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Decision Making by Chinese Students Choosing UK and Chinese Universities

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Background

The study took place in the context of the global expansion of students studying at universities outside their home countries and of declared policies in the UK to expand both the absolute numbers of foreign students and their share of this huge market. The largest component of this growth, worldwide but notably in the UK, has been students from mainland China. They are now by far the largest national group of overseas students in the UK, with numbers increasing by a factor of almost twenty over the ten years from 1994/5 to 2004/5. This study focuses on Chinese undergraduates, for whom the growth in numbers has been particularly marked – from 245 to 20,820 in that same ten-year period.

These students constitute a major input to the UK economy in general and to the financial health of universities in particular. Strategies to expand market share will benefit from a clear understanding of the nature of demand and the customers in that market. Yet, as Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin (2002) point out, there have been no detailed studies to assess the importance of various factors that are believed to influence students’ decisions to study abroad. The small number of studies of foreign students’ motivations do generally adopt this ‘identification of factors’ approach, but tend to focus on the characteristics of the host countries and universities rather than the students themselves and rarely disaggregate student responses by nationality. While identifying and ranking these factors for one national group of foreign students, this study also contextualises and develops our understanding of the processes involved in individuals’ decision-making.

Decisions to study abroad, however, must be understood in the context of relevant conditions in the home country, including the various university options available there. This study therefore also includes Chinese students who have opted to study at universities in China, to give a more complete picture of the decision-making process and its theorisation. These include students taking ‘joint-venture programmes’ in which Chinese and foreign universities collaborate.

Two broad theoretical positions have been used to account for developments in patterns of educational enrolment and the choices that lie behind them: human capital theory and positional competition theory. The former argues that expansion of demand for education reflects increases in the skill levels demanded by the economy, with increasing components of technical and scientific knowledge that require longer periods of more advanced education and training, precisely the situation in contemporary China, and the basis of the policy of ‘massification’ of higher education. Rates of return on educational investment can be calculated and it is these that motivate social and individual decisions to invest in education.

Positional competition theory, on the other hand, argues that the expansion of educational demand at increasingly higher levels of the system, as currently
experienced in China, is the outcome of competition to increase one’s educational standing relative to others. The relationship between education and the labour market is not one of providing necessary technical skills but one which is mediated by the use of credentials as a screening device by employers. Resultant credential inflation intensifies competition for credentials from elite institutions and may promote the development of a hierarchy of universities, at least in popular perceptions. Within China, such a hierarchy is enshrined in the university selection process itself, but we have largely only anecdotal evidence about perceptions of a global hierarchy among Chinese students and how it may affect their choices. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that studying overseas may have as much to do with the perceived difficulty of getting into Chinese universities as it has with notions of a global hierarchy.

Conditions and recent events within China give the study wider relevance in relation to currently dominant theoretical positions:

- The globally unparalleled economic growth in China sets up precisely the situation in which human capital theory makes its strongest explanatory and policy-directing claims.

- The drive towards massification of higher education (Huang 2003) produces a situation in which theories of positional competition and credential inflation should be most applicable.

- The opening up of China to the outside world, coupled with increased opportunities for Chinese students to study abroad, offers the opportunity to test claims relating to the globalisation of positional competition and perceptions of a global hierarchy of universities and credentials.

- The rapid social changes taking place within Chinese society, in particular the emergence of new bases for social stratification and opportunities for increased social mobility, provide an opportunity to re-examine social class-based analyses of educational choices in what can be seen as ‘critical’ conditions.

The proposed study looks, inter alia, at the explanatory value of each of these theoretical approaches in accounting for the reasoning behind university choices made by Chinese students. Unfortunately, both human capital and positional competition theories, in themselves, tend to remain focussed at the macro-sociological level. The micro-foundations of the phenomena with which they deal commonly remain implicit and less commonly subjected to empirical investigation.

Within human capital approaches, patterns of educational enrolment are seen as the cumulative effect of myriad individual decisions based on rational evaluations of the individual economic returns likely to accrue from those decisions. This view of the nature of individual behaviour is neatly captured in rational action theory (RAT), as outlined by Goldthorpe (1998).

Positional competition approaches have more comfortably found resonances in sociological theory, notably in the work of Bourdieu and the concepts of ‘habitus’ and cultural capital; for example, the study by Ball et al (2002) of English students’ university choices. Several authors have commented, however, on the structural
determinism implicit in Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ and have attempted to open the concept up to various possibilities for individual agency without abandoning the framework of cultural and social factors within which it operates. It is not clear how applicable the ‘habitus’ concept might be in the rapidly changing social class structures of contemporary China, which are still emerging and highly uncertain. As such, contemporary Chinese society can be treated as an interesting ‘critical case’ for Bourdieurian approaches. The study, therefore, offers opportunities for valuable comparison with the work of Ball et al (2002) and others, in a very different socio-cultural context.

