

Discussing the Motivations of Chinese Pupils to Study Abroad and Predicting Its Effects on Adaptation Based on Self-determination Theory

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Abstract: As the escalating population of Chinese international students has emerged, their adaptation has become a concern for educators all around the world. Previous literature has rarely explored the impacts of individual factors, such as motivation, on students' adaptation processes. So, this article discusses the motivations possessed by Chinese international students first and then attempts to clarify their importance in adapting. It provides a perspective for foreign universities and researchers to address the issue of international student maladjustment, which contributes to the psychological well-being of students who study overseas. This study is secondary research. Based on self-determination theory, this article categorises the motivation of Chinese international students into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Then, this article investigates the effects of these two types of motivation on students' adaptation journeys. The study found that the extrinsic motivations of Chinese students are: 1. Better living environment and lower expenses; 2. Future occupations; 3. The expectations of parents; 4. Professional Curriculum. Intrinsic motivations are 1. Spiritual Freedom; 2. Self-improvements. In comparison, intrinsic motivation is more beneficial to student adaptation. As a result, this article suggests educators need to focus on developing students' intrinsic motivation to learn.

Keywords: Chinese international students, secondary research, motivations, adaptation, self-determination theory

1. Introduction

As China's economy has risen since the reforms, urban dwellers with relatively abundant social and cultural capital have chosen to send their children overseas for higher education [1]. This has propelled China to rank among the top three countries from which international students originate [2]. The annual increase in the number of foreign learners is noticed. According to Higher Education Student Data, 15 percent of UK undergraduate students were non-UK domiciled during the 2021/22 academic year [2]. For host countries, international students are inextricably linked to cultural transmission and economic growth [3]. However, students who study overseas encounter significant challenges with adaptation. For example, Yan & Berliner found that Chinese international pupils experienced difficulties while participating in classroom discussions and responding to inquiries [3]. They usually have fewer foreign friends and hardly have contact with them [4]. This article agrees

with previous studies that substantial social and cultural differences could lead to adaptation difficulties [3].

The definition of adaptation has been controversial and easily confused with acculturation. In 1955, Lysgaard introduced a widely recognised U-shaped curve that pertains to the procedure of adaptation to another culture [5]. The adjustment process of international students is delineated into four distinct stages, including the honeymoon, cultural maladjustment, acceptance, and recovery [4]. The fluctuations in adaptability are evident through the multiple shifts demonstrated in the U-shaped curve, starting from an initial peak, followed by a decrease, and ending with a rise. Several factors contribute to these changes, including the students' expectations of the host country, the significant cultural differences encountered, and the students' own efforts toward self-adjustment [4]. However, Dailey-Strand et al. conducted a qualitative survey of Chinese students attending universities in the UK and Norway [5]. The results revealed that these students did not conform to a U-shaped curve pattern, indicating that they did not adapt well even from the beginning [5]. Meanwhile, in the context of intermingling two or more cultures, Berry defines acculturation as the transformative process by which individuals' psyche and behaviour undergo changes to adapt to the evolving environment [6]. While Berry continually argues that adaptation is a long-term consequence of acculturation, this article rejects to base the process of adaptation on the necessity of having one side of the cultural change [6]. As a result, this article defines adaptation as the process to self-regulate behaviour and emotions when individuals are confronted with unfamiliar, novel, and uncertain environmental situations.

The increasing size of the international student population has brought a growing focus on the issue of their adaptation. Previous literature suggests that the degree of students' adaption is contingent upon a multitude of elements, including the social class of the student's family, autonomous learning ability, gender, age, and self-expectations, but studies aiming to understand better the role of motivation in socio-cultural adaptation are still scarce [7-9]. Moreover, more studies need to focus on Chinese international students while motivation is a predictor of adaptation [9]. As a result, this article will build on previous literature and focus on two research questions. First, what are the motivations of Chinese students studying overseas? Second, how do these motivations influence students' adaptation? This article will first define motivation and then use extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to divide Chinese students' motivations, as mentioned in previous research. The study will then examine separately how extrinsic and intrinsic motivations influence adaptation. Since the adaptation of international students is directly related to the stress they may encounter in life, this article will be useful when universities establish counselling systems and encourage students to pursue higher education overseas.

