

Comparing Research on Chinese Students Study Abroad Decision-making: China-based versus Overseas-based Perspectives

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With its strong economic growth over the past 40 years, China has become a major source of students for international education providers. Previous research has identified some push and pull factors that influence Chinese students' overseas study destination choice. Nevertheless, scholars hold different viewpoints on those factors. Furthermore, those findings may be limited because most research is carried out by overseas-based researchers and, due to the language barrier and/or cultural differences, they may overlook some most recent findings from the Chinese research literature. The aim of this paper is to identify differences between overseas-based and China-based research outcomes in order to develop a more comprehensive view of factors that may impact on mainland Chinese students' overseas destination choice.

Fields of Research: Marketing and International Consumers

1. Introduction

The tendency for students to study outside of their native country has increased as a result of the worldwide trend to globalisation particularly for tertiary education, impacting international higher education in both sourcing and destination countries. The dominant flow of international students is from developing countries to Western developed countries. In particular, out of every ten tertiary students studying overseas, four are Asians (Wang 2007), and China is among the largest sourcing countries for international students. This trend will become more significant in the near future (Liu et al. 2007). In 2011, there were 339,700 Chinese students studying abroad, among whom 12,800 had been sent and paid for by the Chinese government, 12,100 had been sent and paid by other organisations, and 314,800 of whom financed their own expenses (*Chinese Students Abroad - 2011 Figures Released* 2012).

In addition to the traditional international education suppliers, such as America, Canada, England and Australia, many other countries, like New Zealand, Germany, Singapore and Japan have emerged as attractive study abroad destination for Chinese students. In view of the fact that the large amount of Chinese students can contribute to the destination countries' economy, these countries are trying hard to "pull" Chinese students to study there. The financial benefits of playing host to self-financed Chinese students have been well demonstrated. It is forecasted that more countries will enter into this competition to "pull" Chinese students' attention (Lim et al. 2011).

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The education institutions of each country seeking to achieve success to attract Chinese students must undertake a range of strategies suitable for Chinese students. Some studies have examined factors influencing Chinese students' decision on overseas studying destinations. Nevertheless, those findings may be limited because most research work published in the English literature was carried out by overseas researchers rather than Chinese domestic researchers who may have deeper insights into Chinese students' needs and wants. Due to the language barrier and cultural differences, those overseas-based researchers may not be able to fully understand the Chinese changing cultural, social and economic environments' impact on potential Chinese students' motivation to pursue higher degree studies overseas. Moreover, overseas researchers do not have access to much of the Chinese research literature which is more relevant to Chinese students' realities. In addition, most previous research targeted Chinese students who had already started their study overseas. It is certainly possible that those students might change their mind regarding the factors which influence their decision to study abroad after they arrived in the destination countries. The marketing strategy of the host country should target Chinese students who are still in China rather than those who have already emigrated.

It is therefore difficult to apply the exactly ready-made marketing strategies or solutions to win the competition of "pull" Chinese students who choose that country as their study abroad destination. In order to better understand which factors may impact Chinese students overseas study decision making process, it is necessary to explore all the factors which may exert influence on Chinese students' choice of their studying abroad destinations from both overseas-based and China-based research.

In light of the above discussion, the remainder of the article is organised as follows. First, we review some key publications from both the English and the Chinese literature to identify a collection of factors which have significantly influenced Chinese students studying abroad destination choice. Then, using content analysis we will compare the factors found by overseas researchers with those found by China-based researchers. Finally, we summarise the findings and discuss implications of this study for the host country and its institutions.

2. Literature Review

Considering the importance of recruiting international students, many studies have identified factors which may influence international students study abroad decisions. Those factors can be categorised into two groups, push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) defined the push factors as the factors which operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study. In contrast, the pull factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students. These two kinds of factors relate to a two stage decision: whether to go and where to go (Klenosky 2002).

