influenced by a complex set of social, economic, and institutional conditions. Depending on where the students come from and what their circumstances are, career concerns, the labor market, personal networks, and cultural and social expectations shape the trajectories of their mobility. In engaging the question of student mobility, this study uses

the narratives of Chinese students from a “typical” private university in Japan to take a close look at international students’ decision-making and migration process.

## Data and Methods

The analysis in this paper is mostly, but not exclusively, based on the narrative data of 25 qualitative interviews with Chinese students from Taiyo University.<sup>2</sup> These interviews were conducted by myself and three Chinese research assistants who are graduate students at that university between June 2011 and February 2012.

Chinese students at Taiyo University are representative of average Chinese students throughout Japan. As I have argued elsewhere (see Liu-Farrer 2011a, b), the majority of Chinese students in Japan are enrolled in humanities or the social sciences in a second- or third-tier private university. In previous studies of Chinese students, this university had been mentioned as a popular destination; thus it was not surprising to learn that the international student population at this university is predominantly Chinese. Ninety percent of the total of nearly 600 international students studying at Taiyo’s undergraduate and graduate programs came from China. I therefore regard Taiyo University as a typical host Japanese university for Chinese students, expecting my observations at this university to describe the experiences of many Chinese students throughout Japan.

The interviews are semi-structured. Research assistants were provided with interview guides comprising clusters of questions organized diachronically according to migration process. However, interviews were conducted with an interviewee-centered approach, following the conversational direction of the interviewees without sticking to the questions. Research assistants were trained to do the same. Each of these 25 interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed upon the interviewees’ permission. The grounded theory approach was taken in data analysis. I read through the narratives and created open codes along the way. Matrices of codes for each phase in the mobility trajectory were created and organized into thematic categories.

Although the data presented in the paper is primarily from the 25 interviews, my understanding of the data and my analysis are informed by continuous fieldwork among Chinese students in Japan spanning over a decade. I had previously conducted several waves of interviews with over 100 former Chinese students who arrived in Japan at different times over the last three decades. My regular interaction with Chinese graduate students at Waseda University, a prestigious private university in Japan, also helps me compare and gain perspectives when analyzing Taiyo University students’ narratives.

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<sup>2</sup> Taiyo University is not the real name of the university. The pseudonym is used in order to protect the identities of the informants.

Because the three research assistants were all graduate students at Taiyo themselves, the sample interviewees also included a considerable number of graduate students. In fact, nearly half of the interviewees were graduate students, with three PhD students majoring in economics. This sampling bias might affect the representation of undergraduates in the study. However, it also provides opportunity for the understanding of graduate students at a second-tier university. On the one hand, the majority of these graduate students also went to Japanese universities for their undergraduate education, with many having been at the same school. Therefore their narratives included information about their undergraduate experience. On the other hand, as JASSO data shows, more international students continued in education than those who entered the labor market. Therefore, graduate school is seen as one step in student mobility. Understanding the decision-making processes and the conditions leading to this educational outcome helps us have a more complete understanding about Chinese students' mobility in Japan.

## Changing Context of Student Mobility from China to Japan

It has been nearly 30 years since the influx of student migrants from China to Japan of the mid-1980s. Since then, situations in both the student-sending country (i.e., China) and the student-receiving country (i.e., Japan) have changed dramatically. The economic context in which students migrate has changed. From being a much poorer country that had just started economic reform 30 years ago, China has developed rapidly and become the world's second largest economy. In the meantime, economic globalization has accelerated. The economies of Japan and China have become closely linked. Capital and labor first flew from Japan to China and have increasingly come to run both ways. Despite the financial crisis of 2008, small and large enterprises in both China and Japan now see global trading and transnational production as necessary means for survival and growth. Since 2004, China has been Japan's largest trading partner. On the other hand, China has been witnessing the polarization of its society (Li 2005). Official figures show that rural incomes are less than one-third of those in cities, with the top 10 % of urban Chinese earning about 23 times that of the poorest 10 % (Roberts 2011). In particular, the regional economic gap has been widened. While the economy on the east coast thrives with foreign direct investment and private entrepreneurship, the vast inland stagnates as a consequence of natural resource depletion, environmental destruction, and the disappearance of state-owned industry.

Meanwhile, the sociocultural context has also changed. Because of the implementation of a one-child policy in China since the late 1970s, most student migrants to Japan who were born in the 1980s and even 1990s are singletons. Growing up in relative material comfort, the post-1980s generation is usually showered in parental and grandparental attention. They are a privileged group but at the same time burdened with family expectations (Fong 2004). As a consequence, many middle-class singleton children aspire to go abroad to study, seeing it as an attractive

alternative to earning a prestigious college education in China (Fong 2011). Many studies have also shown that, despite economic development and urbanization in contemporary China, the traditional notion of filial piety and a reciprocal relationship between parents and children continue to persist in this generation (Liu 2008). On one hand, the family invests heavily in their children during important stages of their life course. On the other hand, the children are expected to provide physical, financial, and emotional support for their aging parents (Ikels 2004).

