

Research on the Social Causes Behind the Phenomenon of Studying Abroad in Mainland China

- Taking High School Students as an Example

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Abstract: With the rapid development of China's economy, the exchanges between China and the outside world are becoming increasingly close, and the exchanges in education are no exception. More and more Chinese families choose to send their children to study abroad, and China has become the largest source of international students in the world. However, for a long time, the difficulty of applying for prestigious universities has increased year by year, and the problems such as the increase in living costs still exist objectively. In order to fully understand the real reasons why high school students choose to study abroad, as well as the fundamental reasons why the number of Chinese students choose to study abroad is not decreasing but increasing during the epidemic period, this study is based on Otterbach's push-pull theory, and adopts literature analysis and interview method to conduct case analysis. The research objects are overseas undergraduate students and international high school students in mainland China. Through the research, it is found that the social causes of Chinese high school students' choosing to study abroad mainly stem from two factors: different education systems and students' surrounding environment.

Keywords: international students, push-pull theory, motivation to study abroad, education system, educational internationalization

1. Introduction

After entering the 21st century, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has skyrocketed. The Report on China's Study Abroad Development (2020-2021) and the Report on China's Study Abroad Development (2021-2022) both show that the number of Chinese studying abroad continues to grow [1]. Despite the obstacles to exchange between countries during the epidemic, the number of international students is still growing steadily, so what is the root cause of this phenomenon? This study considers that it is necessary to explore this phenomenon. In the literature review, it is found that most studies on the motivation to study abroad focus on the undergraduate stage. Some scholars in mainland China believe that the motivation of Chinese college students to study abroad mainly stems from six factors: to receive better education, to better realize career ideals, to promote growth, to gain recognition, to aspire to foreign countries, and to be influenced by the external environment [2]. For high school students, when choosing a place to study abroad, it is not only based on the

consideration of the consumption value of higher education services; At the same time, it is also a consideration of investment behavior, that is the income and employment prospects of studying abroad [3]. It can be seen that different age groups have different priorities for studying abroad. At the same time, it is found in the research process that most of the existing studies on Chinese high school students studying abroad focus on the social level or the individual level unilaterally, and few studies combine the two factors. This study hopes to fill the gap in this respect. Based on the theory of push and pull, this study also hopes to analyze the influence of social environmental factors and personal subjective views on the decision of Chinese high school students to choose undergraduate study abroad.

2. Research Design

The interview method is the main research method in this study. In order to ensure the smooth conduct of the interview, the interview outline will be designed in advance before the interview, and the interview time will be determined in advance with the students who choose to study abroad, and the interview time will be determined in advance with the students who choose to study abroad. Then the online interview will be conducted, and the recording will be made with the knowledge and permission of the parties. The research on related topics is mainly based on questionnaire surveys, and the interview method is rarely used in the research on this topic. This study believes that the interview method can make up for the lack of understanding of the respondents. At the same time, in order to better cooperate with the analysis of the interview results, the interview outline, while inquiring about personal information, draws on the conclusions of the push-pull theoretical model obtained from relevant literature, and on this basis, combined with the psychological characteristics of high school students, sets questions for the analysis of the results, and forms a transcript for analysis after the recording.

2.1. Push-Pull Theory

The theory of push and pull originated in the 19th century, when the British scholar Ravenstein first used it to study the law of population migration. After the 1950s, Donald Borg introduced the concept system of population migration into the push-pull theory and used the push-pull factor model to analyze the influencing factors of population flow. In the 1960s, American scholar E.S. Lee proposed a systematic theory of population migration, and used “push” and “pull” to divide factors affecting migration. E.S. Lee believed that push was a negative factor, pushing people to leave the place of residence was due to dissatisfaction with the current status, and the attraction of the receiving place to the circulating population represented a positive pull. In the mid-1970s, Mike Mahon first cited push and pull theory to analyze the reasons for the transnational flow of international students. The push and pull theory is rich in connotation, including the theoretical viewpoints of demography, sociology and economics, and can analyze the fundamental factors of population flow from the macro social level and the micro individual psychological level. With the deepening of exchanges between countries, the academic community has also proposed push-pull theoretical models from different perspectives to explain the circulation phenomenon of international students. Li Xiuzhen believes that the current common push-pull models of international student mobility are mainly divided into two categories: the push-pull model of external factors and the push-pull model of internal and external factors. Altbach is the representative scholar of the external factor push-pull model, which explains the attractiveness of overseas students in political economy and other fields from the external perspectives of sociology, economics and so on. Based on Altbach’s model, Li Mei, a Chinese scholar, expanded the theoretical framework into an analysis model that attaches equal importance to internal and external factors [4]. The theory maintains that external social factors and internal personal factors

are equally important factors in students' decision to study abroad [5]. This paper formulated the interview content and analyzed the results based on the theory of this framework.

