

Becoming a mobile student—The process and reasons why Chinese students choose Italy

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Abstract. In the context of the internationalization of higher education and the yearly increase in the number of Chinese students in Italy, this paper examines the processes and reasons why Chinese students choose Italy. Using a semi-structured interview with ten English-taught Master's students at the University of Padova in Italy, the study illustrates the reasons why Chinese students choose Italy by focusing on previous mobility experiences and the social embeddedness of the students and incorporating push and pull models from the international student mobility literature. The paper finds that previous successful mobility experiences and the social networks in which students are embedded foster the formation of study abroad perceptions. Economic factors, a novel curriculum, high quality of education, and low entry language requirements were key factors in choosing Italy.

Keywords: student mobility, Chinese international student, English-based course

1. Introduction

Student mobility has become a widely discussed topic in recent years, and the continuing internationalization of higher education worldwide is now giving young people a multiple choice of where to study. According to the White Paper on International Students in China 2022, China will have around 875,000 international students in 2022, making it the largest source country for international students, and the trend is towards a more diverse choice of countries, with a decline in the number of students choosing traditional study destinations such as the UK, US, and Australia, and an increase in the number of Chinese students in countries such as Italy, Spain and Norway¹. The spread of English as a language of instruction has eliminated the limitations of language barriers and attracted many international students. The number of courses taught in English in Italy is also increasing, and in 2012 the Rector of the Politecnico di Milano announced that from 2015 all Masters and PhD. courses would be taught in English, which has generated much controversy, but there is no doubt that the trend toward English-taught courses is unstoppable. According to data from the Italian Education Centre in 2020, the number of Chinese international students pre-registered is largely on the increase, from 370 in 2009 to 2,191 in 2020², and this number is predicted to increase significantly after the epidemic.

The continued growth in the number of Chinese students in Italy has attracted the attention of scholars. There is a large body of literature on the mobility of Chinese students in Italy, but most of the studies have been conducted on Italian-medium students and have mostly dealt with the wider implications of the geographical mobility of students such as the economic and social impact on the receiving country, the class entrenchment in the sending country and the brain drain. However, this paper returns to the question of why students move to study in another country or why they choose that country as a study destination before they move. In “Study in Italy, why Italy”, Wang Jun shows that Italy’s long history and friendly policies towards Chinese students are key to attracting Chinese students, while Xue Hongwei in “Overview of the situation of self-funded students in China” gives a detailed list of the “pull” factors of studying in Italy, such as low living costs, easy access to job opportunities, etc. This paper critiques this view, which is mostly static, i.e. treating student mobility as a momentary decision, and instead takes a process perspective, incorporating a “push-pull” model, to show that the choice of student destination is a complex and time-consuming process. The article is divided into five parts, the first is a review of the literature on becoming an internationally mobile student, the second is the research methodology, the third is the impact of mobility capital and social networks on students, and the fourth attempts to analyze what drives students to eventually move to Italy through the push and pull factors in the international education model. The fifth part concludes the whole paper and calls for a focus on student integration.

¹ Report on the Development of Study in China (2020—2021)

² Database Italia

2. Student mobility in the context of internationalisation of higher education

Economic globalization and the international integration of higher education are part of the macro context that drives the international mobility of students. Both globalization and internationalization are dynamic processes rather than static situations and have different impacts in different societies [1]. In some cases, globalization and internationalization are seen as a threat, but in other cases, they are seen as an opportunity. For Chinese students, opportunities are generally seen as stronger than threats. Due to the Chinese government's strict control of higher education enrolment, only about 25 percent of high school students are allowed to enter universities in developed cities such as Shanghai and Beijing [2]. The internationalization of higher education has provided Chinese students with a variety of learning opportunities.

A number of studies have explored the reasons for the choice of study destinations, and the answers are always based on a variety of factors in different areas that are considered to facilitate or hinder student mobility, so they are often referred to as “push and pull” factors, or drivers and barriers to mobility. Altbach proposed a push-pull model of international student mobility in 1998, noting that some students are driven by disadvantages in their home countries, while others are attracted by scholarships and other opportunities in host countries. Some studies have refined the “push and pull” factors, with HEFCE listing international, national, institutional, and individual level factors [3]. Fakunle concludes that key push factors include lack of study opportunities at home and recognition of the quality of education in the host country, while pull factors include quality of education, the reputation of the university, quality staff, and ample opportunities for future employment [4]. However the standard push-pull model focuses only on external factors and ignores the personal characteristics of the decision maker, and some studies have added to this deficiency, for example by advancing the model to a psychological level, where for example fear of recognition of a degree abroad or fear of leaving one's family and friends are cited as deterrents to student mobility, while good foreign language skills are the driving force. While some scholars have argued that the model previously discussed is a “demand-side” theory from the student's perspective, what is needed is a closer look at the role of the supply side that guides student mobility, i.e. admissions agencies, universities, government agencies, and policies, in guiding students' choice of destination. Furthermore, a large body of research on student mobility suggests that higher social class and previous experiences of geographical mobility increase the likelihood of leaving the country [5]. Both the “demand-side” and “supply-side” perspectives fall into a narrow focus of choice models that generalize student mobility as a one-off choice at one point in time and ignore the dynamic nature of mobility choices. As King points out, “migration cannot be thought of as a single decision by an individual at a single moment in time”.