Moreover, this generation of student migrants is frequently the second generation of migrants to Japan in their extended family. In addition, these young students have grown up with the Internet. They therefore have many more resource channels and are much more informed about life beyond Chinese borders.

Finally, migration itself has become more routine and institutionalized. Since the early 2000s, Japanese universities and language schools' recruitment in China has become much more institutionalized. Hundreds of study abroad service centers (*liuxue fuwu zhongxin*), commonly called "brokers" (*zhongjie*), have been established in major cities and provincial towns. Reputations as well as prices of these agencies vary greatly. Some are affiliated with government organizations or local universities, others are affiliated with language schools or universities in Japan, and still others are privately owned. Although the degree of institutionalization and the dependence on such services vary among different regions, the existence of hundreds of such agencies makes information about studying in Japan more public. Migration channels have thus become more open to those who do not have personal ties to Japan.

All these developments and changes have created new contexts within which students make decisions about their future. However, different conditions have a different impact on individual students at different stages of their mobility process. In the following sections, I trace Chinese students' mobility trajectory and examine how the interaction between students' individual characteristics and the contexts shapes different patterns of practice.

## Coming to Japan

The aforementioned contextual conditions—the improved economic situation in China, regional economic disparity, increasing polarization within society, and the one-child policy—have produced distinct patterns of motivations and entry processes among contemporary student migrants from China. In particular, we can see the role of the family and the omnipresence of study abroad service brokers in facilitating student migration after the 2000s.

### ***Reason to Migrate: The Shadow of the Labor Market***

People's motivations to migrate to a foreign country are always complex. Young people in the current study mentioned varied reasons for coming to Japan. Some came to Japan merely because it was an opportunity placed in front of them. Some wanted to experience studying abroad to broaden their perspectives. Others came to Japan to "have some fun" (*wan yi xia*) and accumulate experience (*jianshi yi xia*). Still others came to Japan because their parents wanted them to come or because many people in their social networks had come to Japan. However, one way or another, the labor market is something on every interviewee's mind. To go to Japan to improve one's career prospects and career situation was mentioned by most Taiyo students.

Most of the students who chose to come to Japan for career betterment tended to be college students or college graduates in China already. Because of a lack of interest in their occupation or the major they were already in or because their education was not sufficient to allow them to locate a desirable job, they decided to look for alternative career opportunities in Japan.

Several students left China in the middle of college. Bai Yun, from the Northeast, quit school during her sophomore year. She explains:

In the second year of college. . . I lost interest in my major. . . At that time, I was studying fashion design. There were many reasons. . . In any case, I did not want to tread that path any more. . . Even if I had graduated from college, the competition would have been really great. In other words, there wouldn't be a good employment prospect. So, I lost interest in what I was studying. Because my family has some kin in Italy, and because my family had the funds to support me to go abroad to study, I made the decision (to quit school). (Interview, December 11, 2012)

In the end, she failed to get a visa to Italy. Because she was already using a broker (*zhongjie*) and had quit school, she entered Japan instead.

Some students arrived in Japan to look for more educational credentials to achieve a higher entry point into the labor market. For example, Xi Ning studied accounting in college upon the decision of her parents. She hoped to broaden her employment opportunities to avoid having to use a computer all day. She added that (i)n China, it is difficult to enter the accounting profession. (You) have to pass a lot of examinations to get certificates. The higher the level (of certificate), the higher the salary. Initially the salary is not high (Interview, December 6, 2011).

There are also students who feel inadequate in their job and coming to Japan provides an opportunity to alter their life chances. Li Si is such a case. From Shanghai, he worked for a couple of years at a company after graduating from a 2-year college. The job required some knowledge of both English and Japanese, and he understood neither. He felt inadequate at his job and was stressed-out after a year. The pay was not very good, so he wanted a change. His aunt was in Japan, so his mother helped him apply and obtain entrance to a Japanese language school through a broker.



The difficult labor market for college graduates in China as a strong “push” factor is saliently manifested in the case of two graduate students at Taiyo University who come from Inner Mongolia. Such difficulty reflects regional disparity in development and the difficult economic situation facing many people living in inland areas. Both of these two Mongolian students had never been regularly employed after college. Lalongdi grew up in a nomadic family with four siblings. Their nomadic life became impossible when desertification made living off cattle impossible. According to official regulations, they had to abandon their original means of production and partially lived off government subsidies. He entered a 2-year college because of a government policy for educating minority students. However, he explained that unless one could enter the University of Inner Mongolia or had family connections that allowed easier access to jobs, students after college in his region had little opportunity to find regular employment. He was not able to find a stable job in the 4 years after graduating from a 2-year college in 1997. The following is an excerpt from our conversation:

Author (A): What did you do?

