

Why and how international students choose Mainland China as a higher education study abroad destination

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Abstract In terms of international student mobility, although Mainland China is commonly perceived as a major “sending” nation of international students, it is often overlooked as an important “receiving” nation of international students. Despite its tremendous leap to the third top destination choice of international students, existing research on the motivation and decision-making process of international students who choose to study in Mainland China is minimal. In order to address this gap in the literature, this study seeks to explain why and how 42 international students chose Mainland China as their study abroad destination. A synthesis model consisting of a three-stage process—motivation to study abroad/in China, the city/institution search and selection, the evaluation of the programme—is proposed to explain their decision-making process. Findings reveal that China’s future development prospects distinctively attract students to choose China as their study abroad destination. This research also discusses the growing number of descendants of Chinese migrants who wish to return to their place of origin, China, for higher education in search of their cultural identity. Implications highlight the need for Mainland China government to ensure high-quality education to continue attracting an increasing number of talented students from around the world. Suggestions for future research are also provided.

Keywords International students · Mainland China · Study abroad · Decision-making process

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of international students worldwide, with the majority originating from China. According to the 2015 *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* released by the Institute of

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International Education (IIE), China continued to be the largest contributor of international students in American universities and colleges, representing 31 %. Apart from the USA, China provided the largest number of international students to the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand by 2014. In terms of mobility, China has been commonly viewed as a major “sending” nation, implying the loss of its academic talent to developed countries. However, China’s significant role as a “receiving” nation of international students from other countries has been often overlooked.

Although China is a leading “sending” nation, it has rapidly transformed itself into an international student “receiving” nation (Wei 2013). According to the IIE’s 2015 *Open Doors Report*, Mainland China accounted for 8 % of the international student market, overtaking Germany (7 %) and France (7 %) to become the third-ranked destination for international college students, following the USA (22 %) and the UK (11 %). According to the 2015 statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE 2016), a total of 397,635 international students from 202 countries and regions were studying in Mainland China, representing an increase of 20,581 (5.46 %) over 2014. The *Plan for Study in China*, issued by the Chinese government, projects that by the year 2020, the number of international students studying in elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions in Mainland China will reach 500,000 (China 2012).

Background of this study

For over 1400 years, dating back to the Sui Dynasty (581–618 AD), China has accepted international students. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the education of international students in China has undergone several stages of development (Li 2000). The first stage spanned the first decade and a half under the PRC (1950–1965) and laid the foundation for the education of international students. As China developed close relations with the former Soviet Union and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe, a greater number of international student exchanges resulted with these countries. After the Bandung Conference in 1954, China began to accept a large number of international students from developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in order to fulfil its commitment to provide international assistance. However, China’s low level of tertiary education limited its ability to accept international students.

During the second stage, which spanned the subsequent decade (1966–1977), the education of international students was marked by setback and recovery. Institutions of higher education were significantly affected by the Cultural Revolution of 1966, which seriously hampered the development of education for international students. As a result, international student exchange programmes were terminated for a period of 7 years (1966–1972). In the 1970s, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, China re-established formal diplomatic relations with 124 countries, enabling the country to resume the education of international students.

The development period between 1978 and 1989 exhibited preliminary progress. In 1978, China adopted reform and opening-up policies that facilitated the development of higher education in China, including the education of international students. Two documents approved by the State Council, the *1979 Regulations on Work Related to International Students (Revised Version)* and the *1979 Charge Standards for Self-paying International Students*, made China accessible to self-financed international students.

The fourth stage between 1990 and 1998 saw the establishment of a new system that included both administrative and incentive mechanisms. In terms of administration, in

1996, the Ministry of Education established the China Scholarship Council, in order to organize, finance, and manage the Chinese citizens who were going abroad to study and the citizens of other countries coming to China to study. During this period, the education of international students entered a period of rapid development (Cheng and Huang 2008).

By the twenty-first century, the education of international students in China was rapidly developing, as evidenced by the following. First, in addition to the significantly increasing number of international students in China, the percentage of degree students at Chinese universities continued to increase. In 2015, 184,799 international students (46.47 % of all international students) were enrolled in degree programmes, demonstrating an increase of 20,405 students, or 12.41 %, over 2014. Second, a greater number of institutions of higher learning began to accept international students. In 1979, there were only 23 such institutions, while in 2015, 811 institutions were accepting international students. Third, the portfolio of the number of sending countries of international students to China became significantly more diversified. In 2015, the top ten sending countries were South Korea, the USA, Thailand, India, Russia, Pakistan, Japan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, and France. Fourth, the number of Chinese government scholarships and bilateral government agreements with foreign countries increased. In addition to the scholarships provided by the Chinese government, scholarships were also offered by Confucius Institutes, provincial and municipal governments, foreign governments, higher education institutions, and businesses.

