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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Chinese High School Students' Plans in Studying Overseas: Who and Why

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Abstract This study is among the first to use a large-scale dataset to better understand the driving forces behind the large outflow of Chinese international students. Based on data collected from 3,001 students at 18 high schools located in the three cities of Beijing, Shenzhen and Chengdu, this paper highlights the importance of students' academic preparation and their families' financial capability. It shows that sociocultural factors such as *Experiencing Another Culture* and *Gaining Global Perspective* play a significant role, but are often understudied in the case of Chinese students. In addition, the disadvantaged social strata tend to be influenced more by the pushing force of low- quality education in China, and deterred by the high cost of studying overseas, whereas the advantaged social strata tend to be influenced more by the pulling force of higher-quality education overseas and the pulling force within China such as relatively privileged lives.

Keywords high school, China, study overseas, push-and-pull, motives

Introduction

With the amplification of globalization over the past several decades, educational institutions around the world have been undergoing rapid internationalization, which is reflected in more frequent student and faculty exchanges. In addition,

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there are more collaborations between countries such as establishing twinning, double or joint-degree programs and branch campuses, as well as the, "importing [of] foreign higher education services and exporting [of] educational programmes [sic] abroad" on an increasing scale (Huang, 2007, p. 58). However, nowhere is this consequence of internalization more apparent than in the increase in cross-border student mobility.

The largest number of students studying worldwide is from China. In 2016, China witnessed 544,500 students leave for overseas study; an increase of 36.26 percent compared to the 2012's figures (Ministry of Education, 2017). Between the late 1970s, when China sent the first cohort of students overseas after decades of national isolation, and the end of 2015, the total number of Chinese students studying overseas had reached 4.04 million with an average yearly increasing rate of 19.06 percent for nearly four decades (Ministry of Education, 2016a). According to the 2016 report by the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), a China-based think tank, the most popular destinations for Chinese students are English-speaking countries. For example, in 2014, 40.7 percent of Chinese students going abroad to study went to the US, 23.4 percent to Canada and 17.3 percent to the UK (CCG, 2016).

One noticeable trend is the increasingly younger age of those Chinese students studying overseas. For example, the largest number of students leaving China travel to the US, and in this group, the percentage of undergraduates has been increasing rapidly and steadily. In 2014–2015, for the first time the percentage of undergraduate students surpassed the percentage of graduate students, which were 41 and 39.6 respectively (IIE, 2015). Further, an increasing number of even younger Chinese students are going to the US: In 2009, China became the No. 1 country of origin for international high school students in the US surpassing South Korea. In 2005–2006 only 65 Chinese students went to the US to attend high school, whereas in 2013, among the 49,000 international students seeking U.S. high school diplomas, Chinese students accounted for 46 percent of the total (Farrugia, 2014, p. 3). Likewise, in 2016, the total number of Chinese students studying in American K-12 schools rose to 35,627 (Lew, 2016).

By using evidence well grounded in empirical research methods, this paper aims to address the questions of who in today's China plans to study overseas, and why they would like to. The goal is to better understand the driving force, or forces, that make China the country that sends the greatest number of students

overseas for study each year. This study is the first employing a large-scale dataset to thoroughly examine factors affecting Chinese students' motives and decision-making in studying overseas, and how those factors are related to the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students' families. By providing this information about the relevant factors, policy makers can better understand the needs of different social groups in order to make improvement in educational policy and practice in a more efficient way. Further, knowing more about the relationship between SES and those factors may have important implications for preparations that need to be done on the students' part, as well as improvements that could be made in the recruitment and service efforts on the part of schools.

This paper is in five sections. The first section puts Chinese students studying overseas in the larger context of international student mobility and discusses the motives of higher education institutions in recruiting international students. It is followed in the second section by a detailed literature review of studies explaining international student mobility with a special focus on the push-and-pull factors which is the main framework used for this study. In the third section, the research methods used in this paper are explained, including the research questions, data and unique contributions this study makes. The section providing analyses is the fourth and focuses on the characteristics of high school students who intend to study overseas, factors affecting their decision-making, and how the factors are related to their family socioeconomic status. Finally, directions for future studies are discussed in the concluding section.

International Student Mobility and Institutional Motives

International student mobility, which refers to "international students…taking a full degree abroad or…participating in a short-term, semester or year-abroad program" (Knight, 2012, p. 24), has become an increasingly important part of the higher education landscape globally. Between 1990 and 2012, the number of students studying outside their country of citizenship more than tripled (OECD, 2014). The International Consultants for Education and Fairs (2016) reported that approximately 5 million students studied abroad in 2016, and that, according to the projection made by OECD, there would be 8 million students studying abroad by the year 2025. As Knight claims, "[international] student mobility, in its multiplicity of forms, continues to be a high priority of internationalization"

(2012, p. 21).

The direction in which international students flow is asymmetric, in that it is mostly from developing, non-English-speaking countries such as China and India to developed, English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK and Australia (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). In 2014, among the 4.5 million international students worldwide, about 53 percent were from Asia, and in Asia the top three countries of origin for international students were China, India, and South Korea (OECD, 2015). As Altbach and Knight pointed out, "International academic mobility...favors well-developed education systems and institutions, thereby compounding existing inequalities" (2007, p. 291). However, starting around the mid-1990s, the dominating position of English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK and Australia, as traditional popular destinations for international students has been challenged, and new directions for student mobility have emerged to the extent that by the early 2010s some Asian countries such as China, Singapore and Malaysia, had themselves become competitive destinations for foreign students (Knight, 2011; Tan, 2013).

