

Decision-Making Process of International Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Narrative Inquiry into Reflections of Chinese Students in Canada

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Abstract

Purpose: This research is an exploratory narrative inquiry into reflections of three Chinese international undergraduate students in a Canadian university, University S, which reveals participants' entire decision-making processes as potential international undergraduate students.

Design/Approach/Methods: A two-dimensional analytical framework has been constructed. One dimension is based on three phases of the entire decision-making process: the phases of deciding whether or not to study abroad, selecting destination countries, and choosing target institutions. The second dimension is based on three kinds of hypothetically proposed environmental factors within each phase: policy factors, (family and regional) socioeconomic factors, and information factors. First-hand data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted based on the analytical framework.

Findings: This article suggests that both policymakers in the source country (i.e., China) and university administrators in the destination country (i.e., Canada) should further support potential

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international undergraduate students during each phase of their decision-making processes, particularly through optimizing information supply channels.

Originality/Value: This article has the potential to construct a new theoretical framework as a supplement for analyzing the entire decision-making process of potential international students. As a pilot study, it provides a template for further investigations.

Keywords

Canada, China, decision-making process, higher education, international student, undergraduate student

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Introduction

During the past three decades, “the staggering economic growth of China [. . .] has transformed higher education (HE) around the globe” (Schulmann & Ye, 2017, para. 1). As the largest source country of international students, Chinese mainland had sent 608,400 students abroad in 2017 (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [MOE], 2018). Although there are sufficient studies that investigate on Chinese overseas students, relatively limited narrative approaches have been conducted among the entire decision-making process of Chinese students as potential international undergraduates of overseas HE institutions (HEIs). Canada has become one of China’s major study abroad destinations. As a pilot, this exploratory narrative inquiry digs into potential crucial factors within decision-making processes of three Chinese international students at a Canadian university, University S. Through analyzing data collected via semi-structured interviews, this article attempts to explore the answer of the major research question: What are major environmental factors and their impacts during each phase of the entire decision-making processes of a Chinese international undergraduate student? An analytical framework has been constructed in order to analyze participants’ three-phase decision-making processes. The entire process contains the phases of (1) deciding whether or not to study abroad, (2) selecting destination countries, and (3) choosing target institutions. This study seeks to provide information and suggestions to both university administrators in the destination/receiving country (i.e., Canada) and HE policymakers in the source/sending country (i.e., China), primarily for the sake of establishing and/or optimizing the “decision-making support system” for potential international undergraduate students. As a pilot study, this exploratory inquiry offers a template for follow-up investigations.

The major rationales of conducting this pilot study contain the booming global market of HE within the context of globalization, the rapid increase in HE-level Chinese students overseas during

the past decade, and the high proportion of Chinese international undergraduate students in English-speaking countries such as Canada. From 2006 to 2017, the total number of overseas Chinese students increased from 134,000 to 608,400, among which, the number of overseas students at undergraduate level is large (MOE, 2007, 2018). Chinese upper and middle-class families increasingly choose to send their children abroad to let them “escape” from the current education systems (Sina Education, 2017). During the past decade, Canada welcomed a large number of international students from Chinese mainland. From 2004 to 2015, the number of Chinese international students in Canada (i.e., Study Permit holders) increased 200% from 39,850 to 119,335 (The Canadian Magazine of Immigration, 2016). According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education, in 2015, Canada’s top-five source countries of international students were China (34%), India (14%), South Korea (6%), France (6%), and the United States (U.S.) (3%) (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2016). University S, as a prestigious public research university in Canada, has now become one of the most popular HEIs for international undergraduate students from Chinese mainland. According to the data published by the university, in 2014, it had about 12,000 international undergraduate students, over which 7,000 of them were from Chinese mainland, including over 6,500 at the undergraduate level. China has become its largest source of international undergraduate students. In the light of the large population involved, there is a lack of research on the decision-making process in its entirety.