To better understand Chinese students' choice of their overseas study destinations, we tried to identify key factors in terms of push and pull forces following Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) above outlined framework. We researched into both the overseas-based research published in the English literature and the China-based research published in the Chinese literature. We present first the findings of the overseas-based research, and then our attention will shift to findings from the China-based research.

2.1 Overseas-Based Research

Much of the research found in the English literature focuses on identifying factors affecting international students' choice of overseas study destination. That is the Chinese students constitute a subset of the research. One characteristic of these studies is that the researchers designed their research instruments in English initially instead of Chinese due to the language barrier. Then for data collection purposes, either the initial survey questionnaires designed in English were translated into Chinese, or they interviewed Chinese students with the help of a Chinese interpreter.

This stream of literature, as shown in Table 1 below is the main findings from overseas-based research. Even the researcher with a Chinese cultural background conducted the study in Toronto, and the data were collected in English (Chen 2007).

Table 1 identifies certain key factors as having an influence on Chinese students' choice to study abroad from an outsiders' perspective. Those researchers share some similar findings. Key drivers for many Chinese students to seek their tertiary education in the Western developed countries included these factors: the perceived lower educational quality in China, students' ability to enter domestic universities, the desire to understand "West" or gain international experience and the wish to pursue a good career (Bodycott 2009; Chen 2007; Mazzarol et al. 2001).

As shown in Table 1 below, the future immigration opportunities, universities' reputation and content of program, and job prospects in the host country have all played an important role in determining the direction and magnitude of Chinese students to study abroad according to some overseas-based research (Chen 2007; Lawson 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002).

2.2 China-Based Research

The above discussion provides an overview of some factors influencing Chinese students' studying abroad choices as identified in overseas-based research. We should not neglect the China-based literatures due to the fact that this stream of research may reflect on some points a better understanding of Chinese students' needs and wants, because the researcher and the subjects share the same cultural background and speak the same language.

Table 1: Factors Influencing Chinese Students Studying Abroad Based on Overseas Research

Reference	Data Collection Method and Research Objects	Push Factors	Pull Factors
Lawson (2011)	Survey (questionnaire was translated into Chinese) Prospective students, parents, alumni		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Quality of education •Tuition cost •Living cost •Safety •Prospects for PR •Opportunities to work
Bodycott (2009)	Survey and Interview (with Mandarin-speaking assistants) Chinese students and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Perceived higher quality of education in developed country •International/intercultural experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Onsite accommodation •Range of programs available •English-speaking environment •Language and academic support services •General facilities-buildings and grounds •International education experiences during courses •Relatives or friends studying in the area •Social and emotional support services
Chen (2007)	Survey and Interview Students who come from China and other countries enrolled in two Ontario universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Political environment •Educational System •Social capital •Future career •Program Offering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Visa /immigration possibility from third countries •Academic quality •Environment (safety/climate) •Culture/Language •Geographic proximity •Location •Financial aid •Alumni/Friends
Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)	Survey (questionnaire was translated into student's native language) Students from China, Indonesia, Taiwan, and India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Perception that study abroad is better than local study •Students' ability to enter the local university •Desire to understand "West" •Intention to migrate in the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Quality and reputation of the university •Quality of the academic staff •Alumni base •Geographic proximity

Source: developed for this research

China-based research collected data directly in the students' native language Chinese, and the research subjects are those students who were planning to study abroad but were personally still in China when the research was conducted. The researchers are originally from China and therefore they understand the Chinese language and culture. After reviewing the Chinese literature related to the factors which influence Chinese students' choice, the first author of this article translated the findings into English as shown in Table 2.