It is widely recognized that receiving and educating international students has multiple benefits, including adding diversity to the student body, providing students in host countries with the first close contact they have with a person from another culture, filling the under-enrolled courses that colleges would otherwise find it difficult to offer, and providing crucial support as teaching and research assistants, especially in the sciences (Barlett & Fischer, 2011; Johnson, 2003; Rogers, 1984). However, there is no denying that financial consideration is an important factor in recruiting international students. In the majority of countries where data is available, international students pay higher tuition fees at public educational institutions than do national students enrolled in the same program. For example, according to the OECD, in the US, at public institutions international students are usually charged out-of-state tuition fees which are considerably higher than in-state tuition fees. Likewise, in Austria, students enrolled at public institutions who are not citizens of the European Union or European Economic Area countries are usually charged twice as much in tuition fees as citizens of those countries. Similar policies of differential charges based on an individual's citizenship or residence can also be found in those countries such as the UK, Canada, and New Zealand (OECD, 2014). In fact, these policies are not new. For example, Throsby (1986), who analyzed the Australian

fee-charging policies toward foreign students in tertiary education from an economic perspective some thirty years ago, supported the proposals to introduce a full economic fee for foreign students. Additionally, Kinnell (1989) indicated that higher education institutions in the UK, the US, and Australia adopted a marketing approach in recruiting international students because of the pressure to generate revenues.

Financial incentives for recruiting international students have become more important in recent years. As educational institutions face an increasingly restrained budget situation after the 2008 financial crisis, many of them have turned to the immense international student market for a solution. International education is a huge business indeed. For example, it is reported that higher education has become an important export product for the US and ranks No. 5 in the service industry (Li & Zhang, 2011). In Australia, the total national exports of higher education, vocational education, schooling and English-language courses were AUD 10 million in 2009, and education had become the nation's largest services export and fourth largest export after coal, iron ore and gold, ahead of tourism, agriculture and manufacturing (Marginson, 2011). The annual report of the Institute of International Education (IIE) *Open Doors* estimated that in 2015–2016, international students had contributed $32.8 billion and 400,000 jobs to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2016).

Given the multiple benefits of educating international students, it is no surprise that nations compete against each other to attract them (Knight, 2011). Therefore, it has become a priority for institutions and policy-makers to understand students' motives and decision-making in studying abroad.

Push and Pull Factors

Studies have long existed examining factors related to international student mobility (Ravenstein, 1885; Stouffer, 1940). Today, the push-and-pull framework developed by Everett S. Lee is the most well-known and most widely used. He argued that both home and host countries have push (minus) and pull (plus) factors and that there are "intervening obstacles" (i.e., factors in between the home and host countries) such as distance, immigration laws and transportation costs as well as personal factors such as personal sensitivities, intelligence, and awareness of conditions (Lee, 1966, p. 51). Bogue (1969), one of the leading

demographers in the US, enriched the model by identifying specific push and pull factors. The push factors in his list included decline in a national resource, loss of employment, oppressive or repressive discriminatory treatment, alienation and retreat from a community because of ideological reasons, lack of opportunities, or catastrophe. The pull factors included superior opportunities for employment, opportunities to earn a larger income or to obtain desired education or training, preferable environment and living conditions, the movement of dependents, or lure of new or different activities, environments, or people.

Among the early writers in education who used the push-and-pull framework, Agarwal and Winkler (1985) identified the following factors as the principal flow drivers: per capita income in the home country, the price or cost of education, the education opportunities available in the home country, and expected benefits of studying abroad. To Altbach (1991), an important push factor was the unfavorable conditions in home countries, while pull factors included advanced research facilities, congenial socio-economic and political environments, and the prospect of multinational classmates. Similarly, McMahon (1992), after examining the flow of international students from developing to developed countries in the 1960s and 1970s, identified the following push factors: the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of the developing country in the world economy, the priority placed on education by the government of the developing country and the availability of educational opportunities in the home country. The following pull factors were identified in her study: The relative sizes of the student's home country economy compared to the host country, economic links between the home and host country, host nation political interests in the home country through foreign assistance or cultural links and host nation support of international students via scholarships or other assistance.

Mazzarol, Kemp, and Savery (1997) recognized the following six pull factors: (1) overall level of knowledge and awareness of the host country in the students' home country; (2) level of referrals or personal recommendations that the study destination receives from parents, relatives, friends and other "gatekeepers" prior to making the final decision; (3) cost issues, including the financial cost of fees, living expenses, travel costs and social costs, such as crime, safety and racial discrimination; (4) environment, which refers to the study "climate" in the destination country, as well as its physical climate and lifestyle; (5) geographic proximity, which is related to the geographic (and time) proximity of the

potential destination country to the students' country; and (6) social links, which is related to whether a student has family or friends living in the destination country and whether family and friends have studied there previously. Additionally, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) saw "the desire to have a better understanding of the Western culture" as another pull factor. Azmat et al (2012) expanded the Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) study by specifying additional push factors such as economic wealth, educational opportunity, educational standards, and family influence, and additional pull factors such as university reputation, quality and choice of programs, staff quality and permanent residency. A more recent study by Foster (2014) identified four groups of factors, namely, cost, past social relationships, language and homesickness.