A review of literature and analytical framework

Herbert Simon’s decision-making theory argues that a rational decision-making process (or a decision made by an “economic man”) contains three kinds of activities: intelligence activities for the sake of observing the environment and collecting information, design activities for analyzing target issues based on collected information, and choice activities for making final decisions (Robbins & Judge, 2001). Dealing with different issues, therefore, requires different activities of collecting information and analyzing target situations. In terms of this study, a two-dimensional analytical framework has been tentatively constructed, which longitudinally divided the entire decision-making process into different phases. To some extent, (potential) international students need to deal with relatively mutually independent issues during each phase of the entire process and may be affected by different environmental factors. There are sufficient studies that concentrate on each particular phase of the entire decision-making process and which provided useful information for both constructing the analytical framework and predicting crucial factors involved in formulating interview questions.

Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, and Pascarella (2009) applied “an integrated model of college choice to better describe students who do and do not intend to study abroad” and assessed the “financial, human, social, and cultural capital” factors that impacted students’ predisposition to

study abroad (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009, p. 140). Based on the statistical outputs of a quantitative analysis of data collected from 3,081 full-time freshmen in the U.S., the authors concluded that “social and cultural capital accumulation prior to attending college is positively related to the intent to study abroad” (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 134). In terms of China, it seems that socioeconomic status has significantly influenced this phase of the entire decision-making process. A survey reveals that over 85% of high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) in Chinese mainland believe that they should send their children abroad for education (Industrial Bank Co. Ltd, & Hurun Research Institute, 2012). Meanwhile, as mentioned, Chinese upper and middle-class families increasingly choose to send their children abroad to let them “escape” from *Gaokao* and *Gaokao*-based education/admission systems (Sina Education, 2017). Regional economic development status can be regarded as a major factor. Wan (2017) argued that in Southern Jiangsu Province [*su nan*], one of China’s most developed region, study abroad has become extremely popular. Most students there choose to study abroad to “broaden their horizons [*tuokuan yanjie*] and increase their life experience [*zengjia yueli*]” rather than only for pragmatic reasons (Wan, 2017, p. 2).

Bodycott (2009) concentrated on the differences between Chinese parents’ and students’ push-pull factors that influence students’ decision-making processes of selecting study abroad destinations. A questionnaire was formulated based on previous studies (i.e., Bass, 2005; Fam & Gray, 2000; Hiu, 2001; Hung, Shive, Wang, & Diu, 2005; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Mei, 2007; Zhao & Guo, 2002). Based on “what 251 Mainland Chinese parents and 100 students rated as most and least important when considering study abroad,” the author summarized 10 common pull factors that influence Chinese students’ choice of study abroad destinations (Bodycott, 2009, p. 349). The factors are knowledge and awareness of the institution, positive attitude toward supporting international education in the destination country, recommendations and the influence of relatives, parents, and friends, tuition fees, living expenses, travel and social costs, (natural) environment considerations, geographical proximity to China, social or educational links, immigration prospects, perceived higher standards of education and employment prospects, and availability of scholarships (Bodycott, 2009). The author pointed out that “both parents and students strongly endorsed exhibitions and fairs as a source of information about study abroad destinations” (Bodycott, 2009, p. 358).

Pampaloni (2010) focused on student’s college selection processes while preparing for their application. The author pointed out that the major kind of factors during a college selection process can be identified as “interpersonal influences,” which include the influences of school counselors, teachers, parents, friends, and other family members, as information resources (Pampaloni, 2010). Based on a survey research, the author proposed a principle of “seeing is believing,” which means that visiting schools personally is an important way for students to narrow their college choices

(Pampaloni, 2010). The author suggested that HEIs should build direct connections with their potential students through providing information via activities such as campus tours, open houses, and on-campus interviews (Pampaloni, 2010). In terms of Chinese students' decision-making process of college selection, a survey conducted by Xu and Jiang (2003) reveals that the two most influential factors are universities' reputation and future employment prospects. Meanwhile, domestic and world university rankings significantly affect Chinese students' decision-making processes of selecting target institutions (Gao, 2017; Zhang, Huang, & Shao, 2011).