2.2. Interview Framework

A total of nine people were interviewed in this study, all of whom were graduates or current international high school students in mainland China. Among the nine people, six were overseas undergraduate students and three were international high school students in mainland China, among whom one student was studying IB and two were studying VCE.

The interview outline sets the interviewees' different views on Chinese and foreign education, various factors affecting their decision to study abroad and personal future planning, etc., to analyze the influence of external and internal factors on high school students' choice of overseas undergraduate study.

The following is the summary table of the interviewees.

Table 1: Summary of information on interviewees.

Respondent number	School attended	Country/province city	Major/Course	grade	Paternal occupation	Maternal occupation	Annual household income
A01	Curtin University	Australia	Mining engineering	Sophomore year	Engineer	inoccupation	Middle class
A02	Shanghai Suntech International Experimental School	Shanghai	IB	Year 12	Internet company	Internet company	700,000 RMB
A03	University of Melbourne	Australia	Electrical engineering	Sophomore year	Self-owned enterprise	Self-owned enterprise	Middle class or above
A04	University of Sydney	Australia	Mathematics	Junior year	Government agency	Government agency	Middle class
A05	Jiang Yan No. 2 High School International Department	Taizhou, Jiangsu Province	VCE	Year 12	Self-owned enterprise	inoccupation	Middle class or above
A06	University of Sydney	Australia	Science	Freshman	Self-owned enterprise	Self-owned enterprise	More than 2 million RMB
A07	University of Manchester	British	Education	Junior year	Enterprise management	Enterprise management	Middle class

Table 1: (continued).

A08	Jiang Yan No. 2 High School International Department	Taizhou, Jiangsu Province	VCE	Year 11	Government agency	Enterprise management	Middle class
A09	University of Warwick	British	Business administration	Sophomore year	Self-owned enterprise	Self-owned enterprise	Middle class

Xu Qiao from Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, in her master's thesis "Research on the Motivation of Shanghai High School Students to Study in the UK", used Nvivo software to conduct first-level coding, second-level coding and selective coding of her interview text, and finally extracted the five motivations of Shanghai high school students to study in the UK [6]. This study's result analysis is based on this method, Using the coding function of Nvivo, 237 concepts were obtained through preliminary coding of the collected interview results, and then the same or similar concepts were simplified and combined, and the following 14 categories were finally obtained.

Table 2: Summary of interview results.

Principal category	Coded total	Corresponding category	Code number
External thrust	72	Not suitable for domestic education	64
		Higher education in China is inadequate	4
		The domestic study is not ideal	4
External tension	71	The admission system is reasonable	27
		Educational concept compatibility	17
		Quality education	10
		Diversified learning	7
		Subject knowledge	6
		University ranking	4
Individual objective condition	9	Other's influence	9
Individual subjective motivation	85	Personal development	46
		Good job prospects	21
		Cultivate a global perspective	11
		Yearn for a foreign environment	7

3. Analysis

From the interview results in Table 2, four main reasons for Chinese mainland high school students to study abroad are preliminarily obtained. Then, according to the push-pull factors in the push-pull theory, the following three reasons are finally obtained: China's domestic education system as the external push to promote students to study abroad, the pull force of foreign education system to promote students to study abroad, and the personal factors of students.

3.1. External Thrust

As the Table 2 shown, the most frequently mentioned part of external reasoning is their dissatisfaction with the domestic education system. Respondents believe that the competition in China's entrance examination is too fierce. The second interviewee in Table 1 said: "It's like Darwinian law, you only have better people who can survive in such a tough environment at home unless you take some shortcuts and get out of the competitive environment." The fierce competition in China makes the selectivity of middle school education too prominent, and the teaching mode that only focuses on students' academic performance and ignores students' personal growth further expands students' disappointment. It can be found from the interview results that it is particularly difficult to obtain the admission qualification of famous universities in China's college entrance examination system, and most of the interviewed students in Table 1 are not satisfied with only being admitted to an ordinary undergraduate school, so they choose to leave the domestic competitive environment and take foreign high school courses to obtain a better education diploma. They believe that this can help them better establish their academic advantages compared with domestic students. In the high-intensity competitive environment, it becomes particularly difficult to obtain a prestigious academic degree, which eventually becomes the external thrust of some high school students to the foreign education system.

