



Exploring Chinese international high school students' motivations for pursuing degrees in the UK: An empirical investigation based on push-pull model

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ABSTRACT

This study fills a gap in the existing research on the motivations of young Chinese students studying abroad, particularly focusing on those choosing to pursue education in the UK. This study interviewed 15 Chinese international high school students and 6 Chinese parents to explore the motivations of Chinese students to pursue university degrees abroad. This study applied a narrative inquiry approach and the classic push-pull model as the theoretical framework. The study identifies three micro-level push factors: parental expectations, the ability to pay tuition fees, and students' academic performance. It also identifies three micro-level pull factors from the host country: opportunities to improve English skills, previous travel experience, and friends' recommendations. At the macro-level, two push factors from the home country are identified: application supplements and differences in school curricula. Two macro-level pull factors from the host country include immigration opportunities and the natural environment. These findings provide fresh insights into the differences in motivations between Chinese students pursuing undergraduate versus postgraduate degrees abroad, enriching the theoretical framework of international student mobility research and offering practical references for educational policymakers and study abroad service providers.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the announcement of the reform and opening policy in 1978, the Chinese central government sent students to study in developed countries to gain advanced scientific skills to accelerate the development of Chinese economy. In 1984, the State Council issued regulations allowing any Chinese citizens to raise fund by themselves to study abroad, and self-funded students gradually became the main group of students studying abroad (Zhang, 2003; Zhang, 2000).

According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of China, the total number of students studying abroad reached 6.5606 million from 1978 to 2019. English-speaking countries are the most preferred destinations for Chinese students, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada ranking as the top four options. Neighboring countries in the region are also relatively popular options. Japan, South Korea, and Russia are attractive destinations for Chinese students to begin their overseas studies. Additionally, other advanced developed countries, such as France and Germany in Europe have also shown a general upward trend in popularity in recent years (Chinese Education Online, 2022).

The main reasons a large number of Chinese students choose to study abroad include: first, the strong demand in the Chinese labor market for individuals with overseas academic qualifications; second, the more flexible admission processes abroad compared to the rigid structure of the Chinese college entrance examination; third, the high reputation of international universities; and fourth, the policy benefits upon returning to China with an overseas degree, such as eligibility for household registration transfer (Siu, 2016; Zhai & Cao, 2022b; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2021).

Additionally, the number of Chinese students choosing to study in the United States, Canada, and Australia has dropped significantly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and visa restrictions. In contrast, many Chinese students have shifted their focus to the United Kingdom. According to the "Student Visa Annual Data" released by the British government, approximately 135,500 student visas were issued to Chinese nationals (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023).

Besides, the United Kingdom (the UK) has emerged as the most desired destination for Chinese students, as the UK has a strong cultural influence in mainland China. For example, Shelley's poetry *Ode to the West Wind* appears in the first volume of high school textbooks, Downton Abbey series broadcasts on *iQIYI* (internet television), and so on, all of which have become appealing factors attracting Chinese students to study in the UK.

The UK introduced the Graduate Visa in 2021, allowing international graduates from UK universities to stay in the country for two years to look for a job. This policy intends to attract talented students worldwide to support the nation's economic and social development. It has also increased the appeal of studying in the UK among Chinese students. The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency reports that in 2014, 94, 000 Chinese students were enrolled in UK higher education institutions. In the subsequent decade, the number of Chinese students in the UK grew each year, surpassing 120, 000 by 2019.

Even with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the enrollment of Chinese students in the UK continued to rise, with growth rates of 3.4% and 5.5% in the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, respectively. In 2023, approximately 79, 265 students were enrolled in taught postgraduate programs, while 10, 490 students were pursuing research postgraduate degrees.¹ Notably, an increasing number of Chinese high school graduates are pursuing undergraduate degrees overseas (Siu, 2016). Based on the statistics record, approximately 59, 275 students were studying undergraduate programs at UK higher education institutions.

For such a large group of Chinese students pursuing degrees abroad, the following question emerges: what motivates young Chinese students to seek degrees overseas?

¹ Students enrolled in the taught postgraduate program usually have to follow the school curriculum, while research postgraduate program requires students to conduct an independent research.