Lalongdi (L): Part-time jobs.

A: Really? Was it so hard to find a job?

L: Very difficult, and the wages are low, too.

A: What kinds of part-time jobs?

L: Heavy labor at construction sites, like carrying cement. . . making about 25 kuai (RMB) a day.

A: You have to do such jobs with a college education?

L: Other jobs were hard to find, (only) short-term jobs, and then, (I) did sales too, selling yogurt for a joint-venture between Japan and a local enterprise. And then, I was a welder at a construction site.

A: Were there many people in a situation similar to yours?

L: A lot. Many students could not hold out and returned (to their hometown) after a year. (Interview, June 11, 2011)

For the students who arrive in Japan with the hope to better their career situation and to experience the world, Japan is often an accidental choice and in many cases not their first choice. Only one student mentioned in passing that he consciously chose Japan, for reasons—aside from the convenience of access and his social relations in Japan—that some aspect of Japanese culture “such as animation” had some influence on his decision. There were also other considerations. When one student first applied to go to Europe, his father discouraged him:

(My) father says your face is not the same (as theirs). Your figure is small. If you go there, living alone and not having any friends, you will have a lot of difficulties. And (you) will be so far away from us. I thought about it, and chose Japan. After all, Japan is a big economic power, a civilized and advanced country. It might not be lesser than Europe and the US, so I came to Japan to take a look. (Interview, February 11, 2012)

However, one important reason that students ended up in Japan is family support and developed institutional channels. Three decades of economic reform have significantly improved Chinese families’ economic situations, allowing many to finance their children’s mobility. Nearly three decades of student migration from China to Japan has expanded social networks, linking many Chinese families with

Japanese society. These institutionalized study abroad channels also provide prospective migrants with easy access to Japan.

### ***Family Support and the Institutionalized Migration Process***

Family support is key in allowing students to migrate from China to Japan. Educational brokers, more often than not, facilitate such mobility. Family support is first manifested in the form of financial assistance. As is well established in international migration literature, those who manage to migrate abroad are never the poorest of society because the migration process incurs large costs. Student migration demands even more initial investment. Although a vast majority of student migrants to Japan have always relied on part-time jobs to finance their education and living in Japan and early cohorts often reported having several thousand yen in their pockets when arriving at Narita Airport (Liu-Farrer 2011a), most of the post-1980s generation, usually singletons, arrive with their first year of tuition and often several months of living expenses paid for by their parents. Very few Taiyo University students we interviewed remit money to their parents. On the contrary, their families often continue to pay for their tuition, if only partially.

Several student participants in this study came from families that could be considered “wealthy” and therefore able to provide for the financial needs of their children. However, the majority of student parents were “ordinary” people, e.g., schoolteachers, doctors, or state employees. Some might have earned above-average incomes in their own country, but not when converted to Japanese standards. The reason parents were willing to pay for their children was parental devotion.

Bao Lin, from Inner Mongolia, mentioned that his father encouraged him to study abroad to develop himself:

It wasn't cheap to study abroad. We spent a lot, nearly. . . My parents are state employees. My father is the principle of a high school. My mother is the director of a government bureau office. Both of them are cadres. At home they saved money all their life. My coming to Japan, the processing fees and one year of living expenses, made them invest in me the entirety of almost 40 years of savings. (Interview, January 17, 2012).

Family support is also shown in the availability of relatives or family members that provide young Chinese students with tangible ties to Japanese society. Since the onset of migration from China to Japan in the mid-1980s, within Japanese borders, there are over 700,000 Chinese nationals or ethnic Chinese.<sup>3</sup> Several students had parents or kin in Japan. Most knew someone from their own country who was in Japan. One student moved to Japan because her father was an international student in Japan himself and found a job to move back to China when his

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<sup>3</sup>This number includes the 100,000 Chinese migrants who have obtained Japanese citizenship since the late 1970s.

daughter was graduating from high school. One student whose parents divorced when he was a small child grew up with his father and grandparents. But when he decided to go abroad, his mother, who was married with a Japanese man, helped him find a language school and settle in Japan. Many students had an aunt or uncle or a more distant relative living in Japan who helped in the process.

Family support makes it possible for Chinese students to study in Japan. Mostly singletons, the young generation Chinese students receive parents' and grandparents' total devotion. Yet, as in Bao Lin's narrative, such devotion is also an investment, both economically and emotionally. The expectation for return, in both a figurative and physical sense, has to be taken into consideration when students make decisions about their future.

