

## **Three Levels of Push-Pull Dynamics Among Chinese International Students' Decision to Study Abroad in the Canadian Context**

*Jun Mian Chen*

Brock University, Canada

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*The extant literature on student migration flows generally focus on the traditional push-pull factors of migration at the individual level. Such a tendency excludes the broader levels affecting international student mobility. This paper proposes a hybrid of three levels of push-pull dynamics (micro-individual decision-making, meso-academic marketing, and macro-national marketing) to paint a more accurate picture of student migration flows. A case study of 15 semi-structured interviews with Chinese international students at a Canadian university was conducted to illuminate the underresearched reality that universities and Canada as a nation offer additional incentives, in conjunction with individual/familial reasons, for study abroad. The paper concludes with recommendations for new research directions arising from the present study.*

**Keywords:** Canadian university, Chinese international students, macro-marketing, meso-marketing, micro-marketing, study abroad

---

China is the world's leading provider of international students, with the United States being the international hub for students studying abroad. With over 974,000 international students in 2014/15 fiscal year, of whom over 304,000 are from China (Institute of International Education, 2016), United States continues to attract the greatest number of international students worldwide (UIS, 2016). In comparison, Canada ranks among top seven in the world, with Chinese students comprising the greatest segment (over 110,000 in 2014) of international student population (CBIE, 2016). However, the latest national survey of international students reveals that more than half (53%) of the 5,925 students surveyed chose Canada as their

first-choice country for study abroad, while only 25% preferred the United States (CBIE, 2009).

The population of international students present in Canada is at an all-time high, and it has increased from 159,425 in 2003 to 293,503 in 2013 (CIC, 2013, 2014a). The numbers of international students from CIC (Citizenship and Immigration Canada) is available up to year 2013; newer data is currently unavailable. In 2014, 43% of all international students in Canada were studying in Ontario, followed by 28.9% in British Columbia (CBIE, 2016). Pertinently, 58% of the international student population are enrolled in university-level programs, as opposed to other post-secondary (i.e., college, trades) and secondary or elementary levels (CBIE, 2016). Clearly, Canadian universities, those in Ontario in particular, have experienced tremendous growth in international student enrollment in the last decade.

The recent growth in the number of international students in Canada can be examined at three different yet interrelated levels: micro (individual decision-making processes), meso (academic marketing), and macro (national marketing). At the micro-level, Fama (2011) argued that the demand for education in Canada has sparked an increase in the number of international students who have enrolled at Canadian universities in recent years. Owing to this widely held premise, extant studies at the micro-level (e.g., Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001; Chen, 2008) have typically examined the decision-making process and students' motivation to study abroad. Nonetheless, the exploration of academic marketing, which constitutes just one aspect of the complex meso-level dynamics, is gradually growing in prominence. Meso-level studies (e.g., Çetin, 2003; Pimpa, 2005; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013) point to the reality of decreased government funding, which in turn creates the need for universities to increasingly compete for the international student market, as the panacea for individual institutions' financial slump. As a case in point, in 2008, the University of Toronto reported a loss of \$1.3 billion, while York University lost 19% of its \$300 million endowment fund (Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2010). These large amounts of money exemplify the seriousness of the financial difficulties experienced by even some of the most reputable universities in Canada. Finally, studies that have explored this phenomenon at the macro-level, while limited, tended to focus on the role of the Government of Canada in explaining the recent growth in the international student population.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The push-pull theory of international migration is a classic model that is commonly used to explain student migration, as it allows identifying push

and pull factors that work in conjunction to affect student decision-making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors are the social, political, and economic forces within the home country that initiate a student's decision to pursue education overseas, such as high levels of student competition for university entrance due to overpopulation (Bodycott & Lai, 2012, p. 254). Pull factors, on the other hand, are those that induce students to choose one particular country over another, such as the knowledge and awareness of an institution's reputation, recommendations by peers and relatives, and ability to work in the host country (Mazzarol, Soutar, & Thein, 2001). The value of the push-pull theory stems from its ability to explicate student migration flows. The model has some drawbacks, one of which is the fact that it does not clearly distinguish between country characteristics (e.g., ability to work) and characteristics within the country (e.g., an institution's reputation, which may not correlate to the host country's appeal).

Moreover, most extant studies on international student migration flows focus on one level of analysis, such as examining push-pull factors influencing students' decision to study overseas (e.g., Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), or marketing strategies employed by individual institutions (e.g., Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart, & Choo, 2001) for the purpose of international student recruitment. Such approach implicitly neglects the fact that students' choice to study overseas is affected by numerous, complex, and often interrelated factors that operate at several levels. For instance, the push-pull model tends to treat pull factors as immutable and clearly apparent to the students. Canada has recently started following the example of United States and Australia, where aggressive international marketing strategies have been employed, with the aim of increasing the number of international students within its borders (Michael, 1990; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). This paper contributes to the literature by examining these complex phenomena. In particular, it synthesizes the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, which are all interconnected. It also uncovers the rationales and the broader context within which Chinese students are choosing to study in Canada.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **English-Speaking Countries**

The US, the UK, and Australian literature on international students—and English-speaking countries more generally—have plentiful studies that focus on students' adjustment to the host country and the needs of international students in higher education (e.g., Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Bartram, 2007; Campbell & Li, 2008; Zhou & Todman, 2009; Andrade, 2010; Campbell, 2012; Cheng & Erben, 2012), as well as on migration patterns (e.g., Pan, 2010; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012). Such studies are predominantly

conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom because these two countries have the greatest number of international students studying at their higher education institutions (UIS, 2014). Their popularity is also likely influenced by the fact that a significant number of the highest ranked universities are located in the United States followed by several prominent universities from the UK (Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, 2014). As the number of international students in Canada continues to climb, the body of research on the international student population is also likely to expand (e.g., Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