Considering previous research findings, a two-dimensional analytical framework has been tentatively constructed. The longitudinal dimension involves subdividing the entire decision-making process of Chinese international undergraduate students into three phases: (1) deciding whether or not to study abroad, (2) selecting destination countries, and (3) choosing target institutions. A potential international student needs to deal with a relatively isolated issue during each phase and may take different strategies/methods while observing the environment and collecting/receiving information. In terms of the second dimension, I hypothetically proposed three kinds of environmental factors within each phase, which are (1) policy factors, including China's domestic HE admission system and policies (e.g., *Gaokao*), foreign HE-related policies, and linkages between domestic and foreign policies in source and destination countries, respectively, (2) (family and regional) socioeconomic factors, and (3) information factors, which contains the accessibility, sources, accuracy, and contents of received information about potential destination countries and target HEIs. Following the analytical framework, this research analyses multiple aspects of the entire decision-making processes of three Chinese international undergraduate students at University S in order to interpret their experience and challenges within foreign and domestic HE policy contexts, primarily for the sake of improving institutional and governmental services to support potential international undergraduate students.

Context and method

This study focuses on potential factors within the entire decision-making processes of three Chinese international undergraduate students at University S, D campus. The University S system has three campuses of D, E, and F. The D campus is the flagship campus of the university. University S is a highly internationalized university that has enrolled international students from over 150 different countries/regions. University S is a public research university with a high international reputation, which was ranked as one of the top 50 universities in the world by both Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2018 and QS World University Rankings 2018. After being admitted, according to the university official data, the annual tuition cost for international undergraduate students is about CAN\$ 35,000. Three participants of the present investigation are all international students (i.e., Study Permit holders) from Chinese mainland and

graduated from high schools in China. Based on the identified three phases, their decision-making process can be predicted as (1) deciding to study abroad in their high schools or earlier, (2) choosing Canada as their destination country, and (3) choosing University S (D campus) as their target institution.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at university S for exploring decision-making processes and crucial factors for three Chinese international undergraduate students. Each semi-structured interview contains three sections. The major section (i.e., the second section) was guided by predesigned questions about each participant's motivations, attitudes, and activities during his/her decision-making process. Roles of different predicted factors were investigated. As mentioned, a decision-making process can be divided into the phases of (1) deciding whether or not to study abroad, (2) selecting destination countries, and (3) selecting target HEIs. Decision-making factors in each phase can be summarized as (1) policy-related factors, (2) (family and regional) socioeconomic factors, and (3) information-related factors that mainly include information accessibility, approaches of gathering information, and the content and quality of received information about potential destination countries and target HEIs. Two guiding questions were asked for each phase to probe participants to talk generally about their experience and describe their feelings at each stage of the entire process. Follow-up questions were asked about interrelations/interactions between second-dimension factors and participants' decision-making processes (e.g., participants' awareness, attitudes, and reactions toward different factors). In other words, follow-up questions are about roles of predicted factors within each phase. Follow-up questions have no predetermined order.

Demographic questions were asked for collecting background information. In this section (i.e., the first section), participants were encouraged to talk about themselves freely. In terms of the third section, they were encouraged to express their reflections toward the entire decision-making process, especially about any information gaps, as current international students at University S. Snowball sampling method was utilized. Interviews were conducted in English. The collected interview data were transcribed and coded based on the analytical framework. Important discourses relating to each predicted category were highlighted. I conducted a narrative inquiry among interview transcriptions in order to describe and dig into how participants experienced their three-phase decision-making processes while facing various environmental factors.