However, many students would not be able to come to Japan if it were not for the omnipresent brokers. With a few exceptions, the majority of students we have interviewed arrived in Japan through the arrangement of brokers. Students at Taiyo reported to have paid an average of 10,000 RMB (around 1,500 USD or 130,000 JPY) in broker fees to gain entry to a language school, with students from Fujian Province paying much more. Two hundred thousand RMB (30,000 USD or 2.6 million yen) was a number quoted by several Fujian students. This money usually included their first year of tuition and room at the language school. The brokers are often under contract with specific language schools.

## Education Mobility

Undoubtedly, studying in Japan provides an opportunity for upward educational mobility for most Chinese students. However, in previous studies, I have observed that most Chinese students enter second- or third-tier educational institutions. I have argued that on the one hand, such choices were conditioned by students' academic aptitude, perception of the job market, and self-evaluation of their academic potential. On the other hand, decisions are often made as a result of visa constraints and unpreparedness for academic advancement. With no financial aid, most Chinese students have to work to pay for language school tuitions and living expenses and, in many cases, also the debts they incur to finance the trip. Furthermore, part-time work takes up most time out of the classroom, making them unable to prepare for entrance exams (Liu-Farrer 2011a).

Focusing on students at Taiyo University, a second-tier private institution, one of the purposes for this study is to find out whether or not the aforementioned conditions apply to the younger generation of students who grew up in relative affluence compared with the previous generation. I ask what kinds of student arrive at Taiyo University and through what types of processes. In this Section I present the reasons that Chinese students gave for choosing to study at Taiyo. Again, there is no single mechanism that leads a student to a particular destination. The following causalities exist simultaneously and to differing degrees in students' decision-making process.

### *Academic Aptitude and Lack of Language Preparation*

One reason that many Chinese students enrolled at Taiyo University was their self-evaluation of their academic aptitude and linguistic preparedness. None of the students we interviewed went to elite universities in China. Many of them graduated from vocational schools (*zhongzhuan*) or 2-year colleges (*dazhuan*). Some came to Japan because they aspired to obtain a college degree. One student moved with her parents to Japan immediately after completing high school because in China she had no hope to enter a national or provincial 4-year university (*yiben* or *erben*).

Moreover, most Chinese students enrolled at Taiyo University had no Japanese language training in China, and 1 or 2 years of language school was not enough to prepare them linguistically to compete in high-stake tests.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, even though their financial situation was much improved from the previous generation and their parents paid for their tuition in most cases, they still worked on average 25–30 h a week in order to pay for their own living expenses. As a result, many went through specialist Japanese training schools (*senmon gakko*) before entering university. Lin Yuqin, a 26-year-old woman from Fujian, a third-year university student majored in Japanese, told us her story:

In China my education level was at the vocational school (*zhongzhuan*) level. And then, I myself, I was not particularly into studying, but I longed for a higher education credential (*gao xueli*). Because I had given up education at home—after school I waited over a year to come to Japan—I had then made up my mind that if I came to Japan, if possible, I would like to go to university. Because I had friends who had come to Japan and gone to university, I was pretty envious. (Interview, November 22, 2011)

Lin Yun went to a language school for 2 years, studying Japanese while working part-time jobs. She evaluated her own language ability when she graduated from language school and decided to enroll at a vocational school before applying for college. She applied for Taiyo because she heard about this university while in language school. She chose to major in Japanese language because, in her words, *I am not the kind that can be called particularly bright. I wasn't particularly good at subjects in science, or technical kinds such as those related to computer. So I thought it suited me better if I studied language* (Interview, November 22, 2011).

There were also students who quit university to come to Japan. The universities at which they had enrolled in China were comparable to Taiyo in terms of academic standing. They might have hoped to enter a higher-ranking university. After failing the first attempt, considering their age, they stopped trying. Xiao Qing, a 28-year-old man from Beijing and a second-year graduate student at the time of interview, had been a student in international economics at a provincial university in China. He quit school to come to Japan partly because he did not feel that the Chinese

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<sup>4</sup>There are studies in the USA showing that immigrant children lag behind in their academic performance having a lot to do with their lack of academic language proficiency. It takes 4–7 years to develop academic proficiency in English (Hakuta et al. 2000, Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011).

university could fulfill his ideals. He ultimately found himself studying international economics at Taiyo University. I inquired about the reason that he chose to come to Taiyo. He said:

I also applied for Nihon University, and I took the exam. But I didn't get in, probably because too many people were applying. . . I considered staying for one more year to enter a better university. But I thought about my age, because I had delayed quite a bit, so I thought to speed up a bit. So I chose Taiyo. (Interview, July 3, 2011)