Baoyan Cheng applied the push-pull theory as the framework to summarize the characteristics of young Chinese students studying abroad using quantitative analysis of 2,927 questionnaires. They concluded that students who choose to study abroad tend to have a good academic achievement, come from advantaged family backgrounds, have well-educated parents who made career plans for them at a young age, and whose parents aspire for them to participate in global competition (Cheng et al., 2020).

In addition, Zhai and Cao (2022b) argue that due to the education expansion of higher education in China, the number of Chinese students attending college is increasing, leading to greater competition in the job market. To mitigate this competition during the job-hunting process after graduation, Chinese parents choose to send their children studying abroad. They believe that an overseas degree serves as symbolic capital, enhancing their children competitiveness in the job market (Zhou & Jordan, 2019; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2021).

Similarly, Linder (2018) finds that dissatisfied with Chinese education system and preparing to become a global citizen are attractive factors in making young Chinese students start their secondary school abroad. Wu and Zheng (2019) discover that Chinese parents play a leading role in determining their children's living pathways, they believe that their children can work and live globally if they gain a degree overseas (Wu & Zheng, 2019; Gerard & Uebelmesser, 2014; Lin, 2020; Lu, Jean & Lu; 2023).

Although previous studies have provided detailed explanations of why young Chinese students choose to study abroad, these studies have primarily focused on Chinese high school or university students. This study aims to examine another group of Chinese high school student by focusing specifically on international high school students. The reasons for choosing international high school students as the research subjects are as follows: international high schools in China diverge from public high schools notably in their pathways to tertiary education. Public school students are issued a *xueji* (学籍) upon enrollment in primary school. The *xueji* serves as documentation verifying one's registration as a student with the local education organizations and is requisite for university entrance examination registration. Students lacking a *xueji* are ineligible to participate in these examinations.

Additionally, the curriculum of international high schools differs from that of public high schools. Public high school students usually engage in the study of fourteen subjects and select different models to take for university entrance examination (MOE, 2020, p. 5). In contrast, the curriculum of international high school is tailored to the destination of students' further studies. Notably, students intending to pursue higher education in the UK usually need to study the Cambridge A-Level courses. The Cambridge A-Level program offers a selection of fifty subjects, providing students the opportunity to choose subjects aligned with their interests and academic goals. Students must submit the results of three A-Level subjects as part of their university applications. Evaluation standards vary among universities and are usually graded on a scale from A+ to E, with A+ being the highest grade attainable. A minimum of one A+ is required by several prestigious colleges for admission to their degree programs.

With these background knowledges in mind, it is clear that the curriculum of international high school is designed to preare Chinese students for studying abroad after high school gradaution. However, the questions of when these students start planning to study abroad and what attracts them to study in the UK remain to be explored. This study applies the push-pull model as the theoretical framework and utilizes narative inquiry to analyze students' motivation for choosing to study in the UK. The results of this study aim to contribute to the literature on the international mobility of high school students from China and also provide information for Chinese parents what they should experience when they plan to send their children to international high schools.

THE PUSH-PULL MODEL IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS MOBILITY

In the late 19th century, the geographer Ernest Ravenstein proposed the push-pull model when he was exploring the secret of population movement (Ravenstein, 1889). He emphasized that relocation occurs when bad conditions in one's own country (e.g. harsh regualtions and high taxes) drive people away, while favorable conditions

elsewhere (e.g. job opportunities) pull them in. Many theorists followed in Ravenstein's footsteps, Altbach revealed that international students are often pushed by limited educational opportunities and scholarship availability in their home countries and pulled by the superior resources and research facilities in developed nations. Altbach suggested that understanding student mobility requires analyzing push and pull factors from both host and home countries (Cummings, 1984; Altbach, 1991; de Wit & Altbach, 2020). McMahon's study of international students from 18 developing countries in the United States discovered that economic, educational, political, and historical variables influence their choice to study abroad. He noted that students from less developed economies are more inclined to leave, influenced by political ties and economic interactions between their home and host nations, with stronger connections increasing the likelihood of attracting students (McMahon, 1992).

Recently, Cebolla-Boado, Yang and Yasemin (2018) found that reputation and educational quality of host institutions are the most important factors to attract students to continue their higher education overseas. Some scholars revealed that competitive career development in China and high pressure of working environment play the role as pushing factors to motivate Chinese student to study abroad (Zhang & Xu, 2020; Tu & Xie, 2020). Although these findings constitute an important part of understanding why Chinese students seek degrees abroad, they focus on the influences of macro-level factors on students' motivations to study abroad.

