

An Empirical Investigation on Chinese High School Students' Choice of Pursuing Undergraduate Education Abroad

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Globalization has greatly promoted student mobility around the world. Being a developing economy, China witnessed significant growth of students studying internationally, especially with the number of students study at undergraduate programs. However, empirical research on high school students' choice and the decision-making process of pursuing undergraduate programs abroad in the Chinese context is rarely found. Using a locally developed survey questionnaire, this study intends to explore this phenomenon. An analysis of the survey data reveals that cultural and social capital that parents possessed have significant impact on students' choice of pursuing undergraduate education abroad. This study also shows that these young Chinese high school students are quite rational education consumers. A majority of them have the self-efficacy to make informed decisions.

Key words: high school student, study abroad, choice, cultural capital, social capital, self-efficacy, Chinese

Globalization has greatly promoted student mobility around the world. Being a developing economy, China witnessed significant growth of students studying internationally, especially the number of students study at undergraduate programs. For example, the statistics indicate a trend of over 20% annual increase of Chinese students studying in the United States since 2008 (Wang and Miao, 2013). The total number of students studying in American higher education institutions reached 235,000 in 2013, and nearly 40% of them study at undergraduate programs (China Daily, 2013).

Regardless of the drastic increase in Chinese students studying in undergraduate programs, which demand strong family support, research is rarely found addressing issues related to high school students' choice, such as who pursue undergraduate education abroad; what are their rationales; and how they prepare for such a pursuit.

The review of literature revealed only two published investigations related to the topic of Chinese students' choice of studying undergraduate programs abroad, both of which depict and analyze the trends at a macro level. One, *2014 Report on the Trends of Studying Abroad* (EOL, 2014), reports statistical information about the

general trends of Chinese students studying abroad. It also provides information about the development of international curriculum programs in Chinese high schools, as well as the trends of employment of Chinese returnees with foreign degrees in China. The other, the *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad* (Wang and Miao, 2013), summarizes characteristics of global student mobility and depicts the trends of Chinese students studying abroad. The latter report also introduces 14 countries' policies on hosting international students as well as 18 well-known overseas universities' information describing the disciplinary distribution of international students, tuition fees, and scholarship. So far, no published research that empirically explores individual Chinese high school students' choice of and preparation for studying abroad exists.

This study intends to add new knowledge to the topic of student global mobility by examining factors that impact high school students' choice for pursuing undergraduate education abroad by analyzing the survey data collected from two Beijing high schools. Meanwhile, it will provide implications for education policy makers and practitioners; study abroad agencies; and foreign higher education institution recruiters.

Theoretical Framework and Method

This study adapts the theoretical framework of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. The theory suggests that human behaviors can be explained by a triadic interaction of behavior, personal dynamics, and environmental factors. Environmental factors represent situational influences on the behavior that is performed. Personal dynamics include instincts, drives, or other individual motivational forces

along with the ability to make a decision or take an action. Social cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of external or environmental factors without denying the inner forces, and it provides a framework to understand the interactions between external and internal forces.

In the effort to understand family influence on students' educational choice, one of the most important external factors for high school students, two theories are cited in this study. One is cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This theory suggests that children from families with a high level of parental educational attainment and other cultural resources are more likely to access high quality education and have success in schools. These children have the opportunity to be exposed to social resources such as dominant societal values, attitudes, language skills, and styles of interaction as well as technical resources such as books and advanced IT tools. The other is social capital theory—widely accepted in a range of disciplines in social sciences. There are multiple definitions of social capital in the literature, but they share the common theme of an emphasis on *relations*. Most often, social capital refers to the individual's benefits derived from connections within and between social networks (Halpern, 2005). Coleman (1988) focused his argument mainly on the importance of social capital embedded in the parent-child interaction in the formation of human capital. He argued that social capital exists in these relationships and facilitates rational or purposive action of the individual or collective.

To connect an individual's choice with his environment, this study finds the concept of *social man* in bounded rationality model helpful (Simon, 1957). The concept of *social man* suggests an individual's

decision making is not based solely on his rationality stemming from the calculation of benefits and costs but is restrained by his values and norms, the information he possesses, cognitive limitations of one's mind, etc. To understand an individual's choice, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) is an important concept. It refers to the extent or strength of one's belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals.

Translating the social cognitive theory framework into the present study, the influences from parents, teachers, and peers on students' decision making for studying abroad are identified as major external factors. While students' perceptions about the advantages and benefits of studying abroad, together with their previous foreign experience; their knowledge of the higher education systems abroad; their belief of their own ability to make decision; etc., are investigated as internal factors.

