

A Review of Literature Research on Influencing Factors of Chinese Students Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT

The decision to study abroad is a complex process influenced by a multitude of factors spanning individual, familial, societal, and geopolitical dimensions. As the largest source of international students globally, Chinese students' choices and motivations for studying abroad have garnered significant attention from scholars, policymakers, and educational institutions. This article provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study abroad, synthesizing insights from theoretical frameworks such as the push-pull theory, the theory of planned behavior (TPB), and decision-making models. The review highlights the evolving dynamics of international education in the context of globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shifting preferences toward Asian study destinations. By integrating empirical studies and theoretical perspectives, this article underscores the interplay between structural constraints (e.g., domestic academic competition) and aspirational drivers (e.g., career advancement). The findings emphasize the need for adaptive strategies to address emerging trends such as digital globalization, regionalization of education, and post-pandemic mobility patterns. This review serves as a critical resource for stakeholders aiming to enhance the attractiveness of study destinations and support the holistic development of international students.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Student; Study Abroad; Influencing Factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The international mobility of students has become a hallmark of globalization, with China emerging as the largest contributor to global student flows. In the 2019-2020 academic year, over 1 million Chinese students pursued higher education abroad, with traditional destinations like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia dominating preferences (Wang & Miao, 2022). However, the landscape of international education has undergone seismic shifts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions (e.g., U.S.-China trade disputes), and the rise of Asian countries as competitive study destinations. For instance, Japan and South Korea have seen increased enrollment of Chinese students due to their cultural proximity and cost-effective education systems (Zhang et al., 2021). Understanding the multifaceted factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study abroad is critical for universities, policymakers, and industry stakeholders aiming to navigate this dynamic environment.

This article reviews the existing literature on the determinants of Chinese students' study abroad decisions, focusing on three key dimensions:

Structural Drivers: Push factors within China (e.g., academic pressure, employment competition).

Aspirational Pulls: Attractions of destination countries (e.g., educational quality, post-study opportunities).

Intermediary Variables: Family socioeconomic status, personal aspirations, and geopolitical conditions.

By synthesizing empirical findings and theoretical frameworks, this review aims to provide actionable insights for enhancing international student recruitment strategies and fostering cross-cultural educational exchanges.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1. Push-Pull Theory: Beyond Traditional Paradigms

The push-pull theory, initially conceptualized by Everett S. Lee (1966), has been widely applied to explain international student mobility. According to this framework, students' decisions are shaped by "push" factors from their home country (e.g., limited educational resources, economic constraints) and "pull" factors from the host country (e.g., institutional reputation, immigration policies) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Recent studies have expanded this model to include nuanced factors such as:

Geopolitical Stability: The perceived safety and political climate of destination countries post-COVID-19 (Wang & Zhang, 2022).

Cultural Proximity: Shared linguistic or cultural ties, as seen in the growing preference for Asian destinations like Singapore and Malaysia (Li & Chen, 2020).

Cost-Benefit Analysis: Comparative evaluations of tuition fees, living expenses, and potential return on investment (Chen & Wu, 2021).

For example, Zhang et al. (2021) found that Chinese students choosing South Korea prioritized low tuition costs and part-time work opportunities, reflecting a shift toward pragmatic decision-making. This evolution underscores the need to contextualize the push-pull model within broader socio-economic and temporal frameworks.

2.2. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): Intentions and Constraints

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2002) posits that study abroad intentions are determined by three factors:

Attitudes: Perceived benefits (e.g., enhanced employability) and challenges (e.g., cultural adaptation).

Subjective Norms: Influence of family, peers, and societal expectations.

Perceived Behavioral Control: Confidence in overcoming logistical barriers (e.g., financial constraints, visa processes).

Empirical studies on Chinese students reveal unique cultural dimensions. For instance, family influence is particularly pronounced in Confucian societies, where parents often play a decisive role in funding and approving study plans (Chen & Liu, 2020). Conversely, perceived behavioral control is frequently undermined by structural barriers such as China's stringent hukou (household registration) system, which complicates post-graduation reintegration (Liu et al., 2023). These findings highlight the interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints in shaping study abroad behavior.

2.3. Theory of Planned Behavior

Decision-Making Models: Risk, Rationality, and Identity

The decision-making theory (Simon, 1956) emphasizes bounded rationality, where students prioritize "satisficing" over optimal choices due to limited information. For Chinese students, this manifests in:

Risk Aversion: Preference for destinations with established Chinese student communities to mitigate isolation (Yang & Fan, 2023).

Identity Negotiation: Balancing aspirations for global citizenship with national identity, particularly in politically sensitive fields like STEM (Li, 2020).

Digital Influence: The role of social media and online platforms in shaping perceptions of study destinations (Zhou & Lee, 2018).

For example, a survey of Anhui Province students revealed that 68% relied on platforms like Weibo and Zhihu to compare university rankings and visa policies (Zhao, 2024). This digitalization of decision-making underscores the need for universities to optimize their online presence and engagement strategies.

2.4. Family and Personal Factors

Family and personal factors play a crucial role in students' decisions to study abroad. Parents' life experiences, socioeconomic status, and educational background are significant determinants of students' study abroad intentions (Johnson et al., 2018). Students from families with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to consider studying abroad due to their greater financial resources and exposure to international opportunities (Smith et al., 2022).