Nonetheless, given that the international mobility of students follows a distinct geographical pattern, it is no coincidence that Canada continuously receives significant numbers of international students. According to Waters (2008), the vast majority of international students choose specific English-speaking countries for their studies, such as the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

### **Micro-level Factors Affecting Student Mobility: Decision-making and Motivation to Study Abroad**

Given that the paper aims to draw more attention to the meso- and macro-level factors influencing student migration, only a brief review of the micro-level factors will be given. Essentially, every decision to study abroad is made by the individual student, often with input from his/her immediate family (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001; Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012). The role of parents in a Confucian society, such as mainland China, is especially important because Confucianism is the cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture, upon which the decision to study abroad is in part based on. In mainland China, a strict parent-child relationship prevails and even adult children must respect and obey their parents (Bodycott, 2009). Thus, most of the decision-making involves parents and other relatives. When deciding to study internationally, most students would go through four distinct stages: clarifying the intention to study internationally, choice of country in which to study, the selection of an institution, and the choice of the city (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001).

### **Macro-level Factors Affecting Student Mobility: National Marketing for International Students**

National marketing in Canada is a more recent development than academic marketing. Education in Canada is primarily the responsibility of each province, while immigration visas (often referred to as Canada Green Cards by people outside of Canada), foreign affairs, and international trade are the responsibility of the federal government. The affairs of international students thus fall under the remit of both the provincial and federal government. Until recently, international students were typically recruited

by individual institutions without “a coordinated marketing effort” (Chen, 2008, p. 8) between individual institutions and Canada as a nation. In recognition of this shortcoming, the Government of Canada recently developed strategies to increase the international student intake.

### **Canada’s International Education Strategy**

The Government of Canada recognizes the vital role of international education in creating jobs, economic growth, and long-term prosperity in Canada (FATDC, 2014). Thus, Canada’s International Education Strategy, launched in January 2014 by the Harper government, as the most recent initiative to capitalize on international education, will allow Canada to stay competitive in the global market (as a part of Canada’s Global Markets Action Plan). As noted in the final report—*International Education: A Key Driver of Canada’s Future Prosperity*—issued by the Advisory Panel on Canada’s International Education Strategy, “The overarching goal of an international education strategy is to brand Canada internationally as a choice destination for talented people from around the world for studying, conducting research *and potentially immigration*” (FATDC, 2012, p. 48, emphasis added). Here, the meta-message or the latent objective in the goal statement reveals attempts to link international education (i.e., international students) to immigration by retaining international students post-graduation. The immediate target, however, is to increase the number of international students from 239,131 in 2011 to more than 450,000 by 2022 (FATDC, 2014). In order to achieve the stated strategy goals, as set out in Canada’s International Education Strategy, the Government of Canada acknowledged a number of aims, some of which are: to strengthen cooperation to leverage scholarships for international students, to build strategic partnerships with key countries, to work with online educators to foster greater uptake by international students, and to increase the number of international students opting to remain in Canada as permanent residents after graduation (FATDC, 2014).

### **Canadian Experience Class (CEC)**

Both Canadian Government and individual institutions use the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) as a selling feature to attract and recruit international students for whom permanent residency status in the host country is a desired goal. The Canadian Government created the CEC in 2008 to specifically target international students and migrant workers. The CEC program enables individuals in these groups who have work experience in Canada to move from temporary to permanent residency. Valiani (2013) explained, “The CEC offers the ‘carrot’ of permanent residency to international students and internationally trained workers of various skilled categories following the completion of, respectively, twelve

or twenty-four months of work in Canada, on the basis of a temporary work authorization” (p. 62). As of January 1, 2015, those interested in applying to the CEC must go through the Express Entry system.

A recent change that was instated on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, which caps the total number of new CEC applications to 8,000, is in part a response to the introduction of the Express Entry, launched in January 2015 (CIC, 2014b). Express Entry is a system that manages applications for permanent residence under three federal economic immigration programs: the Canadian Experience Class, the Federal Skilled Worker Program, and the Federal Skilled Trades Program. With the Express Entry in operation, provinces are able to select the most qualified candidates and ensure that these receive immigration status (CIC, 2014c). This policy change exemplifies Altbach and Knight’s (2007) point that, while students generally migrate from south to north, it is the north (in the present case Canada) that largely controls the process, as it produces the conditions upon which students’ decisions to study overseas are in part based on. These policy changes are clear examples of how Canada strategically adjusts its immigration policy to offer permanent migration as an option, thus creating a significant pull factor. In other words, Canada actively facilitates the flow of international students, by adjusting conditions through immigration policy changes.

Available evidence also suggests presence of a link between choice of country in which to study and the likelihood of obtaining permanent residency upon graduation (see, for example, Baas, 2006). Thus, marketing of international education is increasingly being integrated into the migration marketing strategies, such as those pertaining to permanent residency (Baas, 2007). Put differently, the increased flow of tertiary students to Canada may not be solely based on the international education quality alone; rather, the prospect of securing a permanent residency status may in part influence international student mobility.