Researchers investigated motivational factors at the micro-level, emphasizing the role of family in influencing foreign student decisions. Li and Bray (2007) discovered that Chinese students pursuing education in Hong Kong and Macau were significantly impacted by their family background and academic achievements. Similarly, Li Mei (2008) emphasized the importance of family influence, as well as personal relationships and personal values. In a related study on Chinese students' motivations to study in Canada, Jing (2021) identified micro-level drivers, including recommendations from friends and family as well as the desire to enhance foreign language proficiency

It is worth mentioning that scholar such as Jiang Haishan (2000) was one of the pioneering researchers who made significant contributions to the study of Chinese students studying abroad at a young age. Jiang revealed that factors such as students' family economic background, the internationalization of education, and the availability of information played pivotal roles in motivating students to study abroad.

These findings suggest that family expectations, financial support, and cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping students' aspirations and choices. However, the degree of family influence can differ depending on cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions. Additional research is required to delve deeper into the complexities of family impact on international student mobility.

Zhou Jinyan (2009), for example, found that the motivation factors driving Chinese students to study abroad are not solely influenced by family background, but also by personal experience overseas and recommendations from friends and relatives. Subsequently, Zhan Shengli (2010) conducted research involving high school students from seven cities, revealing that factors such as the availability of courses in the host country, student personality, and proficiency in English also play significant roles in motivating high school students to pursue degrees overseas. Similarly, Li Xiuzhen (2013) found that factors such as students' international travel experiences and individual academic achievements play a crucial role in motivating young students to study abroad. Thus, it is clear that advantaged family background and high economic status are the common factors for Chinese parents who send their children to study abroad. Liu's conclusion also indicated that, in the context of global economic integration, the demand for higher education among ordinary Chinese families has increased. Furthermore, factors such as the reputation of foreign universities and China's recognition of foreign credentials have also contributed to the trend of studying abroad at a young age (Wang, 2014). Other researchers have discovered that parents' education level and social status are also decisive factors influencing their children's decisions to study abroad (Cheng et al., 2020; Martin, 2020).

Overall, based on a review of previous studies on students studying abroad, there are still areas that need further exploration: (1) the push-pull model is frequently used to analyze international student mobility, but it has not yet addressed the motivations of international high school students pursuing degrees abroad from the perspectives of both students and parents; (2) while the majority of studies focus on push factors from home countries and pull factors from host countries, little attention has been paid to pull factors within home countries and push factors in host countries.

The purpose of this study is to investigate, at both the micro and macro levels, why Chinese international high school students choose to pursue degrees in the UK using the push-pull framework.

In doing so, the theoretical framework is displayed as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1 The Theoretical Framework of the Study (Created by the Author)

Micro Levels	Macro Levels	Research Questions
Push factors from home country - Personal desires - Family background - Personal attitudes of education overseas	Push factors from home country - Education system in China - Social factors: employment opportunities	What are the push factors at both micro- and macro-levels that motivate Chinese students to study abroad?
Pull factors from host country - Social connections in the host country - Preferred subjects' availability - Language competence	Pull factors from host country - Higher quality of education - Employment opportunities - Local social and cultural environment - Policy	What are the pull factors at both micro- and macro-levels that motivate Chinese students to study abroad?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach from an epistemological perspective to explore international high school students' motivations for pursuing degrees in the UK. As Cronon (1992) notes, narrative inquiry is an approach through which scholars explore theoretical patterns from discursive storied realities. F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin (2006) highlight that the narrative inquiry approach in educational research is idiosyncratic in many ways. By applying this method, researchers can not only understand experiences through open-ended discussions with participants, but they can also create summaries of individual stories, develop a comprehensive overview of all the stories, visually represent the stories, construct a fictional story based on the main ideas, and identify key themes within the narratives. In contrast, participants are able to present their own stories without constraints, providing researchers with the opportunity to interact with them and find answers to the research questions. By applying the narrative inquiry approach in this study, it provides rich data about the particularities of Chinese international high school students' motivations for pursuing degrees overseas (Jing, Peng & Dai, 2021).