Objectives

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1) What are the factors taken into account by Chinese students making university choices and how does the prioritisation of these factors correlate with aspects of student background and their perceptions of socio-economic conditions and opportunities?

2) What support does the prioritisation of factors by Chinese students lend to human capital and positional competition theories as explanations of university enrolment patterns?

3) What is the nature of the decision-making process behind university choices made by Chinese students, and what are the influences on this process?

4) How well do rational action theory and social reproduction theories account for this decision-making process?

Research Question 1 was interpreted primarily as one requiring a quantitative description and was, therefore, addressed using questionnaires. This approach did allow us successfully to identify the factors and their prioritisation with confidence to make generalised descriptive statements about the factors students take into account in their decision making and their relative priorities. Correlations with certain aspects of the students’ backgrounds were also calculated using these data, but with limitations that are discussed below when presenting the results.

Research Question 2 was addressed initially through the questionnaire, which allowed us to generate descriptive patterns to test against the two identified theoretical positions, but the qualitative interview data were required to make sense of these patterns.

Although RQ 3 was addressed through descriptive statistics from the questionnaire data, it was always expected that qualitative data from interviews would give the level of insight that was necessary to understand the processes involved; and this proved to be the case.

RQ 4 embodies the most complex of the research aims as it demands judgements about the extent of the match between theory and data. At a simplistic level the extent of the match could be judged in terms of a ‘frequency of incidents’ approach: the
relative number of statements or responses that could best be categorised under one theoretical heading or the other. This could only ever be a valid approach using the quantitative data and ‘response counting’ for those items that were designed to ‘test’ the two theoretical positions was carried out. A questionnaire was not judged, however, to be the most appropriate means for gathering data for such a test and it was always intended that the qualitative data from the interviews would provide the level of insight into decision making processes that is needed for a satisfactory judgement.

The difficulties, even the usefulness, of trying to determine some sort of comparative ‘best fit’ between data and theory were anticipated in the research design, however, and RQ4 was in fact largely interpreted in terms of the relevance of theories of Western origin to the Chinese’. That is, an investigation of the contextual validity of various sociological theories was one of the key research aims.

**Methods**

Three student constituencies formed the target population: Chinese students in UK universities, those in Chinese universities and those taking joint-venture courses in Chinese universities. The population was restricted to students in the first year of their university course, on the assumption that their recollections of relevant decision making would be more recent and hence more reliable.

In China, three cities were targeted: Beijing, Shanghai and Xi’an. The first two allowed the inclusion in the study of the most prestigious of Chinese universities. They are of further interest in the light of a study of Chinese overseas students in the 1980s which revealed differences between student attitudes in Beijing and Shanghai, reflecting the greater ‘politicisation’ of the former and greater economic opportunity of the latter (Zhao 1996). Xi’an is a major centre for higher education, chosen here because it is away from the main East Coast ‘development corridor’ and attracts students from across China, including the poorer, rural areas of the west. This helped broaden the range of socio-economic backgrounds among the students in the sample. In Shanghai and Xi’an two universities were selected – an elite institution and one other (although ‘elite’ has only a relative meaning in the case of Xi’an). In Beijing, a third university, a little below the highest rank was included.

A quantitative approach was used initially to establish macro-level descriptions of influential factors, their relative priorities and how these relate to various individual background factors. Qualitative data were then obtained from multiple case studies from the three student constituencies being investigated.

**Phase 1: Quantitative data collection and analysis.**

Questionnaires were developed for each of the three target groups through an initial process of literature analysis, drawing on our own experience and that of colleagues in the UK and China and informal interviews with a small number of students in both countries. There was considerable overlap among items in the three questionnaires to allow comparison on core issues, with the wording of these items adapted where necessary for the three constituencies and alternative items inserted to meet their particular circumstances. Questionnaires were drawn up initially in English and then
translated into Chinese. An independent back-translation of one of the questionnaires was carried out to check the accuracy of the original translation.

Piloting and revision were carried out for the questionnaires for Chinese students in the UK and those at all-Chinese universities, but not for that intended for joint-venture course students. This latter omission was for practical reasons given the small number of such courses we were actually able to access and was not seen as a serious weakness given the similarities between this questionnaire and the other two.

The questionnaires were composed largely of closed items and focussed on the following issues:

- Personal and family background
- Factors that influenced the decision to go to university, to study abroad and in the UK (where appropriate) and to choose a particular university.
- Personal aspirations and perceptions of opportunities available, including perceptions of the labour market and sources of advantage therein.