This study draws data from a dataset collected through a student survey. This is a 50-item questionnaire developed by the researcher asking students about their personal information; family backgrounds; previous international experience; rationales for pursuing undergraduate education abroad; knowledge about the higher education abroad; the ways they gained such knowledge; in- and out-of-classroom learning experiences; expenditure related to preparing study abroad; and satisfaction with the international curriculum programs. Most of the questions about facts are in multiple-choice format, while opinion questions use a five-point Likert scale to measure the extent from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Because students enrolling in international curriculum programs in high schools all plan to study abroad for their undergraduate education, this study chose to

collect data in international curriculum programs for the reasons of convenience and efficiency.

The survey was administered in two public senior high schools in Beijing in April and May 2014. A total of 180 printed questionnaires were distributed among students in the international curriculum programs in these two high schools. 157 questionnaires were returned—a return rate reaching 87%—and among the returned questionnaires 153 were valid.

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. The following sections present the results of data analysis and discussions.

Findings

Environmental factors

This study finds that 9% of fathers of the participants had two-year college educations, 47% had an undergraduate education (bachelor's degree), and 33% had received master's or doctoral education. So the total percentage of higher education attainment of fathers reached 89%; the respective percentages of mothers are 9%, 52%, 25% and 86%.

The analysis of the parents' occupations shows that the percentages of four categories—"laid-off/jobless," "farmer," "industrial worker," and "service worker"—combined account for only 12% fathers and 9% mothers. The percentages of fathers and mothers' occupations as "office worker" and "professional" combined are 14% and 18%, respectively. "Private business owner" (who owns a company hiring 8 people or more) accounts for 24% (fathers) and 9% (mothers). "Corporate manager" accounts for 34% (fathers) and 36% (mothers). "Government administrator" accounts for 13% (fathers) and 11% (mothers). This study adds a new category into the 10-category occupational classification developed by Lu

(2004) by taking into consideration the fact that one or both parents is/are the “household executive(s)/freelancer(s)” for a relatively wealthy family. In fact, nearly 2% of fathers and 18% of mothers fall into this category according to students’ reports in this study. Data analysis suggests that about 39% of participants report one or both parents had overseas living/work experience, and 22% report that one or both of their parents received overseas degrees.

As to the multiple-choice question— “who influences your decision to study abroad”— “parents” rank the first (129 responses –84%); followed by “myself” (99 responses — 65%); “classmates or friends” (22 responses — 14%); “relatives” and “others” (both 8 responses —5% each); and “teachers” (7 responses —4.5%) “Others” usually refers to persons who work in study abroad agencies or as foreign higher education institution recruiters. Note: Participants were able to select multiple categories of influence.

Personal factors

Students’ own life experience also influenced their choice of studying abroad positively. As many as 26% of participants reported that they had had more than a three-month overseas experience, among whom about 20% of the total participants had lived abroad for as long as three years or more.

Students’ perceptions about the advantages and benefits of studying abroad over studying in their home country also impacted their choice. The following reasons are ranked from high to low by

number of times selected for the multiple-choice question— “why do you want to study abroad”— in the survey:

- 1- High quality of education and high value of credentials (404 combined responses answering due to “higher quality of education in overseas institutions,” “academic freedom,” “better infrastructure and equipment,” “high value of credentials of foreign degrees,” and “stronger intellectual atmosphere”). Conversely, the following reasons highly correlated to the preference of overseas higher education. The aspects of why students dislike Chinese higher education along with the unavailability or limited provisions in China (260 combined responses answering due to “avoiding taking College Entrance Examination,” “not liking the pedagogy in Chinese education,” “low quality of Chinese higher education,” “unavailability of the discipline that I intend to study,” and “not being admitted into my ideal university in China”).
- 2- Job prospect (143 combined responses answering due to “prospects in job market” and “high employment rate”);
- 3- Enrich life experiences (135 combined responses answering due to “learning a foreign culture” and “enriching life experience”);
- 4- “Escape from pollution” (83 responses)
- 5- “Plan to immigrate” (43 responses)
- 6- The least chosen reason is “following the crowd” (16 responses).