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Table 2: China-based research of key factors influencing Chinese students study abroad

Reference	Research Approach	Push Factors	Pull Factors
Liu et al.(2012)	Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •China's international cultural exchange •The education method in China •Lack of enrolment opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The different foreign cultural experience •New knowledge and skills •Different education method •Employment prospects
Dong (2012)	Literature method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The rapid development of Chinese national economy •Family funding to support their children's education fee •The Chinese government pursues more lenient studying abroad policy •Diversify educational choices in China 	
Hong (2010)	Econometric analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Appearance of the study abroad agency •Personal environment 	
Wu et al. (2010)	Literature method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Perceived national power gap between China and developed countries •Foreign degree recognized in China •Higher wages of returnee than local graduates, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Provide scholarship •Lower entrance requirements •Issue working visa for students after they graduate •The degree of social welfare •Respected degree higher than the home country •Wage level in host country,
Yan (2010)	Survey		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Supervisors' research area and academic level •Reputation of the university •Research Fund
Lu et.al (2009)	Self-completed questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Motivation to live and work overseas •Availability of sponsorship •Well-designed information website in local language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •University ranking •Range and quality of services offered by host university •Well-designed university website
Li & Bray (2007)	Survey Interview		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Job prospects •Ethnic identity •Merger of Chinese and Western culture •The distinctive features of university
Yang (2007)	Survey In-depth interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Gain Western experience •Have international exposure •Learn western culture •Improve English •Difficult to gain entry in Chinese universities •Become better prepared for their career in the future •Conceptions that overseas education is better •Family's financial background •Have broader perspective on life •Travel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Future immigration opportunities •High quality of Education •Lower cost of study and living •Wide range of programs
Zheng & Dai (2006)	Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The possibility of study abroad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The teaching quality of the foreign university •The reputation of the university •The opportunity to improve English •Broaden the social network •Experience the Western culture •The possibility of immigration.
He (2005)	Literature method Comparative analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lower quality of the quality of educational research •Resource distributed unevenly 	

Source: Developed for this research

Compared to the overseas-based research, China-based research proposed more factors that might influence Chinese students' choice of study abroad. Those factors cover almost all aspects of the Chinese society.

As shown in Table 2 above, some scholars thought that due to historical and cultural differences between China and the Western developed countries, the educational quality and research quality in most Chinese universities is perceived inferior or at a lower level.

Some researches took a macro-environment analysis approach to find reasons for Chinese students to study abroad. They concentrated on analysing the direction of Chinese government policy of supporting Chinese students study abroad. In recent years, the Chinese government pursued more lenient studying abroad policy to diversify educational choices for students in China (Dong 2012).

The social and psychological concerns of Chinese students mainly reflect their cultural background. Chinese students love to experience the different foreign culture, learning new knowledge and skills. When Chinese students notice that more and more peers study abroad, they choose to study abroad to prevent being at a competitive disadvantage in the job market. Attracted by foreign countries' favourable conditions, most students would like to take their tertiary education in Western developed countries (Yao 2004).

A well-designed information website in Chinese is proposed as a new factor in China-based research. This is partly because of the diminishing credibility of the study abroad agency's services (Yang 2007). So the well-designed university website can provide quality service information for students which will attract Chinese students to choose that university (Lu et al. 2009).