China clearly recognized the recruitment of international students as an important part of the process of internationalizing Chinese institutions of higher education. At the end of 2014, on the occasion of National Work Conference on Studying Abroad, Chinese President Xi Jinping provided important instructions regarding international education exchange programmes, suggesting for the first time that student mobility for students both going abroad and coming to China should be facilitated (China 2014). On November 5, 2015, the State Council released the *Overall Plan for Coordinating and Advancing the Construction of First-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines*, which requires a number of universities and disciplines to work together with the goal of becoming recognized as among the world's best universities by 2020. The plan also aims to ensure that the quantity and quality of China's first-class universities and disciplines matches that of front-runners worldwide by the middle of the twenty-first century. The *Overall Plan* noted that efforts should focus on creating strong international teaching and research environments that will attract high-quality international students. Furthermore, the international competitiveness and discourse power of China's higher education should portray China as a country that is focused on higher education and one that emphasizes "internationalization...as one of the important ways to build China's world-class research universities" (Huang 2015). As the representative of the Confucian model, Mainland China possesses strong state-driven power that can effectively shape structures, funding, and priorities to accelerate public investment in world-class universities (Marginson 2011).

The literature review

The push–pull model of international student motivation

The "push–pull model" is a dominant framework for explaining international student motivation to study abroad. Most existing research on motivation has applied the push–pull theoretical framework from a macro perspective. Altbach (1998), discussing what he called

the push–pull model for international student mobility, observed that some students were pushed by unfavourable conditions in their home countries while being pulled by advanced opportunities and facilities in the host countries. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) indicated that limited access to higher education among less developed countries was a key driver behind much of the student flow. Push factors include the lack of educational and employment opportunities and political instability (Altbach 2004), while pull factors include academic reputation/quality of institutions, faculty quality (Chen 2007), and general economic and social dynamics (Altbach 2004).

The earlier push–pull model was challenged because it overlooked the micro-level elements and student characteristics in the decision-making process. Thus, a few studies modified the push–pull model to focus on student choice. Accordingly, these stressed personal factors that were then integrated into the macro level push–pull analyses. These motivations included the pursuit of academic and professional growth, economic benefits, individual internationalization, enhanced social status (Li and Bray 2007), improved job prospects, improved opportunities to experience a Western culture (Chen 2007), improved opportunities to migrate after graduation (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), and competitive early- and mid-career opportunities (Bamber 2014).

Further limitations of the push–pull model are noted in terms of the exclusion of samples of considerable numbers of international students studying in economically medium and less developed countries (Jon et al. 2014). The unidirectional flow implied in this model, i.e. from medium and less developed countries to leading developed countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia, may be incomplete and inadequate for capturing the differences in the mobility of the medium and less developed countries (Cantewell et al. 2009). The existing study abroad literature has thus broadened its scope to better understand the growth in the number of students selecting non-traditional or less common destinations outside of North America and Western Europe, such as Mexico (Cantewell et al. 2009), South Korea (Jon et al. 2014), Turkey (Kondakci 2011), South Africa (Lee and Sehoole 2015), and the Middle East (Lane-Toomey and Lane 2012).

Previous studies identified different rationales for studying in medium and less developed countries depending on the student's region of origin. Cantewell et al. (2009) found that students from economically developed Western countries seek short-term study in Mexico owing to a desire to experience a different culture, while students from Latin American countries studying in Mexico are more inclined towards receiving scholarships and the opportunity to receive a higher-quality academic education. Lee and Sehoole (2015) found that financial incentives, quality higher education, job competitiveness enhancement, social connections, and stability are key factors influencing the decision of African students to study in South Africa. Non-African students, in contrast, are drawn to the location because they want to experience a culture unlike their own. Similar findings have held true in studies on international students in Turkey. Kondakci (2011) supported the finding that students from developing countries choose to study in another developing country for financial and academic quality reasons, whereas students from North America and Europe are motivated by different factors.

The decision-making process of study abroad

In addition to discussing rationales for study abroad, some studies examined international students' decision making as a process, involving certain stages. According to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research, this process involves three distinct stages. The student must first decide to study internationally rather than at home, following which the student selects

a host country. In the last stage, the student selects a higher education institution in the host country. Although this three-stage model of international student decision choice is a valuable explanation, it has some limitations. Chen (2007) finds that the study abroad process was not necessarily ordered by country, institution, and programme as suggested by Mazzarol and Soutar. Instead, in some situations, students by-pass the process of choosing a host country and choose a host institution directly. A synthesis model was developed to explain international graduate students' decision-making process that is "the so-called predisposition stage", "search/selection/application stage", and "the choice stage".

These models (Mazzarol and Soutar's 2002; Chen 2007) are important frameworks for understanding the decision-making process of international students. However, some related issues require further exploration. First, whether international students actually follow the sequence of deciding to study abroad, then choosing a host country, and choosing an institution as suggested by Mazzarol and Soutar is well worth exploring. In addition, Chen's findings are applicable to international graduate students from East Asia choose to developed countries (such as Canada). Whether it could explain the decision-making process of international students to study in less developed countries is worth studying. Furthermore, the involvement of city selection in the decision-making process and how international students choose the city are neglected in these models.

The motivation and decision-making process of international students who study in Mainland China

The number of students, for example, who choose to pursue higher education in Mainland China, has increased rapidly in recent years, and this growth is noteworthy. Despite this importance, existing research in English on the motivation and decision-making process of international students who choose to study in Mainland China is minimal. According to research published in Chinese, several articles found out that the major factors attracting international students to study in China are China's improving and potential economic level, good bilateral trade relations, degree of bilateral mutual recognition agreement (Song and Liu 2014); and the comparative advantage, construction of education cooperation policy, maintaining and pursuing the Chinese culture, development of the world's international education, and the "Chinese Craze" trend all over the world (Fang 2015). Yang (2016) used the narrative method and concluded that personal experience and characteristics, and the pull and push policies from the US and Chinese government determined the decision of an American student to come to China. However, when compared with countries with a highly competitive higher education system, China's academic level and research environment are primary factors that sometimes influence overseas students to decide against studying in China. Despite the insights gleaned from this research, it faces a limitation because of the simplistic interpretations of the determinants that motivate international students to study in Mainland China. Moreover, the relevant research did not discuss the problems of how international students made the choice to study in Mainland China, which can be explored further.

Overall, there continues to be a large gap in the literature explaining precisely why international students choose to study in China and the process through which they choose to study in China. Given the stunning growth of study abroad students in China, a better understanding of this issue is needed. To respond to this gap in the literature, this study explores the motivations and process that contribute to choosing to study in China.

The research method is described in the following section. This is followed by presentations of the findings and discussions. The final section presents the conclusion and implications for future studies.

Method

This interview study is based on the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is particularly appropriate for areas of inquiry where limited research exists (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The motivation and decision-making process of international students choosing to study in China is a new field that has not been fully explored yet. Combined with the fact that the findings about international student motivations as presented in previous literature are primarily based on research conducted in developed countries, existing findings may not accurately portray the situation as it pertains to China. Therefore, it is prudent to use grounded theory to avoid directly adopting concepts, theoretical frameworks, and research findings from existing literature to understand the motivations of international students in China. Among the many possible approaches to grounded theory research, we chose to follow that of Strauss and Corbin (1990).

This study is part of the author's doctoral thesis on the learning experiences of international students attending Mainland China universities.

Data collection

The author collected data through semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted between March 2014 and May 2016. Most interviews were about 45 min in duration. Participants included 23 female and 19 male students, who ranged in age from 19 to 33. Representing 28 nations, these students were engaged in full-time studies at Chinese universities. Of these students, 22 participants were in graduate school, 14 were undergraduate students, one was in a foundation programme, and five were non-degree students seeking to learn the Chinese language. Ethical issues were respected in each phase of the research. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

In the beginning, the author applied an open sampling method and chose Beijing as a field site to conduct interviews. Beijing is the capital of China with many universities, and thus attracts a large number of international students. Universities A and B were selected as sites representing the leading university. University A is one of the top Chinese universities for the study of international trade and economics and offers nearly 40 majors to international students for graduate, postgraduate, and doctoral study. Among them, some majors in economics and management are offered entirely in English. University B is a national base for Teaching Chinese as second language. It ranks fourth among all Chinese universities in the ranking table of the international student body. With the permission of the International Student Office at each university, the author presented herself at international student apartments, university cafeterias, libraries, etc., and delivered letters of invitation that provided our contact information, explained our goals, and offered detailed general information regarding the interview process.

Although the author considered snowballing, she rejected it to ensure that respondents would not be similar. In order to increase the relevance of grounded theory, the author decided to use relational and variational sampling. Thus, the author went to Urumqi (the

capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) of China in the northwest of the country, which is very different from Beijing with respect to location and culture. The author also sought to understand what motivated international students to choose this city. University C was chosen to represent a non-leading Chinese university. As a key University in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, University C is popular among students from Western Asia and Middle Asia, and Russian-speaking countries.

The interviews began with general questions to obtain personal and academic background information. They then progressed to questions about personal reasons for deciding to pursue higher education in China and the involved decision-making process. Examples of questions include “Why did you choose to study in China (and in this city, this University)?”; “When did you first consider studying abroad in China?”; “Can you recall the decision-making process that led to your decision to study in China?”; and, “Did you have any other choices if you hadn’t decided to study in China?” The participants were given the choice to conduct the interview in either Mandarin or English in order to ensure fluency during the interview and to be able to convey their thoughts with clarity.

Data analyses

According to the grounded theory principle, interview data analysis and data collection are tightly interwoven processes that occur alternately as the analysis directs the sampling of data. Techniques for data analysis involved three types of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Each line of text is analysed, the phenomena are named and categorized, and the occurrences are then compared for similarities and differences. The constant comparative method of analysis and the method of asking questions were applied to develop concepts and to identify their properties and dimensions.

Findings

An analysis of the data revealed the emergence of three stages related to the decision-making process of international students who chose to pursue higher education in Mainland China:

Stage I: motivation to study abroad/in China

Optimistic belief in China’s future development prospects

When asked why they chose China as their destination for overseas study, almost all the participants mentioned China’s rapid economic development and future development prospects. In fact, an optimistic belief in China’s future development was a critical factor in almost every participant’s decision to study in China. The following excerpts exemplify this point

- “China’s economy is developing so well, and Chinese will become more and more popular (Anna, female, Spain)”;
- “China is undergoing rapid development and reform. This would be a wonderful opportunity to witness this historical moment and to learn and conduct research at the heart and leading frontier of the world (Jack, male, Czech Republic)”;

- “Everybody recognizes the rapid economic development of China. Whether in China or abroad, many things are made in China. (Pham, female, Vietnam)”; and,
- Christina and Macro, both from Italy, mentioned that today in Italy, even students with master’s degrees were finding it difficult to obtain jobs. Neither of them planned to return to Italy after completing their study in China. They said, “In Italy, people always talk about China’s rapid development. If we go to study in China, there will be many work opportunities. (I would) rather become a private tutor in China and teach Italian than return to (Italy) to look for jobs (Christina, Female; Macro, male, Italy).”

In addition, optimism regarding bilateral relations also encouraged students to study in China. As if from Pakistan rates Sino–Pakistan relationship as “particularly good.” He feels that because Pakistan has a particularly good relationship with China, learning Chinese will help him find a good job. A Zimbabwe participant similarly commented, “I chose China because the relationship between China and my country is currently growing, which is influencing many things. The Chinese Yuan is being used as a currency in my country. China is somewhere I can go and study because of its good relations with my country.”

The bright prospects of learning the Chinese language

Many international students in this study viewed study abroad as a way to enhance their career prospects and believed, particularly, that mastering a foreign language could improve their competitiveness in the job market. According to a Vietnamese student, named Pham, Chinese is the second language in Vietnam today. As she indicated, “If a Vietnamese knows both English and Chinese, it is quite easy to find jobs with high salaries.” She further explained, “Learning Chinese well brings many opportunities. I still remember a woman who came to China to attend the Guangzhou International Fair, and I assisted her as an interpreter. She told me that if her Chinese was as good as mine, she could make money.”

Access to scholarships to support study abroad

Scholarship was also one of the most discussed items during the interviews. Publicly funded international students accounted for a considerable proportion of the participants in this research. Many international students decided to come to China based on promises of government agreements or scholarships. According to the participants, receiving a scholarship was a symbol of recognition that indicated approval by the awarding institution of the individual’s capabilities or experience in some area. A scholarship provided financial support and was particularly important for those whose families did not have adequate financial resources. Therefore, students tended to seek scholarships to support their overseas study. One participant from Kyrgyzstan stated, “When I was a sophomore, I saw many of my classmates go abroad to study at their own expense. I was left behind and felt a bit depressed. I didn’t want to self-fund my study abroad. I had been waiting for scholarship opportunities. Two years later, when I received a scholarship from China, I thought, ‘What am I waiting for? My dream finally came true.’”

Contrary to the conventional perception that financial factors do not play an important role for those from developed countries in their decision-making process, many of these international students from developed countries reported that although financial factors did not exert a stronger influence in enrolment decision than did cultural and China’s rapid

development factors, without financial support such as scholarships or assistantships from the institutions, many of them would not be able to pursue education in China.

Besides the external factors mentioned above that motivate international students to study in China, individual factors cannot be ignored.

To promote career development

More than half of the international students interviewed expressed their need for self-development and professional growth. Such views were shared by participants as exemplified: “I chose to study in China because (1) I currently teach Chinese at a Vietnamese university. I wanted to come to China to improve my Chinese, as it will improve my job performance (Pham, female, Vietnam)”;

- “I like Chinese characters very much, as they are visually appealing and interesting. I wanted to improve my Chinese, so I came to China immediately after graduation (Marco, male, from Italy, who chose to major in Chinese when he was enrolled in an Italian university)”;
- “My dissertation is related to reform in traditional Chinese medicine. Those who study China in the UK can only read literature...you can only understand Chinese culture and what Chinese language actually means when you are in China (Alice, female, from the UK, doctoral degree student at a British University)”.

To explore a new way of life by experiencing a different culture

In addition to study, research and job requirements, some international students came to China to seek alternative cultural experiences and to explore a new way of life by experiencing a different culture. They were seeking an adventurous and challenging journey in the “mysterious country” of China. This view is perhaps best summarized by a Canadian student, “I feel I can learn more about the Chinese culture in China. My Canadian friends usually choose countries that have different cultures from ours, as we want to experience something different. More and more, people like to go to Germany or countries in Asia, rather than the US or the UK, as these cultures are similar to ours’ (James, male, Canada).”

To return to China in search of cultural identity

There are more and more overseas students of Chinese descendants who come to China because of the “Chinese Cultural Complex”, the identity of being Chinese, and the culture. Meanwhile, Chinese language education worldwide is a booming industry, encouraging Chinese descendants to learn about China. Yumei was born in France and grew up in Canada, and her parents were Chinese. As she noted, “In Canada, those who wanted to study Chinese asked for my help, but I can’t speak it. They would ask “How come you are Chinese, but you can’t speak Chinese?” It sounded like criticism. I don’t know anything about the Chinese culture, and it felt like there was something missing. Because of this gap, I came to China.”

Another participant from Pakistan who is of Chinese descendant provided a similar reason why he wanted to return to the home of his ancestors. The blood bond was an important reason for him to choose to come to China to study. As he stated, “When I was little, my parents told me that I was half Chinese. In Pakistan, probably most people will say that I am Chinese, and not Pakistani. So it would be best if I could come to study at a Chinese university and learn about my own culture.”

There are some reasons such as the higher cost of education and academic credibility that represented another set of negative push factors from home countries that turned international students away from home countries. For example, faced with a limited supply of higher education opportunities from domestic institutions, a number of students decided to enrol in overseas institutions as an alternative. The lack of suitable and high-quality courses was mentioned by Koden who is from Eritrea “I worked as a teacher for 10 years and wanted to get further education. Unfortunately, the relevant education programme was not offered in my country. Therefore, I had to look for opportunities to study abroad to continue my master’s degree. We had to queue for the study abroad opportunity. Then it was my turn to go to China. At that time, the China Scholarship Council provided my country a few scholarships to come to China.”

Stage II: city/institution searching/selection

The motivation to study abroad is only the first stage, following which students start to select the city and institution.

The selection of the city

Reasons to choose the city of Beijing

All the participants studying in Beijing mentioned that they find Beijing as a metropolitan city with many opportunities attractive. One student shared her motivation for coming to Beijing, “I think that Shanghai is too international, but Beijing is between traditional and international. (Eva, France).” Another participant from Zimbabwe expressed her thoughts on the city choice, “I preferred to stay in Beijing. Most people from my country go to Guangzhou and Hangzhou. I didn’t want to go because many people from my country were already there. I prefer to have my own unique experiences.”

Reasons to choose the city of Urumqi

To other participants studying in Urumqi, cultural affinity and geographic proximity are the primary reasons that motivate them to choose to study in Urumqi. One student from Kazakhstan explained, “It was easy to adapt to Urumqi since it is close to my country, and our cultures are somewhat similar.” This view is shared by most other students from Middle Asia and Turkey. For some of them who are Chinese descents, their ancestral home is in Xinjiang. In addition, they chose to study in Urumqi to carry out the inter-regional economic and trade exchanges in future. Other international students studying in Urumqi expressed a preference for attending a university located in a metropolitan city, such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Xi’an. However, the difficulty in getting admission or failure to get a scholarship made them choose Urumqi.

The selection of the institution

Reasons to choose the leading university

Many participants expressed a preference for attending an institution located in a metropolitan city. The participants from Southeast Asia and African countries studying at

Universities A and B valued the professional discipline level and the overall reputation of the university, which are also factors influencing their institution choice. As Hadija from Tanzania shared, “Because University B is one of the universities that offered a program that has something to do with education and administration together, and its education major ranked in the top, I chose University B”.

However, among the study participants from developed countries such as from the USA, France, and the UK who are studying in Universities A and B, few mentioned the good reputation and high quality of institution. Rather, many of them chose these universities because of the agreement between the home and host country universities. Of the participants who have undertaken degree programmes in Universities A and B, many are conducting academic research about China or majors related to China and the Chinese culture, and they thought that both A and B have excellent advantages in majors related to China and Chinese culture. Both the students from developed and less developed countries primarily choose Universities A and B for non-degree Chinese language learning because of the high quality and good reputation of Chinese language teaching and learning in Universities A and B (Table 1).

Reasons to choose the non-leading university

Of the participants who chose to study in University C, some cited city preference as the primary reason, particularly due to the cultural similarity and geographic proximity of Urumqi. Meanwhile, compared to other universities in Urumqi, University C has a comparative advantage in international education. In addition, some of the participants said frankly that they failed to obtain the offer and scholarship from other cities, because of which they chose University C for financial support (Table 2).

In terms of Stage I and II, the referral or personal recommendations received from parents, relatives, friends, and other “weak ties” significantly influence students’ decisions prior to

Table 1 Reasons to choose the leading university

	Non-degree Chinese language learning	Degree programme
For students from developed countries	Value the high quality and good reputation of Chinese language teaching and learning	The agreement between the home and host country universities; conducting academic research about China or majors related to China; the belief that A and B have excellent advantages in majors related to China and Chinese culture
For students from less developed countries		Value the professional discipline level and the overall reputation of the university

Table 2 Reasons to choose the non-leading university

	Non-degree Chinese language learning	Degree programme
From developed countries	N/A	N/A
From less developed countries	Geographic proximity and cultural familiarity to home country	Easy scholarship opportunities

making the final choice. The current study found that students learned about overseas study channels and received information from relatives and friends, and they believed that such information from personal networks was more reliable and accurate compared to official sources. In particular, if the student had relatives or friends who worked or studied in China, the assurance that there was someone there reduced the discomfort associated with being in a new environment. For example, a student from the UK said, “One of my brothers recommended a university to me. He has friends in China who are opening a trading company there. He also helped me contact universities in China and provided information about research scholarship opportunities (Eline, female, the UK).” One Thai participant whose father worked at a local education bureau in Thailand mentioned that her father’s job made it easy for her to learn about various channels that could aid her in her plans to study abroad. Her family provided her with social capital resources that helped her obtain information on Chinese scholarship applications and Chinese universities.

Influence and recommendations from colleagues and peers play a role in the process by which students choose China for study abroad. Peers who have graduated from a particular institution and enjoyed the experience are likely to recommend it to others. One Zimbabwean student mentioned, “Because of my friend, I came here to learn the language. She told me about this program and encouraged me to try it out.” Similarly, an Uzbekistani student thought about coming to China to study because his father’s friend had recommended it. He stated, “My father’s friend told us that Urumqi was similar to our city. It was nearby, it had a similar lifestyle, and it was more convenient, so I thought it was not a bad idea to study in Urumqi”.

In addition to the recommendations of “strong ties” from parents, relatives, peers, and friends, there are also interviewees who recall influential encounters that originate from a different set of social relations. Contrary to strong ties, the opportunities recommended from a different set of social relations that have not been very personal or long-lasting “weak ties”. June, a participant from Indonesia, met a Chinese woman in Djakarta, who, on learning that June majored in Chinese studies, encouraged her to study in China, and recommended the top ranked institution in Chinese studies. In this case, the Chinese woman is perceived as an information broker who provides vital information with a sort of eye-opening effect on the respondent, making them aware of opportunities hitherto unknown to them.