2. The Definitions of Motivation

On the one hand, Mazzarol and Soutar suggested a push-pull model to illustrate the active mobility of international students all around the world [10]. In the model, push factors are events or circumstances in the student's country that drive them to pursue education overseas, such as an economic depression or the lack of educational resources [11]. In contrast, the pull factors belong to the host country, which attracts international students [10]. For example, prestigious universities or a well-developed social support system for international students [10]. This article posits that the push-pull model offers a framework for elucidating the mechanisms by which external factors motivate international students. On the other hand, self-determination theory places greater emphasis on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation derived from individual goals [12]. Extrinsic motivation usually promotes behaviours for external rewards, such as food and money [12]. Contrarily, spiritual dimensions drive intrinsic motivations, like students' curiosity and interest [12]. This is consistent with Chirkov et al.'s view that the intrinsic motivation of international students stems from their

perception of studying abroad as enjoyable, fulfilling, and offering chances [13]. Although Wang believes that there should be assimilative motivation that promotes individual adaptation more than intrinsic motivation, this article primarily centres around self-determination theory, employing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for identifying the diverse motivations Chinese international students have for studying abroad [14]. This aligns with Trujillo et al., and Chirkov et al.'s findings, which propose students' motivations can be comprehensively categorised by extrinsic and intrinsic motivations [13, 15].

3. Types of Motivations

Ganotice et al. pointed out that motivations related to social and political conditions are typically extrinsic, whereas self-development is intrinsic [9]. As a result, this article discusses extrinsic motivations first, then intrinsic ones.

3.1. Extrinsic Motivations

3.1.1. Better Living Environment and Lower Expenses

Chinese students are seeking a high quality of life [3, 15]. Yan, Berliner, and Wu believe that Western countries' favourable living and climatic conditions are important factors in attracting Chinese students [3, 16]. At the same time, Chinese international students are motivated by lower tuition fees and cost of living [8, 10, 11, 15]. Although this article doubts whether the rent of the nation's capital cities, such as London and Washington, is cheaper than the domestic price, the international students who apply for a housing allowance or have sponsors can alleviate financial pressure. Consequently, the improved living environment and reduced costs promote migration after students graduate. The duration of the overseas study is also intended to enable them to adapt well after migration [1, 10, 11, 16].

3.1.2. Future Occupations

Much of the previous literature suggests that Chinese international students have an advantage in the domestic labour market, as China prioritises its resources on offering highly educated individuals returning from abroad [1, 3, 11]. This is consistent with Wu and Lo et al.'s articles, which state that those with past experiences of studying abroad will receive superior job packages, including high salaries and abundant social benefits [8, 16]. Although the Chinese nationalistic ideology may lead managers to question the international students' Western ideology and professional competence, this article argues that international students may have different strengths from local students [17]. For example, they are more skilled in verbal expression. Moreover, international students may have relatively high independent learning abilities and be able to deal with problems in unexpected situations. In addition, Chinese international students with better language proficiency and a larger social network may be more competitive at the international level and be considered for employment overseas [11, 16].

Additionally, Yan and Berliner noted that when students are surrounded by their peers, relatives, or colleagues who are preparing to study abroad, peer pressure becomes their extrinsic motivation to study abroad [3]. This is the same as Wu's finding, in which the students perceive they have no advantages if everyone around them has a diploma from a foreign university and they do not have one [16]. Although this article concerns the possibility that those who choose good majors but whose schools do not have a high overall ranking may not benefit from recruitment, it acknowledges that the Chinese labour market has expectations and preferences for graduates of elite universities. This proves that international students utilise the experience of studying abroad to enhance their

competitiveness, especially for female employees. The report by Martin shows the desire of Chinese female international students and their families to combat gender discrimination in the Chinese job market through high-quality overseas education programs, thereby securing more opportunities and attention for women [1]. As a consequence, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has risen, with prospects for future employment as their extrinsic motivation for going abroad