### **The Broader Financial Context of International Education in Canada**

Given the factors discussed above, an important question arises: what are the conditions under which a country may want to offer, or at the very least ease the process of obtaining, permanent residency status to international students? The answer lies in the economic value of international students. International education is a multi-billion dollar industry (FATDC, 2012). According to the 2012 federal government report commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (FATDC), estimates pertaining to 2010 reveal several positive economic impacts of international students in Canada. In particular, the findings reveal that international students spent over \$7.7 billion on tuition, accommodation, and discretionary spending; created over 81,000 jobs; and generated more than \$445 million in government revenue (Roslyn Kunin &

Associates, Inc., 2012). The report further estimates that, in 2010, international students in K-12 and university-level education contributed over \$763 million and \$4 billion to the Canadian economy, respectively (Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc., 2012). Given that international tertiary-level students are the major contributors to the economy, the Government of Canada has ample economic reasons and motives to increase the intake of international students.

### **Meso-level Factors Affecting Student Mobility: Academic Marketing for International Students**

*The Economic Impact of International Students on Individual Institutions.* International students are also highly sought commodity for universities that are undergoing transformative changes brought on by neoliberal policies, whereby university agendas are increasingly aligning with corporate interests (Magnusson, 2000; Scott, 2000; Sidhu, 2006). In addition, institutions are increasingly under pressure to internationalize and diversify their campuses, with the main rationale that this shift would ensure that graduates are internationally knowledgeable and thus competitive beyond their borders (AUCC, 2007; Hudzik, 2010). Neoliberalism is a rather broad concept pertaining to an economic and political model of society that has risen to prominence in the 1980s (Harvey, 2005). While acknowledging several ways to interpret neoliberalism (Springer, 2012), the focus of this paper is on the policy and program framework.

Decreases in government funding have led universities to assume greater autonomy in devising methods to secure operating funds, and most have adopted increasing tuition fees as the main strategy (Magnusson, 2000; Godard, 2010). However, many also strive to increase the number of international students (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2010), and have thus started offering language programs to assist with this process. This creates an environment in which universities compete with each other to attract and retain students in order to maximize their competitiveness in the global market and to achieve a worldwide reputation as an excellent and renowned higher education institution (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2010; Newson, Polster, & Woodhouse, 2012). Hence, the competition for international students among universities characterizes the meso-level of internal competition within Canada.

*University Funding in Decline: A Brief History.* Many universities have become corporate organizations that seek to generate profit, rather than to focus on producing and disseminating knowledge for the betterment of society (Maringe, 2010). Academic internationalization is one means through which revenue can be generated in an effort to offset financial

concerns of the institution. This is becoming increasingly important for Canadian universities that are no longer receiving the funds they once did. In the 1960s, government funding for higher education increased, which ensured that universities could focus on education, rather than seeking to maximize revenue (Godard, 2010). From 1977 through 1996, post-secondary educational institutions, along with Canada's healthcare system, were still largely funded by the federal government through Established Programs Financing (EPF) (Teeple, 2000). The EPF was a financial program in which the federal government provided funds according to a formula based on growth of the Gross National Product (GNP) and population (Teeple, 2000). However, the decline of the Canadian welfare state since the mid-1980s has changed the formula, resulting in reduced annual funding for post-secondary education (Teeple, 2000).

Federal funding for post-secondary education significantly changed yet again in 1996, with the introduction of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). In force from 1996 to 2003, the CHST was an amalgamation of the EPF and the federal Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) into one block fund (Department of Finance Canada, 2011). While the EPF largely subsidized healthcare and post-secondary education, the CAP subsidized social assistance (Metcalf, 2010). Although the CHST provided financial assistance to provincial and territorial governments in support of healthcare, post-secondary education, social assistance, and social welfare, owing to the system of block transfer payments, funding to post-secondary education declined.

Since 2004, the CHST has been segregated into two streams: the Canada Health Transfer (CHT) and the Canadian Social Transfer (CST), with the latter serving as the conduit for post-secondary education funding, separating it from healthcare. However, the federal lump sum transfer under the CST conceals the amount designated for post-secondary education. Moreover, the funds are now awarded (e.g., based on research merit) rather than allocated, as has been the case in the past (Metcalf, 2010). This is one of the ways in which neoliberalism manifests itself through policies and programs.

*The Case of University-X.* This case study examines the increased number of international students studying at a small, liberal arts university in Southwestern Ontario (henceforth referred to as University-X), contextualized against the backdrop of increasing body of international students present in Canada. University-X serves over 17,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The university has secured a positive reputation among locals, as well as internationally via branding, and it provides one of Canada's largest Business co-op program. Like many other universities, University-X actively recruits international students, particularly from

China, via academic marketing. Kotler and Fox (1985) defined applying the concept of marketing to education as “the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets, to achieve institutional objectives” (p. 7). According to them, “Marketing involves designing the institution’s offerings to meet the target market’s needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication, distribution to inform, motivate, and service the markets” (p. 7).

Kotler and Fox’s framework of marketing elucidates the rationale behind University-X’s effective promotion of its Business program to international students (as well as locals), which has resulted in the majority of its international students enrolling in that program.

University-X also markets its language program as much more than just an English requirement. The language program offers courses that focus on academic English and on equipping students with English skills in essay writing and reading academic texts, among others. Students also engage in sociocultural activities as a way to experience Canadian culture, such as field trips to Niagara Falls, food festivals, potlucks, and bowling, to name a few. University-X uses the language program to advertise opportunities for international students to interact with English-speaking locals. The language program constitutes one aspect of University-X’s internationalization efforts (Knight, 2004), which serve two main purposes. First, it helps to recruit international students by offering academically qualified students a conditional offer into University-X’s program upon completion of the language program; second, it constitutes an important stream of revenue for the university.