Mobility itself can be conceptualized as a form of capital, a concept developed by Murphy in her anthropological study of student mobility in Europe, where she argues that mobile capital is “a subcomponent of human capital that enables individuals to improve their skills as a result of the rich international experience gained by living abroad” [6], mobile capital exists alongside the other types of capital identified by Bourdieu (cultural, social, economic, symbolic) and it can be transformed into or generated by these other types. The choice of different study destinations is linked to the capital one has and the capital one expects to acquire in the future, so the process of choosing a study destination is also a choice process in which the pros and cons are weighed. The social embeddedness of education cannot be overlooked in this choice process, and as has been noted in a wide variety of articles addressing migration studies, the choice of migration is often tied to the embeddedness of migrants in social relations that tend to cause or guide their geographical migration [7]. This paper will therefore also highlight the importance of various social networks in explaining why students choose to study abroad.

If previous experiences of geographical mobility do increase the likelihood of going abroad, then the choice of destination in relation to study abroad necessitates linking actual mobility associated with study to the capital it possesses and future aspirations it acquires in order to understand how the corresponding motivations contribute to the choice of student mobility destination. This paper, therefore, links study abroad to its early life experiences and social embeddedness, with the choice of specific study destinations analyzed according to push and pull factors.

3. Methodology

According to statistics, Italy ranks ninth in the choice of destinations for Chinese students in 2021 and is on a year-on-year upward trend. There is currently little research on the choice of English-taught courses in Italy by Chinese students, and this study seeks to fill this gap to enrich the literature on international student mobility.

This paper uses semi-structured interviews and chooses the University of Padova as the research site. The University of Padova is one of the top-ranked comprehensive universities in Italy and there are no official statistics on the exact number of Chinese students, but according to data from social networking software (WeChat), about 77 Chinese freshmen entered the university in 2022. A “snowball” sampling method was used, first through personal contacts and then through the interviewees' networks, with a total of five interviewees selected for this paper, which may lack representativeness due to the small sample size, but in order to reduce bias, English-taught Master's students who were also enrolled in 2022 but in five different majors, two male, and three female, were chosen for this paper. The interviews took an average of one hour and were conducted in Chinese. All interviews were recorded, translated, and transcribed. This paper will combine the reasons why international students choose English-taught programs in Italy with their selection process of the push and pull model in international education and the social relations of the students embedded in it.

4. Studying abroad is a socially embedded process

When explaining why they chose to study abroad, respondents cited previous experiences of studying abroad and the influence of other people on them, such as parents, teachers, and friends. It is not possible to say with certainty whether these factors led to mobility, but using them as a signal of the social embeddedness of student mobility allows us to understand that student mobility is not a spur-of-the-moment decision by individuals, but is gradually shaped by social networks and previous mobility experiences.

4.1. Previous mobility experience

Murphy explains the concept of mobility capital by referring to the first experience of adapting to a new environment, which, if the initial 'culture shock' is positively overcome, acts as a facilitation. Wang mentions that "during my first Master's degree I went on an exchange to Hong Kong and Singapore, and although it was only for three months in total and I was under pressure to do research and go to bed at 2 am every night, I really learned how to write academic papers and realized that the quality of education in China lagged behind that abroad. I also realized that the quality of education in China lagged behind that in foreign countries, and I liked the studying mode in foreign countries so much that I decided during the exchange period that I would definitely choose to go abroad if I wanted to continue my PhD. Liao's exchange experience in Korea showed her that she doesn't have to worry about communication in daily life when studying an English course in a non-English speaking country "English is very widespread in developed countries and students move around university campuses, so I don't have to worry about communication at all, which is why I feel comfortable choosing a non-English speaking country to study in". Ning, who has had a lot of international mobility, says, "I did my high school and undergraduate studies in the United States and my internship in Europe, and I'm used to being on the move. I'm planning to study abroad this year when the international epidemic situation improves."