Research findings

Background stories of participants

Alpha is a fourth-year undergraduate student in the program of mathematical application in economics and finance. She grew up in the urban area of Beijing and attended one of the most prestigious high schools there. Alpha described her family as "upper middle class" with both her

parents holding bachelor's degrees. She experienced the highest quality of basic education in China, and her academic performance is above the average in her high school class. Beta is a third-year student majoring in political science. He grew up in the rural area of an undeveloped region in province H in Central China. His father is a local civil servant. After graduating from junior middle school, Beta went to city Z, the capital of his home province, to attend an international class offered by a public high school there. That international class was established conjointly by the local high school and a Canadian province L. It was taught by both foreign and domestic teachers. Gamma is a second-year statistics and computer science (double-major) student from a small city in North China. His father is a senior engineer. He described his family as "upper middle class" in his hometown. Gamma attended a public high school in Shanghai. He later transferred to a high-quality A-level international high school due to policy changes. His academic performance is high above the average in both public and A-level high schools.

The first phase of the decision-making process

Alpha started to think about studying abroad in her first year of high school. Her major motivation at that time was her strong willingness to "escape from [*Gaokao* and] the rigid education system" in Chinese mainland and to experience "Western HE." Alpha explained that she "had suffered the rigid Chinese education system for so many years" and "wanted to experience something new" in her future university life. She described her personal feelings at that time in the following:

During the past years in China, I feel like everything has been already planned for me and I just need to follow the schedules and follow the path. I just feel like that's not me! I don't even have a choice. I want to explore the whole world and be successful in an unfamiliar place.

She explained that the major cause of having such an idea was her "unique experience" in her high school English class. Alpha's high school English teacher had overseas experience and taught in a flexible way. Alpha mentioned that she provided a lot of information about Western culture and Western HE systems to her students. During Alpha's phase of deciding whether or not to study abroad, information was mainly provided by her high school English teacher. She no longer wanted to follow "the rigid system," which involves spending her entire high school years to prepare the *Gaokao* exams in order to attend a top domestic university. The rigidity of the domestic education system and *Gaokao*-based HE admission policy, in contrast to the flexibility of "Western education" introduced by her high school English teacher, were her intrinsic rationale of deciding to study abroad.

Beta's parents decided to send him to study abroad for HE after he graduated from his junior middle school and failed his high school entrance exam [*Zhongkao*], which meant that he could not enter local key high schools and therefore had a slim chance of attending top domestic universities

under the present *Gaokao*-based admission policy. Sending Beta to a Sino-Canadian joint international class offered by a high school in city Z that required lower test scores was a “big decision” for his entire family since it was relatively expensive. The Sino-Canadian class was a joint program initiated by the Canadian province L for attracting Chinese students to attend universities there, and its annual tuition was about 60,000 RMB. His grandfather made the decision that it was worthwhile for the whole family to support him to attend a high-quality foreign university since he is the eldest grandson of the family. “In traditional Chinese culture, the eldest grandson of a family often has the responsibility of rejuvenating the ‘family business [*jia ye*]’,” mentioned Beta. Beta’s parents were informed about the program through local newspapers, and they did not know that there were other international higher school programs in province H. For Beta and his family at that time, the major rationale of deciding to attend international high school program for preparing to apply to foreign universities was that under the current *Gaokao*-based HE admission policy, Beta, as the “important eldest grandson” in a Chinese rural family, could hardly enter a top domestic university through the mainstream approach: getting a high *Zhongkao* score, entering a local key high school, and then getting a high *Gaokao* score.