Personal factors such as academic performance, language proficiency, and previous international experiences also influence students' decisions to study abroad. For example, Lee and Park (2021) found that students with higher academic performance were more likely to pursue study abroad opportunities, while Park and Kim (2019) found that language proficiency was a significant predictor of students' intentions to study abroad.

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

3.1. Push Factors in China: Structural and Psychological Pressures

3.1.1. Academic Competition and the Gaokao System

China's college entrance examination (Gaokao) is a pivotal yet stress-inducing milestone. With only 40% of test-takers gaining admission to top-tier universities, many students view studying abroad as an alternative pathway to prestige (Zhang & Liu, 2020). This "escape route" mentality is particularly prevalent in provinces like Jiangsu and Hubei, where competition is fiercest.

3.1.2. Employment Challenges

Despite China's economic growth, youth unemployment reached 21.3% in 2023, exacerbating the appeal of overseas degrees as a career differentiator (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Graduates from foreign universities often command higher salaries, especially in sectors like finance and technology (Wang et al., 2021).

3.1.3. Quality of Domestic Education

Perceptions of overcrowded classrooms, outdated curricula, and limited research funding drive students toward institutions in countries like Germany and Canada, which are renowned for innovation-driven education (Garcia & Martinez, 2020).

3.2. Pull Factors in Destination Countries: Evolving Priorities

3.2.1. Educational Excellence and Global Rankings

QS and Times Higher Education rankings heavily influence choices, with 72% of students prioritizing top-100 universities (Li & Wang, 2019). The U.S. and U.K. remain dominant, but institutions in Hong Kong and Japan are gaining traction due to regional accreditation agreements (e.g., the Bologna Process in Asia).

3.2.2. Post-Study Work Opportunities

Countries offering generous post-graduation work visas, such as Australia (Temporary Graduate Visa subclass 485) and Canada (Post-Graduation Work Permit), are increasingly attractive. A 2022 survey found that 65% of Chinese students cited immigration potential as a key factor (ICEF Monitor, 2022).

3.2.3. Cultural and Social Safety

The rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in Western nations during the pandemic has shifted preferences toward destinations like Singapore and New Zealand, which are perceived as safer and more inclusive (Wang & Zhang, 2022).

3.3. Family and Personal Factors: The Role of Socioeconomic Capital

3.3.1. Family Socioeconomic Status (SES)

High-SES families disproportionately fund overseas education, with annual expenditures averaging \$50,000 per student (ICEF, 2023). Conversely, middle-class families increasingly rely on education loans, reflecting the commodification of international degrees (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.2. Generational Aspirations

First-generation college students often view studying abroad as a means to uplift familial social status, whereas second-generation students prioritize personal growth and global exposure (Yang & Liu, 2019).

3.3.3. Gender Dynamics

Female students constitute 56% of Chinese overseas learners, often opting for fields like education and public health, while males dominate engineering and computer science (UNESCO, 2021). This gendered pattern reflects broader societal expectations and labor market trends.

4. DISCUSSION: NAVIGATING POST-PANDEMIC REALITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably altered the study abroad landscape. Key trends include:

Hybrid Learning Models: Blended programs combining online and in-person components are reshaping mobility patterns, particularly for master's students (Mok et al., 2021).

Regionalization of Education: The Belt and Road Initiative has spurred collaborations between Chinese and Southeast Asian universities, reducing dependency on Western institutions (Yang, 2020).

Mental Health Considerations: Isolation and xenophobia during the pandemic have heightened awareness of student well-being, prompting universities to enhance support services (Zhang & Deng, 2021).

These shifts necessitate adaptive strategies, such as:

Scholarship Diversification: Targeted funding for underrepresented regions (e.g., rural Anhui Province).

Policy Advocacy: Streamlining visa processes and bilateral recognition of degrees.

Cultural Integration Programs: Pre-departure orientations and peer mentorship networks.

The literature review highlights the complexity of factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study abroad. While traditional factors such as educational quality and career prospects remain significant, newer factors such as social safety, cultural proximity, and financial considerations are increasingly influencing students' decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the decision-making process, with students placing greater emphasis on social safety and political stability in their choice of study destinations.

The findings suggest that universities and policymakers need to adopt a more holistic approach to attracting and supporting international students. This includes not only offering high-quality education and career opportunities but also ensuring social safety, providing financial support, and fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for international students.

5. CONCLUSION

This review of the literature on the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study abroad provides valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and researchers. As the landscape of international education continues to evolve, it is crucial for universities and policymakers to adapt their strategies to meet the changing needs and preferences of Chinese international students.

This review underscores the complexity of factors influencing Chinese students' study abroad decisions, spanning individual aspirations, familial expectations, and global systemic forces. While traditional drivers like educational quality remain pivotal, emerging trends—such as digitalization, regionalization, and post-pandemic safety concerns—demand innovative approaches from stakeholders. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of hybrid learning, intersectional identities (e.g., rural vs. urban students), and the role of emerging destinations in reshaping global education hierarchies. By addressing these dimensions, policymakers and institutions can foster equitable access to international education and enhance the transformative potential of cross-cultural exchanges.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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