4.2. Social networks

When interviewees talked about the events that led them to study abroad, they had to bring up social relations such as family, teachers and friends, which also reveals the social embeddedness of what is known as mobile students. "Embeddedness" was first introduced by Granovetter in his explanation of economically relevant actions and outcomes, stating that "actions are social and cannot be explained by reference to individual motivations alone, and are therefore "embedded in an ongoing network of personal relationships rather than conducted by individual actors"³, a theory that is also applicable to the study of international student mobility.

"All my classmates were posting articles in English, and instead of doing their PhDs in China after their masters, they all applied to universities abroad. So as soon as I enrolled, my teacher told me I could prepare for the IELTS test to prepare for studying abroad later" (Wang). Liao also cites the influence of key people on him: "When I was at university, I met a senior who had gone abroad and described his life and studies abroad to me, and I decided then that I wanted to go abroad for my master's degree as well. In addition to the role of key people, we cannot ignore the influence of family: "My father is a university teacher and has many colleagues whose children have done their masters abroad, and he thought that the quality of education in foreign universities was higher, so he told me to go abroad for my masters when I first entered university" (Yi).

Previous mobility experiences and the social network in which one finds oneself have led to the idea or belief that studying abroad is a matter of course, and to behavioural preparations (such as preparing for the IELTS exam). However, the final choice of destination is a matter of weighing up the pros and cons.

5. Study abroad destination is the choice after comparison

The analysis of the five interviewees' interviews reveals that four of them did not choose Italy as their first choice of the country during the application process, but were one of many countries to target, but were driven by different factors to finally choose Italy as a study destination.

"Before I started my application, I selected my target as a European country through information search, and then made a number of applications, targeting the top 300 schools according to QS ranking, applying to France, Italy, Switzerland, and Denmark, and got an offer from every school except for the university in France".

"I applied to the Universities of Edinburgh and Bristol in the UK, Tilburg in the Netherlands and KU Leuven in Belgium, and also chose two universities in Hong Kong as guaranteed schools, and got offers from each of them".

The internationalization of higher education gives students a greater choice of mobility destinations, with students being able to make multiple joint applications but ultimately choosing only one university. From the interviews, it is possible to summarise the factors that influence international students' final choice of Italy: (1) the cost of study; (2) the curriculum; (3) entry language requirements.

³ Official data on study in Italy released. Retrived from <http://www.turadu.com/article/170.asp>

5.1. Study cost

In all the literature on international student mobility, economic factors are inevitably the ones that need to be mentioned. In Peter's assessment of the factors that attract and influence decisions on study destinations, scholarships and the cost of study are two key factors. In a study involving 1,621 international students from Indonesia, Taiwan, India, and China, Mazzarol lists six factors that influence international students' final destination choice, with the issue of the cost being one of them. In a qualitative study of 24 students from international schools, Buchanan illustrated that low tuition fees and low cost of living were important influences on the choice of country. In the interviews, each student mentioned Italy's low tuition fees and cost of living as important factors that attracted them.

Liao jokingly said, "If I had the money, why wouldn't I go to the US?"

"My family will not support me financially because I am already working, so the first factor in choosing a country is cost-effectiveness" (Han).

"The tuition fees and living costs in the UK are just too high, one year in the UK costs more than two years in Italy, so although the UK was the country I wanted to go to since I was a child, I gave it up after thinking rationally" (Yi).

In addition to the low cost of study, Italy's rich scholarship policy, such as Foreign Ministry scholarships and regional bursaries, is a strong pull for international students.

"My boyfriend and I both got offers from Spain and Italy, but we both got regional bursaries in Italy and the canteens are free, which, together with our previous savings, completely covered the costs for two years" (Han).

"I was torn between a German university and an Italian university, but in July I applied for a scholarship from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for €900 per month, while the German university's scholarship application failed, so I choose to come to Italy" (Ning).

5.2. The curriculum

In the literature on the international mobility of Chinese students, the inadequate supply of university degrees and rigid teaching methods in mainland China and the higher level of education in overseas universities than in Chinese universities are important reasons for choosing to study abroad. In Peter's study, the range of courses available, the physical learning environment, and the international status/reputation of the university were factors that were important to students' choices. In the interviews, respondents indicated that they "apply to any program that is relevant to their major or interests at the time of application, but only after they have received offers do they make a careful selection" (Han). All interviewees described a careful screening process before choosing a school, browsing the school's website and searching for information on social media to learn about the program's curriculum, and canceling the program if it did not align with their interests and future career plans.

"My father is a university teacher and at the time I was accepted to four universities and when I was struggling with which one to choose, I showed my father the courses offered at each one and he decided then and there that I should come to Padua because he thought it was multidisciplinary and new and that I could really learn" (Yi).