Gamma started thinking about going abroad for HE in his second year of high school due to a policy change. Before that, Gamma was allowed to attend public high school and take *Gaokao* in Shanghai. It is much easier to enter top universities by taking *Gaokao* in Shanghai than in Gamma’s home province since Shanghai usually has more admission quota and fewer examinees. Without being allowed to take *Gaokao* in Shanghai and having no intention of going back to his home province and experiencing a much more exam-oriented high school education there, Gamma’s parents decided to send him abroad for HE. As preparation for studying abroad, he transferred to a private A-level international school and spent 2 years there. Most of his peers there planned to study in Commonwealth countries and their foreign teachers provided large amounts of information about HEIs there. Senior schoolmates were invited to come back to give lectures about their life and academic experience in Australian, Canadian, and British universities. Attending a foreign university is expensive for his family. He mentioned that his parents spent “all of their annual income” for paying his first-year tuition. However, his parents still have strong motivations for sending him abroad since there were very limited opportunities for him to enter top domestic universities due to the policy change.

The second phase of the decision-making process

In terms of Alpha, the second phase of her decision-making process started at the end of her second year in high school, which meant that she spent 2 years to finalize her choice. She mentioned several times while describing this phase that high tuition and other kinds of expenses were not problems for her family because of her parents’ high income. Her father is a senior manager of a

famous U.S.-owned airline and her mother worked in the real estate sector. After deciding to attend a foreign university, Alpha obtained the information about potential destination countries and their HE systems, especially application policies, from education fairs, peers, and the Internet. She told me that every year, people from different foreign universities go to Beijing to attend education fairs to promote their HE services. She also mentioned that it was easy to do research among relevant policies in potential destination countries, such as immigration policies and off-campus working policies. She received information about the U.S. and its HE system from her high school classmates who prepared for applying to American universities and about Commonwealth countries from her best friend who was studying International Baccalaureate Diploma Program in an international high school in Beijing at that time. The major factors that prompted her to finally choose Canada as her destination were Canadian universities' application requirements and her previous experience in North America. Having no time to prepare both TOEFL and SAT tests, she decided to choose either UK or Canada instead of the U.S. For many Canadian universities, *Gaokao* scores were accepted for application, which made Canada more attractive to her. She mentioned that although she desired to escape from the "rigid domestic education system," she still wanted to take *Gaokao* as a backup at that time. Moreover, Alpha traveled to the U.S. on vacation several times previously. She mentioned that

I have been to North America, but I have never been to Europe. So, for [. . . the UK], I think it is sort of far away from me [. . .]. I like American [pop] culture very much and I thought that Canada may have a similar [pop] culture. I like American TV shows.

Beta mentioned that although most students in that Sino-Canadian class planned to apply to Canadian universities, some of his peers also planned to apply to universities in the U.S. and UK. Information about other countries and their HEIs was provided informally by their foreign teachers. Beta thought that his classmates received additional information from the Internet. He finally decided to choose Canada as his destination country at the beginning of his third (last) high school year. He mentioned the main reasons as follows:

For us [Bate and his family], there was a trade-off between HE quality and the cost. My parents and grandfather thought Canadian universities had a good reputation in my hometown and were less expensive compared to the British or American [private] universities. People in my hometown believed that universities [in country C] were not good enough.

Beta's tuition was paid by his parents and his grandfather. Beta mentioned that some senior schoolmates were invited by the high school to come back and give lectures about university life in Canada, which made him believe that Canada had high-quality HE and was a good place to live. Beta also mentioned that since he made the decision so late, he did not have time to prepare for

SAT exams to apply to American universities. Moreover, Beta said that students in his international class (program) were treated differently by the high school. The school did not provide them with information about *Gaokao* and domestic HE admission policies. However, some of his classmates changed their mind after entering the international program and wanted to prepare for *Gaokao* to attend domestic universities. He told me that in his international program, no one told him that many Canadian universities accept *Gaokao* scores, and therefore, preparing for *Gaokao* and applying to Canadian universities were not mutually exclusive pathways.

Gamma finally chose Canada as his destination country due to two major reasons. First, he believed that Canada had relatively flexible immigration policies and offered more job opportunities for graduated international students. Second, he believed that Canadian universities had more connections with American universities than universities in other Western countries. Gamma planned to apply to American universities' graduate schools at that time. Another factor is that A-level scores are highly recognized by Canadian universities. During the process of making the decision, Gamma received first-hand information from his family friends in Canada and through the Internet in addition to the information provided by his foreign teachers. Gamma felt that official websites of Canadian universities were well designed. Looking back, he felt that information was quite accessible even without foreign teachers' assistance, and online application systems of Canadian universities were convenient to use.