However, the push-and-pull framework proposed by Li and Bray (2007) is the main framework used in the analysis of this paper. Li and Bray (2007) call the pull factors in home countries and push factors in host countries "reverse push-pull factors" (p. 795). They argue that there are four combinations of factors: (1) push factors in home countries and (2) pull factors in host countries, both of which provide pushing forces for motivating students to leave their home countries, as well as (3) pull factors in home countries and (4) push factors in host countries, both of which are pulling force for students not to leave their countries. To further develop the push-and-pull factor framework, Li and Bray (2007) proposed using four categories of motives: academic, economic, social and cultural, and political.

Even though studies have been done on factors affecting Chinese students' decision-making in studying overseas, these studies are either about reasons why the students chose certain countries, such as Australia and the UK (Azmat et al., 2012; Counsell, 2011; Iannelli & Huang, 2014), or about the mobility of Chinese students within China, including Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Li & Bray, 2007; To, Lung, L. Lai & T. Lai, 2014). Bodycott (2009) is among the few studies examining factors affecting Chinese students' choice of study-abroad destinations using empirical data, and its mixed-method design helped to provide valuable information on Chinese students' motives in studying overseas along with their parents' attitudes. However, the focus of this study is how children and parents differ in their ratings of the factors. Further, the participants in this study were recruited at international education exhibitions or information sessions on studying overseas, which limited the generalizability of

the findings as people attending those events were self-selected. Further, the sample size was only 100, which was quite small.

Methods

Research Questions

This study seeks to provide a thorough examination of Chinese students' motives in studying overseas, as well as the relationship between those factors and students' family socioeconomic status. Three research questions are addressed:

(1) What are the characteristics of Chinese high school students who plan to study overseas?

(2) What factors affect Chinese high school students' decision-making in going abroad to study? and

(3) How are the factors related to students' family socioeconomic status?

Data Collection

The data used in this study was collected at 6 public high schools in each of the three cities of Beijing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu, making it a total of 18 schools. To maximize the representation of the sample, stratified sampling was used in each city to ensure that selected schools came from different tiers including municipal key school, district key school and regular (non-key) school (in descending order of prestige and teaching staff/facilities). Altogether 3,275 surveys were distributed at those schools between the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2016, and 3,001 of them were completed and returned, which resulted in a high response rate of 91.6 percent thanks to the assistance of the schools in distributing and collecting the survey. The survey included information on students' demographics, socioeconomic status, plans regarding studying overseas, reasons for and concerns over studying overseas, and perceived costs and benefits of studying overseas.

The three cities of Beijing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu were chosen to represent large cities in China since the majority of Chinese students studying overseas come from large cities such as these three. Beijing is located in the northern part of China, and as the nation's capital, it is a political and cultural center. Shenzhen is located in the southern part along the coast, and as the first and largest Special

Economic Zone in South China, it is among the most economically advanced cities in China. Chengdu is located in the southwest, and as the capital of Sichuan Province which is one of the largest provinces in China in terms of both area and population, it is the cultural and economic center in the Western region of China. It should be pointed out, however, that even though these three cities are quite different in terms of their levels of economic development and geographical locations, in doing analysis, little difference was identified in terms of students' motives and the relationship between SES and factors affecting student's decision-making in studying overseas. As a result, the presented analysis in this paper focuses on examining the results from the three cities as a whole instead of differentiating between them.

This study makes contributions to the existing body of literature on the motives and decision-making process of Chinese students in the following three aspects. First, the use of a large-scale dataset from three cities located in different parts of China provides a better representation of the student population and thus enables the researchers to undertake a more comprehensive investigation on the motives and decision-making among Chinese high school students. Second, although there have been studies done on the factors related to international student mobility and also Chinese students' flow out of China, they are mostly at the post-secondary level. This empirical study is among the first to examine Chinese students at the high school level. Unlike other studies which gather information from students who are already enrolled in a post-secondary institution overseas, this study investigates students' motives and decision-making process while they are still in the preparation or decision-making stage. Third, this study is the first to examine how the factors are related to students' family SES, which helps to further develop and expand the push-and-pull framework in studying motives of international student mobility. This contribution in theory building thus greatly enriches the relevant literature.

Findings and Discussion

Characteristics of Participants: Those Who Plan to Study Overseas vs. Those Who Do Not

Individual Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, 55.7 percent of the participants (N = 2,978) are female, and

the average age of the participants is 17.4 (N = 2,854). Among the 2,927 participants, 26.0 percent specifically stated that they did not have a plan to study overseas, and 27.9 percent were undecided. 44.3 percent stated that they planned to study overseas, which is a considerable proportion, and it includes 2.4 percent who planned to attend high school overseas, 24.1 percent who planned to do undergraduate study overseas and 17.8 percent who planned to do graduate study overseas.