### *Social Networks as Information Channel*

Most Chinese students had little knowledge of Japanese higher educational institutions. As a result, their choice was very much influenced by their immediate social networks, their language school teachers, their friends, and their coworkers at part-time jobs. As the student from Shanghai, Fang Yuan, explained,

I only knew those famous universities. But I was working part-time, at night too. So I didn't have time to review my academic subjects. And my Japanese wasn't good enough to go to those prestigious schools. So I asked my Japanese teacher. . . and the teacher introduced the school. I happened to have a friend who was working together with a student from Taiyo at his part-time job. He asked him, and he said the school was not bad. . . and it was close to where I worked. . . pretty convenient. (Interview, November 24, 2011)

More than one student chose Taiyo because they knew somebody who was already studying there. Failing to enter a public school of his choice the first time, Lalongdi, the graduate student from Inner Mongolia, enrolled in specialist training school in order to stay in Japan legally. Having no interest in the school he chose and seeing no future in that education, he spent all his time laboring on part-time jobs, working 70 h a week. When he was pondering on what to do next, he met a Japanese man who was a Taiyo student. He reflected on his experience as follows:

(I was thinking) I would just go to a university, get the visa, and work a couple of more years, making some money to go back. In the end, there was a young Japanese man at my part-time job. During chats I asked which university he was from, and what major he was in. He said he was at Taiyo and majored in environmental studies. Hearing that, I felt very interested, so I applied for Taiyo. If it were not for him, it is possible that I would not have gone on to university. Because it was about the environment, I thought there was a future in that. So I chose to go to university. (Interview, June 11, 2011)

Social networks can sometimes constrain a student's choice. One woman from Hunan, Dan Zhou, wanted to study law at Hosei University. However, her roommate and best friend in Japan could not find anything at Hosei that she was interested in studying. She recommended Taiyo to Dan Zhou, saying that she could study law at Taiyo too so they could stay together. Dan Zhou gave in and went to Taiyo.

## *Institutional Channels*

As interviews with Chinese students studying in Japan progressed, we gained a distinct sense of private universities' efforts in recruiting international students. Taiyo University set up a liaison office in Beijing next door to Beijing University of Foreign Studies. Li Zhongping, who was in his second year in a university in China, studied Japanese in college. He passed by Taiyo's Beijing office one day, decided to enter, took an entrance examination in their office, and arranged to come to the university directly.

Taiyo University also had a nondegree language program that recruited Chinese students in China through study abroad services. Students who were enrolled into the program were expected to go to Taiyo University's degree program. Yang Ming, from Xi'an, reported that all the students in his cohort ended up in Taiyo's degree programs. He explained:

After entering the Language Course (*bekka*), the teachers hardly gave us any information about college admissions, such as the Entrance Examination for International students (*ryuugakusei shikken*). They did not provide us any documents about the requirements for different universities. They only gave us a piece of paper, asking us to write down what majors we wanted to study the next year. Teachers taught us Japanese only. It was different from regular Japanese language schools. There they would prepare you for the Japanese proficiency test. Here we were taught textbook contents only. (Interview July 29, 2011)

Taiyo, as a second-tier school, was not as aggressive as some third-tier private universities for whom international students were their main source of prospective students. From the case of Ye Caixia, we have a glimpse of some private universities' recruitment strategies. Ye entered a now defunct language program opened by a specialist training college (*kousen*). Her classmates were all Chinese. It was supposed to be a 1-year language course. A year later, she became a student of Seiyin University.<sup>5</sup> Asking her how she chose this university, she answered:

I didn't choose. I came to Japan in April, and had to take the (college entrance exam) in October. So I had only 6 months. I had no time to prepare. Because when I came in April, I had to find part-time jobs first. After that, I had to get used to the life here. For me, everything was new. It took another 3 or 4 months. So I had no time to prepare for college. When the university sent the offer to our school, the school teachers wrote recommendation letters for all of us. So the school wanted us to go. We all went. We didn't prepare at all. (I) hardly had any time to think about it. (Interview, June 20, 2011)

After having taken a paper-based examination and attended an interview, Caixia was accepted by the university along with all her classmates. According to Caixia, in 2002, the year she entered the university, there were over 500 international students enrolled in the university, making up for over half of the entire student population. In order to make it convenient for the international students to work part time outside the campus, the university moved their campus for international students to downtown Tokyo. The aggressive recruitment strategy does not

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym.

necessarily mean that the university was laid back in terms of the rigors of students' education. Caixia was happy with her college education. She ended up choosing to go to graduate school at Taiyo University because it offered programs that suited her needs better.