Sampling Process

This study uses purposeful sampling method to collect data. The goal is to select individuals that are likely to provide the most valuable insights into the research topic. The fieldwork was finally conducted in collaboration with International High School A, located in City G in the southern region of China. The school has 20 classes per grade, with an average of 25 students per class. This school was chosen for the research due to its high teaching quality, this school is ranked among the best five schools in City G and approximately 98% of its graduates receive

university offers from the UK. Consequently, International High School A is the best international high school in City G.

A connection was made with the school’s admission office in November 2022, following the approval of research ethics. Permission was confirmed after a month of negotiation with the head teacher of the school. This study recruited participants through two methods: (a) school teachers distributed a “Call for Participants” flyer in each class; and (b) snowball sampling was used in this study. 15 students and 6 parents took part in the study overall.

As shown in Table 2, there were 8 female students labelled F1 through F8 and 7 male students labelled M1 through M7. When the interviews took place in March 2023, interviewees were between the ages of 16 and 19. Noteworthy, only one parent participant was a father (for M7), while the remaining 5 parent participants were mothers of the student participants (see Table 3). At the time of interviews, F5’s mother lived in Beijing, while the other parent participants were living with their children in City G. The five female parent participants were labeled A1 through A5, corresponding to their children’s labels. For example, F5A1 refers to the mother of student participant F5. The male participant was labeled B1. For example, the father of M7 was labeled M7B1. To supplement the information gathered from the student participants, data was also gathered from the parents.

Table 2 Summary of Student Participants Profile

Name	Age	Father’s occupation	Mother’s occupation	Father’s education background	Mother’s education background
F1	17	Businessman	Teacher	Vocational college degree	University undergraduate degree
F2	18	Businessman	Housewife	University undergraduate degree	University undergraduate degree
F3	16	Professional	Housewife	High school diploma	Vocational college degree
F4	17	Businessman	Housewife	High school diploma	Junior high school diploma
F5	17	Businessman	Businesswomen	University undergraduate degree	University undergraduate degree
F6	17	Businessman	Teacher	University undergraduate degree	University undergraduate degree
F7	17	Professional	Professional	University undergraduate degree	University undergraduate degree
F8	19	Businessman	Clerk	Vocational college degree	High school diploma
M1	18	Businessman	Clerk	High school diploma	Vocational college degree
M2	19	Businessman	Housewife	Vocational college degree	High school diploma
M3	18	Professional	Housewife	University undergraduate degree	Vocational college degree
M4	18	Civil servant	Businesswoman	University undergraduate degree	University undergraduate degree
M5	17	Professional	Businesswoman	University undergraduate degree	Vocational college degree

M6	18	Businessman	Housewife	High school diploma	High school diploma
M7	18	Civil servant	Housewife	University postgraduate degree	University undergraduate degree

Table 3 Summary of Parent Participants Profile

Name	Gender	Age
F5A1	Female	46
F7A2	Female	49
F8A3	Female	43
M3A4	Female	51
M5A5	Female	48
M7B1	Male	55

This study conducted in-depth interviews to explore the push-pull factors driving Chinese students to pursue degrees in the UK. There were six main sections in the interview: (1) students’ family background and educational history; (2) parents’ educational background and experiences; (3) micro-level factors pushing students to study abroad; (4) macro-level factors driving students to study abroad; (5) micro-level factors attracting students to the UK; and (6) macro-level factors influencing the choice of the UK as a study destination. All interviews were conducted via the online platform TenCent Meeting

Mandarin Chinese used in the interview process, and the average interview time was approximately 50-90 minutes per person. The interviewees were notified that the interview would be recorded and securely stored on a hard drive. All transcripts were transcribed into written format for further analysis. To ensure data authenticity, a follow-up interview will be arranged after the initial transcript is produced. This second interview will focus on clarifying any uncertainties or contradictions identified in the original transcript, such as extended pauses during responses or inconsistencies between different statements. If the participant is still unable to provide clear answers after the second interview, the researcher may consider interviewing the participant's friends or family members to seek additional information.

Thematic Analysis

Prior to coding, transcripts were transcribed and reviewed three times to ensure accuracy. Important statements and quotations were highlighted to aid in the categorization process. The coding schema followed the push-pull framework, encompassing both micro- and macro-level push factors, as well as micro- and macro-level pull factors.