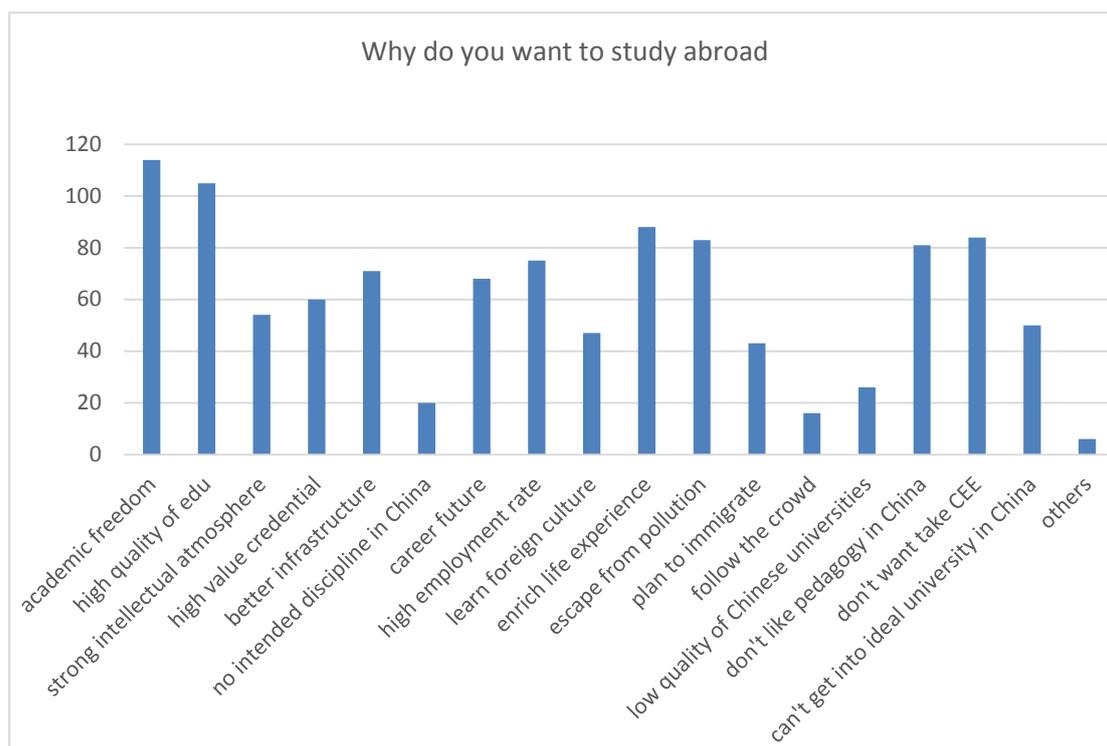


Figure 1. Rationales for Chinese high school students' choice to pursue undergraduate education abroad

When the decision was made

According to the participants, 16% of them made the decision during primary school, while 60% made the decision in junior high school. Both account for three-fourths of the total participants. When students made the decision to study abroad, they began to spend more time learning English, attending various English tutoring classes, participating in overseas summer camps and/or visiting foreign campuses.

Students' knowledge about higher education abroad

The majority of students (86%) report they have the knowledge—very well or quite well—about the higher education system in their destination countries, whereas less than 4% of students suggest that they know nothing about it. As to the knowledge of the institution they intend to apply, more than 82% of the students indicated they know it well, while less than 2% students admit they have no knowledge about it.

This study reveals students acquire the knowledge of the higher education system and a specific institution abroad through multiple ways. These options are: “finding information online by myself” comes first (77 responses—52%); followed by information being obtained from “parents” (59 responses—40%); “teachers” (52 responses—35%); “peers” (38 responses—25%); “open lecture provided by recruiters or study abroad agencies” (37 responses—25%); “individual consulting with agencies” (36 responses—24%); “school organized activities” (28 responses—19%); “mass media” (21 responses—14%); and “campus visit” or “summer camp” (4 responses—5%).

Students' choice about type of college and field of study

As to the question – “what type of higher education institution they plan to apply” (multiple-choice question) — most students (131 responses—87%) prefer a comprehensive

university, followed by a liberal arts college (23 responses—15%), and then a specialized college such as a college of design (16 responses—11%). Only one student chooses to study at a community college.

Among the reasons that students choose a specific higher education institution (multiple-choice question), “fitting with personal style” is most popular (122 responses—81%); “the ranking of the discipline that I plan to study at this institution” is chosen by 104 responders (69%); “the ranking of the institution” and “the location of the institution” weighed almost the same among students (67 and 66 responses—44%); while 11 responders choose “following the parents’ decision” (7%). In the “other reason” category, one student indicates “going to the same institution with my friend”.