In summary, entering Taiyo University was considered an opportunity for upward educational mobility by most students in our sample. There might be students who, given more time to hone their language skills, could have entered a higher-ranking university. But students' choice of university and their subsequent educational mobility have a lot to do with their assessment of their own academic aptitude, language proficiency, and their attraction toward certain majors. Much of the decision making was influenced by their immediate social circle. The university's active recruitment and availability of institutionalized channels also brought in some students.

My earlier concerns with the negative effects on educational attainment due to excessive part-time work seem to have been exaggerated. On one hand, several people mentioned their part-time work engagement took up their study time and rendered them less prepared for university admissions. On the other hand, it is also obvious that students regard part-time work (*dagong*) as an inseparable part of the "studying in Japan" experience. They also learn the Japanese language as well as the workings of Japanese society through such employment. This generation of Chinese students is under much less financial pressure than their predecessors. Several students said they did not need to work to support themselves, yet they did. They felt that in terms of personal growth, part-time work experience was as important as formal education. One young woman told the interviewer that she wanted to study abroad in order to "become independent." And she did.

It is also to be noted that with the exception of two students, interviewees were satisfied with their education and found the academic work challenging and fulfilling. They accepted their education with appreciation.

## To Stay or Not to Stay

Our interviews with undergraduate and graduate students at Taiyo University show a diverse and uncertain picture of students' future orientation in Japan. Out of the 25 students, only one young woman entertained the possibility of going to a third country and talked about enrolling in a hotel management school in Switzerland. The rest were divided between staying on in Japan and returning to China. However, in either case, I perceived a strong sense of uncertainty and reluctance. Students are trying to have a control over their future by making what they see as necessary effort. Yet, their dreams are subject to the tyranny of the labor market. Moreover, I sense a certain conflict between their aspirations and those of their parents. In a way, these students' future orientation is very much contingent upon the labor market situation, their family's attitude, as well as the existence and strength of social connections.

## ***To Stay: The Tyranny of Labor Market***

Nearly half of the Chinese students we interviewed expressed a desire to stay in Japan. Such a desire is shaped by several considerations, all of them having to do with concerns about the labor market and career prospects. The most stated reason has to do with students' estimation of their own labor market competitiveness. The job market situation in China renders their educational credentials insufficient for a good career. In particular, the students at Taiyo are aware that their university is not prestigious enough to allow them access to good career positions. As some students explained, in China, employers might have heard of Waseda, but they do not know Taiyo University. To increase their competitiveness in the job market in China in the long run, accumulating work experience in Japan becomes a necessity. Yu Wen, from Liaoning, said:

In fact many people decide to work in Japan only to accumulate experience. After 5 years they can change to a company (in China). In China, for those who have 0 experience the salary is about the same as those who freshly graduate from domestic universities. And even if you graduate (from a Japanese university), you have to see if your university is recognized in China. Yes, they need to see if your university is good enough. If you have work experience, you are not... not completely inexperienced... You can bring back overseas work experience. Japan is after all more developed than China. (Interview December 8, 2011)

Some students were attracted to the Japanese culture and lifestyle. Several women particularly mentioned that they felt comfortable living in Japan and hoped to continue living in Japan. Most students who expressed a desire to stay in Japan had very little knowledge about and lacked real connections to the Chinese labor market. They felt distant or unprepared for the job market in China. Staying in Japan, in a way, was a more obvious option than going back to the unfamiliar Chinese market. Wang Lixin, from a small town in Fujian, wanted to look for jobs in Japan first. She said, *If I go back... I don't know what I can do back there... in China. I have been here for so many years that I am not clear about the job market in China* (Interview, November 10, 2011). Moreover, these students tend to have come from small towns in China where there are few opportunities to work at foreign firms or large companies. They had to go to prominent coastal cities in order to find what they considered to be decent employment. However, Shanghai and Beijing, even though in China, are equally distant from home and are in a sense more unfamiliar culturally than Tokyo. Another student from Fujian, Yuan Ling, explained:

If I went back to China, I would have to go to work in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Dalian. That would not be so different from staying abroad. If I returned, my family would definitely want me to stay with them. But if I went back, I would have to go to the North. China is so big. It would be the same as going abroad. (Interview October 31, 2011)

Whether or not these Chinese students can manage to stay in Japan very much depends on their labor market outcomes. The interviews were conducted after the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake. Students were somewhat pessimistic about



Japanese economy and their labor market prospect in Japan. The aforementioned Wang Lixin, a third-year college student, said,

Before, I wanted to find employment here. At present, the situation is... I feel it must be hard to find a job here. I feel it is hard for the Japanese themselves, and it must be harder for international students. So I am thinking of going on to graduate school. . . . . But I will see if I can find a job here first. (Interview, November 10, 2011)

In summary, considerations related to the labor market very much condition Chinese students' decision to stay or to leave. However, two points need to be emphasized. The first is that students at Taiyo's graduate school will not be satisfied with any job they can find. They mentioned "a job that I like" or "a decent job" as a condition to stay in Japan. Some specifically pointed out that they would not consider taking up certain jobs, such as those in the restaurant industry. Also, they would only continue to stay in Japan if they still "liked it in the future." This shows that young students nowadays are less likely to compromise in order to stay in Japan. This is different from previous observations that some students were willing to take up any job in order to stay in Japan (Liu-Farrer 2011a).