The purpose of the present study is to explore why Chinese international students choose to study abroad, specifically at University-X. Chinese international students are selected for this investigation because they comprise the majority of the international students at University-X, as well as worldwide. The study is guided by the research question—what factors influence international students’ decision to pursue international education? The present study contributes to the extant literature in the field by examining a case example within the Canadian context to demonstrate the effect of three levels of push-pull dynamics on international migration among Chinese students looking to study abroad.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The ability to understand the perspective of students as closely as possible in regards to their decision-making processes is of vital importance for the present study. According to Yin (2014), a case study design is appropriate when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions, and to

uncover contextual conditions relevant to the phenomenon under study. Yin (2014) defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 16). As well, a qualitative approach was selected, given its advantage over quantitative inquires when it comes to capturing a deeper understanding of students’ narratives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

### **Procedures**

The present study is a pilot case study with 15 Chinese international undergraduate students studying at University-X. The study participants were chosen via two recruitment strategies. The primary recruitment initiative took place through class solicitation in one of University-X’s North American Studies classes. This particular course is designed to provide international degree-seeking and exchange students an introduction to Canadian society, culture, politics, history, and geography, among other important aspects. This particular course was deemed an ideal platform for recruitment, as it is open to first- and second-year international degree-seeking and exchange students only. Students’ interest in the study was very high and interviews started on the day of the in-class recruitment.

The second recruitment strategy comprised of snowball sampling. At the end of each interview participants were asked if they knew of any Chinese international students whom they thought might have been interested in the study. The snowball method proved to be effective because this population of students is typically difficult to locate (Amit & Riss, 2007). To qualify for participation in the study, students had to be undergraduate degree-seeking international students, rather than exchange students, from China. To satisfy this condition, participants self-declared at the beginning of each interview.

### **Research Instruments and Participants**

Two data collection instruments were used to gather the information required to meet the study aims. The first involved questionnaires, which solicited demographic information from the participating students. Each participant completed a questionnaire just prior to starting the one-on-one interview. The main research instrument comprised of individual in-depth, semi-structured, and audio-recorded interviews. Interviews were conducted in English, using a set of interview questions, and lasted 52 minutes on average. In addition, stress was minimized by not using a translator as it might have caused some students to feel slightly uncomfortable. The principal investigator of the study conducted all 15 interviews. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

The cohort consisted of two males and thirteen females, all of whom were interviewed from April 3rd to April 16th, 2013. At the time of the

study, all participants were 18 to 20 years old and all but one was first year students. The majority of the students were studying either Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) or Economics. The only two exceptions were a student pursuing a double major in BBA and Financial Math, and a first-year Biology major student. All but two students finished University-X's language program prior to studying at the university.

### **Qualitative Descriptive Research Design**

The present study examines students' decision-making processes through the symbolic interactionist framework, or the perspective that students construct their own actions, which are deliberate and intentional, as a result of social interaction with others as well as their environment (Handberg, Thorne, Midtgaard, Nielsen, & Lomborg, 2015). Adopting a qualitative descriptive research design ensured that a comprehensive understanding of reasons that motivated students to study in Canada, and specifically University-X, could be obtained. According to Sandelowski (2000), qualitative descriptive studies are best suited when the aim is to present a comprehensive summary of the data in everyday language, rather than interpret events and meanings in other terms.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis follows a bottom-up approach, otherwise known as inductive analysis. Inductive analysis refers to the generation and emergence of categories, themes, and patterns that come directly from the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The first step in the data analysis was open coding, resulting in common themes, which were subsequently refined and narrowed into central themes (van den Hoonaard, 2012). These themes led to several sensitizing concepts, including competition, pressure, disappointment, reputation, English, friends, homestay, and Canadian culture.

A sensitizing concept refers to a construct developed by the participant and through the perspective of the participant, using his or her own language or expression, to convey the meaning of that construct (van den Hoonaard, 1997). From this standpoint, sensitizing concepts helped capture the meanings that the students attached to the world around them. Sensitizing concepts also complement the inductive approach to analysis because they stem from the data rather than from preconceived ideas held by the researcher (van den Hoonaard, 2012). With each sensitizing concept, a general direction was followed along which to look deeper (Blumer, 1954, as cited in van den Hoonaard, 1997, p. 2). For this reason, sensitizing concepts were quite useful, as they suggested possible areas to be analyzed, and guided the direction of the analysis.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Validity and reliability are important concepts in qualitative research. To help safeguard validity during the research process, Kvale (1996) recommended that studies of this type undergo seven stages comprised of thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, validating, and reporting. In the transcribing stage, for example, the researcher should choose a linguistic style that best translates the oral interviews into written form. In the analyzing (or interpreting) stage, the researcher should assess whether the analysis is sound and whether it answers the research question. The validating (or verifying) stage progresses throughout the research process. In particular, the researcher validates his/her own work by discussing the validity of the research project with others (e.g., supervisors, colleagues). Kvale's seven stages were useful guidelines to ensure the validity of the present research.

The reliability of a research project is increased by adopting methods that are consistent, dependable, and accurate. In other words, reliable measurements are those that produce the same result when repeated under similar circumstances (Gleason, Harris, Sheean, Boushey, & Bruemmer, 2010). The present study ensures reliability by maintaining consistency throughout the interviewing process, as well as in the transcription phase and data analysis.