3.1.3. The Expectations of Parents

Many Chinese parents are aware of the paucity of educational resources in China at present, so they are attempting to send their offspring abroad to get a better education. Mazzarol and Soutar's article shows that Chinese parents believe that the return on wealth to their families will outweigh their investment in education if they raise children as highly educated students [10]. This could improve a family's living quality in the future [16]. Martin, therefore, views this as an opportunity for families to ascend to the upper social stratum [1]. Meanwhile, in Chinese Confucianism, children are expected to be filial to their elders [11]. Accordingly, most children in Chinese families adopt their parents' opinions and take their parents' expectations as their motivation to study abroad [15]. Although nationalism may make relatively older parents resistant to Western countries and children from these families less motivated to study abroad [17], many Chinese parents choose to go abroad for the sake of their children's future. As a result, parental expectations can function as an external motivation for international students.

3.1.4. Professional Curriculum

Most foreign education systems are student-centered, so Chinese parents believe that this is more conducive to their children's development [15, 18]. Furthermore, foreign programs are more specialised and flexible in time than the Chinese system [8, 16]. For instance, undergraduate degrees at British universities are only three or four years long, whereas changes in the major are permitted after enrolment at American universities. Whilst this also seems to be integral to students' pursuit of self-improvement, in many cases, an individual's motivation is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations [12]. In the meantime, Martin claims a pragmatic motivation that shares a similarity to extrinsic motivation [1]. However, Martin also recognises that most Chinese international students from middle-class families are more likely to possess intrinsic motivation [1].

3.2. Intrinsic Motivations

In light of Chinese history, it is evident that following the surge in East-West interactions, a certain portion of the Chinese populace expressed heightened discontent over domestic circumstances and ideological stances while simultaneously idealising Western countries [3]. Consequently, the Western world swiftly gained a reputation and image characterised by sophisticated technological advancements and valued educational programs. This contributes to the rise in the international student population.

3.2.1. Spiritual Freedom

Previous studies have proven that most Chinese students study abroad because they aspire to Western countries' freedom and open social climate [1]. Students believe that in Western countries, they can live their true selves [1, 11]. For example, girls do not have to worry about dressing too revealingly or having body anxiety. At the same time, Chinese international students are far away from their families and are not bound by their parents, so they have the power to make decisions about their lives as independent individuals. This article argues that this is an atmosphere of freedom in contrast

to traditional and relatively conservative China. This is also in line with Gao's view that Chinese students who have middle-class family backgrounds have relative difficulty in accepting China's nationalist conservatism [17]. Although not all students come from high social class families, Trujillo et al. suggest that they develop a clearer self-concept and that the process of studying abroad is seen as a process of character maturation [15]. Moreover, international students will feel confident in dealing with daily life problems independently [15, 16]. In addition to that, with the development of society and the rise of women's consciousness, female international students in China take studying abroad as an escape from the standardised lifestyle in China, such as getting married at the right age and the fact that it is not easy for highly educated girls to get married [1]. This is evidence that Chinese women are breaking free from the prison of entrenched ideas, and they may even choose to take a second graduate course to increase their study time abroad [17]. Additionally, as residents in Western countries are more tolerant and accepting of people with different experiences, introverted Chinese international students can express their affinity for the host country [8]. For instance, Japanese animation, food, and trendy fashion. This enhances the motivation of Chinese international students to study overseas.

3.2.2. Self-improvement

Self-improvement is a significant motivating factor for Chinese international students seeking higher education in Western nations. Prior research has indicated that quite a few international students perceive studying abroad as a chance through which they can acquire knowledge about the customs and traditions of the nation where they are studying [18]. According to Wu, students hold the belief that engaging in communication with local inhabitants enables them to observe and acquire an understanding of the prevailing social norms and customs [16]. At the same time, immersion in a particular culture has been identified as a factor that can enhance students' problem-solving abilities [16]. Therefore, students improve their linguistic abilities and accumulate valuable life experiences [8, 15].

4. The Impacts of Motivations on Adaptability

The article by Chirkov et al. mentions that there is a direct link between motivation and the outcome of adaptation [13]. Intrinsic motivation positively impacts international students' adaptation [13]. When students go abroad to improve themselves, they are more likely to communicate more confidently and positively with their foreign classmates [4]. Lewthwaite suggests that interaction with the host population is a distinctive feature of successful adaptation for international students [4]. Although Chinese international students may prefer to make friends from their own country due to their lack of language skills, this article argues that the intensity of intrinsic motivation will contribute to their confidence in stepping out of their comfort zone again [3]. Students who are motivated to study abroad are more likely to find new things to be interested in and are often happier during their studies than those who are pressured to study abroad [13]. Thus, extrinsic motivation is likely to lead to low adaptive capacity. For example, if Chinese students are overly motivated to achieve high grades, they may spend less time socialising, which is likely to lead to isolation [3]. Although students may push themselves to talk to foreign tutors to get feedback due to their desire for good grades, extrinsic motivation may put too much pressure on students [3]. Therefore, it is not conducive to adaptation in unfamiliar environments. As a result, this article argues that intrinsic motivation is more beneficial to students' adaptation than extrinsic motivation [13].

5. Conclusion

This study argues that the incentives of Chinese students to pursue overseas education can be categorised into two distinct types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, as characterised by the self-determination theory. Extrinsic motivation is to motivate students to go abroad through external stimuli or rewards. Firstly, Chinese students may opt to pursue their studies in countries with picturesque natural landscapes, high-quality air, and pleasant temperatures. Also, the costs of products in the host country may be lower than in the students' home country. This could alleviate the financial strain on the student's family if they apply for scholarships or social grants. Secondly, both domestic and international labour markets place a high value on those who have engaged in overseas study experiences, which may contribute to advantageous job prospects. Moreover, it presents a good opportunity for female students to enhance their skills and demonstrate their capabilities to companies in China that may hold discriminatory attitudes towards women. Although nationalism has the potential to foster discrimination, it is imperative to acknowledge the indispensable requirement for diverse and intricate skills within huge corporations. Thirdly, it is worth noting that families situated within the lower middle-class stratum tend to perceive the prospect of pursuing education overseas as an intelligent investment. Consequently, students hailing from these families are propelled by the deeply ingrained Confucian ideology, which emphasises filial piety and deference towards elders. Finally, Chinese students consider a more specialised and flexible curriculum appealing. It is closely linked to students' desire for personal growth. A well-developed curriculum stimulates both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Then, this article highlights two intrinsic motivations. The first is to live peacefully. In contrast to the culture of the East, international students can freely express themselves without concern of being observed in Western countries. In addition, the problem-solving and social skills they progressively acquire while studying abroad boost their confidence. The second is personal development. Being immersed in a foreign environment enables students to learn the local culture and decorum and to pursue higher education at a local institution. Additionally, this article indicates that intrinsic motivation facilitates adaptation more than extrinsic motivation. This is because students with intrinsic motivation will take the initiative to communicate with foreigners and learn from their experiences. As a result, this article suggests that parents should cultivate intrinsic motivation as much as possible when developing their children's motivation to learn, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and enjoyment of education. This article builds on previous literature to investigate the role of motivation in adaptation, laying a theoretical foundation for future empirical research. However, most of the literature used in this paper examines the motivation of international students in developed countries such as the UK, the US, and Japan, and this article realises that international students going to non-developed countries may have different motivations. However, as the main population of Chinese international students is still concentrated in developed countries, this paper chooses to ignore the differences in the motivation of these students. Meanwhile, this article believes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations may have different effects on specific subgroups. Therefore, future research could subdivide the study population according to different circumstances, such as family social class, religion, and gender.

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