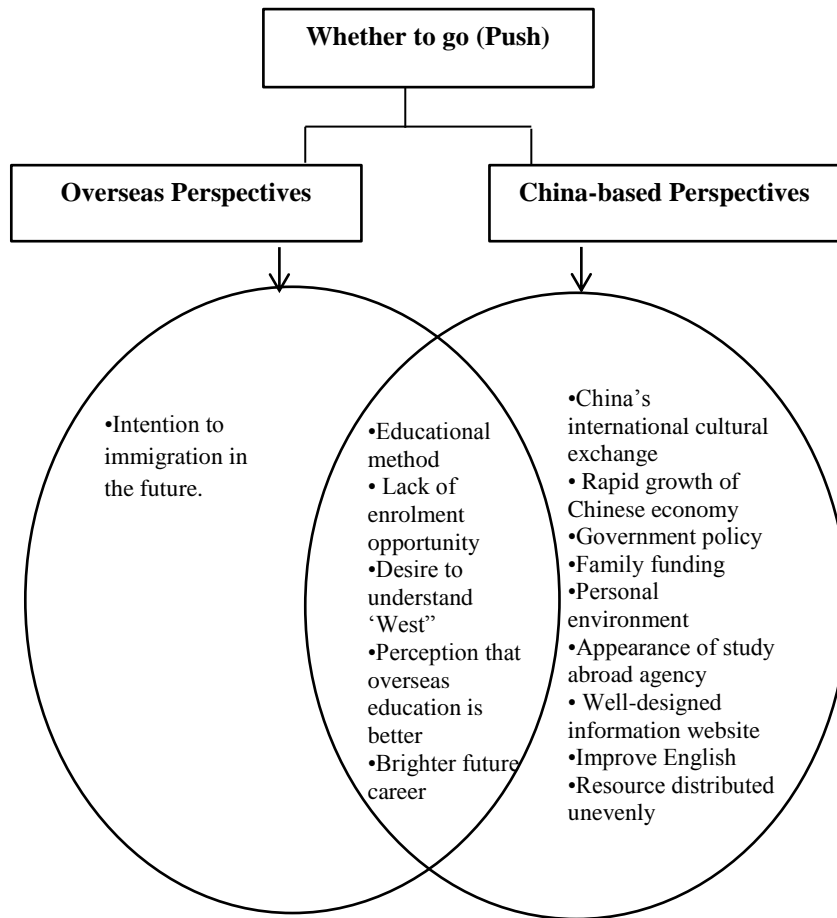
3. Methodology

Based on the above review, it is evident that there are similar and different viewpoints between China-based and overseas based researchers on the findings of what factors affect Chinese students studying abroad.

3.1 China-Based versus Overseas Perspective: Whether to Study Abroad

Chinese scholars and overseas scholars shared the similar perspectives as for whether Chinese students deciding to study abroad (See Figure 1). Both China-based research and overseas-based research found that many Chinese students want to avoid the harsh competition of entering the Chinese domestic universities (lack of enrolment opportunity). The training and learning system of Chinese education system has not kept pace with its economic growth. Even though the Chinese government has increased the number of universities and colleges, competition is still very strong to gain admittance.

Figure 1: China-Based versus Overseas Perspective: Whether to Study Abroad



Source: Developed for this Study.