The version of the questionnaire for UK-based students can be accessed at http://www.bath.ac/~edsjal/questionnaire.htm

Identification of universities and students for the questionnaires in China relied heavily on contacts and connections. This approach (guanxi in Chinese) pervades almost all activities in China and is widely recognised and accepted as the best route to the successful achievement of any venture. Contacts were sufficiently wide and diverse to ensure we obtained a sample of students that represented a range of university types and courses and was gender-balanced. Paper questionnaires were distributed during class time, ensuring a 100% return, and a total of 596 completed questionnaires were returned, compared with an original plan for 400, from two universities in Shanghai, two in Xi’an and three in Beijing.

Guanxi was less productive as a strategy for accessing joint-venture courses and only 233 completed questionnaires were obtained rather than the target 400, from two Shanghai and two Beijing universities.

Accessing students at UK universities was more problematic, as originally anticipated. It was decided to use a web-based version of the questionnaire and to bring it to the attention of first-year Chinese students in as many universities as possible, covering a wide range in the THES university rankings. Universities were telephoned and asked to circulate an e-mail to the target population. Some universities agreed and were able to contact the students more or less efficiently; others agreed but then did not act; others felt they were unable to participate for a variety of reasons and a few universities refused without offering a reason.

Other strategies were tried in an attempt to increase access, such as contacting Chinese Student Societies and using personal contacts, but these proved to be largely ineffective.

In the end 294 usable responses were obtained from 120 female and 174 male students in 26 universities covering ranks 1 to 90 in the THES table.
Data were entered into SPSS for frequency, cross-tabulations and correlational analysis.

**Phase 2: Qualitative data collection and analysis.**

The number of interviewees was increased from the original target of 12 from each group, except for the joint-venture course students because of our dissatisfaction with the size of the sample and the limited diversity in key areas.

Interviewees were chosen using a combination of a broad notion of representativeness on the one hand and maximal variation in relation to gender, university, course and socio-economic background variables on the other. Twenty one students were interviewed from seven Chinese universities; eight from three joint-venture courses and twenty three from nine UK universities. Interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were conducted in Chinese. These interviews explored the informants’ personal and family backgrounds together with their perceptions of the social and economic environment, particularly in relation to their future options and plans. They were asked to recount the decision-making process that led them to their current studies and to discuss key events, people and other influences in that process.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated. Transcription and translation were time consuming and expensive and the increase in numbers of interviewees was only possible because of savings made elsewhere in the project.

Initial coding of the interviews was driven by the concern to compare the explanatory validity of rational action theory and social reproduction approaches to decision making. More open coding was also used to achieve analytical saturation and maximise validity of the analysis and interpretation process.

**Results**

Questionnaire data revealed the prioritisation factors taken into account by the students when making decisions about going to university. Comparison of the priorities between UK-based students and those in China revealed very similar patterns.

The top ten priorities were the same for both groups with some slight differences in order. One set of these is directly linked to the labour market: items such as ‘I can get a better job’ and ‘I will earn more’; but these were not the most highly ranked. Both groups gave highest priority to a more general notion of greater opportunity. This was followed by a desire ‘to learn more’ and the wish to ‘become a better person’. We were somewhat cynical about these responses and they were explored in more detail during the interviews.

The interview data did support these questionnaire findings but also provided significant illumination. Two explanatory strands emerged about this order of priorities. The first is that the world of work was still a long way in the future for these (on average) 19 year-olds. The relatively low priority given to ‘It will help me to get the job I want’, reflects not so much a lack of belief in the value of their degree in the labour market as a lack of clear job aspirations. They did generally recognise that
job opportunities would be highly circumscribed in contemporary China without at least a first degree; but many of them commented that a first degree would not provide the advantage that it did in the past and they were already considering postgraduate courses. For some, however, this consideration was more a matter of gaining as much education as they could for its general rather than job-specific value.

There was a strong conviction about the value of education in a broader sense. High proportions of students agreed with the statement that going to university was largely a non-decision, being the ‘natural’ thing to do. This is the position that Ball identified among middle class students in the UK but amongst our Chinese students this position was not dependent on parental socio-economic status. It would be easy to ascribe this valuing of education to a ‘Confucian ethic’, simply because such an explanation is available, but we were wary of doing this entirely. We suggest rather than such a cultural explanation must be tempered by more instrumental considerations on the part of the students, which can be related to social reality and personal experiences in contemporary China. Education was seen as the key to accessing the broader range of social and cultural opportunities that are emerging.