Second, Oishi (2012) argues that Japanese firms do not attract highly skilled foreign workers partly because of its organizational characteristics and work culture. Some Chinese students mentioned that rigid Japanese corporate culture and excessive work hours turn them away from Japanese labor market. It is one reason that those who aspired to work in Japan for several years upon graduation would do so solely to accumulate work experience in order to be more Marketable. It is also one reason that made some Chinese students want to go back to China immediately. However, among the Chinese students at Taiyo, for those who have decided to return to China upon graduation, family situations matter significantly.

### ***To Go Home: The "Ties" of Family***

The expression "ties of family" has two meanings. One refers to emotional connections. As previously mentioned, two conditions have changed since the onset of student migration from China to Japan. One is that most of post-1980s Chinese students are singletons. Contrary to the common discourse about spoiled "little emperors," there is an increasing discourse of filial piety among the post-1980s generation. The other condition is that China's economy has developed significantly since the mid-1980s. Earlier Chinese student migrants felt a great deal of pressure to contribute to the financial well-being of the family back home. The students we interviewed in 2011 and 2012 mostly do not consider financial contribution a goal. Except for one student from Inner Mongolia whose parents needed financial support, most had not remitted money. Many still relied on their parents for tuition. Yet, the parents of these students often hoped that they would return home. The March 11 earthquake concerned many parents. Some called their

children back immediately after the earthquake or wanted their children to go back to China immediately after graduation.

Fu Jun, from Liaoning and a first-year graduate student in Japanese, said she was confused about her future. She wanted to try to work in Japan for several years, but her family wanted her to go back immediately upon graduation:

My family says I must go back. My mom and dad ask me to go back. It is mainly because I am the only child and has been let loose so far away and for so long. I have to consider my parents. They are older year by year. I haven't been around them to take care of them, I feel. . . So I think I will go back to look after them after graduation. (Interview, October 13, 2011)

In Dan Zhou's case, her family pressured her to change her academic major because in their opinion, studying law in Japan, a major she chose, would make it difficult for her to find a job in China. Not liking economics or management, she chose to study Japanese. She described her family pressure as follows:

I wanted to study law, all the way up till PhD level. If I could settle in Japan, I could open a law office in Japan, like a window giving the foreigners here a voice. That would be a meaningful (career). . . . But my father is against it, saying that I can't stay in Japan forever. . . . When I was changing majors, my law professors tried to keep me, saying few foreign students could keep up with the curriculum as I did. . . . But I didn't get the permission from my family. They said that my making such a decision by myself. . . . was like. . . marrying out a daughter at the age of 19 when I came abroad and never to return. My mother was crying at home. . . . so I agreed. (Interview November 7, 2011)

Another meaning of "ties of family" refers to the social connections (or power) the family possesses in China that can help students with their employment. Even though they might have considered looking for opportunities in Japan, after evaluating their competitiveness in the Japanese market and particularly with the threat of an earthquake, these more privileged students did not hesitate to return to China. Wang Sheng, from Xi'an, a second-year MA student in economics, liked the lifestyle in Japan and had originally planned to stay in Japan to develop his career. But after the earthquake, his fiancé went back to China. He also felt that a Taiyo degree would not allow him to compete with first-tier university graduates, and therefore he had no hope to enter first-class firms in Japan. He decided to go back to China. As he put it, *China is developing. I can first enter the place my father is working at. I can close my eyes (meaning: easily) and get in there to work. . . . And the company will definitely grow in 10 years. Also they will let me be a branch head or department head* (Interview July 29, 2011).

### ***Graduate School as a Waiting Room***

According to JASSO (2012), 22.6 % of university graduates and 22.7 % of students who obtained a master's degree in the 2010 academic year (from April 2010 to March, 2011) continued to pursue a higher degree. Graduate education, for some

Chinese students that we interviewed, was a necessary means to increase one's market position.

Li Zhongping was a third-year undergraduate in management from Shandong, a coastal province and a former Japanese colony that has attracted a large amount of Japanese investment. He saw many large Japanese firms and big-name banks opening branches in his hometown. He saw his future in the Chinese side of the business, to be employed in Japan and sent back to work in Chinese branches. However, he felt an undergraduate degree was not sufficiently competitive, so he decided to go on to a master's program. However, he felt that Taiyo University's graduate school might not be prestigious enough. He was looking to apply for a program at a national university.

While Li Zhongping believed a graduate degree would allow him to get ahead in the future labor market, many Chinese students enroll in graduate schools because they fail to find desirable employment upon graduating from the undergraduate program. Graduate school therefore becomes a "waiting room" of sorts; students are there to wait for opportunities to come or to prolong their stay in Japan even though they know their destiny is in China. Many of them, especially those in PhD programs, do not see their career future in Japan. They chose to advance to the doctoral program at Taiyo partly because they have given up on the Japanese labor market and have made up their mind to go back to China, if possible, to teach or do research. As a result, according to the interviewees, Taiyo's graduate programs have more Chinese students than Japanese students.

Many Chinese chose to continue education at Taiyo partly out of consideration for scholarships as well as established academic relationships. As Lalongdi, a first-year PhD student in economics, explained:

Continuing on with economics, honestly, I am not feeling too comfortable. I am putting up with it at this university for scholarship. Otherwise I am going for humanities. I like cultural anthropology. But if you go to other universities, you compete with other (students) from zero again. At my own university, you have build the foundation, and academic records, and also interpersonal relationship that can be used sometimes. Professors who recommend you know what kind of person you are, and when they recommend you, they have more confidence. You have to start all over from zero again. So (I) have stayed on at Taiyo. In terms of money it has been a big help. In terms of academics, I have suffered. The future is not bright. (Interview June 11, 2011)

## **Conclusion: Understanding Student Mobility Through Taiyo Students**

This paper set out to understand the mechanisms that initiate as well as affect international student mobility. Students at Taiyo University, a second-tier private university and a popular destination for Chinese students, provided their mobility histories and thoughts on their education experience as well as future outlooks. Through understanding student mobility at such an average and typical university,

this study aimed to understand the situation of average and typical Chinese students in Japan.

Consistent with several studies on international student destination choices, this study indicated that Chinese students and their families see studying in Japan primarily as an opportunity for upward mobility, educationally and career-wise. Even though China's higher education opportunities have greatly expanded since the 1980s, when first generations of Chinese students went abroad (Shao 1995), in some areas entrance into university remains competitive. Some students migrate to Japan in order to regain educational opportunities or improve their educational prospects. Some use studying abroad to break away from their previous trajectory and seek to start anew. Even though academic unpreparedness and linguistic inadequacy might have dampened their chance to enter first-tier institutions and some had to go through specialist training school before reaching Taiyo, the reality is that all students have achieved educational upward mobility. Where they are now is higher than where they stood when they left China.

Compared to previous generations of students, what has changed is the fact that studying abroad has become a household strategy and practice. What this means is twofold. On one hand, with rapid economic development and the institutionalization of study abroad services, international education, especially studying in Japan, has become an affordable household choice and routine practice. Some early students who came to Japan in the mid-to-late 1980s arrived with several thousand yen in their pocket. The Chinese students in this sample all entered Japan with several months' living expenses in hand. Even though most students in this study are from middle-class families, their parents continually paid their school tuitions. It is important to note that parental devotion and financial support are seen by the students as an emotional, rather than a financial, investment. Students feel obligated to their parents and grandparents, and when they face the choice of staying or returning home, their parents' opinions and their feeling of filial obligation weigh heavily in their decision making. In one student's metaphor, she was a kite and was allowed to fly far away and for a long while. But in the end, she was to be pulled back by her family.

One important facilitator of international education that shows itself prominently in this case study is the educational broker. International education has become an increasingly lucrative business. In China, the government issues annual licenses to several hundreds of agencies that are dealing with international education. Every province has at least several official agencies, with Beijing alone having 78 certified brokers.<sup>6</sup> These brokers are channeling students to different destinations and educational institutions. Many schools recruit students through these brokers. Meanwhile, most individual students in our study relied on brokers for choosing

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<sup>6</sup> A list of about 450 agencies are licensed in 2012 by Chinese Ministry of Education. The list is available at <http://www.jsj.edu.cn/index.php/default/intermediary/lists/北京>, last accessed on February 28, 2014.

both the destination country and particular institution. The qualifications of the brokers, therefore, need more careful scrutiny in future research.

Finally, most Chinese students' mobility is determined by where the jobs, especially the more desirable jobs, are. For those from smaller towns with little foreign direct investment and without family connections in China, staying in Japan promises a more predictable future. However, whether or not students can stay depends entirely on whether they succeed in the Japanese labor market. For those whose families are well-situated in their locality, job prospects are more certain in China than in Japan. Some of them might make an attempt to enter the Japanese labor market but would not settle on a less desirable job for the sake of settling down in Japan.

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