### **Limitations**

Although the present study has reached its aims of identifying and uncovering the rationales behind Chinese students' decisions to study abroad, and specifically choosing University-X, it is affected by some unavoidable limitations. Because of the gender composition of the sample, the findings are heavily skewed towards female perspective. Similarly, it is the perspective of students from University-X's Business program which are represented, due to the participant recruitment method employed. Despite these limitations, the current study contributes to the limited literature on student migration in a Canadian context by accentuating three levels of push-pull dynamics.

## **FINDINGS**

### **(Micro) Push-Pull Factors in the Decision to Study Abroad**

The decision-making process to study internationally is complex and factors affecting its outcome are multifaceted. Most students envision studying abroad before they commence high school. One of the study participants explained that high school in China lasts three years, covering grades 10 to 12. After middle school, comprising of grades 7 to 9, students are streamed into either traditional high schools, where they will have to

take the daunting university entrance exam, or international high schools, for those who are planning to pursue further education overseas. All students who took part in the present study see the former option as highly competitive and stressful and the latter as an alternative to the pressure and competition in China. According to them, attending international high schools reduces the pressure of studying for and taking the university entrance exam at the end of high school, which is the conventional route.

The participants in this study unanimously expressed concern about the university entrance exam, which constitutes a major push factor recognized by both students and their parents in their decision to study abroad. In Chinese Confucian culture, parents take on an active role in the education of their children. Myla recalled,

When I was in middle school, my parents decided to send me to international school, like English education system. So, I was there for three years high school study and then my dad didn't want me to take the Chinese university entrance exam 'cause it was really, really hard and then *that* exam decides your whole life. So, my dad really didn't want me to get stressed out, so he just want to send me abroad and then I was really interested in studying English, so I chose to come to Canada.

A detailed analysis of the interview transcripts revealed some variations in the onset of the decision-making process. More specifically, while eight students indicated that their parents initiated the idea of studying abroad, six interviewees stated that the idea was their own and they had to convince and persuade their parents to support it. Only one student specified that it was a mutual decision right from the outset. Despite these differences, all participants concurred that the final decision to study abroad was reached by mutual consent.

While academic streaming, high competition levels among students in China, and the pressure of the university entrance exam all constitute push factors, their effect on the students' decision to study abroad is highly interrelated with the pull factors of their target country. When asked what prompted the students to study abroad, interviewees cited expectation of new life experiences, ability to learn and improve English language skills in an English-speaking country, and a desire to make new friends from different countries, all of which coincide with pull factors at the macro and meso level.

### **(Macro) Push-Pull Factors in Selecting the Country of Destination**

The participants all had a desire to improve their English language skills, and only Canada and the United States were highlighted as the most

suitable countries for that purpose. There was no mention of other English speaking countries. The students reveal that Canada's perceived quality of education was not a strong factor in their decision to study in the country. Instead, most students contrasted what they knew about life in Canada and the United States with that they could expect life to be if they remained in China. In Ayame's assessment,

Canada is safe; it's safer than America. And there's less people, not like China there's a lot of people and it's quiet and it's good for our study. It's a good country for study. . . . They [parents] think, you know, North American countries are always providing a lot of opportunities for you and for you to discover. Not like China, you know.

As Ayame revealed, perceived opportunity is a key pull factor in selecting the country of destination. The discourse of the American Dream, or the Canadian Dream, within immigrant populations is principally associated with the idea of opportunities. Both Canada and the United States are believed to hold opportunities for those willing to work to achieve their goals. This system in both countries is perceived as based on meritocracy. Sora provided yet another example of how the popular discourse functions by implanting these ideas into the minds of prospective students:

I love Biology but Biology does not have a beautiful future in China; so I think North America will be better for me, easier for me to find a job, or do the lab thing.

The data analysis revealed that all participants took the notion of attainability of the American/Canadian Dream for granted without questioning whether meritocracy applies in Canadian and the US societies practice.

Although both Canada and the United States are envisioned as a land of opportunities, the former is perceived to be a much safer place for one to study and live. Thus, while the lack of opportunities in China is a major push factor, the perception that favorable life chances are abundant in Canada is a strong pull factor in choosing Canada as the destination of choice.

In addition, the ability to work in Canada and to potentially gain immigration status is a highly attractive option. When asked about her plans, Myla responded,

I'm thinking to work here for like two or three more years after I graduate so then I can immigrate. . . I kinda want to get that Canadian citizen[ship]. I wanna stay permanently here and then bring my parents here.

Because of the recent policy changes, international students are now allowed to work on- and off-campus without a work permit. This is another incentive to study in Canada, as international students can gain valuable experience as well as lessen the financial burden on their parents.

Furthermore, students reason that being bilingual, and as fluent in English as possible, will serve them well in the job market, whether in China or in Canada, should they stay post-graduation. In fact, in China, students start learning English at a very young age. Formal instruction commences in primary school (around grade 3, depending on the province), as English is a compulsory subject, along with Chinese and Math. However, several students expressed that the English they learn in China was not very useful. Aeris described the practicality of English classes in China:

You have to learn it [English], but I don't think it's useful. We just learn the vocabulary and we learn the skills that the Canadian people won't use now; so, actually it's just like, we won't learn how to speak and how to communicate. We just learn something on paper.

Aeris alluded to the reality that students in China learn English by way of rote-memorization. Simply learning English without engaging in natural dialogue to practice language skills hinders one's ability to communicate in a natural context in which it is used. Zanar was more explicit,

. . . they [referring to students in China] just do the paperwork, memorizing the vocabulary, and maybe pay more focus attention on grammar; but honestly, we don't practice a lot on speaking and listening. That's why lots of Chinese students, including me, the first time come here, are afraid of speaking, open our mouth to the English speaking people . . . because we don't have experience to talk, to listen in English, just read.