The coding process involved three steps (see Table 4) (Saldana, 2021):

- (1) Open coding: this first step focuses on selecting and simplifying relevant information from the transcripts, examining lexical cohesions within the raw data.
- (2) Data categorization: this step organizes open codes into meaningful groups, paving the way for theme extraction. Notably, in this study, categories were formed by grouping similar data which revealed characteristic patterns.
- (3) Thematic coding: The final step involves identifying thematic codes that emerge from different categories. A theme is extracted for each category, representing the overarching ideas found throughout the entire dataset. This step determines the significance of answering the research question.

Table 4 A Sample of Coding Process

Respondents	Open Codes	Category	Theme
M6: I just want to <i>learn biology</i> , if I enroll the university in China, I cannot choose the subject which I really like.	Learn biology	Subjects selection	Academic performance

F3: My favourite subject is *mathematics*. I want to continue Mathematics my study in the university.

FINDINGS

Since the guided interview questions were developed based on existing research, this study employs a deductive analysis process to identify new themes that have not been discussed in previous studies. The following section is divided into three parts: first part analyses the micro-level factors that motivate Chinese students choose to study abroad, while second part presents the macro-level factors that promote the willingness of students to study abroad, the last part discusses the new findings from both push and pull factors from home and host countries.

Research question 1: push factors from the home country at the micro-level

The interviews revealed that push factors from the home country at the micro-level include several factors, such as parents' educational backgrounds, students' academic performance, and parents' ability to cover high tuition fees.

Parents' Educational Backgrounds

As Li and Brey (2007) mentioned parents play a role of influence to motivate their children to study abroad. According to the participants' responses, parents' educational backgrounds play a crucial role in motivating students to pursue their studies overseas. F2, F5, M4, and M7 come from well-educated families where their parents hold university undergraduate degrees. Their parents expect their children to obtain a degree from a prestigious university, viewing such a degree as a symbol of social status.

"My mother wanted me to attend a top university when I was in primary school, she always told me that I should perform better than she did." (F2)

"My father graduated from a top university in China, he will be disappointed if I cannot enroll in a good university." (M7)

In contrast, parents with lower educational levels are often more eager for their children to receive a better education. They regard education as the symbol to represent success and a better life.

"My father received a high school diploma at the age of 19. He always told me that he had to work hard to make money due to his low educational level, and he wanted me to obtain a university degree." (F3)

Ability to Pay for the Expensive Tuition Fees

In addition to parents' educational backgrounds, one of the most important reasons for these students to study abroad is their capability to pay for the expensive tuition fees. All parent participants highlighted their willingness to invest in their children's education through financial support.

"I know the annual tuition fees in the UK is expensive, but we would do our best to support our child to study in the UK." (M3A4)

UK higher education is not only famous for its higher reputation of education quality, but also the expensive tuition fees, students need substantial financial support to successfully pursue their studies.

"My dream university is Imperial College London, which has an average tuition fee of around 40,000 pounds per year. I know it's quite expensive, but my father will cover the costs." (M3)

When asked whether it would be difficult for their parents to pay for their tuitions, all student participants showed confidence with their family financial backgrounds. For instance, M3 answered, “My parents can fully fund my studies, so there is no need to worry about that.” The rest of student participants expressed similar sentiments, highlighting the significance of financial support in their ability to study abroad.

Academic Performance

The student participants interviewed in this study are relatively high-achieving in their school. Five student participants mentioned factors related to their academic achievements. For instance, F3 received an Olympic Mathematic Award at the age of 16, and M6 received a biology competition award at 17.

“I received an A+ in biology, an A in mathematics, and an A in physics on the mid-term exam. I enjoy studying natural sciences and am interested in pursuing biology at university.” (M6)

“I want to study mathematics for my undergraduate degree, I don’t like humanities and I prefer not to take subjects related to that (humanities). From what I have heard from my cousin who is currently studying at a Chinese university, politics seems to be a compulsory subject at the domestic university, and I have no interest in that.” (F3)

Four student participants and one parent participant reported concerns about university subjects. They expressed apprehension about the compulsory courses in Chinese universities. To avoid unfavorable subjects in Chinese universities and maximize their interest in potential subjects, these students regard studying abroad as a preferable option.

Research question1: push factors from home country at the macro-level

The interviews revealed that macro-level push factors related to educational, geographical, and political dimensions drive Chinese students to pursue degrees abroad. Particularly, two macro-level push factors from the home country were identified: the application supplement, and the structure of school curriculum.