The third phase of the decision-making process

After choosing Canada as her destination country, Alpha quickly selected University S as her target university, based on information provided by people from University S (D campus) in education fairs and one of her friends at a nearby high school. That nearby high school was selected by the E campus of University S as one of its "Green Path" program partner schools. The Green Path program was a special interview-based admission approach for Chinese students. Some of her senior schoolmates who were admitted by the E campus of University S through the "Green Path" have successfully transferred to D campus (i.e., the main campus) after finishing their first academic year. They provided first-hand information about University S to Alpha. Alpha also mentioned that world university rankings were also important for her and her parents while making the final decision.

In terms of Beta, information about different Canadian universities and their application requirements were provided by high school teachers. He told me that his teachers introduced only HEIs in province L. As mentioned, the alternative way of using *Gaokao* scores to apply to Canadian universities was not introduced. Due to information barriers, Beta only applied to University R in province L and was admitted. Thereafter, Beta's parents and grandfather recommended him to transfer to University S since it was the only Canadian university that was recognized by people in his hometown. Beta mentioned that he planned to go back to China after graduation and "Chinese

employers only look at [world university] rankings.” “They would not believe me if I say that the education quality of University R was no worse than University S during the interview,” said Beta. He finally transferred to the D campus of university S. He thought that the information about application requirements, academic departments, and professors were quite accessible.

Gamma’s choice was based on the information about the location and reputation of Canadian universities he received from his high school foreign teachers, his family friends in Canada, and through the Internet. Gamma thought V (a city in Canada) was a place for vacation rather than for study since it was “too quiet and beautiful.” He also mentioned that he did not choose University G since he thought N (a Canadian city where the University G is located) was too cold. Gamma and his father also focused on world university rankings at that time. They looked at almost all kinds of “mainstream” rankings at that time, including the QS Rankings, the Times Higher Education’s rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (i.e., the Shanghai ranking). As mentioned, although University S was expensive for his family, Gamma’s parents believed that they “made a perfect decision.”

Additional reflections toward the entire process

While providing general reflections, Alpha mentioned that the information that she received from education fairs was accurate and useful. She complained that students who planned to study abroad were treated separately by the high school at that time and received almost no support. Beta was “angry with the international program” offered by his high school. “It’s neither fish nor fowl,” said Beta. “We were treated separately, and we experienced neither real Chinese high school education nor real Canadian high school education.” Beta complained that in his program, he could hardly receive enough information about foreign universities outside province L, which narrowed his view while making decisions. “Information about Canadian universities is actually quite accessible,” said Beta. In terms of Gamma, looking back, he thought that there was no obvious information gap during his application and decision-making process, and all the information that he received from his high school foreign teachers, senior schoolmates, and universities’ official websites were accurate and useful.

Discussion and conclusion

In terms of my three participants, different environmental factors (i.e., policy factors, family and regional factors, and information factors) influenced their decisions in different ways at different stages. Based on their respective reflection, it seems obvious that policy-related factors played important roles during the process of deciding whether to study abroad or not (i.e., the first phase). They either wanted to escape from a “rigid *Gaokao*-based education system” or could hardly enter top domestic universities due to existing admission policies/policy changes. Other than spending

the entire high school years to prepare for *Gaokao*, there were limited alternative approaches for Chinese students to attend high-quality domestic universities. Foreign universities, therefore, became their choices. It seems interesting that these three participants were influenced by different environmental factors at different education stages while deciding to “escape” from *Gaokao*. Alpha made such a decision primarily for experiencing “Western education” and increasing her life experience, while Beta failed his *Zhongkao* and had only a very limited chance to enter a high-quality domestic university due to the current education system and policies. In terms of Gamma, his situation relates to the inequality between provinces under the current HE admission system.