In brief, all participating students stated that their desire for social interaction with native English-speaking students in an English-speaking country was one of the main reasons for choosing to study in Canada. In their view, this is the ideal way to learn and improve their English skills.

### **(Meso) Push-Pull Factors in Selecting University-X as the Study Destination**

The English that students learn in China does not equip them well for academic study abroad, especially at the university level. In particular, it does not prepare them well for social/conversational interactions with English-speakers, justifying the need for attending language programs at individual institutions once students are admitted into the country of study. As Aeris explained,

. . . you know, like we study in university, we learn how to write essays and we didn't learn before so it's kind of difficult for us to learn now.

Aeris alluded to the reality that, she experienced learning difficulties as a result of not having learned the essential writing skills early on. Thus, the lack of proper English training and the desire to study in an English-speaking country, where one has a chance to study among native English-speakers, constitute a key pull factor to studying overseas, particularly in Canada. Upon admission to University-X, as is the case with many other universities, international students must meet the university's language proficiency requirement. Thus, those that do not successfully pass the TOEFL or IELTS tests are required to complete the university's language program. The fact that 13 out of 15 participants finished University-X's language program confirms that English studied in China was not sufficient.

When it comes to selecting the university, the findings of the present study revealed that parents have more say on their child's decision to study abroad than they do on the choice of university. This decision is generally left to the student. When asked about her parent's involvement in the decision to choose University-X, Sango noted,

. . . [when] I came to Canada and entered [University-X], my Dad's friends asked where did your daughter go and my Dad said, "Oh I don't know which university she goes to." My Dad completely does not know where I am; just know, "Oh, my daughter is in Canada right now," that's it.

While the push factors in choosing University-X were mostly personal in nature, the pull factors are numerous and diverse. Majority of the study participants contrasted the institutional ranking and status of the Chinese institutions with those of various Canadian universities. They confirmed the widely held view that graduating from a reputable international school is important for future career and life prospects. In their

individual interviews, students also explained that they gauged reputation of various institutions by looking at rankings in magazines and websites.

Both the University of Toronto and University of Waterloo are referred to by the students as internationally famous universities. On the other hand, University-X does not appear in the Shanghai Ranking (Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, 2014) as a top national university and is thus not well known in China. This appears to be highly relevant in the university choice, as noted by Aeris, when asked if Chinese employers value Canadian degrees more than their Chinese equivalents,

It depends if the university is more famous. Like, if you do the Tsinghua University in China, if you graduate from Tsinghua University and you, or another one graduated from [University-X], maybe they'd prefer the student in Tsinghua University.

Tsinghua University is nationally recognized as a top university in Beijing, China. Yet, despite this prevalent view, the study participants still felt that gaining a degree abroad would give them advantage upon returning to China. Hence, the majority of the students are studying Business at University-X, a program for which the university has gained an international reputation.

While University-X is not considered very well known in China, there is a consensus among the students that University-X has a strong and reputable Business school. Ayame elaborated on her rationale for choosing University-X,

I hear that [University-X's] business school is awesome. My first choice was York University, but I heard that the area is kind of . . . it's pretty dangerous 'cause there's many news, like gunshots and it happened in their university; and I can't say often, but sometimes it is. Sometimes, I think it's really a big problem so I didn't choose that school, although they sent me an offer. [University-X] is not big like University of Toronto, but I like small university; it makes me feel safer.

Even though some of the participating students felt that gaining a degree at a more reputable university, such as the University of Toronto or York University, would give them a greater advantage in life, these universities are perceived to be situated in undesirable locations. Thus, it is important to have a safe environment to study and live. In other words, University-X's location emerges as a pull factor mainly in response to an aversive factor pertaining to another university.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

The findings of the present study indicated that the four-stage process of student migration may not be as linear as posited by Mazzarol and Soutar's (2001) findings. The results challenge the prevalent view that students generally decide to study overseas first, after which they identify their preferred country, followed by an institution in which to study, and finally the city. In fact, the present study revealed that, while some students' decision-making processes did follow Mazzarol and Soutar's (2001) linear model, some participants made their decisions differently. In this particular sample, which was mostly comprised of young females, the city in which a university is situated seemed to take precedence over an institution. Given that the reputation of a university is a major criterion in selecting school, these findings suggest that the linear model may undergo further shifts in the future, as internationally reputable universities must consider their location as well, if they are to attract sufficient number of overseas students. This discernment highlights the shortcoming of focusing on the traditional micro-level aspects of the push-pull model to the exclusion of macro- and meso-level decision-making. Conversely, accounting for all three levels of push-pull dynamics to explain students' decision to study abroad will reveal nuanced details, including the difference between country characteristics (e.g., ability to work/immigrate) and characteristics within the country (e.g., the reputation of an institution).

The study findings also revealed that students' choice of country is based upon popular discourses (e.g., the American/Canadian dream, recommendations from relatives and friends both at home and from abroad), rather than on current policy changes pertaining to international education and immigration in Canada. None of the students interviewed for this study considered Canadian policy changes when making their decision to enroll at University-X. However, it is also likely that these issues were not revealed because the interview questions did not specifically address the meso- and macro-level factors. These limitations should be addressed in further research focusing on Canada, as well as other countries. In-depth assessment of the effects that macro-level processes have on the decision to study abroad would provide a more comprehensive picture of the international student migration dynamics. Exploring this unique area may reveal new kinds of pull factors that a particular country creates, as well as aversive factors that would deter prospective international students. This research direction would extend and challenge the classical push-pull model by adding the possibility that there may be aversive kinds of push factors within a country that has been traditionally viewed as mainly creating pull factors.