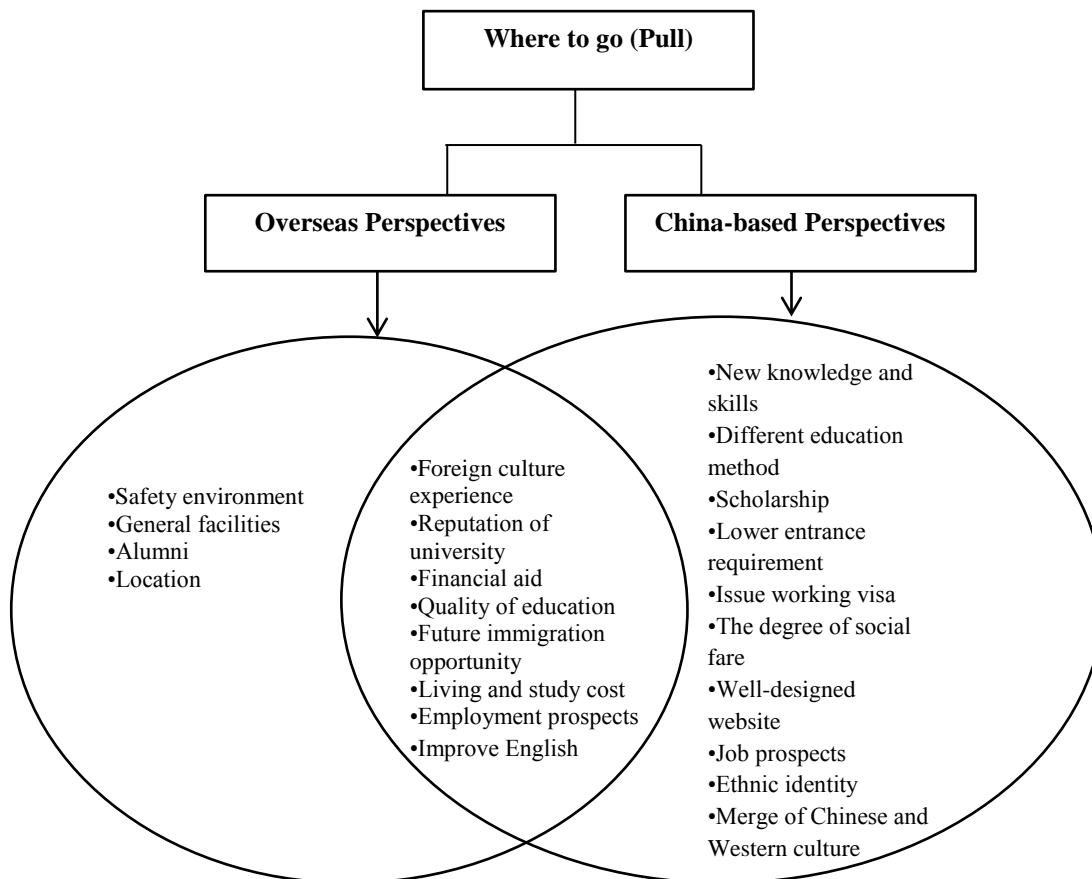
The differences of the viewpoints between Chinese and overseas scholars on whether to study overseas are obvious. Firstly, the overseas-based researchers paid more attention to pull factors than to push factors, while China-based researchers addressed both push and pull factors evenly. This difference might be due to the language barrier or to the fact that overseas scholars lacked Chinese cultural background. Furthermore, Chinese scholars stressed the rapid development of Chinese national economy providing a chance for Chinese students to pursue their higher education abroad. The growth of Chinese family income promoted the development of the overseas study market.

China-based research also stressed the important impact of social and economic influence on Chinese students' decision making. The students perceived that their peers who are returnees might have a better salary than the local graduates. In addition, the rapid internationalization of the Chinese economy makes English an important skill when students look for jobs, so the purpose of mastering fluent English is also a major influencing factor. There is only one factor which overseas scholars identified but has not been confirmed by Chinese scholars, and that is the intention to immigrate in the future.

3.2 China-Based versus Overseas Perspective: Where to Study Abroad

China-based research and overseas based research also share some similar viewpoints on where Chinese students are going (See Figure 2). Firstly, both Chinese and overseas scholars have recognized that the main attraction of destination countries for Chinese students include the foreign culture experience, improving English capability, reputation of university, quality of education, availability of financial aid, living and studying costs, employment prospects, and future immigration possibility.

Figure 2: China-based versus Overseas Perspective: Where to study abroad



Source: developed for this study

China-based and overseas-based studies hold some different viewpoints in terms of where to go. Chinese scholars noticed that the entrance requirements of studying abroad are lower than for entering Chinese universities. Furthermore, some host countries issue working visas for students after they graduate which greatly attract Chinese students. Many believe that students who have overseas working experiences will have better job opportunities in China than local graduate students, because the economic development of China needs more employees with international perspectives and experiences. Overseas based research proposes some factors that are not studied by Chinese scholars. These factors include safety environment in host country, general facilities in the host university, alumni and university’s location.

4. Analysis

Chinese and overseas scholars study the same problem, but it leads to some different conclusions. One of the reasons is that the language barrier generates the different research subjects and research outcomes. Although a questionnaire used by those overseas researchers can be easily translated into Chinese, the design of the questionnaire will not be the same due to the cultural differences between China and the West. Furthermore, the fact that employing a Chinese interpreter conducting the interviews will also affect the final research results, because the interpreter's performance will directly affect the results of interviews. The interpreter should be not only competent in both the target and the source languages, but also needs to have cultural competence of the target culture and the source culture. In the overseas-based research we cannot evaluate the interpreters' competency; accordingly it is hard to ensure the quality of the collected data.