While selecting destination countries and target institutions, it seems that the unique policy linkage between Chinese and Canadian admission systems (i.e., using *Gaokao* scores to apply to Canadian universities) was attractive. However, such information was usually provided through unofficial channels and was therefore not accessible enough to students from regions other than so-called “first-tier cities (e.g., Beijing and Shanghai).” It seems easy to imagine the reasons that the government of the source country (i.e., China) does not publicize such a policy on a large scale. Due to various reasons such as its concerns about brain drain, the government of a source country naturally does not want a high percentage of outstanding students to move overseas. Meanwhile, it seems easy to imagine that the government of a destination country may face various difficulties (e.g., local policy contexts, cultural barriers, language issues) while promoting its policies in a foreign country. Moreover, it seems that family socioeconomic status was not a crucial factor for my participants from either so-called “middle-class” or “upper middle-class” families. All three participants mentioned that their parents had strong motivations for investing in their HE. Given China’s cultural traditions, such phenomena may not be difficult to anticipate and understand. Entering a high-quality university is always perceived as an opportunity. However, family backgrounds and regional differences between urban and rural, small and so-called “first-tier cities” significantly influenced participants’ methods/channels of collecting/receiving information.

Based on interviews, different methods/channels of collecting/receiving information significantly influenced each phase of participants’ entire decision-making processes. During each phase, information was usually received through informal and unsystematic channels. The accuracy and comprehensiveness of received information can hardly be guaranteed. The information about potential destination countries and their HE systems may be provided by high school teachers, relatives, classmates, family friends, and/or from the personal travel experience. Information about foreign universities and admission policies was sufficient in “first-tier cities” (e.g., Beijing and Shanghai) with annual international HE fairs, Sino-foreign cooperation programs, and high-quality international schools and programs. In terms of my three participants, information about Canada as a destination country was provided through personal connections such as relatives, family friends, and/or senior schoolmates. Information inequity and barriers may be caused among potential

international undergraduate students in different regions and social contexts. Moreover, in addition to the factor of the employment market, lack of information may also lead to students' excessive dependence on world university rankings.

It seems obvious that Alpha, as a child of a high-net-worth family living in Beijing, neither economic nor information factors became serious obstacles to her decision-making process. The most influential factor is the macro-level policy context. Her story, to some extent, reflects the trend of choices of HNWI in so-called "first-tier cities" in planning their children's education. In terms of Beta, as a child of a local civil servant in an undeveloped region in Central China, his story reflects the anxiety of local elites. There was a tension between his family's expectation and relatively limited information and financial resources. Somewhat similar to Alpha's situation, macro-level policies and the operating mechanism of the existing (education) system are the most influential factors in Gamma's decision-making process. As a child of an "upper middle class" family in a small city in North China, studying abroad did bring economic pressure to his family. However, as mentioned, his parents' strong motivation had offset the negative impact of economic factors. Given the present situation, it seems necessary for policymakers in the sending/source country (e.g., China) and university administrators in the receiving/destination country (e.g., Canada) to strengthen international cooperation in order to further support potential international undergraduate students during each phase of their decision-making processes, especially through optimizing information supply channels. For instance, institutions in the destination country may attempt to build direct connections with their overseas (potential) applicants, especially those from outside the so-called "first-tier cities." Moreover, it seems necessary that government sectors of both sending and receiving countries should encourage high schools to give more support to their international programs/classes rather than simply using it as a tool for profit. Considering the overall context of globalization, further promoting international cooperation between source and destination countries may ultimately benefit international students, receiving universities, and the development of HE systems in both sending and receiving countries. Further studies are necessary to conduct for providing more detailed and comprehensive information, particularly for the mentioned stakeholders in both destination and source countries.

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