The present study also offers implications for universities wishing to expand their academic marketing, which typically focuses on the benefits of their academic/language programs and campus environment. Given the findings reported here, it is evident that greater emphasis should be placed on marketing the university location and the way of life students can expect upon arrival. As well, University-X and other universities generally employ micro-marketing strategies that target a precisely defined student population (e.g., students with an interest in University-X's Business program). It is highly recommended that these be complemented by macro-marketing strategies, focusing on promoting the university image more broadly.

## REFERENCES

- Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3-4), 290-305.
- Amit, K., & Riss, I. (2007). The Role of Social networks in the Immigration Decision-making Process: The Case of North American Immigration to Israel. *Immigrants & Minorities*, 25(3), 290-313.
- Andrade, M. S. (2010). Increasing Accountability: Faculty Perspectives on the English Language Competence of Nonnative English Speakers. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(3), 221-239.
- Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). (2007). *Internationalizing Canadian campuses: Main themes emerging from the 2007 Scotiabank-AUCC workshop on excellence in internationalization at Canadian universities*. Retrieved from <http://www.aucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/scotiabank-internationalization-workshop-2007.pdf>
- Baas, M. (2006). Student of Migration: Indian Overseas Students and the Question of Permanent Residency. *People and Place*, 14(1), 8-23.
- Baas, M. (2007). The Language of Migration: The Education Industry versus the Migration Industry. *People and Place*, 15(2), 49-60.
- Bartram, B. (2007). The Sociocultural Needs of International Students in Higher Education: A Comparison of Staff and Student Views. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(2), 205-214.
- Bodycott, P. (2009). Choosing a higher education study abroad destination: What mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 8(3), 349-373.
- Bodycott, P., & Lai, A. (2012). The Influence and Implications of Chinese Culture in the Decision to Undertake Cross-Border Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(3), 252-270.
- Campbell, N. (2012). Promoting intercultural Contact on Campus: A Project to Connect and Engage International and Host Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(3), 205-227.
- Campbell, J., & Li, M. (2008). Asian Students' Voices: An Empirical Study of Asian Student's Learning Experiences at a New Zealand University. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(4), 375-396.

- Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE). (2009). *Canada First: The 2009 Survey of International Students*.
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE). (2016). *Facts and Figures: Canada's performance in international education, 2015*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbie.ca/about-ie/facts-and-figures/>
- Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario. (2010). The Impact of Government Underfunding On Students. Retrieved from <http://cfsontario.ca/downloads/CFS-Underfunding%20Factsheet.pdf>
- Çetin, R. (2003). Planning and Implementing Institutional Image and Promoting Academic Programs in Higher Education. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 13(1-2), 57-75.
- Chen, L.-H. (2008). Internationalization or International Marketing? Two Frameworks for Understanding International Students' Choice of Canadian Universities. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 18(1), 1-33.
- Cheng, R., & Erben, A. (2012). Language Anxiety: Experiences of Chinese Graduate Students at U.S. Higher Institutions. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(5), 477-497.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Citizenship & Immigration Canada (CIC). (2013). *Facts and Figures 2012 – Immigration overview: Permanent and temporary residents*. Retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2012/teporary/16.asp>
- Citizenship & Immigration Canada (CIC). (2014a). Retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2013-preliminary/08.asp>
- Citizenship & Immigration Canada (CIC). (2014b). *Express Entry*. Retrieved <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/express/express-entry.asp>
- Citizenship & Immigration Canada (CIC). (2014c). Retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/cec/applications-accepted.asp>
- Department of Finance Canada. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.fin.gc.ca/fedprov/his-eng.asp>
- Fama, M. (2011). A New Era for Canada's International Student Program. *Canadian Diversity*, 8(5), 11-14.
- Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (FATDC). (2012). *International Education: A Key Driver of Canada's Future Prosperity*. Retrieved from [http://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/ies\\_report\\_rapport\\_sei-eng.pdf](http://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/ies_report_rapport_sei-eng.pdf)
- Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (FATDC). (2014). *Canada's International Education Strategy*. Retrieved from <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/assets/pdfs/overview-apercu-eng.pdf>
- Gleason, P. M., Harris, J., Sheean, P. M., Boushey, C. J., & Bruemmer, B. (2010). Publishing Nutrition Research: Validity, Reliability, and Diagnostic Test Assessment in Nutrition-Related Research. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 11(3), 409-419.
- Godard, B. (2010). Chapter 3: The Risk of Critique: Voices across the Generations. In J. Newson and C. Polster (Eds.), *Academic callings: The University We*