Generally speaking, students planning to study overseas have a better academic performance than those not planning to study overseas and those who are undecided. For example, 23.5 percent of the students planning to study overseas ranked themselves among the top 10 percent (N = 1,122) in their overall academic performance, as compared to 12.9 percent for students not planning to study overseas (N = 703), and 11.8 percent for undecided students (N = 740). The differences between those three groups of students in their overall academic performance is statistically significant (p < .001). When comparing the three main subjects of math, English and Chinese, the differences between the three groups are the largest for English (p < .001).

Table 1 Summary Statistics, Overall and by Plan for Studying Overseas

Demographic	Overall	Students planning to study overseas	Students not planning to study overseas	Undecided students
Female	55.9 (N = 2,978)	58.6 (N = 784)	50.2 (N = 380)	56.8 (N = 459)
Age[1]	17.4 (0.02) N = 2,854	17.3 (0.03) N = 1,284	17.5 (0.04) N = 729	17.3 (0.04) N = 774
Academic Performance (at school)				
Overall ***	N =2,620	N =1,122	N =703	N =740
Top 10%	17.1	23.5	12.9	11.8
11–30%	30.2	29.4	30.4	30.9
31–50%	26.3	26.3	24.6	28.1
Below 50%	26.5	20.8	32.0	29.2
*Math****	N = 2,512	N = 1,079	N = 677	N = 708
Top 10%	17.5	23.8	15.2	10.3
11–30%	29.9	30.3	27.2	31.6
31–50%	26.9	25.0	27.6	29.2
Below 50%	25.6	20.9	30.0	28.8

(*To be continued*)

(*Continued*)

Demographic	Overall	Students planning to study overseas	Students not planning to study overseas	Undecided students
*English****	*N* = 2,516	*N* = 1,077	*N* = 676	*N* = 713
Top 10%	19.0	27.2	12.0	13.6
11–30%	27.2	29.1	25.1	25.9
31–50%	25.3	22.4	24.3	30.9
Below 50%	28.5	21.4	38.6	29.6
*Chinese****	*N* = 2,503	*N* = 1,069	*N* = 676	*N* = 710
Top 10%	18.0	25.4	13.0	11.5
11–30%	30.2	28.8	31.8	31.0
31–50%	27.6	24.8	29.0	31.0
Below 50%	24.1	21.0	26.2	26.5
*Father's Education****	*N* = 2,822	*N* = 1,270	*N* = 728	*N* = 764
Associate or below	50.4	33.9	64.7	64.3
Bachelor's degree	33.5	40.9	26.2	28.4
Graduate degree	16.1	25.2	9.1	7.3
*Mother's Education****	*N* = 2,812	*N* = 1,266	*N* = 723	*N* = 763
Associate or below	57.8	42.3	71.4	70.9
Bachelor's degree	31.3	41.1	22.0	24.0
Graduate degree	10.9	16.6	6.6	5.1
*Father's Occupation****	*N* = 2,777	*N* = 1,246	*N* = 719	*N* = 760
Government official	8.3	10.8	6.7	5.9
Business	40.9	46.1	33.7	40.0
Professional	18.1	18.9	18.6	16.3
Worker, farmer, and other	32.7	24.2	41.0	37.8
Family Annual Income (2014)***	*N* = 1,172	*N* = 481	*N* = 369	*N* = 298
<100,000 yuan	30.4	15.8	42.0	39.3
100,000–190,000 yuan	28.7	22.7	33.1	33.6
200,000–290,000 yuan	13.0	16.2	10.6	11.1
300,000–490,000 yuan	9.7	15.2	4.6	7.4
500,000–1 million yuan	9.4	15.0	5.1	6.0
>1 million yuan	8.8	15.2	4.6	2.7

Note. Means are shown, and standard deviations are in parenthesis. Percentages are reported for the rest of the variables. Test results are from Chi-square tests.
~ $p < 0.1$ ***$p < .001$

Family Characteristics

Accompanying the rapid economic development and the establishment of the market as the dominating force for allocating resources, China has been undergoing a social transformation which has been characterized by rapid social stratification over the past several decades. According to Lu, a renowned sociologist in China, the largest change in social strata in recent years lies in the increase in the number of white-collar workers and professionals, civil servants, and private business owners, who are all members of the rising middle class (Lu, 2010). In particular, two social groups within this class have drawn attention in recent years from the public, and the media, as well as scholars and researchers. The two groups labeled *guanerdai* (官二代) and *fuerdai* (富二代), are the offspring of government officials and wealthy business people, respectively. Showered with the inherited privileges of power and wealth, these children carry important labels of the new social strata (Zhang, 2013).

The following analysis on family characteristics and on the relationship between family SES and motivating factors pays particular attention to those subgroups which are at an advantage in building networks and mobilizing social resources, namely, civil servants (referred to as Official hereafter), business owners (Business hereafter), and white-collar professionals (Professional hereafter). Children of these three groups are examined in reference to others (Other hereafter) in order to allow a more nuanced understanding of how family SES is related to students' motives in studying overseas as these three subgroups of students are likely to enjoy more social resources because of their advantaged social status.

