

Factors influencing Chinese students' higher education choices

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Abstract:

While Chinese students now have a variety of pathways to higher education, research on individual Chinese students continues to rely on statistical forms of questionnaires, making it challenging to understand international students individually and examine their choices through several detailed influences. Few studies have been carried out that are more detailed and specific to Chinese students. It is, therefore, worth exploring how students from different walks of life make their higher education choices and the factors that influence them in greater depth. This paper reports the results of a comparative study of five Chinese students with different higher education choices using semi-structured interviews. The author will control for the influences of each interviewee to conclude. The paper also explores the experiences and considerations of several Chinese students in their choice of higher education. The paper argue that Chinese students' choices are significantly related to both family circumstances and personal ability, with family social class and the educational attainment of the student's parents having a significant impact on Chinese students' higher education choices. In addition, the individual student's strengths of thought and ability also contribute to their own decisions in higher education.

Keywords: higher education, international education, study abroad, qualitative analysis, education quality

Introduction

After China's reform and opening up <when>, higher education in China, both at home and abroad, has expanded rapidly [1]. China's economic level has also developed rapidly, which has led to a massive increase in China's financial standards and made its citizens more affluent [2]. In addition, many companies prefer students with overseas backgrounds to those without [3]. With financial means, parents increasingly choose for their children to study abroad so they gain a higher quality of institutionalized state cultural capital [4]. However, although education in China is currently more equitable compared to other countries [5], the rapid development and popularity of education in China over the years have also been accompanied by the problem of fierce competition for higher education in China [5]. Compared to the competitive pressure of the Chinese college entrance examination, the pressure of applying to universities abroad is undoubtedly more minor than the competitive pressure of the Chinese university entrance exams, so this may be a factor contributing to the increasing number of Chinese students.

Chinese students are now the largest group of international students accepted in the UK [6]. For example, by helping international students to improve their skills during their studies, Foreign cultural capital can build stronger relationships of trust and inclusion [7]. Moreover, inclusion [7] and Overseas experience can give people greater cognitive

flexibility [8]. In addition, studying in the UK can also have a significant impact on the future development of international students, such as strong effects on students' schooling outcomes [9] and therefore choosing the UK as a great the following study will refer to Foundation.

The Foundation programme at the University College London, which is mentioned in this paper, originated in 1991[10] and is a system that accepts explicitly international courses that are not required for undergraduate study in the UK. It is a system that accepts students who have not studied the international curriculum required for undergraduate study in the UK. The Foundation Programme acts as a bridge between the high school curriculum and the undergraduate curriculum in the UK [11], and the results obtained in the Foundation Programme can be used to apply directly to all undergraduate courses in the UK in place of the international curriculum.

Methods

The author chose a semi-structured interview as the primary method to conduct online one-to-one interviews with five students from China. All of the research participants were in their first year of university or matriculation and were at the stage of new exposure to higher education. One of the interviewees was at a university in China, another was at a university in the USA, and the remaining three were all matriculating or at university in the UK. These six students were chosen as a sample because they

were different in terms of gender, class, major, geography and the educational background of their parents, and therefore could be compared well. They were also chosen because they had a good relationship with the author, so they were likelier to have an authentic expression than the unfamiliar interviewees. The author also knows their family situation well, so there are no problems with misinformation and can add to the information they provide in the interviews.

During the interview, each interviewee was asked to answer ten questions, with the ten questions being graded from shallow to deep. The first question only asked the interviewee to comment on their current life situation. Then they were asked to answer several open-ended questions about studying abroad. Their current academic choices, followed by questions about their parents' views on them, their influence on academic choices and their expectations, followed by two short answer questions asked: whether they would recommend someone close to them to make the same academic choices as they did and whether they thought their academic choices were the right ones. Finally, they were asked if they had any additional information they would like to add to this interview. Although the sample size in this interview is minimal and therefore not very representative, this study can provide a reference value for groups similar to these interviewees.

The five interviewees, Lucy, Rose, Helen, Charlie and Amanda, in this study were openly recruited through social media. All of these interviewees were in the age group of 18-21 years old and came from China. Lucy and Rose belonged to the upper middle class, Helen, Charlie and Amanda belonged to the middle class. Lucy is studying at a university in China, Rose is studying at a university in the United States, Helen, Charlie and Amanda at universities in the United Kingdom.

Findings

In my research, I was interested in the differences in their responses in relation to various social factors, such as parental education, family class and the number of children in the household, the responses were laboriously influenced by these factors. The first thing that all interviewees had in common was that they generally considered their current situation good and gave it a positive rating. They all described their situation as “good”, “well”, and “okay” and said that they had made a lot of external and internal gains. In terms of external gains, people generally made progress in their studies or had new experiences such as “going to the park”, “exploring new things”, and new skills such as “practising photography” and “feel good about my studies”. Internally, they all had a lot to explore

internally, such as “improving self-care”, “improving self-control” and “helping each other better”. There was also a surprisingly consistent response to whether to recommend others to study abroad or to stay in China for university. All of them found it difficult to answer this question, as it depends on the student's personal or family situation. When asked if they were right about their choice of higher education, three interviewees answered “Yes” directly. The remaining two did not give a definite answer and were hesitant but still gave a relatively positive answer. Therefore, it can be seen that the interviewees tend to have a positive attitude towards their choice.