Stage III: the weighing of international study options

After students obtain offers of admission from universities, the process moves to the “choice” stage: international students revisit the same factors they considered during the previous two stages and evaluate and weigh the options before making a decision based on a cost-benefit analysis of overseas study. If the student believes that studying in China will provide greater benefits, the student tends to choose to come to China to study. Some international students made their decision to study in China after comparing and weighing other options. For example, a student from Kazakhstan had originally planned to study at home. “If I study at home, even with high scores on the entrance exam, I have to pay for it myself. Tuition costs in Kazakhstan are probably higher than those in China. Moreover, there is better language exposure here in China.” After weighing the cost and benefits of studying in Kazakhstan against those of studying in China, she found that the two options were equal with respect to cost, but the latter offered far more benefits in the area of mastering a foreign language.

From the above examples and analysis, it is clear that international students coming to China to study do so after recognizing the trade-offs they are making. Students were

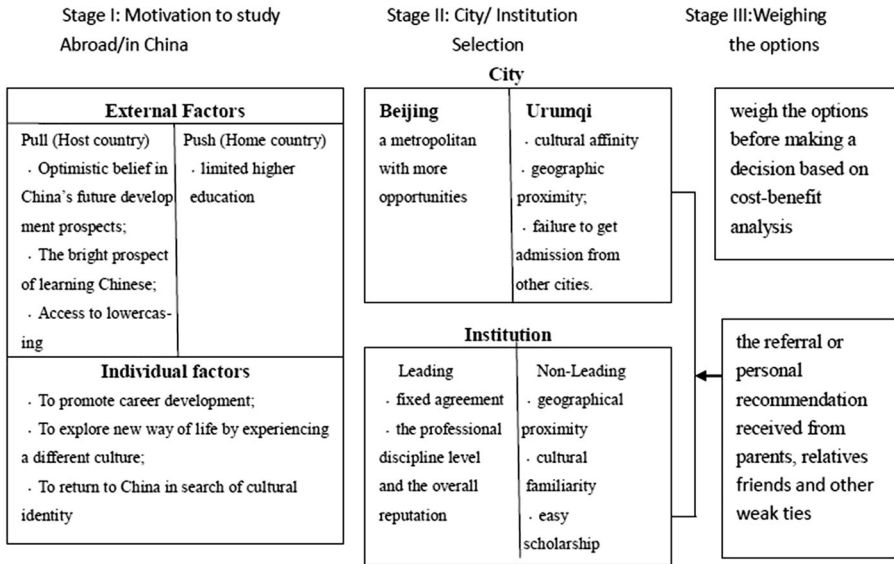


Fig. 1 Synthesis model of the decision-making process

seeking to maximize their benefits, whether be economic, emotional, or cultural. They may have had other options, such as studying in their homeland, going to another country to study, or continuing with their work. Thus, they ranked these options, analysed the anticipated results of different action plans, and compared the pros and the cons of each option before making their decision.

The findings presented here shows that going abroad is eventually the result of rational decision making, involving an individual who has specific motivations, who then engages in the city/institution search, weighs the pros and cons, and considers all the available options (Fig. 1).

Discussion

China will continue to play an increasingly important role in the hosting of international students. This research addressed China's important role as not only senders but also receivers of international students. The qualitative method was used to discover the motivations of international students who choose to China and the process of decision making to study in China.

This research is similar in many ways to other research projects that examine the motivation of international students. However, the new findings of this research contribute to the extant literature on international student mobility in a number of important ways.

The motivation to pursue higher education in Mainland China

Similar to other studies in the literature (Li and Bray 2007), this study suggests that the intention to study abroad is a function of the interactions of micro and macro dynamics. However, this study offers two new insights.

First, at the macro level of country selection, three push factors were found to contribute to the motivation to study in China: China's future development, the bright prospect of learning Chinese language, and scholarships support. At the individual level, three types of motivation influenced country selection: to promote career development, to explore a new way of life by experiencing a different culture, and to return to China in search of cultural identity. The higher cost of education and academic credibility and limited higher education opportunities represented another set of negative push factors related to home countries.

In the studies by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Li and Bray (2007), and Chen (2007), students' beliefs about the high quality of education, strong reputation of institutions, provision of degrees recognized by employers, facilities and resources, and curriculum and programme ranking were core determinant factors for students from less developed countries who chose to study abroad in leading developed countries when they selected their destination. However, according to this study, educational quality is not the prime driver behind the participants' choice of China for study abroad. Instead, it is further noted that the increase in the number of international students was mainly driven by China's rapid development and its future prospects. This observation is consistent with Chen and Barnett (2000), who concluded that "the higher a country's economic and political position in the world system, the more central it is in the international student exchange network". All participants in this study mentioned "the rise of China", "China as representative of the world's future", or "the endless development potential of China" as factors that appealed to them and their families. Accordingly, these core factors attracted students to China to study.