Overall the parental educational level of the participants seems to be high compared to the general population as 33.5 percent of the students have a father with a bachelor's degree and 16.1 percent a graduate degree (N = 2,822); 31.3 percent of the students have a mother with a bachelor's degree and 30.9 percent a graduate degree (N = 2,812). Since there is a well-established high correlation between parental education and parental occupation, it is no surprise that the occupation of the participating students' fathers seems to be of relatively high social status. 8.3 percent of the fathers are government officials, 40.9 percent are business people, 18.1 percent are professionals, and only 32.7 percent belong to

other relatively disadvantaged social strata (N = 2,777). Annual family income[1] also seems to indicate that the participating students tend to come from relatively privileged family backgrounds. Among the participants, only 30.4 percent of the families had an annual family income below 100,000 yuan[2] in 2014, while 69.6 percent of the families had an annual income above 100,000 yuan, including 8.8 percent above 1 million yuan. The relatively privileged family backgrounds of the participants reflect the relatively high family socioeconomic status of residents in large cities, which have the highest concentration of high-income population with high educational level and high professional status. By comparison to students who do not plan to study overseas and those who are undecided, students planning to study overseas have more privileged family backgrounds, as reflected in their higher parental educational levels, parental occupations with higher social status, and high family incomes.

To sum up, students who plan to study overseas are differentiated from the other students by relatively high academic performance and high family socioeconomic status indicated by parental education, parental profession and family income. In other words, it seems that, in order for students to have the determination to study overseas, they need to have confidence in both their own academic capability and their family's financial capability to support them. Interestingly, there is no evidence suggesting any differentials among the three cities in the characteristics of students who plan to study overseas and their family backgrounds.

Factors Affecting Students' Decision-Making

Table 2 presents the top three factors affecting students' decision-making in studying overseas. Those factors are categorized in Fig. 1 using the framework proposed in Li and Bray (2007).

[1] In order to improve the accuracy of the information on annual family income, students were asked to take the questionnaire home to complete it with their parents. They were also encouraged to ask the teacher who helped to distribute the questionnaire for clarification if they had any questions.

[2] In 2014, the exchange rate between US dollar and yuan was about 6.2.

Table 2 Factors Related to Students Decision-Making in Studying Overseas

Factors	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3
Education-related reasons for studying overseas (N = 1,384)	*Inferior overall quality of domestic institutions* (48.5[i])	*Intense competition* (15.0)	*Lack of programs of interest to me* (12.8)
Reasons for choosing an institution (N = 1,354)	*High-quality teaching staff* (29.7)	*Good reputation* (29.0)	*Innovation in teaching and research* (17.7)
Reasons for choosing a country (N = 1,277)	*High-quality education* (46.4)	*Advanced science and technology* (14.0)	*Diverse culture* (11.4)
Destination country of choice (N = 1,275)	*United States* (61.6)	*United Kingdom* (11.5)	*Canada* (7.6)
Non-educational reasons for studying overseas (N = 1,340)	*Gaining global perspectives* (32.7)	*Better career prospects* (17.5)	*Experiencing another culture* (14.8)
Concerns over studying overseas (N = 2,635)	*High cost* (37.0)	*Language barrier* (19.1)	*Away from family and friends* (10.4)
Benefits of studying overseas (N = 1,156)	*Learning advanced technology* (34.2)	*Gaining global perspective* (17.8)	*Obtaining a foreign diploma which carries more weight* (13.0)

Note. i. Percentages are reported in parenthesis.

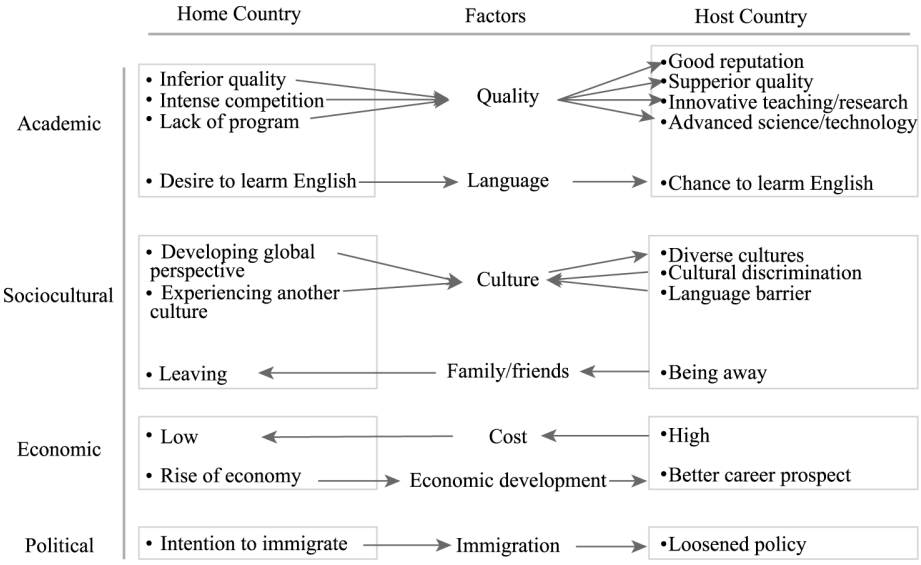

Fig. 1 Summary of Push and Pull Factors

Academic Factors

As shown in Table 2, among the 1,384 students who plan to go overseas to study,

the top three education-related reasons for studying overseas are (1) the inferior overall quality of domestic institutions, (2) intense competition, and (3) lack of programs of interest to them. Academically, educational quality and educational opportunity seem to be the biggest factors. This finding confirms existing studies which showed the dissatisfaction of Chinese students and their families with the increasingly crowded environment of the higher education system in China, as well as with the quality of curricula and teaching methods "which are considered to be not as advanced and up-to-date as those adopted by higher education institutions in Western countries" (Ianneli & Huang 2014, p. 808).