Nearly 80% of students report that they already have a preference of a field of study. As to the top 10 disciplines on their list (multiple-choice question, total 24 options), finance is most popular (42 responses), followed by management (40 responses), economics (32 responses), arts (27 responses), psychology (25 responses), journalism/media and engineering (both 21 responses), mathematics (18 responses), sociology (14 responses) and finally information technology (13 responses). Overall, more students favor social sciences (169 responses with nearly half choosing finance and management) over humanities (85 responses), natural sciences, and engineering/technology (87 responses combined).

Discussions

The impact of cultural capital and social capital on students’ choice

According to the findings, it is obvious that the cultural capital and social capital families possess positively influence the students’ choice to study abroad. The attainment rates of higher education of the fathers of survey participants

are nearly 90%, far above the rates (2% to 5%) for the parents of cohorts in the population (40s or early 50s) in the country. Parents that have higher levels of educational attainment think highly of the role that education plays in life and can better recognize the value of foreign credentials. Thus, it is understandable that these parents support their children to gain foreign education credentials to increase their children’s life opportunities. This confirms “elite reproduction” theory (Szelenyi and Szelenyi, 1995), that relatively high levels of cultural capital possessed by the parents would enhance “elite reproduction” by affording better tutoring, providing a nourishing environment, and offering valuable experience which are virtually excluded from the rest—ultimately enhancing their offspring’s cultural capital.

This study also shows high percentages of parents who lived/worked abroad (39%) and received foreign degrees (22%). Parents with foreign experience usually possess language skills and knowledge of foreign society, culture, and higher education systems, so they can better advise and effectively help their children to succeed in higher education abroad. Therefore, they are more likely to encourage their children to study abroad.

The high tuition and other fees of undergraduate education abroad require families to have high financial means. The cost for international students in American colleges ranges from 30,000 to 80,000 US dollars per year; about 7 to 18 times of the per capita annual disposable of urban residents and 20 to 55 times of the per capita net income of rural residents¹ in China. This study did not collect data on family income because students are unlikely to know this information. However, the parents’ occupational status can help provide

¹ In 2013, the per capita annual disposable of urban residents is 26,955 RMB (roughly 4,350 US dollars) and the per capita net income of rural residents is 8,896 RMB (roughly 1,430). Data cited from the website of National Bureau of Statistics of China. <http://data.stats.gov.cn/>

such information reliably though indirectly. Findings show that children of private business owners and corporate managers are more likely to choose to study abroad. Nearly 60% of fathers (from this research) fall into these two categories, while the percentage of both categories combined account for only 2.6% in the Chinese population a decade ago (Lu, 2004). There is no current information available in this regard, yet it is safe to assume a big gap still exists. In contrast, only 12% of fathers fall into the four categories of jobless, farmer, industrial worker, and service worker backgrounds; the percentage was more than 76% of the total population in Lu's (2004) research. The gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups in terms of choosing to study abroad is huge.

In addition to having means, the advantaged groups also provide social capital (social networks and resources) that their children can draw from. Then these families can maintain their status because their children can extend these networks and bring new resources after graduation from overseas universities. This may be the reason disciplines such as finance, management, and economics are so attractive among students' choices.

Because of these students rely on their family's high cultural and social capital children, "parents" rank first place to the multiple-choice question—"who influenced your decision of studying abroad".

Students' choice and self-efficacy

The findings suggest most students are rational education "consumers." This is reflected in the motives to study abroad. Students consider the quality of overseas higher education, job prospects, and life enrichment as benefits of studying abroad. Very few of them made the choice to "follow the crowd" (the least chosen reason for studying abroad). This counters the prevalent notion that students'

decision making is heavily influenced by the "last bus sentiment" (Biao and Shen, 2009). It is not surprising that students choose studying abroad as a way to escape from "examination hell," rigid management, and instruction-centered pedagogy of the Chinese education system. Although "escape from pollution" is unrelated to student development, it is understandable and significant environmental factor due to the serious pollution problem China currently has.