The costs in Europe (not the UK) are generally lower than in English-speaking countries such as the UK, the US, and Australia. After receiving offers from different countries at the same time, the degree to which the course curriculum matches their interests and future plans is a key factor for students to consider, and most respondents said that their future plans are to continue their studies and do a PhD degree, so they want to improve their research skills through the master's program. "I would like to go on to do a PhD and that is why I chose to come to Padua, the university is more capable in research and the course teachers are very responsible" (Wei).

5.3. Entry language requirements

Good foreign language skills are considered to be an important factor in driving international students abroad, but language can also be a barrier to studying abroad. According to the general requirements of the British government, university graduates who have studied for a bachelor's degree in China for four or five years and have a TOEFL score of 80 or above or an IELTS score of 6.5 or above can enter a British university at the master's level [8], but the IELTS requirements vary from one subject to another, e.g. a 7 (6.5) or above is commonly required for humanities and social sciences.

Han says, "I had already studied a master's degree and wanted to apply directly for a PhD, but I took the IELTS test about nine times and was unable to get a 6.5, so I finally gave up and went to work for two years. After working, I found that I still liked campus life, so I tried IELTS again and got a 6 after two attempts, and I didn't want to do a language course in the UK, but I found out that the English requirement for a Master's degree in Italy is 6, so I chose to do another Master's degree in Italy."

"I actually wanted to go to KU Leuven and the Cultural Anthropology course was more in line with my interests, but it requires an IELTS of 7 and a writing sub-score of 7. I took the test three times and eventually only got 6.5 (5.5), and 7 (7) was a score I had difficulty getting, so I gave up going to Leuven" (Yi).

For non-Italian majors, passing the Italian language proficiency exam is more difficult than the English exam, which is why some students choose English-taught courses". I studied Italian for two months in the summer of my third year, but I found the

grammar difficult and it was harder to reach B2 level in a year, so when I heard about the English-taught courses, I stopped studying Italian and prepared to take the IELTS. The agent said that the PTE test was easier than the IELTS test and that Italian schools recognized it, so I ended up taking the PTE test.

Analysis of the interviews shows that Italy is not the only destination for international students wishing to enroll in an English-medium course and that comparative choices are only made after a large number of schools have applied and received offers of places. The low cost of study and the scholarship policy in favor of international students, the innovative design of the courses and the good quality of education, and the low language requirement are three important influencing factors that lead international students to choose Italy for their studies among the many national decisions.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Focusing on the application process of five Chinese English-taught Master's students at the University of Padova in Italy, this paper analyses the reasons why Chinese students choose to study abroad and eventually become Master's students in Italy, in relation to the push and pull model in international education.

The choice to study abroad is not an instantaneous personal decision; it is gradually shaped by the social network of relationships with which the individual is embedded and by previous successful mobility experiences. Using mobility capital theory as a starting point, Murphy argues that students' thoughts about studying abroad are shaped by their earlier successful mobility experiences, which leads to the formation of a habitual tendency that facilitates mobility to happen again. The interviewees' previous international mobility experiences enabled them to overcome their fear of unfamiliar surroundings, to know that they were capable of living abroad and that the rewarding experience made them want to try studying abroad again in order to improve the abilities that they had not been able to gain by studying at home in China. Good mobility experiences convince students that studying abroad is beneficial to their growth, and the social network in which they are embedded implicitly shapes the idea of studying abroad in the minds of individuals. On the one hand, the resources (e.g. information, mobility capital) that students gain through their social connections lead to their mobility, and on the other hand, students' mobility is also generated by their reaction to their social embeddedness (e.g. the mobility experiences of relatives or friends).

The choice of final destination is a combination of factors that are considered by the individual and their family. International students who choose an English-taught Master's program often make multiple applications and Italy is not their only destination, but it is their final mobility destination after taking into account the cost of study, the curriculum, and the language requirements. Italy's low registration and living costs, combined with a scholarship policy that benefits international students, reduce the financial pressure on international students and make study affordable for individuals or families. The innovative curriculum and high quality of teaching are key points in choosing the University of Padua. The relatively low English language requirements of Italian universities are a key pull factor for students who do not achieve good results in their language exams to choose Italy. After spending three months in Italy, all five respondents were satisfied with the living and learning environment in Italy, but four said that their inability to speak Italian made it difficult to communicate with locals and integrate into the local community, and that they had difficulty making foreign friends and were on the fringes of the class with a sense of alienation due to their weak English skills and inability to fully understand the class content. The issue of social integration of Chinese students and whether language standards should be raised is worth further debate.

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