In spite of the rapid expansion of Chinese higher education during the past few decades, it is still quite competitive to enter a college or university of acceptable quality. In 2015, the total enrollment at higher education institutions in China was nearly 36.47 million (Ministry of Education, 2016b), and the enrollment rate among students between the ages of 18 and 22 reached 40.0 percent, compared to 15 percent in 2002 and 3.4 percent in 1990 (Wu & Lu, 2002, p. 40). Nonetheless, the National College Entrance Examination remains the main avenue through which students can access higher education, and the competition to enter a quality higher education institution continues to be quite intense.

The above-mentioned factors in China which are pushing Chinese students overseas correspond to better university reputation as well as high quality and more choice of programs in host countries which serve as pulling forces. In evaluating an institution's quality, 29.7 percent of the participants ranked *High Quality Teaching Staff* as the No. 1 factor, 29.0 percent ranked *Good Reputation* as the No. 2 factor, and 17.7 percent ranked *Innovation in Teaching and Research* as the No. 3 factor (N = 1,354). The importance of academic reasons for studying overseas is highlighted by the fact that *Learning of Advanced Technology* is ranked as the No. 1 perceived benefit of studying overseas. Those academic pulling forces in host countries are confirmed by existing literature (Azmat et al., 2013; Iannelli & Huang, 2014; To, Lung, L. Lai, & T. Lai, 2014).

In other words, the major motive behind the Chinese student mobility seems to be learning, which contradicts recent media coverage on international students from China who do nothing but show off their wealth. As a recent report in *the Chronicle of Higher Education* states: "Here's what Americans think about the Chinese students who have been crowding their campuses: They all drive fancy

cars, and they all are rich" (Fischer 2015)[3]. The Chinese students who have gone overseas in recent years are very different from their predecessors who had embarked on the same journey two decades earlier. A recent article in *Foreign Policy* (Liu, 2015) depicts some typical Chinese students studying overseas in the 1980s and 1990s: They tended to be among "…the nation's best and brightest…[usually] penniless…didn't go out to dinner, didn't go to parties, and assumed that American students were all really rich." They also tended to be "…idealistic and patriotic." In less than two decades, the image of the humble and diligent Chinese students studying overseas has been drastically transformed, and is replaced by the image of the "nouveau riche," or, according to Liu, "…the second-generation scion in a wealthy family, who studies abroad in order to return home to run the family business. He adds that "…they pay full tuition, often study finance, business management, or economics, and spend their time clustered together"; and they drive luxury cars and go into the city "for extravagant weekend shopping trips." As Liu summarized: "It's not just a thickening wallet that separates yesterday's overseas Chinese student from today's. Many have noted a shift in the academic goals and underlying motivations pulling Chinese scholars to study overseas" (Liu, 2015).

Thus, in contradiction to the negative media coverage, the data indicates that learning is still the main driving force behind the large outflow of Chinese students. Moreover, the importance of learning is confirmed by the reasons for the students' top three choices of No. 1 destination country i.e., the US, the UK and Canada. 46.4 percent of the participants choose *High Quality Education* as the No. 1 reason (N = 1,277).

Sociocultural Factors

As Beine, Noel, and Ragot (2013) pointed out, cross-border migration of international students may also be viewed as a consumption choice. In that case, students not only consider the returns to their educational investment, but they also consider the circumstances and the places where they will study. The fact that *Gaining Global Perspectives* is ranked as the No. 1 non-educational reason

[3] For more reports on Chinese students showing off their wealth, please refer to Higgins (2013) on Bloomberg and Drash (2015) on CNN.

for studying overseas, and that *Diverse Culture* is ranked as the No. 3 reason for choosing a particular country, demonstrates that social and cultural experiences are important considerations for Chinese students in their decision-making regarding studying overseas. In fact, 22.1 percent of the participants (N = 1,101) indicated that they do not care whether they will be able to recover the cost of studying overseas.

Liu-Farrer (2016), after examining the recent, "third-wave" of migration out of post-reform China, argues that "emigration is in fact a form of class-based consumption, a strategy for class reproduction, and a way to convert economic resources into social status and prestige" (p. 499). Similarly, in a quantitative study about studying overseas and social stratification in the Chinese context, Fan and Cheng (in press) demonstrate that studying overseas is a tool for advantaged social class members to maintain their status and for disadvantaged social class members to climb up the social ladder.