The Application Supplements

The term “application supplement” refers to an organization that assists with all matters of overseas university applications. Five student participants mentioned that their consultants’ encouragement had a significant impact on their decision to study in the UK.

“I want to apply to the London School of Economics (LSE), I know I have to meet the academic requirements, but what else is needed? People who apply to the LSE must have scores equal to or higher than mine. How can I stand out in such a competitive selection process? My consultant, Kevin, who graduated from the LSE, knows more about the application process and did his best to help me prepare my application materials.” (M5)

Based on the interviews, it became clear that application supplement was a recurring theme in the student participants’ reports. Parent participants also noted that their children felt more confident with the support of application consultants and were more likely to submit their applications to universities with encouragement from these consultants.

The Structure of School Curriculum

The structure of the school curriculum varies between international high schools and public high schools. Student participants found it challenging to switch to public high schools after taking A-Level courses for a year. Three student participants stated that they had considered transferring to a public high school in grade eleven but gave it up due to the differences in the teaching curriculum. During the interview, F8A3 mentioned that her daughter, F8, experienced depression in the tenth grade. Although she recruited a private tutor to teach the public-school curriculum to her daughter before considering the transfer, F8 finally decided to stay at the international high school.

“The school coursework was overwhelming, I had to prepare six subjects to prepare for the Chinese university entrance examination. I think it is better to continue my studies at this school - International High School A.” (F8)

Two assumptions can be made based on these findings. First of all, parents play a key role in supporting their children to pursue degrees overseas, parents' preference for the destination is often a country with a high quality of higher education. Secondly, students who excel in either natural sciences or humanities are more likely to pursue higher education abroad, as they fear they may not meet university admission requirements in China. Therefore, parents' economic support and students' academic performance will continuously act as push factors motivating students to study abroad. In addition, top universities worldwide will remain attractive to Chinese students seeking higher education opportunities.

Research question 2: pull factors from the host country at the micro-level

According to the participants' responses, three key pull factors at the micro-level were identified, including both educational and social aspects from the host country. These factors include the opportunity to improve English skills, recommendations from friends, relatives and teachers, and previous international traveling experience.

The Opportunity to Improve English

English is the global language in the world, and mastering this language can enhance one's competitiveness in the job market and contribute to personal growth (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018). Seven student participants and two parent participants mentioned the importance of mastering the English language. For example, M2 said,

“I started learning English at the age of four, I won an award of 10,000 RMB (approximately 1400 USD) in an English-speaking contest when I was in Junior High School B, it was a taste of success. Since then, I have worked hard to improve my English skills, I believe that speaking fluent English will provide me with more opportunities in future development.” (M2)

Moreover, F1 and F6 emphasized that pursuing an undergraduate degree abroad allows for better mastery of English compared to postgraduate studies. This indicates that age is a factor considered by Chinese students when deciding whether to study abroad (Jing, Peng & Dai, 2021).

Previous Experience in Traveling Abroad

During the interviews, six student participants mentioned their previous experience traveling to the UK. Three parent participants also noted that they had taken their children abroad to destinations such as the US, Canada, and France. They emphasized that exposing their children to foreign countries at a young age helps broaden their horizons and sets the stage for their goals of studying abroad.

“I first travelled to London with my father at the age of ten, it was impressive to see London Eye and Tower Bridge. At the age of fifteen, I had the opportunity to study as an exchange student in Edinburgh. I enjoyed the city and dream of living there in the future.” (M4)

Friends and Relatives' Recommendations

Friends and relatives' recommendations constitute a social factor influencing Chinese students seeking degrees abroad (Jing, Peng & Dai, 2021). Six student participants reported that they were influenced to some extent

by their friends' recommendation of receiving education overseas. For example, F5 had the opportunity to work as the volunteer to observe panther in the Amazon Forest at the age of sixteen. She mentioned that one of her team leaders, who had studied at Imperial College of London, suggested her to pursue a degree in the UK. In addition, all parent participants reported in the interview that they have friends living in the UK, who recommended the country when they were considering destinations for their children's education.

"My friend Amy, who used to work in Manchester, enjoyed her life in the UK. She suggested me to send my child to study there." (M5A5)

Research question 2: pull factors from host country at the macro-level

In addition to the macro-level pull factors, various elements of the UK at the macro level attract Chinese students, including educational, political, and environmental factors. The findings highlight two key macro-level factors that pull Chinese students to the UK for their studies: immigration opportunities and the natural environment.