- Have Had, Now Have, and Could Have* (pp. 26-34). Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Hanassab, S., & Tidwell, R. (2002). International Students in Higher Education: Identification of Needs and Implications for Policy and Practice. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 6(4), 305-322.
- Handberg, C., Thorne, S., Midtgaard, J., Nielsen, C. V., & Lomborg, K. (2015). Revisiting Symbolic Interactionism as a Theoretical Framework Beyond the Grounded Theory Tradition. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(8), 1023-1032.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hudzik, J. K. (2010). The Economy, Higher Education, and Campus Internationalization. *International Educator*, May/June, 96-102.
- Institute of International Education. (2016). Fast Facts Open Doors 2015. *Research and Publications: Open Doors*. Retrieved, <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fast-Facts#.Vy-Susv2YdV>
- Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5-31.
- Kotler, P., & Fox, K. F. A. (1985). *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions*. Englewood Cliffs, CA: Prentice Hall.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Magnusson, J.-L. (2000). Examining Higher Education and Citizenship in a Global Context of Neoliberal Restructuring. *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes ethniques au Canada*, 32(1), 72-88.
- Maringe, F. (2010). The Meanings of Globalization and Internationalization in HE: Findings from a World Survey. In F. Maringe & N. Foskett (Eds.), *Globalization and Internationalization in Higher Education: Theoretical, Strategic and Management Perspectives* (pp. 17-34). London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Mazzarol, T., & Hosie, P. (1996). Exploring Australian higher education: future strategies in maturing market. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 4(1), 37-50.
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2001). *Push-Pull Factors Influencing International Student Destination Choice*. CEMI Discussion Paper Series, DP 0105, Centre for Entrepreneurial Management and Innovation. Retrieved from <http://www.cemi.com.au/sites/all/publications/CEMI%20DP0105%20Mazzarol%20and%20Soutar%202001.pdf>
- Mazzarol, T., Soutar, G. N., Smart, D., & Choo, C. (2001). Perceptions, information and choice: Understanding how Chinese students select a country for overseas study. *Australian Education International: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs*, i-96.
- Mazzarol, T., Soutar, G. N., & Thein, V. (2001). Critical Success Factors in the Marketing of an Educational Institution: A Comparison of Institutional and Student Perspectives. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 10(2), 39-57.
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *The International Journal of Education Management*, 16(2), 82-90.

- Metcalfe, A. S. (2010). Revisiting Academic Capitalism in Canada: No Longer the Exception. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81(4), 489-514.
- Michael, S. (1990). Marketing Educational Institutions: Implications for Administrators. *International Journal of Education Management*, 4(5), 23-30.
- Newson, J., Polster, C., & Woodhouse, H. (2012). *Toward an alternative future for Canada's corporatized universities*. *English Studies in Canada*, 38(1), 51-70.
- Oplatka, I., & Hemsley-Brown, J. (2010). The Globalization and Marketization of Higher Education: Some Insights from the Standpoint of Institutional Theory. In F. Maringe & N. Foskett (Eds.), *Globalization and Internationalization in Higher Education: Theoretical, Strategic and Management Perspectives* (pp. 65-80). London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Pan, S.-Y. (2010). Changes and Challenges in the Flow of International Human Capital: China's Experience. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(3), 259-288.
- Pimpa, N. (2005). Marketing Australian Universities to Thai Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(2), 137-146.
- Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc. (RKA, Inc.). (2012). *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada*. Accessed from [http://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/economic\\_impact\\_en.pdf](http://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/economic_impact_en.pdf)
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334-340.
- Scott, P. (2000). Globalisation and Higher Education: Challenges for the 21st Century. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 4(1), 3-10.
- Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. (2014). *Academic Ranking of World Universities*. Retrieved from <http://www.shanghairanking.com/aboutarwu.html>
- Sidhu, R. (2002). Educational Brokers in Global Education Markets. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 6(1), 16-43.
- Sidhu, R. K. (2006). *Universities and Globalization: To Market, To Market*. Mahwah, India: New Jersey.
- Springer, S. (2012). Neoliberalism as discourse: between Foucauldian political economy and Marxian poststructuralism. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9(2), 133-147.
- Teeple, G. (2000). Chapter 16: The Decline of the Canadian Welfare State: Policies and Implications of Retrenchment. In B. S. Bolaria (Ed.), *Social Issues and Contradictions in Canadian society* (3rd ed., pp. 434-468). Toronto, Canada: Harcourt Canada Ltd.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). (2016). *Global Flow of Tertiary-level Students*. Retrieved from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>
- Valiani, S. (2013). Shifting Landscape of Contemporary Canadian Immigration Policy. In L. Goldring & P. Landolt (Eds.), *Producing and Negotiating Non-Citizenship: Precarious Legal Status in Canada* (pp. 55-70). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

- van den Hoonaard, W. C. (1997). *Working with Sensitizing concepts: Analytical Field Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- van den Hoonaard, D. K. (2012). *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer*. Don Mills, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Waters, J. L. (2008). *Education, Migration, and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada*. New York, NY: Cambria Press.
- Wilkins, S., Balakrishnan, M. S., & Huisman, J. (2012). Student Choice in Higher Education: Motivations for Choosing to Study at an International Branch Campus. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(5), 413-433.
- Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2013). Student Evaluation of University Image Attractiveness and Its Impact on Student Attachment to International Branch Campuses. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(5), 607-623.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research Design and Methods* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zhang, Z., & Zhou, G. (2010). Understanding Chinese International Students at a Canadian University: Perspectives, Expectations, and Experiences. *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale*, 39(3), 43-58.
- Zhou, Y., & Todman, J. (2009). Patterns of Adaptation of Chinese Postgraduate Students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4), 467-486.
- 

**JUN MIAN CHEN, MA**, teaches at Conestoga College and is a MEd candidate at Brock University. His interdisciplinary research interests fall within and around the area of student migration and immigration, international student experience, internationalization of higher education, philosophy of education, and philosophy of race. Email: jchen@conestogac.on.ca

*Manuscript submitted: June 9, 2015*  
*Manuscript Revised: February 2, 2016*  
*Accepted for Publication: May 5, 2016*