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Fischer (2015) gives three examples of the importance of sociocultural factors in the decision–making process of Chinese families who send their children overseas for education. In one example, Fisher describes the case of Abby Wu whose mother is an executive in a prosperous Chinese company and father works in satellite communication. In spite of their high-paying jobs, Abby's parents describe themselves as a "normal family," which means that they lack the "connections" which can help one "secure a position, particularly in government or state-owned companies." Her parents had been contemplating the option of her studying abroad which they thought would guarantee her a "more certain future" since she was in middle school. In another example, Fischer describes Beini Wang's parents who are both instructors in a local university. They had dreamed about sending their daughter overseas to study because they wanted her to "learn something" and they thought the test-centric educational system in China was "exhausting and boring." Being professionals whose combined yearly salaries of 200,000 yuan (an equivalent of $32,000), paying for an American undergraduate education was out of the question, so they sold their large, well-located apartment and bought a smaller, less expensive one, which helped them to pay for the cost. It is not uncommon for families to pay for an education abroad using profit made from the skyrocketing real-estate prices. Like most Chinese parents, Beini's parents think it is well worth it. According to Beini's mother, "It's not an investment…it's our

child's life" (Fisher, 2015). Fisher's report summarized: "For Chinese parents, the choice of an American education for their child—and almost always their only child—is not just a financial investment. It's a political maneuver, a personal sacrifice, a bet on greater opportunity abroad."

As counter force to the above-mentioned external sociocultural pull factors, external sociocultural push factors such as cultural and language barriers, as well as having to be away from family and friends serve to deter students. As a culture that attaches great importance to family and values friendship, it is conceivable that Chinese students may not want to go overseas to study because they do not want to be away from their family and friends.

Economic Factors

From a human capital perspective, going to another country to study is considered an investment and the motive is to have better job opportunities and thus higher expected income in the future. In fact, 17.5 percent of the participants rated *Better Career Prospects* as the No. 2 non-educational reason for studying overseas. Therefore, economic considerations serve as important pulling forces in destination countries. Moreover, along with economic factors being a pulling force, the rise of China's economy serves as an important pushing force within China. Studying overseas used to be a privilege reserved for a few of the most wealthy and powerful elite in China, but now even an average white-collar professional can afford to send their children abroad thanks to the rapid economic development in China. This development is reflected in higher living standards, more wealth accumulated among individuals, skyrocketing real estate prices, and the appreciation of the Chinese currency.

However, in spite of the increasing affordability of studying overseas, the financial cost is still a major consideration for most Chinese families, and thus serves as a push factor in host countries. As shown in Table 2, 37.0 percent of the participants identify *High Cost* as the No. 1 concern, Further, 52.8 percent of the participants think that they would consider studying overseas only if the cost accounts for less than 30 percent of their annual family income, 21.9 percent would accept between 30–50 percent, and only 10.5 percent would accept above 50 percent (N = 2,634). In addition, 56.5 percent of the participants expect to recover the cost of studying overseas within five years of graduating, 16.6

percent between 5–10 years and 2.1 percent between 10–15 years (N = 1,101).

Political Factors

Loosened restrictions on visa and immigration in host countries have been identified as a pulling force (Bodycott, 2009; Lee, 1966; To, Lung, L. Lai & T. Lai, 2014). However, this is not seen as an important factor among Chinese students. For example, only 6.7 percent of the participants (N = 1,340) who plan to study overseas identified immigration as the No. 1 non-educational reason for studying overseas, and only 2.3 percent (N = 1,277) of them stated loosened immigration policy as the No. 1 reason for choosing a particular country.

How Family Socioeconomic Status Is Related to the Identified Factors

In order to examine how family socioeconomic status is related to the above identified push and pull factors, logistic regressions were run to explore how the influence of pushing and pulling forces differ for advantaged and disadvantaged social strata. The logistic regression results are presented in Table 3.

Model 1 shows the influence of domestic academic push factors relative to external academic pull factors. The outcome variable assumes the value of 1 for the former, and 0 for the latter. Since the reference group is disadvantaged social strata, the negative sign of the coefficient –0.44 for advantaged social strata means that domestic academic push factors are of less importance to advantaged social strata than they are to disadvantaged social strata. The odds ratio is 0.65, which means the odds for advantaged social strata is 0.65 as much as the odds for disadvantaged social strata to be pushed by domestic academic factors.

Domestic academic push factors include the overall inferior quality of educational institutions and the intense competition for the very limited high-quality educational resources. Children of advantaged social strata are able to win in this competition partly because of their superior academic achievement and partly because of their families' ability to access those resources. However, since the parents in the advantaged social strata have better education and higher expectations for their children, the limited resources within China cannot meet their demand. Although their children are able to enjoy better-quality educational resources in China, their purpose in studying overseas is to obtain even better

Table 3 Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Social Strata Predicting Factors Affecting Students' Decision-Making in Studying Overseas

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B (S.E.)	Exp(β)	B (S.E.)	Exp(β)	B (S.E.)	Exp(β)	β (S.E.)	Exp(β)
Advantaged Social Strata	−0.44*** (0.163)	0.646	−0.36*** (0.113)	0.699	−0.24 (0.152)	0.78		
Official							0.21 (0.246)	1.236
Business							−0.41** (0.164)	0.662
Professional							−0.05 (0.204)	0.950
City	0.097 (0.106)	1.102	0.138** (0.07)	1.147	−0.058 (0.097)	0.944	−0.030 (0.098)	1.974
Sex	−0.323** (0.145)	0.724	−0.212** (0.102)	0.809	−0.201 (0.134)	0.818	−0.195 (0.135)	0.823
Constant	−0.559 (0.344)	0.572	0.904*** (0.234)	2.469			−0.078 (0.322)	1.081
P	0.006		< 0.001		0.159		0.013	
N	1,090		1,719		982		985	

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. Exp(β) = expoentiated(β). Standard errors are in parenthesis.