3.2. External Tension

From a macro point of view, the external pull factor is best reflected in the preference for foreign education systems. From the comprehensive analysis, it mainly stems from the following two reasons: the first reason is that the breadth of foreign entrance examination is large and the difficulty is small. There are more subjects in the foreign entrance examination, which gives students the right to choose the courses they are interested in. At the same time, students are encouraged to fully understand the relevant knowledge of the course in the formulation of learning standards, so there are more learning chapters, but they will not be too in-depth, focusing on students' mastery of knowledge. However, the contents of Chinese high school textbooks tend to assess students' research and application abilities, so the assessment is relatively difficult. The fifth respondent in Table 1 also said: "For the college entrance examination, I think the requirements of foreign countries are lower than those of the mainland, and the foreign exams I think are heavy breadth rather than heavy difficulty." The second reason is that the multi-stage performance assessment system in foreign countries is different from the pattern of "one test for life" in domestic college entrance examination. In foreign university entrance exams, multiple evaluation standards are also used. Taking VCE courses in Victoria, Australia as an example, the final score of a subject is weighted from the test scores of different stages of the three years of high school and the final exam results, which can also better understand the students' mastery of knowledge in each period. Compared with the population density of China, the popular destination countries have a smaller population density, which brings less competition and more concentrated educational resources, so they have relatively obvious advantages in undergraduate study and can well attract Chinese students.

3.3. The Micro Level of Students

Students' micro-level factors are mainly divided into three points. First of all, it comes from the influence of others. The opinions of relatives and friends around will have an impact on the decision to study abroad. For example, the eighth interviewee in Table 1 said in the interview: "My father has many relatives and friends' children to study overseas, so I can know the general situation of studying abroad through daily communication." The second point is the influence of family environment. All the nine respondents are from middle class families or above, and family background has a very

important impact on the decision to study abroad. The last point is that the study abroad experience is not only more recognized, but also can cultivate certain working ability. Among the 14 factors analyzed in Table 2, “personal development” and “good employment prospects” are mentioned second and fourth respectively. In order to promote international development and attract talents, the Chinese government has formulated relevant preferential policies for overseas students, which shows that overseas students will have broad prospects for employment back home. It can be seen that students’ choice of undergraduate study abroad is not only a choice of a more relaxed education system, but also includes the prospect of the future and the impact of the surrounding environment on their own internal factors. This conclusion is basically consistent with the conclusion of the push-pull model combining internal and external factors proposed by Li Mei.

4. Conclusion

This study combined the push-pull factor theory and the students’ own factor theory to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the interview results.

The external thrust factors can be divided into three aspects: dissatisfaction with domestic education, unsatisfactory study at home and insufficient higher education at home. Among them, “dissatisfaction with domestic education” was the most mentioned factor, including failure to adapt to the education system, fierce competition for admission, and high pressure on students. According to the analysis results in Table 2, students believe that the system of studying abroad is more reasonable. The entrance examination adopts multiple assessment standards; Foreign educational ideas meet the needs of students. Factors such as higher ranking of universities admitted abroad together constitute the external pulling factors for students to choose to study abroad for undergraduate studies. According to the analysis in Table 1 and Table 2 at the micro level of students, the influence of students’ surrounding relatives and friends. The student’s family has at least middle class and above economic conditions; Students’ parents attach importance to their children’s education; Returning overseas students can gain employment advantages. Factors such as students’ personal longing for foreign life affect their subjective choice of undergraduate study. In the current popular study abroad, many families have a relatively vague concept of studying abroad. Many students and their parents think that choosing to study abroad can avoid the competition of the domestic college entrance examination and open a relaxed study career, but they ignore the difficulty of applying for world famous universities, the culture shock of studying abroad life and the teaching characteristics of “wide entry and strict exit” in foreign universities. Studying abroad is not only to reduce the academic pressure, but also to consider carefully when choosing to study abroad, and seriously consider whether studying abroad is really suitable for the future development needs of students. The qualitative research method was adopted in this study, and random sampling was not adopted, so the research results are not universal. Meanwhile, the questions in the interview outline are too biased towards the conclusions of the push-pull theoretical model, and the question setting is not comprehensive enough. It is hoped that it can be improved in the subsequent research.

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