In addition, this study finds that as some developed countries are struggling to recover from the economic crisis of the past years, students may be increasingly concerned about the financial cost of studying abroad. Scholarship funding was mentioned frequently not only by students who studied in less developed but also by those from developed countries. The receipt of scholarships and reduced tuition fees encouraged them to study in China.

Second, the relative importance of each rationale for choosing China differs according to the personal characteristics of the students. It is found, in accordance with existing research on student motivation to pursue higher education in less developed countries (Cantewell et al. 2009; Lee and Sehoole 2015; Kondakci 2011), that most participants from well-developed countries in this study were most motivated by opportunities to experience the Chinese culture and improving Chinese skills and noted their desire for a different, and special experience rather than high-quality education. Most of them came to China for non-degree Chinese language learning or degree majors related to the Chinese culture. For students from Asia and Africa, the rationales for moving to China were mostly related to obtaining academic degrees and future employment. Some students expressed a desire to learn from China in order to contribute to their home nation's knowledge or technology. It is noteworthy that scholarship possibilities and opportunities to enhance career prospects are not only important to students from less developed countries but are also factors that motivate students from developed countries. In addition, based on their origins and culture, a growing number of descendants of Chinese immigrants are choosing to return to the country of their origin in search of their cultural identity.

The decision-making process of international students to study in Mainland China

First, the findings highlight that the decision to study abroad is not a one-step decision process but rather the culmination of several steps. This paper takes a processual

perspective by asking how students choose China as a destination, thus considering studying abroad not as the result of a one-time choice but as the outcome of different long-term biographical and social process. The findings presented here show the personal motivation to study abroad/in China, the city/institution selection, and the evaluation of international study options making up the stages that determine the final choice made by that student.

With respect to city selection, those who chose Beijing as a study destination found the opportunities in Beijing as a metropolitan city to be more attractive. Other participants studying in Urumqi in this study were motivated by the Muslim cultural affinity and geographic proximity to choose Urumqi. In terms of institution selection, academic reputation, the agreement between the home and host country universities, and access to scholarships are the primary factors influencing the motivation of students to choose the institution.

Furthermore, each step consists of complex processes and is influenced by various factors. Mazzarol (1998) and Chen (2007) propose a three-stage decision-making process for international students selecting a final study destination: the decision to study abroad, the choice of a host country, and the selection of a host institution. However, in this study, the three stages Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) noted were not found in a clear sequential order. Rather, the intention to study in China was often considered in conjunction with the choice to study abroad, a host country and the institution. For example, some international students found that programmes such as Chinese language education or Chinese history were far more advanced in China than in other countries and that China was the only viable country for those students whose majors or professions were directly related to China. Thus, stages one and two of Mazzarol and Soutar's study can occur simultaneously. As another example, the selection of a host institution is likely to be skipped if the student receives a scholarship from the institution or participates in a programme under pre-existing contracts that binds him/her to a specific institution. This study also found that city selection was indeed influential in the decision-making process of international students, a factor that was been often neglected by previous studies.

Conclusion

This study explains the motivation and the decision-making process of international students who choose to study in Mainland China in entirety. It generates a three-phase model for the decision to study in Mainland China and offers some useful insights regarding why and how international students choose China as their destination for higher education. It lists the determinant factors influencing students' motivation to choose a country, city, and institution. Instead of being attracted by the reputation and perceived high quality of institutions, as presented in previous literature, this study finds that the strong economic growth of China is a major factor that encourages international students to seek higher education opportunities in China.

The study offers several key implications for Mainland China in order to continue attracting an increasing number of prospective students. First, China must continue to create cooperative opportunities with governments and to sign agreements that offer scholarships to international students. Additionally, China must maintain its steady and rapid economic growth and seek to create a positive reputation through word-of-mouth. Second, not many international students in this study mentioned the pursuit of advanced

education as their primary motive for studying in China; this implies that there is substantial room for improvement in the quality of higher education. Accordingly, the provision of high-quality education can be considered as a new growth point for attracting top global talent to choose China as their study destination. Finally, the interest of overseas Chinese nationals and Chinese descendants in returning home and seeking their cultural identity must be considered as a legitimate rationale for prospective students.

While providing valuable information and insights, this study also has its limitations. For example, the findings from this qualitative study are not statistically significant because of its method and small sample size and cannot be generalized to other contexts. Moreover, it is important to ascertain whether international students on completing their international study programmes, wish to continue their studies, seek long-term employment in China, or return to their homeland. Accordingly, future studies that include in-depth discussions of these issues are recommended.

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