Life enrichment ranks the same in this study as in Wang and Miao's (2013) study. Although the term "life of enrichment" is not very specific, we can still see the general trend of students' willingness to attain cultural and social capital of the elite class in the more developed countries. These are advantages that "develop the proper habitus and the competence" for further capital accumulation and conversion. (Bourdieu, 1986)

The major difference of the two studies lies in the importance of "job prospect". In Wang and Miao's study, "job prospect" becomes paramount in the list of rationales to study abroad, but the quality of higher education is weighted more by participants in the present study. The sample of participants may explain this difference. The background and academic competency of the students in the international curriculum programs in highly-rated high schools in Beijing may be different from that of the average high school students in all regions throughout China. As this study reveals, the students' backgrounds are more homogeneous because most of these students come from advantaged groups (high cultural capital and social capital families). They are less likely to worry about jobs while they pay more attention to the value of their education.

A surprising finding of this study is the high frequency of students that chose "academic freedom" and "strong intellectual atmosphere" as the attraction to studying outside of China.

These terms were not included nor discussed in the *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad*. Students in international curriculum programs have the chance to register in elective courses; to be trained by Western instructors using Western pedagogy, which encourages freedom of choice and critical thinking; and to develop their opinions of academic norms. They are unsatisfied with the unavailability of some courses at their schools and the absence of some AP exams in mainland China such as Comparative Government & Politics and United States Government & Politics. The most frustrating thing in their learning experience is that they cannot access Google and Google scholar thus creating difficulties researching for information and literature in English needed to write essays. These examples also show their choice is influenced by environment as well as individual norms and skills.

As to the reasons they choose which college/university and what discipline, students demonstrate their rationality as well. When they choose an institution, they consider the ranking of a discipline (which means they take into the consideration their future career); the ranking of the institution (better quality and higher value of credentials); and the location of the institution (correlated with the quality of life such as weather, the population density, the availability of Chinese food, and job opportunities) rather than only following “parents’ decision.” When they choose a discipline, they either choose those which will lead to a higher income/better social status or they follow their personal interests. A surprising finding about students’ choice of discipline is the large number of those choosing to pursue the arts—this is a new phenomenon. Possible explanations for this unexpected occurrence are that new elective courses in arts are now available in their high schools, or the success stories of ethnic Chinese designers are inspiring their interests.

Students’ rationality is reflected in the fact that students or their families made the decision to study abroad very early. More than 76% responded that the decision was made during junior high school or even as early as primary school. They began preparing for it years earlier so that they would have a better chance of being admitted into their top-choice universities. Students’ rationality also gives support that to study internationally is an informed decision. As high as 86% of participants think they know very well or quite well the higher education systems in their destination countries and the institutions that they plan to apply.

Although the students are rational in making their choice, they show a high level of self-awareness and self-efficacy. These are characteristics of the younger generation of Chinese who have grown up in families with high cultural and social capital. These are the reasons “follow my own decision” is only second to “follow parents’ decision” and ranks much higher than the influence from teachers, peers and others. “Fitting with personal style” has prominence over all other reasons. They are more aware of what they want and have the confidence that they can make the right decisions. With the exception of choosing finance and management as fields of study in hopes of increasing income and status with their future careers, many students choose to study the social sciences and humanities. They think highly of their personal interest, their sense of self-realization, and life fulfillment.

This study also reveals that the younger generation knows where to find the information they need. They have the skills and ability to independently search and process information via the Internet, open lecture, consultancy, and mass media. They rely more on their own judgment that is based on the researched information from multiple sources rather than the opinions of others.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study indicate clearly the significant impact of cultural capital and social capital on students' choice of pursuing undergraduate education abroad. Global student mobility provides a new arena for competing and maintaining advantage and is deepening further the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots." This research confirms the findings of the qualitative research on Chinese students' backgrounds and experiences abroad (Biao and Shen, 2009) and agrees with Biao and Shen's statement that "international student migration has become a prominent aspect of social change in China over the last 30 years (p. 514)".

The findings of this study also illustrate that students are informed education consumers. They have self-efficacy to make rational choices which are shaped by their values and norms; knowledge and skills; their past experiences; as well as environmental factors.

This study contributes to the knowledge of student mobility internationally by empirically examining the factors that influence Chinese high school students' motives and choices for studying abroad. However, the convenient sampling has compromised the generalizability of the study. In future research, a better sampling strategy will be applied to enhance generalizability. Also, qualitative data will be collected so that research can reveal more detailed information that can foster a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of international student migration.

This study also has implications for education policy makers and practitioners as well as for agencies and overseas higher education institution recruiters. Chinese higher education institutions should reform their pedagogy, improve quality, and foster an academic culture that parallel international standards. College/university recruiters and study abroad agencies can refer to the findings

of this study and adjust their strategies to attract more, higher academically performing Chinese students to study abroad.

Author Biography

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