Possibilities for Immigration

The UK has implemented new immigration policies, such as the Graduate Visa, to encourage more students to settle in the country and contribute to its development. Student participants identified the Graduate Visa policy as a critical factor in their decision to study in the UK. Additionally, two parent participants stressed that recent immigration policies offer enhanced opportunities for immigration. For example, the Innovator Founder Visa allows individuals to start new businesses in the UK, initially valid for up to three years with the option of renewal.

Ultimately, visa holders have an opportunity to become permanent residents in the country.

"My father plans to immigrate to the UK. If I cannot find a job, he plans to apply for the Innovator Founder Visa and start a business in the UK." (M5)

"The Graduate Visa increases opportunities for international students to stay in the UK. I want to settle in the UK, and that's why I want to study there." (M3)

Natural Environment

Six student participants mentioned that the natural environment was the major factor motivating them to seek degrees in the UK. F2 said, "Scotland has the most pleasant natural environment, this is why I plan to study in Edinburgh." Similarly, M3 said, "My friend sent me a postcard from Whitby, I found it attractive with its beautiful landscape and architecture. I want to visit Whitby and other places when I arrive in the UK."

Two assumptions can be identified from these pull factors. Firstly, as English is a compulsory subject in Chinese education, the number of students choosing English-speaking countries is expected to continue growing. Secondly, since the United States, Canada and Australia have a longer immigration history than the United Kingdom, a temporary decrease in the number of Chinese international students going to these three countries during the COVID-19 pandemic does not imply a loss of appeal. Immigration policy remains an important factor attracting students. Chinese students will still regard these three countries as important study abroad destinations.

New findings 1: Push factor from host country at macro-level

In this study, participants reported not only the pull factors related to the UK, but also the macro-level push factors. These push factors include ethnic discrimination and food. The absence of these push factors from host country in the previous designed framework makes these findings valuable for extending the model of push-pull in the study of student mobility.

Ethnic Discrimination

Politics is always a core element in motivating or demotivating students to study abroad. Five student participants expressed their concerns about discrimination. “I know it rarely happens, but it does exist. I read posts on Chinese social media about some people being attacked at X university. I am worried,” F1 stated.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, reports of discrimination against Chinese individuals in the UK have emerged, raising concerns about social security and ethnic tensions. These concerns have deterred some Chinese students from considering studying in the UK.

Although all universities in the UK have international student offices to offer support, ethnic conflicts and discrimination still occur on campus. Parent participants reported that they had consider sending their children to Australia instead, as both the UK and Australia are top host countries for Chinese students.

“I traveled to the UK several times, and the people I met there were friendly. I don’t think it’s necessary to consider changing the study destination for my son.” (M7B1)

Food

During the interviews, six student participants expressed concerns about the diet in the UK. M5 stated in the interview, “My problem is the food! Our school provides a British breakfast every Monday, and I didn’t enjoy it, I found it greasy.”

F7 and F8 stated similar concerns, F8 stated, “I don’t know how to cook, and my mother never allows me to use the kitchen, I think I will go to the school dining hall every day. I am a little worried about the food there, because I don’t like greasy food.” Diet is a new factor that has never been discussed in the previous literature. This factor constitutes a cultural factor associated with motivation to study in the UK. It also reflects the attitude of Chinese parents regarding the personal living skills of the new generation in China.

New findings 2: Pull factors from home country at micro-level

The micro-level pull factor identified in this study involves only one aspect: romantic relationships. This factor can deter Chinese students from studying abroad.

Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships between boys and girls are seen as a significant pull factor from the home country. F8 is the only participant with a boyfriend.

“To be honest, I didn’t want to go abroad. Of course, I know I have to, but if I study abroad, I will probably lose connection with my boyfriend. I didn’t dare to talk about this with my mother because she would be angry.” (F8)

F8’s boyfriend is a freshman at a university in City B and has no plans to move abroad. Romantic relationships often have a great influence on decision-making. People generally do not want to lose connection with their partners. Thus, love and romantic relationships can become a significant pull factor for some Chinese students, who must consider the implications of moving abroad.