In terms of differences, Lucy and Rose, who were of the same class, upper middle class, and parental education, were asked about their expectations of university, giving responses such as “improving my abilities” and “studying hard”, respectively, both of whom were concerned with self-improvement. However, the other three interviewees with similar levels of education to their parents, Amanda, Charlie and Helen, focused on external improvements in their responses to this question. For example, they all had high expectations in terms of relationships, such as “I want to expand my social circle” or “find a future partner while studying in the UK”. In addition, they also had high expectations for academic success, mentioning “I want to go to a better university in the future” and “I want to do postgraduate studies”. Lucy and Rose's responses also differed significantly from the rest of the interviewees regarding what their parents thought of them and what they expected academically. Rose said that her parents' opinion of her was negative “they often questioned my ability to study” and “my mum in particular often had a bad opinion of me”. In contrast, Lucy said that her parents' opinion of her was more mixed and more harmful, “They think I am open-minded and a good learner, but they also think I am lazy and do not have good self-care skills.” They also mentioned that their parents wanted them to be top experts in their field. The parents of the remaining three interviewees were all generally positive about their children and did not have any particular expectations.

One of the interviewees' most unusual responses was that of Amanda. Regardless of their relationship with their parents, the other interviewees said that their parents had positively influenced them in their choice of higher education. For example, they said in the interview that their parents “nurtured their interest in their current university studies”, “provided financial support”, “gave me moral encouragement”. “and “gave me moral encouragement”. Nevertheless, Amanda says, “I came to the UK to get my parents' attention and to spend more money on myself because although they were against my decision, they promised I would fund 600,000 RMB, but I would have to

earn the rest.” With her academic ability, Amanda could have gone to one of China’s top universities through the Chinese university entrance exam but chose to study abroad, a financially difficult form of higher education for her, to gain affection. Another interviewee from a family with many children, Rose, said, “I feel like my parents do not pay as much attention to me after I have a brother.” However, she did not show any more profound impact on her in the interview.

Discussion

Rose and Lucy’s families belong to the upper-middle class, the highest class that ordinary people in China have reached since the reform and opening. Their grandparents came from ordinary families, so it was not easy for their parents to reach their current class; it took a lot of hard work and luck. Obtaining the highest quality education through competition, such as access to the best universities in China and the ability to reach the highest level in a particular field, is undoubtedly the way their parents gained their current status and is their most trusted route to success. They want their offspring to replicate their path to success as they did. Success through this fierce competition undoubtedly requires great personal competence and a great deal of ability. Therefore, as renowned professors, court vice-presidents and bankers, Rose and Lucy’s parents had extremely high expectations of their children’s abilities and future development. This is also because these parents were in professions that were not inheritable, like Charlie and Helen’s family’s company, but non-inheritable, which made it easy for their offspring to slip down the social ladder, and so they felt anxious about their children’s situation and had a strong sense of crisis. Furthermore, with such high expectations and demands on their children, inevitably, they will not understand them or even clash with them, leading to problems in intimate relationships.

Charlie and Helen’s parents were not as high up in society as Rose and Lucy, especially as they both had small businesses that their children could inherit. Therefore, they did not have the same sense of crisis that Lucy and Rose’s parents had that their offspring would slip down the ladder. In addition, Charlie and Helen now attend a much better university than their parents did, so at least in terms of higher education, Charlie and Helen are now at a university that has surpassed the one their parents attended. It means that their parents are more easily satisfied that their children are already better equipped than they are in terms of education. As a result, Charlie and Helen’s parents are better positioned to have a good relationship with their children and are more likely to be satisfied with their

children’s achievements. Just as Rose and Lucy’s family would have seen it as a necessary step for their children to maintain their class, for Charlie and Helen, studying abroad could have changed their lives’ trajectory and exceeded their forebears’ expectations.

The most striking presence is undoubtedly Amanda, as her academic abilities are far superior to those of the four remaining interviewees. Her family is the one with the most children. However, Amanda’s family’s financial means and resources are very modest compared to Rose’s family, which has many children and a mother who works full time, so Amanda receives less financial support and family care than the other interviewees. This resulted in a completely different family model than the other four interviewees. The other four interviewees received significant help from their families on their journey to higher education, regardless of their parent-child relationship, such as Charlie and Helen, who received adequate financial and emotional support from their parents, or Rose and Lucy, who received resources and financial support from their parents. Nevertheless, Amanda is personally capable of much more than her family can give, so she has to rely more on her abilities to struggle. Therefore, in addition to the family, the child’s abilities are also essential.

Conclusion

For my research participants, the choice of higher education for Chinese students has much to do with the intentions of their parents and the assistance they can provide. However, it is also based on their wishes and abilities. However, how this outcome is achieved varies from parent to parent. In families with high social status and well-educated parents, the student’s choice of higher education, whether they stay at home or go abroad, is primarily aimed at maintaining and continuing the family’s social status. For those families with lesser social status and parents’ educational backgrounds, however, higher education is about finding more resources and opportunities for the individual student. Admittedly, this article has several limitations, such as the number of interviewees, gender and region, which could be studied in more depth, and the pattern of higher education choices of secondary school students from other segments of China could be expanded horizontally. However, in this article, the author links Chinese students’ higher education choices and the conditions of their families, and highlights the influence of parental class, parental education and individual ability on students’ higher education choices, rather than using the statistical model found in much of the previous literature, and selects specific cases for deeper and more personal study.

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