In addition, those overseas based researchers usually targeted Chinese students who have already arrived in their host countries and started their study with a Western university. This might be due to the language barrier or convenience of contacting the potential research objects. However, a natural question arises about this kind of data collection. How can we know these students did not change their minds after their arrival in the host countries compared with the time when they were in China? If the aim is to enrol Chinese students to Western universities, those subject students should still be in China and are in the stage of planning to study abroad. Students might change their perspectives for different reasons due to their actual overseas experiences.

Furthermore, the researchers might bring biases and prejudices to their work. These are rooted in their knowledge and personal experience (Dennis & Giangreco 1996). Scholars have described the basic problem as 'How do we know the informant is telling the truth' (Atkinson et al. 2003) or "the difference between what people say and what they actually do" (Deutscher 1973). These arguments do not ask us to give up the use of the interview data in standard ways, but alert us about the limits to what could be inferred from the data. The cultural identities of the researcher could influence the validity and credibility of qualitative interviewing (Fern 2001). The interviewer collects data and has a significant impact on the quality of the data. The facial expressions, body gestures, tone, way of outfit, and style of terminology may present bias and prejudice. Similarly, the interviewer's age, social status, race, and gender can generate bias. In particular, Chinese teenagers were sensitive to the interviewer's cultural identity. That is, such issues as the interviewer's physical appearance and language fluency would decide whether interviewees might withhold or reveal certain kinds of information (Song & Parker 1995).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to cross-cultural research regarding Chinese students' decision making process of study abroad. Our results delineate critical differences between Chinese students' decision process to study overseas as studied by Chinese researchers with previous overseas based research. Chinese students' decision to study abroad and their choice of a preferred destination were found to be influenced more by factors grounded in students' social influences, perceived high educational quality in destination countries and social-economic pragmatism.

The specific aim of this study is to compare overseas-based research and China-based

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research regarding factors that may influence Chinese students' decisions on their overseas studies. A major contribution of this study is that we identified some similarities as well as significant differences between the overseas-based research and China-based research.

A second contribution lies in analysing and understanding the reasons behind these differences. The qualitative research methods usually lead to cultural bias. When Chinese students participate in interviews, they are easily under the influence of the interviewer; the answer they gave might cater to the interviewer needs. Furthermore, due to language barriers, the overseas-based researchers usually recruit Chinese students who have already started their study overseas, while China-based research usually targeted the Chinese students who have not started their tertiary education overseas. This could easily lead to the different research outcomes. Finally, also contributing to the differences between China-based and overseas research is that many overseas-based researches ignored the analysis of historical and social environments in China. .

The findings from this study support some previous research findings, but also exhibit some differences from the previous studies. The previous studies mainly focus on Chinese students who have already started their study overseas. The previous literature is based on those studies and ignores the research findings from China-based research. The China based research provides more perspective than overseas-based research regarding either push or pull factors which influence Chinese students to study overseas. An examination of China based research suggests host countries and their education institutions need to consider the importance of influencing factors for Chinese students to study abroad from both the overseas-based research and the China-based research. By understanding Chinese history and culture, we understand the high place of education in Chinese tradition, so that the education quality of host universities is likely to remain the most important factor influencing Chinese student's choice. This highlights the need for host countries and universities to improve their education quality and to offer a variety of courses and programs to attract Chinese students. In addition, as Chinese families and students pay more attention to the situation of finding a job after graduation, providing more practical courses are very important to Chinese students.

The international student recruitment market plays a key role in shaping and challenging the higher education sector in countries around the world. As highlighted in this study, when we take an in-depth study in this field, it requires taking consideration of overseas-based as well as the study of China-based research. Success in the mainland Chinese tertiary education recruitment market requires a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese cultural, social, and historical values. With the advance of time, many factors are changing now. In future studies, we should pay attention and check changes of such factors and explore new emerging factors which may influence the decisions of the Chinese students.

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