Although ethnic discrimination is a negative push factor, the situation has constantly changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher Education Students Statistics show that Chinese students still rank first among international students pursuing the degrees in the UK. Additionally, with the labor market requirements in China and

the benefits of obtaining an overseas degree after returning, studying in the advanced developed countries are likely to remain a popular choice for Chinese students seeking higher education.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Randall Collins (2019) argues that education serves as a pathway to achieving social mobility. Enrolling in a high-ranked university is often perceived as a pathway to higher social status. Therefore, examining the motivations of international students to pursue foreign degrees offers researchers fresh insights into how China's contemporary middle and affluent classes view international educational mobility.

This study illustrates how motivational factors at both macro and micro levels influence the decision of Chinese students to study abroad. The study utilizes the push-pull model as its theoretical framework to explore the various factors shaping the decision of Chinese students to study in the UK. Considering the push factors at the micro-level, student participants are more focused on personal interests and the availability of desired subjects in the host country rather than merely escaping the intense competition in China. Studying in the UK allows these students to concentrate on their favourite subjects. Another micro-level push factor is parents' expectations. Parents with limited educational backgrounds often desire to improve their children's educational prospects.

Additionally, this study highlights three major differences in the motivations of Chinese high school students when considering undergraduate studies abroad compared to postgraduate studies.

The first difference is the structure of the school curriculum. International high schools offer a different curriculum compared to public schools, which often results in students needing to pursue their degrees abroad. Students attending international high schools must therefore put in significant effort to gain admission to overseas institutions.

The second difference lies in the role of immigration policy within the decision-making process of Chinese students studying abroad. Unlike previous research, which rarely considers immigration policy in the UK context, this study emphasizes its influence in drawing Chinese students to pursue their education in the UK.

Finally, parents play a key role in motivating young Chinese students who studying abroad at a young age. High school students usually have to follow their parents' recommendations and plans for their future development. When parents send their children to international high schools, they determine their children's future path, requiring their children to study A-Level courses and complete the degree programme in the UK. As mentioned in the introduction, international high schools aim to teach compulsory subjects to prepare students for foreign university entrance examinations. This means that once students enrol in an international high school, transferring back to the public education system becomes challenging. On one hand, this condition encourages students to study abroad, on the other hand, it impacts their personal autonomy.

In addition to the above-mentioned findings, this study shows that the reputation of higher education institutions is not a major factor in attracting Chinese students to pursue degrees their degrees in the UK. Previous research findings have suggested that Chinese students often choose to study in the UK because of its educational reputation and high world university rankings. However, in this study, none of the participants mentioned the reputation of the university as a key factor in their decision to study in the UK. There are two possible explanations for this finding. The first is that the quality of British universities is widely known among Chinese students, so they may not need to consider this factor when making their decision. The second one is that Chinese students may be more focused on finding suitable degree programs that align with their specific interests and areas of study.

Considering the pull factors from home country at the micro-level, romantic relationships have emerged as a newly identified pull factor influencing Chinese students' decision to study abroad.

In addition to the major findings discussed above, this study offers suggestions for Chinese policymakers to help mitigate brain drain. According to the participants' feedback, it suggests that Chinese educational policymakers should consider reforming the higher education entrance requirement.

In particular, the official university entrance examination system should not be the only method of evaluating high school students. Chinese universities should also consider accepting different types of examinations, such as A-Levels. If Chinese institutions accepted applications with A-Level grades, many students might be more likely to continue their studies in China. Besides, universities should avoid forcing students to take compulsory courses, such as politics and political science, students should be given greater freedom in selecting their courses.

This study also has implications for UK policymakers aiming to address ethnic issues. The findings indicate that ethnic discrimination is a major push factor at the macro-level. It suggests that UK policymakers should introduce new policies to combat discrimination against foreign students. They should implement essential programs to educate those with radical racists views and mitigate the negative impact of discrimination on international students.

However, this research has two limitations. One limitation is that this study does not address the motivational factors of students in public high schools. Do these students face similar situations to those of students in international high schools? Besides, this study focuses on only one international high school as the research field when examining push-pull factors from the home country at macro-level, without comparing the nuanced differences with other international high schools. Consequently, future research should expand to include a wider variety of international high schools within the home country to investigate other potential push-pull factors. Additionally, researchers could apply quantitative research methods to explore the motivational factors through large-scale data analysis.

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