For model 1: 1 = domestic academic push factors, 0 = external academic push factors;

For model 2: 1 = external economic push factors, 0 = domestic sociocultural pull factors;

For models 3 and 4: 1 = external economic pull factors, 0 = external sociocultural pull factors.

educational resources so that their children can have better prospects in the long term. By comparison, parents in the less advantaged social strata, who have less education and lower expectation for their children, would be content if their children can gain access to high-quality educational resources within China. As a result, the domestic academic push factors have more influence over parents in the less advantaged social strata.

Model 2 shows the influence of external economic push factors relative to domestic sociocultural pull factors. The coefficient for advantaged social strata is

–0.36, and the negative coefficient means that economic push factors are of less importance to advantaged social strata than domestic sociocultural pull factors are. The odds ratio is 0.70, which means the odds for advantages social strata is 0.70 as much as the odds for less advantaged social strata. Domestic sociocultural pull factors include being away from family and friends, living independently, and concerns over maladjustment in another country. Children of advantaged social strata enjoy superior living standards in China and their families are able to mobilize rich social resources which they will lose once going overseas. On the other hand, children of less advantaged social strata do not have as much to lose from their lives in China by going overseas. As a result, the influence of domestic sociocultural pull factors is greater for advantaged social strata.

Model 3 shows the influence of external economic pull factors relative to external sociocultural pull factors. The coefficient of –.24 for advantaged social strata is not statistically significant, which means that there may not be differences for advantaged and disadvantaged social strata in the degree of attraction between such economic factors as better career prospects and sociocultural factors such as experiencing another culture and gaining global perspectives. Once the advantages for social strata are broken down into *Official*, *Business* and *Professional*, however, it seems that the statistically non-significant results in Model 3 for advantaged social strata are mainly driven by the *Official* and *Professional* sub-groups, while the result is statistically significant for the *Business* sub-groups, as shown in Model 4. The negative sign of the coefficient –.42 for the *Business* sub-group means that external economic pull factors are of less importance than external sociocultural pull factors are for them. The odds ratio is 0.66, which means the odds for the *Business* sub-group is 0.66 as much as the odds for the disadvantaged social strata. In other words, the *Business* social sub-group tends to consider more of the sociocultural benefits of studying overseas in their decision-making whereas the *Official* and *Professional* subgroups tend to consider both sociocultural benefits and the practical benefits of better career prospect equally in their decision-making.

To sum up, advantaged social strata tend to be influenced more by the pulling force of higher-quality education overseas, and thus their decision-making process can be described as proactive. By contrast, disadvantaged social strata tend to be influenced more by the pushing force of low-quality education in

China, which means that their decision-making can be seen as a passive response. Among the advantaged social strata, the *Business* sub-group tends to be attracted more by the sociocultural factors such as gaining global perspectives and experiencing another culture, whereas the *Official* and *Professional* subgroups tend to be attracted equally by sociocultural considerations. Further, disadvantaged social strata tend to be more sensitive, and thus deterred by, the high cost of studying overseas, whereas advantaged social strata are more concerned over, and thus influenced by, the fact that their children will have to be cut off from their social connections and networks within China, and thus give up their relatively privileged life when going overseas to study.

Conclusions

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and interdependent economically, politically, culturally and socially, international student mobility can only occur more frequently, and thus remains an important topic. Using the push-and-pull framework based on data collected from 3,001 students at 18 high schools located in the three cities of Beijing, Shenzhen and Chengdu, this study identifies important factors in the academic, economic, sociocultural and political aspects that serve as the pushing and pulling forces in students' decision-making process of studying overseas. The finding that sociocultural factors such as *Experiencing Another Culture* and *Gaining a Global Perspective* play a significant role is an important one. Further, the findings reveal the importance of students' academic preparation and their families' financial capability. In addition, the disadvantaged social strata tend to be influenced more by the pushing force of low-quality education in China, and deterred by the high cost of studying overseas, whereas the advantaged social strata tend to be influenced more by the pulling force of higher-quality education overseas and the pulling force within China such as relatively privileged life.

For future directions, similar studies could be carried out in second- and third-tier cities in China. Currently, the majority of Chinese students studying overseas come from large cities, and the choice of the three cities of Beijing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu in this study was made to reflect this trend. However, sporadic data has shown that this trend has been trickling down to smaller cities. As students' motives and decision-making may be somewhat different in smaller

cities and towns than those in large cities, it will be worthwhile to examine the drive behind students from smaller cities going overseas. In addition to large-scale survey data, as used in this study, in-depth interviews with students and their parents could be conducted to supplement those quantitative data.

Further, in order to have a better understanding of the drive behind international student mobility, it will be essential to study it from both ends, namely, the sending country as well as host country. Once international students arrive in their destination country and at their institution, how well they can navigate between the two cultures and thus adapt themselves to the new environment determines to a large extent whether their expectations could be met and whether they could fulfill their goal in studying overseas. As cultural adaptation is viewed nowadays as a bi-dimensional process which is related to both cultures of origin and the receiving societies (Berry, 1974, 1980; Phinney, 1990), a related issue would be what schools and teachers can do to assist with international students' adaptation. Even though studies have been conducted on this topic, students who go abroad to study at a young age may face particular challenges simply because of their age and thus this makes it an important topic to examine.

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