For the rural students, in particular, these opportunities were often related to life in the cities, which they largely experienced for the first time on going to university. Under the current hukou or residency permit rules, however, living in a city for those who did not originate from that city is only possible if one has employment there and it is this which drives what job aspirations many of these students do have.

Rural students were also more likely to feel an obligation to ‘repay’ their parents for the cost that their education had incurred. This was expressed more in terms of providing support for their parents rather than a straightforward repayment. Almost all students expressed a more general sense of gratitude and obligation to their parents, which again it would be easy to interpret in ‘Confucian heritage’ terms, but which again we feel is too simple an option to adopt. For UK-based students, the personal sacrifice of most parents in meeting the costs was enormous and it would be surprising if this did not generate a sense of obligation in students from any cultural background. For the rural students with peasant family backgrounds (who did not figure in our UK sample at all) the cost of a university education in China may make relatively the same demand of their parents.

Among students from wealthier backgrounds the sense of an obligation to repay the money spent was largely absent although expressions of more general obligation and respect were still made. It was interesting to find some evidence of cracks appearing in this model of filial piety among the children of the wealthy. One female student at an elite Chinese university declared that she did not have to worry about looking after her parents in the future as they were rich enough to look after themselves. They, in turn, had allowed her to make whatever decisions she wished about her life.

Respondents were asked to give their parents’ occupations but it was difficult to categorise some of the responses, and statements about parental occupations inevitably include a significant proportion of ‘indeterminates’. There is also a theoretical issue here in terms of our descriptions of occupational/ social categories. We were cautious about using Western occupational categories in view of the different structure of social stratification in China and its state of flux.
Our study did support evidence from a small number of Chinese studies that social background is linked to the status of the university attended. In all universities in our Chinese sample, children of working class and peasant background were highly under-represented but this was most noticeable in the elite universities, where those with educated, ‘professional’ parents predominated. A noticeable feature of the UK-based student data was the relatively high proportion of parents from a ‘business’ background.

A significant marker of advantage or disadvantage is urban or rural residence. Analysis by residence produced even more marked differences in the status of university attended (in China), with less than 10% of those in elite universities giving their residence as ‘village’, compared with 37% in the Xi’an universities and 30% in the low status Beijing university. Only 3% of the UK-based sample came from villages and the proportion in joint-venture courses was even smaller. Interviews confirmed the apparently obvious conclusion that it was the cost of these courses and of overseas study that prevented such students from attending.

Further quantitative data from the UK-based student questionnaires concerned the decision to study abroad, to come to the UK and to choose the university they were attending. Although 62% agreed that a foreign degree would help them get a better job in China, this response ranked only tenth and only 36% felt that a foreign degree has a high reputation in China. This suggests that it is obtaining a degree rather than obtaining a foreign degree that is seen as the key to better employment. Interviews revealed a rather more complex picture than this, however, with a considerable amount of ambiguity. There is considerable sophistication in these students’ perceptions of university status. Although various rankings of UK universities influenced their particular choice, and reputation and ranking were the two leading reasons declared for that choice, students were also looking at individual course rankings and were placing the UK universities (and those in China) in an approximate global hierarchy.

By far the dominant reasons for wanting to study abroad were that it led to greater experience and independence, and opened up greater opportunities that in interviews were only partially seen as occupational opportunities. (This desire for independence also ranked highly in the general desire to go to university.) There was also a widely shared perception that foreign courses would offer more ‘useful’ knowledge than those in China. In interviews, many students lamented the overly-theoretical, exam-bound nature of Chinese university courses.

The intense competition for places at the elite Chinese universities was recognised and some commented that coming to the UK was a way of avoiding this and the associated stress. A significant fact that emerged was that some 40% of the UK sample had attended school in the UK for at least two years, to take A-levels, rather than taking a one-year foundation course. Interviewees at the elite UK universities commonly held the opinion that access to these universities was only possible with A-levels. Some students had spent up to five years at UK schools before going to university. One important implication of this finding is that the common stereotype of Chinese students having problems with ‘cultural adjustment’ and even with language
at UK universities is simply far too generalising, particularly with respect to undergraduate students.

Further quantitative data analysis can be found in the conference paper available at http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/jl/Oxcon_paper.doc but one last point will be made about the decision to come to the UK. Although the main reasons given for this were related to the perceptions of educational quality and a desire to improve their English, for a high proportion the UK was actually the second preference, after the USA, but a US visa was too difficult to obtain.

It was found that quantitative data from the questionnaire did not allow us to make adequate judgements about the validity of different theoretical interpretations and it was in the interviews that this was mostly sought. There was only occasional evidence of the students (or, more importantly, their parents) engaging in an explicit cost-benefit analysis that might be expected from ‘hard’ forms of rational action theory. A ‘softer’ version of RAT might be invoked to account for the almost universal declarations of the value of a university education and of an overseas experience, but even here, RAT is simply too crudely instrumental in its perceptions of ‘value’ to provide an adequate understanding of the decision making.

Here we must add a reservation that arises from a weakness in this study that was recognised from its inception. We could not interview parents and other family members about their roles in the decision making. These clearly did have an influence, but it is also clear that many parents gave their children a relatively free choice, supporting their decision rather than overtly influencing it. We do not know whether the parents – as ‘paymasters’ – engaged in any sort of cost-benefit analysis. Many students stated that they had discussed the cost and their parents had described the ‘value’ of studying overseas in much broader terms than any sort of financial return. These students did not – in general – see the future in these purely economic terms; they perceived ‘opportunity’ and a future they are keen to engage with, but in much broader terms than the economic. They seek ‘experience’ and an engagement with ‘life’ that they perceive as now opening up in all sorts of ways in modern China – and the outside world. Here though we would add a further reservation that amongst the poorer students in our sample there was often a greater concern with financial issues. The full diversity and subtlety of the positions here are best described through individual case studies for which there is no space here.

The study does indicate that students were seeking ‘value’ in their decision making, and in this their decision making is not ‘irrational’, even though it may not be describable in the narrow interpretation of rationality of ‘hard’ RAT. But an understanding of this ‘value’ requires at least an understanding of ‘values’ that are often culturally mediated. The analytical individualism of RAT is rejected for an approach that recognises more explicitly the mutual interaction between and constitution of the individual and culture. One widely shared value is the importance of education for its own sake rather than for narrow instrumental purposes. Here there is a significant difference from European studies which suggest that the valuing of education is linked to social status. Thus, one aspect of cultural capital that forms a key aspect of Bourdieurian analyses of education and social reproduction is not easily transferable to the Chinese context. Our data do suggest that there is a considerable degree of social reproduction taking place and that education plays a role in this. In
the present context of social flux, however, there was also evidence of considerable social mobility – certainly of aspirations towards such mobility – in which education plays a significant role.

There is also evidence, from the overseas sample in particular, of the more direct use of ‘financial capital’ to promote social mobility. The new entrepreneurial elite, sometimes from ‘lowly’ origins and with little education themselves, is using its wealth to obtain higher status for their offspring. They may be anticipating the emergence of a new basis for social stratification in China in which educational qualifications will play an important role and are trying to ensure a place for their children in this new order. In some cases, there was clearly a desire for their children to obtain experience and qualifications that would allow them to support the businesses they had themselves established, perhaps recognising that in the future the ‘entrepreneurial flair’ that had allowed themselves to succeed would not be sufficient to ensure continued success. Our data point to a need for a better understanding of the nature of social change in contemporary China and the role that education is playing in this. It is this that we hope to address in future research, in collaboration with Chinese sociologists.

Activities

Seminars to present and discuss the findings of the study were held at Beijing Normal University, the University of Yunnan and the University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, during April 2006.

Contacts and networks in Chinese universities were established and are currently being pursued with the aim of further collaborative research (see below).

Outputs

Articles for submission to refereed journals are currently in process.

A paper on the initial findings was presented at the 2005 BAICE/UKFIET Oxford conference.

Two further papers drawing on the data from this research, combined with that from other studies carried out by PhD students under the researcher’s supervision have been accepted for international conferences in July and September 2007.

Impacts

No contacts with potential non-academic users have yet been made, although it is anticipated that the data will be of interest to universities and other agencies involved in the ‘recruitment’ of Chinese students.

Future Research Priorities

The research findings highlight the value of seeking a better understanding of the relationships between education and socio-economic change in contemporary China.
This researcher’s own interest here now lies in focussing on the most disadvantaged
groups in China – rural minority groups in the west of the country, in particular – and
the role that education may be playing in changing or reinforcing their position. Their
significant absence from the samples in this study is at least one reason for this
interest. Discussions with potential research partners in China are currently underway.
These potential partners include sociologists and economists, as well as those working
in educational research.

A second priority is to examine the experiences of Chinese students in UK
universities, beyond the first-year accounts gathered here. This study would be
usefully located in the present discourse on the internationalisation of universities, in
particular looking at the fit between university rhetoric and strategies to offer an
internationalising educational experience and the experiences of the students. This
study has already been embarked upon through follow-up interviews with some of the
students in this initial study, complemented by extremely detailed and sensitive
research being carried out by one of the researcher’s PhD students into the
experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK.